

Xanadu at Basunti 13th-19th October 2010

This October CinemaXanadu will be curating a series of films in Basunti. CinemaXanadu (www.CinemaXanadu.com) is a film club based in a small privately owned cinema in London. The club focuses on films that are outside of the mainstream tradition; an important part of members' enjoyment is adequate time for discussion, lead by Prof. Howard Jacobs.

Indian cinema is, of course, highly developed, with an immense number of accomplished films, ranging from the acclaimed arthouse cinema of Satyajit Ray to the commercial successes of the Bollywood and Tamil studios. For many Europeans, however, Indian cinema is, for the most part, as unreachable as is much of her social structure and spiritual life. For this reason, we have chosen to focus on European explorations of India in the hope that, through the mediation of a number of European cinematic masters, we may deepen our understanding and appreciation of Indian traditions and culture.

Phantom India (1969) and Calcutta (1968-9),

We open with a selection of the acclaimed documentaries of **Louis Malle**, the distinguished French director of features such as *Lift to the Scaffold* (1957), *The Lovers* (1958), *Lacombe, Lucien* (1974) and *Atlantic City* (1980).

Malle wrote about his experience in making the documentaries

I was so amazed by India – it was my first trip, but I had always been interested in Indian religions. I knew India would be a shock, but it was much more so than I expected. After those two months I realized that although India was impossible to understand for a foreigner – it was so opaque – yet I was so completely fascinated by it that I would have to come back.

and

I tried to understand Indian culture and Indian religions rationally. Of course, in a matter of days I realised how silly it was. Indians have such a completely different approach to everything – for instance, how they deal with death. The Indian way is the opposite of our Judaeo-Christian tradition.

The professional cameraman employed by Malle was disconcerted by the way the people they were filming looked straight at camera. Malle responded:

Why should I tell them not to look at us since we're intruders. First, I don't speak their language; just a few of them speak a little English. We're the intruders disturbing them. They don't know what we're doing, so it's perfectly normal that they look at us. To tell them not to look at us, it's the beginning of mise-en-scène. It's what I resent about so many documentaries where film-makers arrive from somewhere and start by

telling the people, 'Pretend we're not here.' It is the basic lie of most documentaries, this naïve mise-en-scène, the beginning of the distortion of the truth. Very quickly I realized that these looks at the camera were both disturbing and true, and we should never pretend we weren't intruders.

Malle organised his material into a documentary initially released in cinemas, *Calcutta* (1968-9) and a seven-part television series (*Phantom India*, 1969).



Calcutta

The first episode of the series is sub-titled *The Impossible Camera*, and Malle specifically structures it to explore the role of the camera and the people using it when trying to understand a culture. As a foreigner, he is fascinated by – and films – vultures feeding on a buffalo's corpse. The Indians ignore the sight because for them it is an everyday scene. On the first day of filming, he informs us, one woman fled from the camera. The camera was "stealing herself from her".

Malle always attempts to look beneath the veneer of Western pre-conceptions to see if there is another truth.

A good example was a religious ceremony in a little temple near a village and after the ceremony the faithful were giving money and food to the beggars. But when I talked to them afterwards I realized those beggars were not really beggars, they were Brahmins. They were members of the higher caste, the priest caste, and were, by Indian standards quite well off, but it was part of the ritual to give money and food to the Brahmins. We Westerners thought we were filming beggars and actually it was something else. It was typical of what always happened to us in India; we thought we were filming a reality and behind this reality there was another one. The truth was always more complicated and devious.

Click here to watch Malle's musings on caste

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwMx3FAN8qQ&feature=related>

India Matri Buhmi (1959)(India, Motherland)

Our next film is a 'lost' film of the Italian auteur Roberto Rossellini. The film is much lauded in histories of cinema as being one of the earliest to blend documentary with fiction. As in his NeoRealist movies, Rossellini employed non professional actors in this film.

The film is divided into four stories which move between fiction and documentary, draw a geographical survey of India and develop from youth to middle to old age, while charting various transactions between humans and



nature. The film has four basic themes: life is hard, toil never ceases, rewards are modest or nonexistent and extreme realism is required for survival.

In all but the second episode, nature is represented by animals. In the first, there is a sequence showing elephants working and then being taken to a river to be bathed and scrubbed by their mahouts. Epitomising a utopian harmony between

men and animals, it is considered by the American film scholar Jonathon Rosenbaum to be 'one of the most hypnotic, magical, beautiful sequences in all of cinema.'



It becomes evident that the narrator of this segment is one of the mahouts; we are shown his first acquaintance with a young woman at a travelling puppet show, his request to her father to marry her and, ten months after the wedding, that both she - and one of the elephants - have become pregnant.

