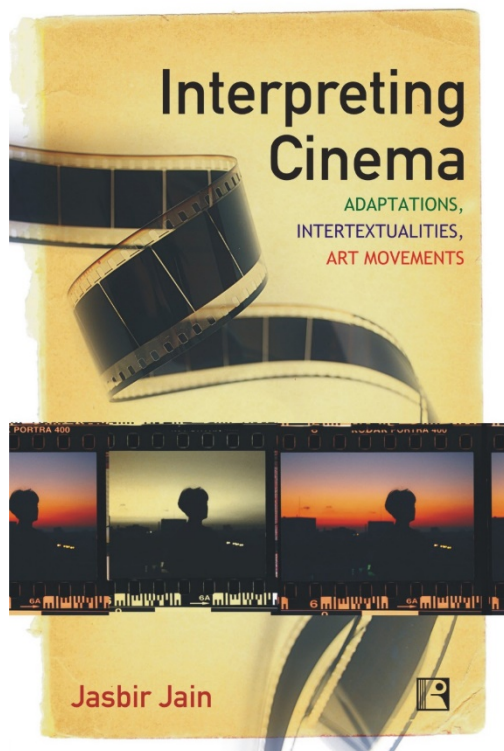


Book Review

Interpreting Cinema: Adaptations, Intertextualities, Art Movements by Jasbir Jain

Jaipur & Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2020
298 pages; Rs. 1295/- ISBN 9788131611425



Reviewed by
Somdatta Mandal

Former Professor of English, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, W.B.

Email: somdattam@gmail.com

Film studies now has become a full-fledged discipline with several theoretical approaches lined up behind it and has a strong foothold in serious academics. Films are now read from various perspectives as text, as a serious novel is read over and over again, since every successive reading/viewing yields additional insights into their meaning. *Interpreting Cinema: Adaptations, Intertextualities, Art Movements* by eminent academician and scholar Jasbir Jain is a collection of sixteen essays which explores the academic aspect of film studies and has a wide range of

primarily Hindi films for discussion crossing decades, genres and cultures. The essays in this volume take up adaptations from fiction and drama both from within the same culture and across cultures and explore the relationships between cultures and mediums. There are individual essays on relationships, theoretical frameworks and art movements, reflecting the intimate connection between critical theory and filmmaking.

The first chapter 'Interpreting Cinema: A Retrospect and an Analysis' provides information on how we can read cinema. Focussing on the issues of the usage of time and space, camera-eye, light, sound that are discussed by western film critics like Andre Bazin and others, the essay illuminates us with the progressive idea of love and romance beginning from Hindi films of the 1940s and 50s right up to more recent productions. It talks about other issues like setting, realism, use of songs, family and religion, all of which have great significance in the Indian context. The second chapter 'Travelling Memories: Between Word and Image' continue with the discussions presented earlier and also how with the opening up of the discourse, terms such as narrative, representation, audience, theoretical frame and art movement acquire a new dimension. Despite being labelled as mass culture, due to the advancement of technology, film is fast creating different levels of audiences. After discussing multiple remakings and intertextualities of Sarat Chandra's *Devdas* and Mahasweta Devi's and Kalpana Lajmi's rendering of *Rudali*, the author discusses several cross-cultural adaptations like *Omkara*, *Maya Memsaab*, *Bride and Prejudice* etc. and emphasizes how the movement from novels into films, and films into novels works both ways.

The third chapter 'Theatre into Film: Adaptations and Cultural Formations' discusses several Shakespearean adaptations in Hindi films, and the next chapter continues with the idea of intertextuality as revealed in film songs. These intertextual references move both across the linear chronicity of the filmic narrative, becoming ways of interpreting and expressing desire, and also outwards into audience memories evoking audio-visual memories of a period in the past. Since songs in Indian films have served various functions on different occasions such intertextuality functions differently from literary intertextuality. Rajinder Singh Bedi's Urdu novel *Ek Chadar Maili Si* and its film adaptation which, though loaded with cultural significance, did not receive the reception it deserved is discussed in details in the fifth chapter. 'Histories of Violence: Little Narratives Countering Master Narratives' discusses the recurrence of terrorism in films. Taking the Punjab militancy as a case study, through films like *Maachis* and *Amu*, the sixth chapter traces its rise, fading out, dormant currents and the way it has affected life and attitude in Punjab. Between 1954 and 1981, we find a large number of filmmakers turning to the mid-nineteenth century milieu, a period which marks both the high point of a cultural renaissance and the disintegration of native power centres. So in the next chapter the author analyses Sohrab Modi's *Mirza Ghalib* and Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* as two films discussing issues of failure, exile and loss among other things. We are told how by shifting the focus from Premchand's perspective, which literally holds the past responsible for our present woes, Satyajit Ray creates a counter-discourse at once more complex and balanced. Mention is also made of two other such period films located in the years between 1830s and 1850s, namely *Junoon* and *Umrao Jaan* that went on to receive several awards. Was it mere nostalgia or some other post-partition factors that triggered such interest in recreating the past remains unclear.

