

Patricia Zimmermann [author, professor at Ithaca College]: I wonder what kinds of “equipment” you ransack for your students from theoretical or historical paradigms around the world?

Deocampo: I throw myself into actual filmmaking, into teaching, so that these theoretical, Western questions and constructions are always deflected into praxis. I can tell a student the history of *mise-en-scène*, or I can grab a wicker chair and *show* the student what it is. But I *don't* want us to intellectually ghettoize ourselves. I met some of the teachers in the Beijing Film School and my god, they're teaching psychoanalysis! So why should *we* be afraid of all these theoretical models? We're beginning to introduce theory in our classes, but easy does it!

The first generation of independent filmmakers were all *personal* filmmakers (even Lino Broca, who *did* try to make a lot of institutional changes; he was a role model for lots of us), and we remember the wonderful films that they did. But did that change the structures of the movie industry? Not at all.

I thought we needed another strategy, that we must come in *as a generation* with institutional *structures*. And the first structure needed to be a film school. Our generation is beginning to affect the industry. They are now producing short films. They are now open to experimental films. They are open to animation. Philippines animation on the big screen! Can you imagine?!

What we asked for during the revolution was a democratic plurality. I'm trying to translate that into cinematic plurality.

**Mani Kaul: *Uski Roti* (“A Day's Bread,” 1970);
Dhruvad (1982), August 9, 11, 1994**

[L. Somi Roy, one of the programmers of the 1994 seminar, introduced Mani Kaul's films. I've included Roy's introduction and the discussion.]

Welcome to this evening's program. We're going to be showing a film by the Indian director Mani Kaul, called *Uski Roti* (the English title is “A Day's Bread”). It's a film Mani Kaul made twenty-six years ago, when he was a young man of twenty-five. He had just completed his studies at the Film Institute of India.

India, as you know, has the largest film industry in the world; its films are seen from Morocco to Indonesia (and sometimes in New York!), but the majority of the films tend to be formulaic. You all know the Indian musicals, the melodramas, and so on. The new Indian cinema started in the late sixties and early seventies, and *A Day's Bread* was one of two or three films that can be seen as the beginning of this new development (another was *Bhuvan Shome* [1969] by Mrinal Sen, who had been working with political films and was influenced by the French New Wave; and a third was *Ankur* [“The Seedling,” 1974] by director Shyam Benegal. In comparison to what had been going on in the Indian film industry, most of these new Indian films were trying to be socially conscious while still appealing to a large audience.

Seminarian: I'd like to hear more about the relationship between the independent movement you spearheaded and the Philippines commercial cinema.

Deocampo: It's seldom that I make a film, because much of my time is spent in administration work and on a lot of social action. As director of a film school, my sphere is cultural production. I've studied the careers of the seventies generation—Lino Broca, Ishmael Bernard, Kidlat Tahimik—trying to see what exactly *their* solutions were to the problems of the movie industry. I think I'm posing different solutions to those problems.

The Philippines industry is very commercial. It produces 120 films a year, and we're one of the few countries in the world where a local industry film can outgross American movies, even Stallone. Filipino films make a lot of money at the box office. We are introducing the whole idea of independent cinema and education to them, and they've been responding. I used to run the film school on five hundred dollars a year from the industry. Five hundred dollars! Now, after five years, I have a million pesos, around twenty-five thousand dollars. Still, running a film school on twenty-five thousand dollars doesn't sound like NYU!

George Stoney [filmmaker]: That's what it costs to go to NYU!

Deocampo: Advocacy is very much a part of the creative process. At the moment, the industry, which is currently in a state of crisis, is questioning the whole validity of independent cinema, and whether it's going to be productive. The good thing is that I can out-talk any bureaucrat and any producer. I confront them in meetings and at conferences, and tell them we need to train young filmmakers if we want the industry to survive.

At the same time, I always caution everyone that we independent filmmakers should not immediately try to become part of the industry. I have studied the case of Brazil, where they made it a requirement for every feature to be shown with a domestically produced short film. Ultimately all the commercial values filtered into those short "independent" films. We want to have more options than that! We want to pluralize the modes of articulation.

I am happy that at least the industry no longer accuses us of elitism and assumes our films will only survive in academe. Not everybody likes our independent films, but we show them regularly, and an audience is growing. During December, we show *only* Filipino films, for ten days. *Isaak* and films by five of my students were presented as a package during last December and were seen by millions of people. A lot of Asian countries are now beginning to look at this model.

