Gopalan dignifies the audience of Indian cinema (and indeed all genre films) by recognizing that they are expert viewers who are complicit in the ‘formal’ nature of the genre. She writes as a cinephilic who recognizes and respects fellow cinephiles, and her book deserves recognition and wide acclaim. In Gopalan’s words:

The selection of films in this book illustrates the links between local and global cinematic styles, a selection infused by cinephilia rather than by a hypernationalistic methodology of inclusion. Not only are these films ideally suited to exploring the tension between local and global cinematic styles as a particular mode of double articulation, but they also demonstrate a confidence in film-making that is most visible in the strengthening of local conventions even as they overtly engage with the structuring of anticipation and pleasure found in genre films. Highlighting Indian cinema’s indirectness, in-between-ness, its propensity for digression and interruptions, the book modulates reading strategies inflected by psychoanalysis and narratology, moulding them to sharpen our understanding of this cinema. Through close readings of films, each chapter of the book explores the ways in which interruptions are yoked to the structuring of global genres and how my own reading strategies inherited from film theory accommodate local difference. (p 28)

Hence Gopalan embraces, and asks readers to embrace, the detours and dead-ends that are often part of the Bollywood film journey.

Each of the four central chapters considers the interruptions in relation to a different film genre. Chapter Two examines avenging women in Indian popular cinema, and in particular Gopalan scrutinizes the rape-revenge genre. She incorporates work by Laura Mulvey, Carol Clover, Joan Riviere, Mary Ann Doane, and Sigmund Freud to discuss the significance of the representations of violence towards women in films such as Pratighat/Retribution (N. Chandra, 1987), Insaaft Ka Tarazu/Scales of Justice (B.R. Chopra, 1980), and Police Lock Up (Kodi Ramakrishnan, 1992). More importantly, she focuses on representations of powerful, angry Indian women who take charge of their own fates and manufacture their own justice when the (patrarchal) state has failed them. For readers familiar with Death Wish (Michael Winner, 1974) and its follow-ups, I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1977), The Accused (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988), and similar films that have received substantial critical attention (particularly by feminist film scholars), Gopalan provides new insights into representations of rape and its aftermath. She refers to the interruptions that occur during a sex scene (or a scene displaying sexual violence) as coitus interruptus (p.39), and offers insights into India’s censorship laws and how film-makers negotiate them.

Chapter Three includes a lengthy discussion of the function and the symbolism of the intermission in Indian popular cinema, but it focuses primarily on J. P. Dutta’s westerns. Gopalan’s examination of Ghulami/Slavery (1985) and Batwara/Partition (1989) includes discussion about caste prejudice and injustice in India, which lends significance to Dutta’s work, and extends and makes national this global genre. Film scholars interested in westerns and other male-dominated films will be interested to read about Indian cinema’s take on this highly popular genre. Of course, other national cinemas—such as the Italian Spaghetti Westerns—have also made their mark on this genre, and Gopalan makes mention of them. Anyone who has read texts such as Sexguns and Society (Will Wright, 1975) or West of Everything (Jane Tompkins, 1992) will find this chapter mandatory reading. Gopalan notes the homoeroticism of such a homosocial genre, and incorporates the work of well-known scholars in the field such as Eve Sedgwick, Steve Neale, Laura Mulvey, and Paul Willemen. Filmic representations of masculinities have drawn significant attention in recent years and masculinity studies is a growing area of film scholarship. Gopalan stakes a claim in the discipline with her insightful comments about J. P. Dutta’s body of work. Almost as a bonus, Gopalan includes an examination of the use of the train and car in Indian cinema, and draws on the work of Lynne Kirby and others. Once again, this demonstrates Gopalan’s breadth of knowledge about film culture and film scholarship.

Chapter Four concentrates on Mani Ratnam’s Nayakan (1987)—a Tamil film loosely based on The Godfather (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). Here Gopalan discusses the Indian gangster film and issues such as masculinity, class, justice, revenge, commodity fetishism, narrative verisimilitude, and Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘writing’ the nation state. She also includes comments about the use of the automobile and the figure of the flâneur, and she manages to do all of this without appearing to digress unnecessarily or let her argument lose momentum. Chapter Five covers similar territory in a discussion of memory and gangsters in Vidhu Vinod’s Parinda/Caged Bird (1989).

_Cinema of Interruptions_ is framed by an excellent Introduction and Conclusion, which explicate Gopalan’s stance on the interruptions that are integral to Indian popular cinema. She writes stylishly, displaying the breadth of her knowledge about Indian film and film theory in general, and her ideas are both original and well supported by her arguments and examples. Gopalan deserves congratulations for this text. Read this book and then present yourself at your local cinema or video store and revel in the glorious discontinuity of Indian popular cinema.

