

7. Film and Video

Synopsis

This module provides an introduction to the moving image, audio-visuals, film and video. It also introduces film appreciation through a few films .

Lectures

- 7.1 The Moving Image
- 7.2 The Auteur School of Thought
- 7.3 The Rasa Theory
- 7.4 Film Appreciation

7.2 The Auteur School of Thought

The origin of the word 'auteur' is linked to the word 'author', An author is typically a writer and writers are often people who have some unique way of looking at the world that we all inhabit. All of us who share the same cultural or economic background possibly experience a very similar set of events and happenings. Yet, it appears that there are some who respond quite differently to these and seek to express their relationship with the world around, through some medium. This could be words, it could be visuals, music or a film. When such creative expression of a person appears to have some unique thread of perspective and outlook and offers us some unique insight into our own selves, we use the word 'auteur' to describe such a creator.

We shall focus on the works of two film-makers , Abbas Kiarostami and Anand Patwardhan, whose approach to films is quite different. Kiarostami works largely with fiction (or docu-fiction) while Patwardhan chooses to make films that are documentary. The fiction-documentary divide is in many ways a construct that can be misleading. Central to all films is the need to communicate and connect with audiences and viewers.



Fig. 7.2.01a and Fig. 7.2.01b

(Left) Abbas Kiarostami and (Right) Anand Patwardhan – film-makers whose work emerges from a deeply personal commitment and vision. Kiarostami makes films that are fictional or semi-fictional; Patwardhan chooses the documentary approach.

Abbas Kiarostami, an Iranian director whose approach to film-making over the years is such that one may regard him as an 'auteur'. Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940) has made over forty films (including shorts and documentaries) since 1970. He may be said to belong to a generation of filmmakers in the Iranian New Wave, that includes Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Forough Farrokhzad, Bahram Beizai, Parviz Kimiavi and Sohrab Shahid Saless. The work of these filmmakers have the quality of poetry and use narratives that are both philosophical and political.

Interestingly, Kiarostami studied to be a painter and a graphic designer at the Tehran. Before taking to films, he worked as a traffic policeman as well as advertising man, creating posters, commercials and credit titles for films. While many of his colleagues left Iran for the West, after the revolution in 1979, Kiarostami chose to stay on. This he believes had great significance in his evolution as a film-maker.

"When you take a tree that is rooted in the ground, and transfer it from one place to another, the tree will no longer bear fruit. And if it does, the fruit will not be as good as it was in its original place. This is a rule of nature. I think if I had left my country, I would be the same as the tree." Abbas Kiarostami

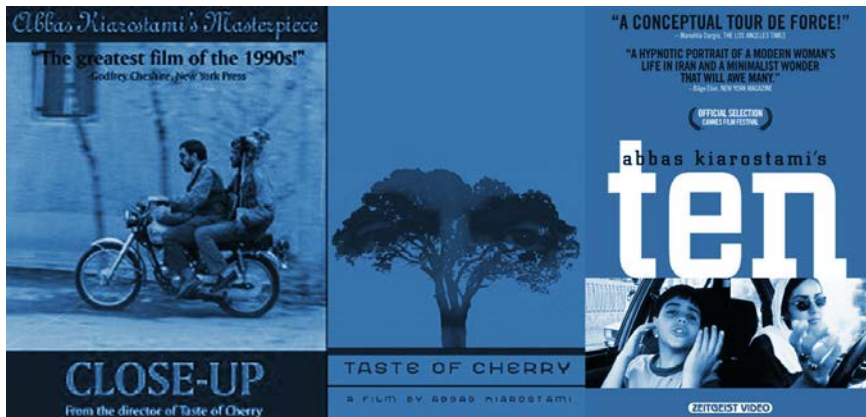


Fig. 7.2.02

'Close-Up', 'Taste of Cherry' and 'Ten', three films by Abbas Kiarostami.



Fig. 7.2.03

A still from 'Close-Up'.

Close-Up (1990) is a film by Kiarostami, that tells a real-life story of the trial of a man who impersonated film-maker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, by deceiving a family. The film is about our longings for fame, but it is also about an act of forgiveness.

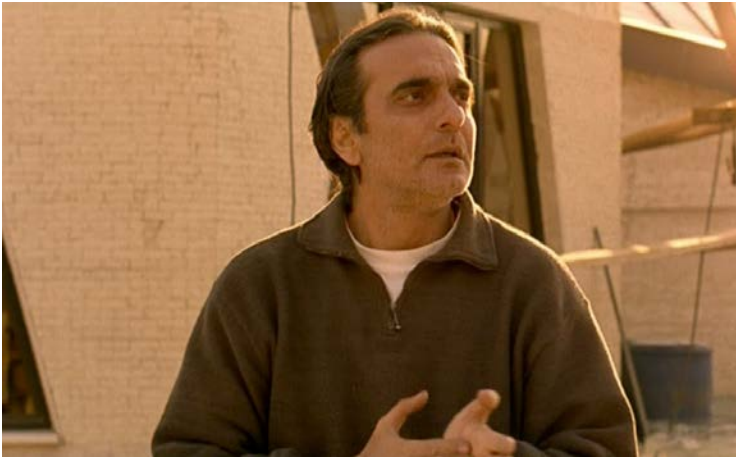


Fig. 7.2.04
A still from 'A Taste of Cherry'.