So my position toward the movie industry is constructive. Before I left most recently, they delegated my institute to be the training school for the whole industry. [applause] That's a big burden, but I said, "So long as you give me the right budget, we'll start training the people." Right now, they're building us a building, which we hope will be the training center for Asia. I'm going to festivals to talk to donors. In Berlin, a studio closed down, and I was able to convince them to donate three Arriflex cameras, and a Steenbeck! Wow! And everything was free! We're asking UNESCO to have training programs with us.

The artistic integrity of this new Indian cinema was expressed in a couple of different ways. First, this cinema was rooted in particular regions. You have the Bengali cinema (Satyajit Ray, a precursor of the new Indian cinema, is the most famous instance), and you have cinemas from the many other regions (and languages). Shyam Benegal and other new Indian filmmakers made films in the Hindi language, which is the language of the Indian commercial cinema, but tried to deal with new themes and reach a new audience. Another precursor of the new cinema was Ritwick Ghatak, an unsung master of Indian cinema, at least in the West (and especially here in America). Ghatak was also a political filmmaker who derived his film technique from the theatrical tradition of Bengal. He became the vice principal of the Film Institute and was tremendously influential on a group of young Indian filmmakers, including Mani Kaul.

A Day's Bread caused quite a bit of controversy when it was first seen in India. It represents a departure in many different ways from what had been considered Indian film up to that point. It is a non-linear, non-narrative film based on a very short story by Mohan Rakish, who wrote in Hindi. The film does not have English subtitles, though there is very little dialogue. It's about a woman in a village in the Punjab who every day walks from the village to the highway with her husband's lunch, his daily bread. He's a bus driver who drives by a couple of times a day. He spends little time at home, and doesn't seem to care much about his wife (he has a mistress in another town, and does a lot of drinking with his buddies). One day the wife misses the bus and is distraught—after all, he provides her livelihood, and she's a traditional good Indian wife. This is when a lot of things begin to happen in her head, and the film is very much about the interior of her mind. The filmmaker starts commenting on her past in flashbacks, and she starts having fantasies.

Mani Kaul told me several things about the style of the film that I'd like to share: *A Day's Bread* is a film about time, and Mani Kaul deliberately plays with very extended shots. The film is about waiting; it is deliberately slow. Also, he used only two lenses in shooting this film: a 28mm lens and a 35mm lens—basically a wide-angle lens and a long lens. He did not employ the normal 50mm lens. At the beginning of the film, he employs the two lenses in the traditional way: that is, when you want a universal focus to bring all the action into play, you use a wide-angle lens with great depth of field, and when you want to get into more introspective material, you use the long lens and shorten the depth of field. But later on, when the flashbacks and the woman's fantasies come into play, he switches the lenses, so you're no longer sure *what* is actually happening and how much is fantasy or the filmmaker commenting on the past.

[*A Day's Bread* is shown and Kaul takes questions afterward.]

Kaul: I don't want to talk about this film. [laughter] It's so many years ago.
George Stoney: What was the *plot*? We had no idea what was going on!

Kaul: When I made *A Day's Bread*, I wanted to completely destroy any semblance of a realistic development, so that I could construct the film almost in the manner of a painter. In fact, I've been a painter and a musician. You *could* make a painting where the brush stroke is completely subservient to the figure, which is what the narrative is, in a film. But you can also make a painting stroke by stroke so that both the figure and the strokes are equal. I constructed *A Day's Bread* shot by shot, in this second way, so that the "figure" of the narrative is almost not taking shape in realistic terms. All the cuts are delayed, though there is a preempting of the generally even rhythm sometimes, when the film is a projection of the woman's fantasies.

My way of looking at women has changed over the years, as you will see in my later films. But it's not as if I saw this woman as pathetic. Indian women are very close to the idea of tradition, and this woman's actions implied much more than her just being subservient to *him*. Really, there is no plot at all in the film, except what Somi explained.

I was living as a "paying guest" with a family at the time I made *A Day's Bread*. At a dinner with a group of people, the man in the family was explaining, "Mani Kaul has made this film where there is a woman who goes to the bus stop and waits . . .," when his wife interrupted to say, "William, you're telling them the whole plot!" [laughter]

I must say, the idea of non-narrative has stayed with me all these years, and the closest to a conventional story I've made is a three-hour adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* which itself has a narrative that goes haywire in terms of what we recognize as "development."

Seminarian: The film is stunning to look at. Could you talk about the process of composing the images?

Kaul: I believe the camera is not something you're *seeing* through; it's the way your body extends into life. This is what I teach my students (I should tell you that they make very different films than I make; I never encourage them to make my kind of films). I want them to understand that when I move, I move differently; and when I sit, I sit differently. You have to learn to hold the camera with *your* rhythm, and not just have an idea in your head and try to illustrate that idea. You have to understand this, even when a cameraman is physically shooting the film. We all create differently, precisely because everyone's body extends differently. Your movements are like a dance.

