

Jacob Joyner

Nandana Bose

Bollywood Research Paper

December 5, 2013

The Aesthetic of Conveying Messages in Post-Colonial India

The year 1955 is an underestimated milestone in the history of Indian Cinema. Only eight years after the formation of the Republic of India, two incredibly influential films were released that altered the course of Indian Cinema forever. *Shri 420* and *Pather Panchali* were released in 1955 and although both films deal with similar themes and issues they couldn't be any more opposite in their aesthetics. The film *Shri 420* resides in the Masala Genre of filmmaking which encapsulates almost every type of film genre into one entertaining piece. *Shri 420* has something for everyone: comedy, suspense, romance and of course musical numbers. This film is a predecessor to the extravagant and outlandish films of modern Hindi Cinema or "Bollywood." In comparison, *Pather Panchali* is on the opposite spectrum of filmmaking, harping on realism, on location sets, non-professional actors, narrative ambiguity and to the chagrin of many, no musical numbers. This film establishes the birth of parallel cinema in not only Bengal but in the entire country of India. Even though *Shri 420* and *Pather Panchali* were both released in 1955 and seem to deal with similar social, cultural and political themes, the films have opposite cinematic aesthetics within the framework of filmmaking.

Shri 420 is a 1955 Popular Hindi or "Bollywood" film that was produced, directed and starred Raj Kapoor. The title of the film *Shri 420* literally translates into English as Mr. 420. The number 420 is derived from the Indian Penal Code System, where 420 is the crime of cheating.

Thus the title of the film literally means Mr. Cheat. *Shri 420* follows Raj Kapoor's character Ranbir Raj from Allahabad to Bombay as he tries "to cheat" his way to success. The film begins with Ranbir Raj in Allahabad attempting to hitchhike his way to Bombay to look for work. Raj stops a car owned by a dishonest businessman, Seth Sonachand Dharmanand or "Nemo", and attempts to lie his way into gaining a ride to the city. Raj eventually is found out by Nemo and is immediately thrown out of the car while being called a cheat. This interaction between these two characters immediately sets the tone for the rest of the film.

Raj Kapoor's character Raj finds himself again and again in situations that call for white lies to move him socially and financially up in the world. Raj eventually meets a young woman named Vidya, who is a local School Teacher for the children in her neighborhood. In Hindi the word vidya means knowledge thus explaining Vidya's career and standing as a character. Although at first, Vidya and Raj hit it off and become friends, the extent of Raj's lying and cheating begins to stir up what the two characters have together. Raj meets another girl later in the film named Maya. Once again in Hindi maya translates to illusion. Maya helps Raj reach a higher social standing as he begins to hang out with the rich of Bombay. But eventually his luck turns to misfortune as Maya begins to cheat the cheat himself. Raj is swept up in a business scheme by the man he originally tried to hitchhike with in Allahabad, Nemo. The scheme involves collecting money from the impoverished and thus promising new housing to be built for them. At first Raj is confident Nemo is telling the truth but in the end the truth comes out and the wealthy businessman ends up trying to scheme the poor. Although Raj is made rich from the lie, he cannot come to terms with his conscience and eventually informs the public of this knowledge. In the end there is a moment of suspense until everything is made better, Nemo goes to jail and Vidya forgives Raj because she sees he tried to do the right thing in the end.

Pather Panchali is a 1955 Bengalese film that was directed by one of the most acclaimed Indian Auteurs, Satyajit Ray. *Pather Panchali* when translated into English means, “Song of the Little Road.” This name is incredibly accurate, considering the film takes place in a small Bengali Village and the narrative is told in an entirely poetic and visual manner. *Pather Panchali* has a loose narrative structure which in turns creates an ambiguous plot similar to the films of the Italian Neorealism movement in Italy after World War II. The film centers on the Roy family in rural Bengal. Harihar, the father, Sarbajaya, the mother, Durga, the daughter, and Apu, the son. They live a simple life with few travelers coming through the village, until Harihar cannot sustain his family because of limited resources and income. The father then travels to the city to find a better paying Job while leaving his family at home. During the father’s absence, the family sinks into negligence without many resources or money. One day Durga and Apu, stay out in the rain for too long and Durga comes down with a cold. This cold eventually leads to Durga’s death because of inadequate basic medicines being available. On return to his family, Harihar is informed of the news of his daughter. Because of this horrible news and scarcity of resources in the area, the family decides to leave their home in search for a better life.

Raj Kapoor’s film *Shri 420* deals with its incredibly serious subject matter in a non-serious, entertaining way. To understand why this film deals with certain subjects, it’s necessary to understand the context this film was made in. *Shri 420* was released in 1955, eight years after India gains its independence. The film gives the sense of almost an Indian identity crisis. The song “Mera Joota Hai Japani” or in English, “My Shoes are Japanese” was popularized not only in India but in other socialist, communist countries such as the Soviet Union. Although the song was performed by Raj Kappor, it was actually sung by Mukesh, a playback singer at the time. The song deals with the identity crisis the newly independent India was going through at the time

in an incredibly kitsch and entertaining way. This sets the tone for how the film deals with its serious issues for the rest of its two and a half hours. From this point on the film deals with everything from living conditions, poverty, class, starvation, to white collar crime. At the beginning of the film Raj cannot find a place to stay or work because he has little to no money. He wanders around Bombay until he finds a group of peasants hanging out in the street. The peasants demand rent from Raj even though he is just as poor as they are. This scene is clearly stating a message about how humans act when they are hurting for money. It becomes a dog eat dog world. Raj meets Maya while delivering laundry and she begins to exploit Raj to make money for her by gambling. This leads to Raj's rise and eventual downfall. Raj ends up working for Nemo, tricking foreign investors to invest money into mines and eventually exploiting the poor. Although this film is dealing with a heavy subject matter, it makes the issues seem plastic and unreal because of the ridiculousness of the acting and the song and dance sequences.