In the second episode, a man-made lake represents nature (cf Maharana Pratap Sagar, the 40 km long manmade lake that Basunti overlooks). A labourer, one

of the 35,000 strong work force that created the dam, prepares to leave. His wife is sad and angry at having to abandon their home just five years after they were ousted from East Bengal as a result of Partition. This episode, concerned with water, death, migration and marital discord, is as suffused with melancholy as is the first with jubilation.

The third episode is narrated by an 80 year old man, whose contemplative life in the countryside is interrupted by the arrival of trucks carrying men prospecting for iron. Most of the birds and animals flee; the old man lights a fire to provoke a tiger to leave before the men set out to hunt and kill him. The final episode (this time narrated in the third person) tells of a monkey, caught between human and animal worlds. His master dies from heat stroke and, having warded off the vultures that came to feed on his corpse, the monkey travels back to the city where it continues to perform and collect money out of habit, not knowing what to do with the coins that are offered.

Rossellini's film moves between a kind of visual prose and visual poetry and it is difficult to understand why this film is so difficult to find. While we are privileged to have acquired a copy, it must be admitted the subtitles are risible. Nonetheless the film in the version we have still contains much to delight its audience.

(Adapted from Jonathon Rosenbaum: *The Creation of the World: Rossellini's India Matri Bhumi*, in *Outsider Films on India 1950- 1990*, ed Shanay Jhaveri, The Shoestring Publisher, Mumbai 2009)

Shakespeare Wallah (1965)

Not being a costume drama adapted from a classic work of literature, it's tempting to see **Shakespeare Wallah**, an early Merchant Ivory film from 1965, as a more personal film from the director/producer team and their screen writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, that holds the key to themes that they continue to explore in their films.

The Buckingham family are an English family who travel around India with their acting company, performing Shakespeare for Indian royals, for schools, for anyone who will put them on, but times are changing. Contracting engagements is getting more difficult, the company finding schools crowding English out of the syllabus with more emphasis on sports and the public being more interested in the growing popularity and glamour of the Indian movie industry. With actors to pay, some difficult decisions need to be made, particularly regarding their youngest daughter Lizzie (Felicity Kendal), who is involved romantically with an Indian man she has met, Sanju (Shashi Kapoor).



Their first major success, **Shakespeare Wallah** has all the hallmarks we have come to expect from the Merchant Ivory team. As in many of their films from this through to **The Europeans** to their latest film **Le Divorce**, the theme of cultural differences is explored. The Buckingham's daughter Lizzie was born in India and lived her whole life there, so what does national identity mean if you have never seen the country of your nationality? The cultural differences between English and Indian attitudes are also explored, between those who are thoroughly English – the Buckingham's, those who are thoroughly Indian – the Indian movie star Manjula, and those who don't fully belong to either tradition – Lizzie and Sanju, who create a new identity that draws from both cultures.

The film is clearly inspired by the real-life circumstances of the Kendal family's touring acting company, who all appear in the film as the Buckingham's – Geoffrey Kendal, Laura Liddel, Felicity Kendal and her sister Jennifer Kendal – and the circumstances of the Buckingham family (is the royal sounding name just a co-incidence?) mirror the wider political and social changes going on in India, a country moving away from imperialist rule towards finding its own identity. Merchant Ivory's take on the situation appears to be somewhat unfavourable or pessimistic towards India's capacity for self-determination, seeing in the rejection of 'The Buckingham's' the loss of a more civilised tradition – turning its back on a great culture that gave birth to Shakespeare, that seeks to educate and reform and replacing it with what is portrayed as the rather vulgar popularity of colourful Bollywood musicals and sport and a rather boorish attitude towards high-culture. It's a very old-fashioned and somewhat elitist attitude, but entirely in-line with the rather reactionary tenor of later Merchant Ivory productions.



But there may be some degree of compromise or mutual understanding reached in the characters of Lizzie and Sanju. Yes, perhaps the Buckingham's have had their day and perhaps the new India is vulgar by comparison, but there appears to be hope in a newer generation, the promise of a mutual attraction between the demure, simple charm of Felicity Kendal's English Rose with the passionate spontaneity of Shashi Kapoor's Sanju that could lead to something grander. The film however stops short of delivering any such optimistic realisation, indicating that Kipling's maxim that "*East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet*", may well be true.

Noel Megahey, in Home Cinema

<http://homecinema.thedigitalfix.co.uk/content.php?contentid=12561>

Partition (1987)

A brilliantly executed and intense drama based around the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the transfer of power from British to Indian hands. Based on Saadat Hussan Manto's famous short story about partition, Ken McMullen's film (co written with Tariq Ali) focuses on the historical footnote that inmates of lunatic asylums were also transferred - Muslims to asylums in Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India. The film is set in both an asylum on the border and the conference rooms of the rulers, and the same actors play both the rulers and the inmates of the asylum, with events in the asylum mirroring the actions of the ruling order. The film's structure is complemented by superb cinematography and set design and the cast list reads like a who's who of Indian acting talent.