I sincerely believe now that I can make a film without looking through the camera. In fact, I have a project in mind where I won't allow my cameraman to look through the camera. Looking through the camera obviously was important to me when I made *A Day's Bread*, because at that time I *thought* about organizing space. Since the European Renaissance, we have been trained to understand that organizing space, and especially a sacred space—a church or a temple—is what creates a sense of attention and therefore time. But now I believe that I should in fact place myself *in time*, and into a certain quality of attention, and let the space become whatever it becomes. It doesn't interest me anymore

to compose my shots, to frame them in any way. I wish to place myself in a particular sense of *time* and let *space* be, or grow. Nothing can go wrong—I know that—nothing can go wrong. When I shoot now, I have only a brief script. The film unfolds on the spot as I shoot.

Even when I am editing, my shots have mobility. In a film I will show you later there was one shot that traveled through all the reels. It was in the first reel first; then it went to the second, to the seventh, to the fifth—finally it found a place! And I know that when the shot finds a place, it has a quality of holding you. The position *is* its meaning.

Seminarian: When you were shooting *A Day's Bread*, did you mentally picture the shots and then teach the actors and the crew how to go about making those shots? Or did the specific shots come along as you rehearsed?

Kaul: With *A Day's Bread*, it was strange. I had a dream. In the dream, I saw a filmstrip lying on the floor, and on it I saw *all* the shots. So I had a very strong sense of what I was going to do.

But even at that time, locations were very important for me, as important as the actors. When I go to a certain place, like when I came here [the 1994 Flaherty Seminar was held at Wells College in Aurora, New York], immediately the location itself automatically suggests certain images and movements.

At that time, I used to *think*, then go to a location. But now I don't want to think. I don't want to think, "Now *this* is the scene; therefore she should be in the foreground and somebody should be in the background." Actually I've never done that kind of thing, not even in *A Day's Bread*.

Seminarian: Despite your unstructured, intuitive approach, you're still making feature films, which usually require a lot of organization. What kind of relationship do you have with your crew and with funders. I'm imagining you on location with everyone going crazy . . .

Kaul: No, no, no. I have a wonderful relationship with my crew; they love working with me. Really! Funders, I don't know. [laughter]

This question has been repeated for the last twenty-five years: how have I continued to raise money to make films like this? It's a big mystery. But each time, I am able to raise the money, and every year I make this kind of film. I've had no problem in finding funds. I can't explain this to you. I tell you, I know of no other similar situation, at least in my country.

[The discussion continues after the screening of *Dhrupad*. "Dhrupad" is a form of Indian classical music.]

Kaul: In *Dhrupad*, I tried to give a straightforward introduction to the music of the two musicians you see in the film. It is a music without notation. In a sense, it is not even possible to notate this music; it is too complex. There are continuously ascending and descending tones, and it is impossible to say that



Mani Kaul (facing camera) at the 1994 Flaherty Seminar.

Then, after a month, she stopped speaking about her compulsion. For fifteen days she said nothing. Finally, she asked, “Do you think I do it too much?” And he said, “Yes, I think you do.” And it was corrected forever, and her main music was never disturbed.

Seminarian: Would you talk a little about the importance of meditation in preparing to play the music, or perhaps to shoot film?

Kaul: I’ll tell you something, if you don’t mind. This word “meditation,” which is mystified in the West, has no meaning in India. There is simply a question of attention, of a quality of attention. The word *dhyan* literally means attention. There is a dichotomy between Being and this quality of attention. Being cannot free itself from certain sorrows; it cannot free itself from its past, or from problems and unhappiness, because Being is full of them. The idea of transcending them and reaching a state where there’s no sorrow is all a dream. You can talk about it, but until the end of your life, your sorrows will pursue you.

However, *attention* can be free. The quality of attention can be free. The teacher transforms that quality of attention—of listening, of talking, of seeing, of feeling, of touching—until there is no sorrow, no fear, no anger, no desire. In this music, and perhaps in some of my films, one has this quality of attention.

Seminarian: I wonder if you would like to comment on the more political vi-

sions that we've been seeing in other films this week, visions that are angry at times, and that are desirous of shaking up or disbanding an established order.

Kaul: I'm very proud of the fact that I make my kind of film. But quite a few of my friends in India make political films, including films in which people are angry. I sometimes help with these films in ways I can. It would be horrible if we had to make only one kind of film. *All* that is happening is real, and *everything* desires expression. All kinds of engagements are valid and legitimate as long as they keep within a certain discipline and reach certain truths of perception. They're perfect. No problem. I enjoy films that are *completely* different from mine.