In 'Constructing the Nation through the Semiotics of Difference' the author's focus is on the semiotics of difference which mark the shifts not only in the perception of difference, but also in terms of patriotism, moral values, national solidarity, self-reflection and guilt, while constantly moving between reconstructions of masculinity and femininity. By placing this difference of the

body, mind and identity in the national discourse, she tries to trace the move from *Mother India* (1957) through *Upkar* (1967) and *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989) to *Faana* (2006) and *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005) in both literal and metaphorical terms. *Mother India*, with its nationalistic fervour, draws a mixed response. The heights of grandeur (and sacrifice) and the human tragedy involved in it set off contrary responses as hope and despair jostle each other. *Upkar*, though less artistically made, is in some ways a continuation of the debate initiated in *Mother India*, but it takes a different course. Directed towards didactic nationalism there is constant juxtapositions of national fervour and patriotism with black marketing and corruption. Together, these films trace a conjunction of popular attitudes and the moments of change brought in by Nehruvian socialism.

Deepa Mehta's 'Elements' trilogy, *Fire*, *Earth/1947* and *Water* is the content of the following chapter. In terms of filmmaking, Mehta journeys from the present to the past, step by step, looking for roots, causes and explanations. The author rightly points out how for all practical purposes, the films are women-centered, but the female body and its sexuality are delinked from procreation. The trilogy reflects on Deepa Mehta's relationship with India and the author categorically tells us that the director's concern for a Western viewership (if it is there) has not affected her concern for aesthetics, and the trilogy, despite its artistic flaws, work in a continuity for the diasporic director. Incidentally Deepa Mehta has herself refuted the idea that her target audience is in the West. Moving from film to film, Mehta's relationship with herself has clearly evolved as it has with the culture of her origin.

Women's issues are central to every society primarily because they go on to define all human relationships and social constructs. In the next chapter aptly entitled 'Body as Text: Women Transgressors and Hindi Cinema' we are shown how as far as Indian cinema is concerned, the focus remains on women's beauty or their bodily exposure. By giving examples of films like *Mirch Masala*, *Tamanna*, *Panchvati*, *Aastha*, *Astitva*, *Rihaee* and *Paroma*, made by different directors, we are shown how even if they use formula situations, they handle women's issues with great sensitivity and shift from cliched symbols and statements to create detonative signs which generate complex responses. We find that the body, the will controlling it, its sexuality or the violation of it through seduction or rape, its procreativity or barrenness, its location within space, all acquire meaning which can either reinforce conventional perspective, or produce a counter-discourse. Each film in its own way discusses issues of victimhood, rebelliousness and transgression in different ways. Even films like *Mrityudand* and *Lajja* that use all the formula motifs and ingredients of mainstream cinema like song, dance, violence and rhetoric in liberal measure also try to problematize women's issues.

As a kind of continuation to the issues discussed above, the next chapter 'Reclaiming the Body: The Gender of Creativity' discusses how women need to reclaim their right over their bodies, if freedom of choice is to have any meaning. Generally speaking, Hindi cinema has created a male tradition, indulged male fantasies and obsession and pushed women to peripheral roles and projected them as objects to be gazed at. It is against this background that the author discusses several films which look at the nature of creativity and where gender plays a vital role in the very basic formulation of respectability and success. The author shows us how films like Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* and *Kagaz Ke Phool*, Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* and *Sardari Begum* and Vijay Anand's *Guide*, at some level or the other, all deal with the nature of creativity and the struggle of the creative artiste: poet, dancer, singer, actress and director. They also critique the notion of respectability, of success as measured in material terms and the exploitative tendencies present in society. Together these films critique the institution of marriage which confines a woman, as also

the romantic relationships which subdue them. Spanning a period of nearly forty years, these films raise several questions which are relevant to both film theory and feminist perception, and so the author asks what messages do they send to the female viewer and to society at large? Are there any judgemental structures present in these films or do they merely narrate a story?