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MICHAEL RABIGER

DIRECTING: FILM TECHNIQUES AND AESTHETICS


REVIEWED BY R.A. GOODRICH

Apprenticing the Film Director: A Scriptwriting Perspective

If nothing else, this third edition of Michael Rabiger’s _Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics_ reinforces one immediate impression: this is a highly comprehensive manual of almost seven hundred pages, principally aimed at tertiary students and wrought from decades of his experience as a film-maker and teacher. Yet it remains a text which has received little formal and certainly no critical attention from cinematic and educational journals alike since its first ap-
pearance in 1989. Why? What is it about this text, a text which forms one of the key references for half a generation of apprentice film and video-makers, that invites so little discussion? Are its assumptions so much a part of cinematic and video practice that they have virtually become invisible to us? By concentrating upon one persistent theme within the text—that of scriptwriting where ‘first-rate’ examples, laments Rabiger, prove ‘extremely rare’ (p.129) and the vast majority succumb to ‘static scenes in which people verbalize what they think and feel’ (p.133)—we may in the brief space allocated to us begin to develop an answer.

Certainly, Rabiger’s strongly practical concerns in the overwhelming majority of his eight parts—forty-seven chapters—maintain a clear focus upon the role of the director, cinematic ‘language’ or ‘grammar’, screen-writing processes and narrative development, key tasks and skills associated with pre-production, production, and post-production, and entering the industry itself. Consider, for example, the way in which he construes the process of scripting for cinema. Rabiger repeatedly warns readers that the ‘verbal blueprint’ that is the very nature of the screenplay is ‘designed to seed a nonliterary, organic, and experiential process’ (p.129) and is not ‘built theatrically around the moment’ since it is ‘primarily behavioral’ (p.131). Hence, Rabiger exhorts, ‘try to substitute action for every issue handled verbally’ (p.137); indeed, try to re-conceive scenes, where ‘nothing would be missed by listening with eyes closed’, ‘to include behavior, action, and interaction’ and to ‘prune the dialogue by 80%’ (p.138). Even in the midst of emphasizing writing (scripts) as process not product, he re-iterates these points:

To avoid creating filmed theater, try turning conversations into behavioral exchanges that a deaf person could follow. This means writing as though for a modern, but silent cinema. Not only should dialogue be minimal, storytelling itself should use images to drive the story forward ...

Characters in a movie should be seen in action; their actions should give clues to their inner tensions. When they speak it should be to act on each other. They should not speak for the sake of realism or atmosphere, and never because their author needs to speak through them ... Dialogue is best when it is a form of action, and sparse dialogue raises words to high significance. (pp.151-152)

Of course, the extent of scripted speech within the four major forms of the performing arts varies markedly, as the following proportional chart attempts to depict:

| cinema   | <-----visual-----> |
| theatre  | <-----visual-----> |
| television| <-----visual-----> |
| radio    | <------------- verbal ------------> |

Yet this is curiously overlooked by Rabiger. So, unless we borrow the narrative technique of the voice-over, we cannot describe or explain characters, plot, and/or settings instantaneously: a script can only progressively unfold in linear fashion (no matter what chronological and visual shifts happen to be signaled implicitly or explicitly). In other words, scriptwriters have the task of continuously demonstrating or embodying what is happening (to whom, when, where, why, and so on). This basically arises from the fact that, as scriptwriters, we can invite our audience to generalize, but we ourselves do not generalize because we do not speak; we are not implicit narrators or ‘voices’ in the way novelists can be, because our audience is not being asked to read and reflect en route, but to witness events which are moving irreversibly in time. Yet having said that, it does not preclude intensive use of speech in any of the performing media, since speech undertakes a specific set of tasks directed at actions and objects, sometimes perceptible and sometimes not perceptible to the audience, not only in dialogue (an exchange with others—duologue, being self and one other), but also as soliloquy (self-addressing oneself) or as monologue (self-addressing others). Recent European practice from, say, Andrei Tarkovsky’s Stalker (1979) or Ingmar Bergman’s Fanny and Alexander (1983), to Alexander Sukurov’s Russian Ark (2001) has as much to teach us as does the Anglo-American practice generally favoured by Rabiger.

However, Rabiger’s belief that we ought to ‘replace dialogue with action’ and, where we cannot, we should ‘contract dialogue ... even by a syllable’ when reviewing first drafts (p.186), again falls short of providing its readership with a sufficiently developed rationale. As speakers, even the apprentice film-maker will have more or less articulate intuitions about language. All of us, in quite practical ways, have a sharp appreciation of the various media by which language is conveyed, especially the spoken, the gestural, and the written variety. As scriptwriters, particularly scriptwriters who practice the craft of writing for spoken delivery in cinema, we are all aware of the need to translate from one medium into another. And in that act of translation, most of us are also aware how often the written has to supplement its characteristic features or properties in order to signal an equivalence for the spoken (stage directions and screen treatments are only the most obvious, larger scale techniques at our disposal).

The more we focus upon the features of the media involved and the less we diverge into matters of style—as Rabiger is tempted to do with comments such as ‘Dialogue is best when it is a form of action, and sparse dialogue raises words to high significance’ (p.138)—the more likely we are to identify the differences between writing and speech and therefore what is fundamentally involved in translating between them. In basic terms, for all the ways in which they can resemble each other, writing and speaking operate quite differently in terms of space and time. The distance or displacement in space and time between, say, the individual, isolated scriptwriter and his or her reader(s) is totally compressed in the case of a speaker and his or her listener(s), whether in life or on film. In other words, there is virtually no time and space difference in face-to-face encounters of speakers and listeners. Consequently, if there is literally no time and space, then unrehersed, spontaneous speech is constantly improvised, fragmented and rapid, and, to that extent, tends to operate as a direct expression...
of our ongoing thought processes and physical activities. Perhaps for that reason alone, Rabiger’s belief that ‘Film is a reproduction of consciousness’ which functions ‘through a texture of seeing, hearing, and moving’ (p.49) holds true for so many of us.