The very choice of actors is part of *Partition's* critical project, the way it wants to take issue with the depiction of British/Indian history in popular British films and TV series of the eighties like *Heat and Dust*, *A Passage to India* (what was David Lean thinking when he put Alec Guinness in blackface?), *Gandhi*, and *The Jewel*

in the Crown (Salman Rushdie famously accused *Jewel* of outright racism.) In particular, Zohra Segal, who plays what Ali and McMullen call the Everywoman figure in *Partition*, had a significant second-tier role in *Jewel*, and Roshan Seth was most famous for playing Jinnah in *Gandhi*. In fact, Ali has stated how with Seth they wanted to “break him loose” from the kind of film represented by *Gandhi*. *Partition* is a British production, so it’s not truly an example of post-colonialist “writing back” from the margins to the historical centre of imperial power, but Tariq Ali’s South Asian origins (he was born and grew up in Pakistan) and his long-standing anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti-authoritarian, and firmly socialist stance (he has a long association with the *New Left Review*) all underpin the determination with which the film contests the excuses, obfuscations, and simple bad faith of conventional, mainstream depictions.

Partition refuses to partake in the common nostalgic indulgence in the history of Britain’s presence in India. Instead, it’s quite scathing of Britain’s responsibility for the mayhem in the subcontinent it left behind.

In *Partition* we may be present at the centres of power and decision-making but the film offers above all a view from below, and that’s where its sympathy lies. “Everywoman,” the humble sweeper, is our guide and narrator, there in the opening sequence in the lunatic asylum, first wiping the mirror (mirrors recur throughout the film as surfaces that reflect reality but that also can diffract and distort it to the advantage of the powerful) and then sweeping up the dust from the courtyard. She’s also present as a cleaning woman in the civil servants’ world, framed to emphasise her exclusion from the setting that makes decisions about and effects change in her world. She is for them (but not for us, who hear her 13th commentary) a silent witness, dusting the piano in a reception hall, cleaning the Venetian blinds, or outside in the hall on her knees while inside the division of her country is bargained out.

Although the name doesn’t appear in the film itself, the way Ali and McMullen, when discussing the film, refer to Zohra Segal’s character as “Everywoman” is a clear enough sign that we’re not dealing here with fully and consistently developed characters of individual psychology. Indeed, many of the characters remain unnamed. Rather, they are “types” familiar from Brechtian drama, figures that act as an embodiment of a particular thematic point or representative of a particular class. But this doesn’t mean that there is anything dry or academic about the characters – or, in most cases, the multiple characters – that the actors here play. *Partition* is full of moments of emotion, drama, humour, irony, pathos, and passion, and the acting is a rich and rewarding combination of an involving appeal to our emotions and a witty prodding of our intellect. It’s a rare film that has as raw and visceral performance as Saeed Jaffrey’s “What have you done to my world?” monologue.

Partition firmly places itself in the line of the Brecht-influenced politically *and* aesthetically radical cinema of the sixties and seventies. What is at stake for the film is that the viewer is brought – in the tradition of Brechtian drama – to reflect on the events as and after they unfold, and the style McMullen establishes for the film works to support that. That style is a rich and invigorating mix of different elements: elaborately choreographed camera movements, long takes, trompe-l'oeil effects with mirrors, black-and-white and colour footage, voiceover and contemporary audio recordings (including Nehru's famous "two minutes to midnight" speech), and documentary footage that is often intersected by black bars representing the bars of the asylum.



The central scene of the film, and as fine an example as there is of its combined beauty and intelligence, is a ten-minute take, a tour-de-force which takes Roshan Seth from his one character as a civil servant to another as an asylum inmate. Starting in the civil servants' setting the camera fixes on Seth's unmoving head and facial expression as he moves back through what was shortly before a mirror behind us, down a dark tunnel that forms the link between the two worlds and marks the point at which Seth's Western suit is exchanged off-frame for a simple "native" garment, and then out into the brightly lit asylum courtyard. Here, he moves away from the camera and lies down on the ground in the corpse position while Everywoman (who has also come from the civil servants' setting, where she was cleaning the Venetian blinds) moves around sweeping the dust over everyone. This is the film's answer to the claims of a new beginning, that "now everything is stripped bare" with the rending of the veil that the British maintained between Indians and their own land. Here is the symbolic death (with a reminder of the literal deaths of hundreds of thousands) of an idea of a single united India and a sign of the suffering that is inflicted from above on ordinary Indians.



IAN JOHNSTON

<http://www.notcoming.com/reviews/partition/>