Films are not only a cultural representation, but also a means of cultural production. Their appeal to large and mixed audiences provides an effective means of political criticism and raising social consciousness. Films become the unconscious of the nation as they reflect upon the power relations, political conditions and social disturbances using the individual psyche as a medium of expression. Another conceptual category important for film arts is the environmental space. Interaction between space and individual is an important part of the semiotics of the film and sends out signals towards its meaning. We find that space plays an important role in many realistic and modernistic films. Entitled 'Urbanscapes, Shifting Cultures and the Film Narrative' the next chapter discusses several films focussed on Lahore, Mumbai and Delhi and shows us how urban spaces do not duplicate each other but instead tend to link their representation with the thematic thrust, the culture the city has inherited and moulded through the interaction of disparate forces. The author tells us that there are also countless films like *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Naukri*, *Gaman*, *Rihaae* and others depicting the rural-urban migratory pattern of our country and each one deals with space in a unique way.

Masculinity has ordinarily been associated with power and authority, but the tenderness which surfaces in the father-daughter relationship reflects a different aspect of masculinity which is usually camouflaged by the strict exterior. In the essay 'Fathers and Daughters: An Enigmatic Bond' the author focuses on fathers who are outside the range of power and cannot exercise a patriarchal authority. She examines films like *Daddy* where the father is an alcoholic, *Tamanna* where the foster father is a hermaphrodite, *Pitaah*, where the father is caught up in the feudalistic rural society in which he is at the bottom rung and has no social authority, and *Main Aisa Hi Hoon*, where the father is autistic. Apart from commenting on the nature of masculinity, the importance of the girl child, there is often a reversal of roles where the daughter takes on the protector's role.

Chapter Fourteen discusses the idea of surrealism as expressed in a 1956 film *Jagte Raho* which is a different kind of experiment in terms of narrative and quite different from Raj Kapoor's early romantic films or where he portrayed the Chaplinesque figure of the tramp. It is a psychological probing of the malaise which has overtaken modern life. The next chapter reviews feminist theory by studying in details Nagesh Kukunoor's 2006 Hindi film *Dor* which looks at the emergence of a new modernism rooted more firmly in contemporary cultural specificities. The last chapter 'Exteriorising the Self: Film Autobiographies' is an interesting area of film studies. The autobiographical form, in itself, is a complex genre with multidirectional thrusts as it wavers between self-reflection and public projection. Within this broad category, film autobiographies written by actors, directors, lyricists and scriptwriters have taken different forms and have come into being through various means. The author tries to answer several questions that are raised about the nature of film autobiographies which are so different in form and content that they cannot be brought under an individual rubric. In trying to locate the purpose of writing or telling, she takes up several texts namely Hansa Wadkar's *You Ask, I Tell*, Kishore Sahu's *Meri Aatmakatha*, Balraj Sahani's *Meri Filmi Aatmakatha* and Shaukat Kaifi's *Yaad Ki Rahguzar* for detailed discussion. In conclusion we are reminded that autobiographies form a parallel account of the making of films and are of immense help in recording film history. In them lies a valuable

source for film history, in addition to their literary value and the values which made their subjects what they are or were.

Dedicated to the memory of Girish Karnad, “an intellectual who had the generosity to share and the sensitivity to reach out to others,” this book will be of interest both to the lay reader and the serious researcher as it comments upon the significance of the film medium and opens out new avenues for discussion. After going through the various essays we become even more convinced that a film, even of the commercial category, is more than mere entertainment. There are so many hidden layers and agenda that comes out from them and the author points out several such examples for us. The vast range and references to different kinds of films spanning so many decades speak of the erudition of the author to a great extent. Another plus point of the book is of course the innumerable black and white photographs that accompany most of the chapters, a must for any book on film studies. A must read for any and every one interested in film studies for sure.