Taste of Cherry (1997) is a film about a man who drives a car, looking for someone who can bury him after he has completed his plan for consuming an overdose of pills. The stark landscape and the near absence of any dramatic action, has critics sharply divided over such an approach to film-making. The film may be regarded as an existentialist question of sorts, that draws its title from a Zen story that offers a poetic insight into human life.



Fig. 7.2.05
A still from 'Ten'.

Ten (2002) as the title suggests is a film that has ten parts, each of which is a conversation between the protagonist who drives a car and her co-passengers, which includes her son, her sister, a bride, a prostitute, and a young woman going for her prayers. The conversations are centred around the life of the protagonist after her divorce and the conflict that emerges from this. The film is a pointer to the contemporary Iranian society, particularly the problems of women.

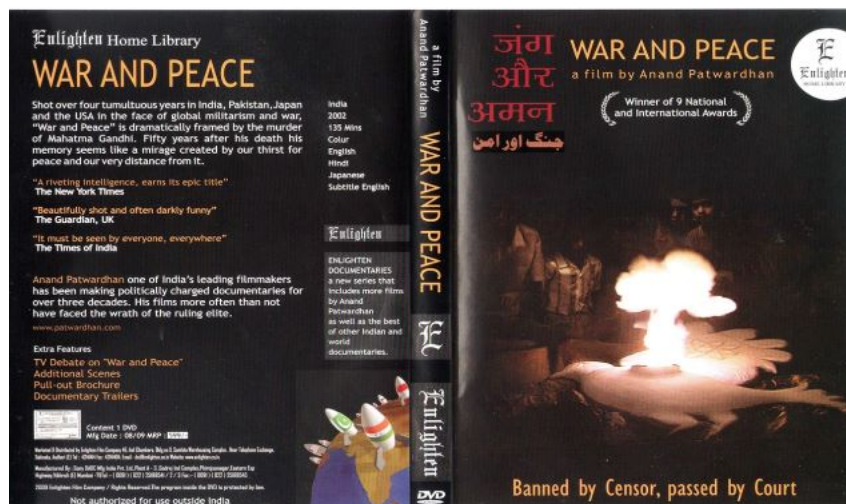


Fig. 7.2.06

'War and Peace' is a brilliantly argued plea for a world without nuclear weapons.

Anand Patwardhan's films seek to examine aspects of contemporary societies that are seldom the subject for conversations amongst the privileged. His films are commentaries on the lust for power in contemporary societies in India and worldwide. This has many different manifestations such as human insecurities masquerading as national pride; unhealthy distrust leading to a global arms race; inhuman insensitivity that destroys the homes of the dispossessed and marginalized as they are 'slums'.

Bombay: Our City (Hamara Shahar) (1985) This film tells the story of the daily battle for survival of the 4 million slum dwellers of Bombay who make up half the city's population. Although they are Bombay's workforce - industrial laborers, construction workers, domestic servants - they are denied city utilities like electricity, sanitation, and water. Many slumdwellers must also face the constant threat of eviction as city authorities carry out campaigns to "beautify" Bombay.

War and Peace (2002) Filmed over three tumultuous years in India, Pakistan, Japan and the USA - WAR & PEACE is an epic documentary journey of peace activism in the face of global militarism and war. Triggered by macabre scenes of jubilation that greeted nuclear testing in the Indian sub-continent, WAR & PEACE is dramatically framed by the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. Fifty years after his death memories of Gandhi seem like a mirage that never was, created by our thirst for peace and our very distance from it.

Jai Bhim Comrade (2011) 'Unfortunately we gave up 330 million gods but made Ambedkar into a god. We wear Babasaheb Ambedkar's photo around our neck. On waking up, we say "Jai Bhim". Before sleeping, it's "Jai Bhim" and when having a little drink, it's Jai Bhim!'. The self-awareness in the Dalit movement should not detract from the statistics that suggest the continuation of a caste-mindset that makes the lives of the marginalized extremely difficult in a nation that prides itself on its new-found creativity. The film examines the assault on the Constitution and the slow appropriation of radical Dalit leaders into mainstream Congress or hardcore rightwing politics while also critically examining the role of the left in dealing with caste. While documenting decades of caste oppression, the film does find that symbols of joy, hope, perseverance and resistance, always survive.

The work of certain film-makers acquires a quality that is special to their way of looking at the world around us. Such film-makers may be called as 'auteurs'. The significant difference between films by auteurs and films that are genre-based is in the manner in which the language of cinema is used. While

both approaches need to respect the craft of making films, the auteur appears to be more guided by concerns that are not subservient to the established grammar of film-making.

A genre-based-approach to film-making, works within a predetermined goal of evoking some predominant emotional response in the viewer. Experimental film-makers seek to explore an alternative cinematic language that allows them to depart from regarding the medium as a manipulative craft that plays upon human emotions, to create works that require a more active involvement from the viewer. Expressed more simply, one may observe that there are films that entertain and films that enlighten, though the boundary between the two is a fine one.

Kiarostami, observes that there are films that are so overpowering that they take hold of us when we are watching them. We walk out of such a film, in a daze-of-sorts. There are other films that make us fidget in our seats as we watch them, but later keep us awake, thinking about what was being said. Film-makers who make films of the latter kind, clearly regard the viewer as an active agent in the act of watching.