Michael Grillo: I'd like to ask about the innate cultural implications of basically a Western technology: cinema. I don't mean simply the traditional history of cinema, but rather its language: the optical system inherited from the Italian Renaissance, and the narrative system based on nineteenth century novels. Given your cultural background and the nature of what you are making, where do you run up against the limitations of these culturally loaded technologies? And how do you resist them? Somi described one instance—your use of lenses in the opposite-of-conventional way—but are there other instances where you turn this Western cultural language into your own vernacular?

Kaul: I speak English, but it's not my language, and so I am liable to make mistakes while using this language. While I'm speaking, I'm not consciously following any grammar, but there *is* a very strict grammar to English and my slightest mistake will be detected, and you'll know I don't know English completely. It is my opinion that cinema is *not* a language, whereas Indian classical music *is* a language. Why do I say that? There are strict grammatical rules concerning Indian music, and if a musician goes off, his deviation will immediately be evident. But while he sings, he's not concerned with that grammar at all, even though it is *so* strict that the slightest mistake would be detected. He goes into an intuitive singing, which is absolutely correct grammatically *and* perfectly subjective. *This* I would call a language. Cinema is nothing like that. Cinema is information, and in particular films, information is saturated or, as is true in my films sometimes, rarefied.

It is true that the camera is a product of the European principle of perspective, of convergence—which is basically an optical illusion, because in reality parallel lines *don't* converge: you can shut your eyes and walk and you won't come to a convergence point. During the Renaissance, the idea of convergence produced great work. The same is true of Western symphonic music, which is very beautiful (and in a sense, convergent), and of narrative film, which creates climactic “convergences.” Earlier chronicles and epics didn't have the convergences that modern narratives do. And it is perfectly legitimate if young filmmakers would rather explore non-narrative ideas. In fact, it's a tragedy that we don't yet have an instrument that can deal with the non-narrative forms we have in our hearts.

these tones follow this or that note. The tones are always traveling in the dissonant areas *between* notes.

I was especially interested in how the Indian musicians transmit the tradition of their music orally. A student can study this music for years and never write a sentence in a notebook. You can only learn the music by continuously listening and practicing until you begin to elaborate it in your own way. The secret of the survival of the traditions of Indian music is deeply linked with opening the disposition of the disciple, the pupil.

I'm very closely associated with the family in the film, and one day I was sitting with Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar, the elder musician, and four students, who were singing a phrase that he had sung and had asked them to repeat. One by one, the four sang the phrase, and then he asked me, "What do you think?" I told him they all made mistakes: in some sense they changed the phrase that he had given them. He asked me gently, "Did you notice that they made different mistakes?" I said, "Yes, they made different mistakes." He said, "Well, the only crack through which you can look into the nature and disposition of the pupil is how he insists upon making a certain kind of mistake. Far from getting impatient with him, you should try and understand why he repeatedly insists on making *that* mistake. When he is *not* making that mistake, he is imitating me, and he's nobody. When he's making the mistake, he's himself, and you must build on *that*."

In this music, individual musicians must express their own individual selves *as they are*. That's the secret of this tradition: if you wrote down phrases and forced people to learn only a certain way of playing, the tradition would die.

Another anecdote: Nancy Lash, an American disciple of Ustad lived in a village for five years in order to be close to Ustad's ashram. She was very devoted. Every day she wanted a lesson. She would say, "Ustad, lesson!" Ustad would say, "No, I've spoken to you today, I'm not going to speak again for fifteen days—you keep on practicing." It takes time to adapt a lesson into yourself.

Nancy had a habit, as many new students do, of plucking *chikari*—a sound you make when you complete a musical phrase—much too often. When the young students play, their playing does not have that continuous ring that you hear when great masters play, and there's a void. The student tends to play this other sound excessively, to fill the void. For some, it's very difficult to get out of this habit.

So he sat there, hearing her make this sound all the time. But he remained silent about it, waiting for *her* to realize what she was doing. After two months, she said, "Ustad, I have this bad habit." He realized that if he said, "Yes, you're playing the rhythm notes too much," her whole attention would go towards controlling this problem, and her main music would suffer. So he said, "No, no, Nancy, it's fine! There's no problem." Then next time, she says, "Ustad, I do this *too much*." And he says, "No, no!" Every day that month she says, "I have this habit; I must get out of it!" And he says, "There's *no* problem. You don't have to get out of anything!"