Expressed in different terms, speech is usually anchored to the moment, even when recounting events in the past (‘narrative’) or anticipating those in the future (‘hypothetical’), a moment where our attention is involved with the particular circumstances of the utterance. This, in turn, means that when speaking, it is often enough for us to ‘point’ verbally at what we can commonly take or see for granted, so we—and thus our scripted characters—therefore make heavy use of pronouns (I ... you ... she, he, it ...), the most rapid and economic way of making references. But, in so doing, we have of course to forego the descriptive (the modification system of language), implicitly identified by Rabiger with the theatrical and the literary, since pronouns simply cannot be described—unlike the ‘content’ words in our language (or the noun and verb systems underpinning ideas and events). This does not mean that speech is the preserve of the inarticulate: its complexity lies in the way we thread utterances together as part of what it means to ‘hold the floor’ in dialogue. Mere exhortations by Rabiger to reduce verbiage without explanation to his readers of how wording works are in danger of becoming repetitively empty invocations.

Let us consider Rabiger’s somewhat constricted practical pre-occupations in a slightly different way. His emphasis is constantly focused upon procedural knowledge: the business of ‘knowing how to do or make such-and-such’ with only occasional allusions to what facts one needs to know; the matter of ‘knowing that such-and-such is the case’, largely drawn from reflections upon his own experience. Each major facet previously listed—the director’s role, screenwriting practice, and so forth—is anchored in sets of summaries (‘checklists’) at the end of each of the eight major parts of the manual. These, in turn, are interspersed with chapter-length exercises of the pedagogic kind in the case of writing scenes (pp.182-187) or working with playscripts, preferably the short Pinteresque kind (pp.311-318). Here, it may be added, Rabiger’s praise for Harold Pinter, writer for stage, screen and radio, and his deft exploitation of the ‘disparity’ between ‘what characters say’ and what they mean (p. 311), leaves unsaid the means by which screenwriters draw upon the informing cues, conventions, and contexts of spoken discourse. Also, for constant reference, there are two appendices comprising, firstly, a set of ‘outcomes assessment forms’—which ‘looks in detail at what students can do, rather than what they know’ (p.617), but not, we might add, both—and, secondly, a ‘form and aesthetics questionnaire’ that supposedly ‘encapsulates the artistic process’ (p.621) as it moves from initial conception and selected genre towards narrative resolution and intended impact. Rabiger is redolent with so many things to do that it would keep even an assiduous student audience occupied for several semesters.

However, in the final analysis, the practical virtues of this text might tempt us to speed too quickly past its underlying tensions which are manifested in so many curious ways. Time and again, Rabiger draws his readers’ attention to the role of the audience:

‘... dramatic art can only fulfill its potential if it evokes universals. It is insufficient to simulate reportage; it must evoke the audience’s co-creation. (p. 15)

Even in initial summaries aimed at securing the student reader’s ‘artistic identity’, what it is to ‘entertain’ an audience is glossed as, amongst other things:

‘ ... Giving the audience mental, emotional, and imaginative work to do ...’

‘ ... Inviting the audience to co-create the movie ...’

‘ ... Using screen language that suggests, not just shows, so your audience can imagine (p. 42).’

Yet in all such appeals to the role of the audience, nowhere does Rabiger confront his readers with what distinguishes cinema from other narrative art forms. Without a narrator’s voice telling the story, film director and screenwriter alike feign to show it, shot after shot after shot. Cinema, unlike stylistic choices open to scripting elsewhere, has a peculiarly heavy reliance upon its audience making inferences about causal connections if narrative coherence is to hold. Furthermore, because Rabiger holds that the viewer can be invited by a film director or screenwriter to become a co-creator of a film and its meaning (or ‘universals’), then to what extent has he become caught in a bizarre conundrum? If the viewer’s act of interpretation leads to true or false beliefs about the film, then when his or her beliefs are true, the film already possesses the properties attributed to it by that act, so making the ‘co-creation’ redundant. When his or her beliefs are false, the film in question does not have those properties and will not suddenly gain them by virtue of false attributions. Worse still, if the viewer’s act of interpretation by contrast can never lead to true or false beliefs about the film, then how can it ever coherently allow for ‘co-creation’ to occur in the first place?

Perhaps for the more critically cognizant reader, these and other tensions might be traced to a text whose intense emphases upon character and plot are immersed in our culture’s deep dependence upon Aristotelian frames of reference and which are never quite integrated with the thematic or perspectival framework pervading the ‘aesthetic choices’ proposed in the fourth part of Rabiger’s manual (pp.191-248). It is as if the ‘event-based’ scripting lauded throughout the text remains irreconciled with its ‘idea-driven’ counterpart.

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