Pather Panchali may be at the other end of the spectrum of filmmaking but it deals with similar themes and the subject matters of *Shri 420*. The film respectfully deals with poverty, living conditions, class, starvation and death. Not only does this film deal with these subjects but it does it in an ambiguous, tasteful way. In no way shape or form could this film be called entertaining. Little happens plot wise throughout its two hours runtime. *Pather Panchali* is clearly inspired by the Italian Neorealist films of the late 1940's. The film almost seems real, like the viewer is a fly on the wall. *Pather Panchali* is set in a rural part of Bengal. It follows an extremely poor family who has to fight almost every day to survive. Even something as simple as a candy man coming to the village is a huge event in the film. The family is living in a little shack that seems to barely keep them protected from the elements. Food and money are scarce resources in rural India and the father eventually leaves the village to go look for a better job to

provide for his family. Unfortunately on his return he finds that his daughter Durga has died from a cold. The film is stating its messages in a textual way. The viewer is not required to look deeper than the surface text to understand what Ray is trying to communicate to the audience. Unlike its counterpart, the film deals with the social, political and cultural issues in a head on way. In *Shri 420* the viewer needs to look deeper into the subtext of the film to understand the messages it is trying to convey. Instead of dealing with issues through a suspension of disbelief, the film shows the viewer the issues head on through use of the family. This style of filmmaking can be attributed to Satyajit Ray, one of the only and greatest Indian auteurs. Not only did Ray want to make a film that was completely different than the films being made in Bombay but he wanted to put India on a world stage. No matter the culture or heritage it is clear that this film is transcending generations and nationalities.

Raj Kapoor brings a Chaplain-esque comedy to the *Shri 420*, lightening the heavy subject matter the film seems to constantly be dealing with. His pants seem to be a little too short, his expressions are big and of course Raj Kapoor acts like an all-around goof. Even throughout all the adversity in the film, it seems as though Kapoor can never turn his smile upside down. He carries the film through its gloomy subject matter and eventually brings the film to a happy ending. Kapoor's performance creates the base on which the plot and narrative are built around. He is the centerpiece of the film and he brings an aesthetic that only a big personality can bring to the screen. In terms of the aesthetic of production, the entire film is shot inside sound stages. Although the filmmakers did an excellent job with the set design, it gives the film a dreamlike quality. This requires the viewer to hold their suspicion of disbelief throughout the entire film. In opposition, *Pather Panchali*, is shot entirely on location and deals with the real atmosphere of Bengal. The sound stage aesthetic does not take away from the film, it enhances the world the

way *The Wizard of Oz* was enchanted by its sound stages. The film has a very professional look to it and there isn't any point that your bubble of disbelief is burst because of incompetent filmmaking. It really feels as though you have stepped into the world of Raj Kapoor. The aesthetic of this film sets the tone for Bollywood films to come in the future. Films that are made today in modern Bollywood Cinema have the same structure as *Shri 420*, it's just an updated form. *Shri 420* also begins a trend of reflecting the social, cultural and political issues of the nation onto film. According to Ganti, "Hindi cinema in the 1950s was influenced by a variety of factors: institutions such as the Indian People's Theatre Associate (IPTA), events like the First International Film Festival of Indian, phenomena like large-scale rural to urban migration, and processes such as nation building, economic development, and social reform." *Shri 420* encapsulates many of these issues and factors attributing to the development of the newly independent India. The aesthetic of *Shri 420* only further emphasizes the differences in filmmaking between it and *Pather Panchali*. It's interesting how certain films can deal with similar subject matters and be made entirely different. *Shri 420* feels like the beginning of Popular Hindi Cinema.

Pather Panchali is on the other end of the spectrum when it comes to aesthetics. Not only does the film not have any song and dance sequences but it does not ask the audience to hold a suspension of disbelief at any point during the film. The movie is so grounded in reality that it feels like everything being shown is real. The camera is not stylistically out there, it has minimal movement and the cinematography is simple. Because the film is told in such a visual manner, it does not require the film to do anything stylistically excessive. If there was excess of style in *Pather Panchali* it would detract from the film as a whole. In this sense, you can really grasp Ray's aesthetic through the aesthetic of the film. Although, the way the film is shot and

directed may detract from the overall messages the film is trying to convey. Neepa elaborates on the aesthetics, “Contemporary Western reviews were marked by an aesthetic response to poverty, framed in terms of visual poetics, beauty, and universal humanism, which T.G. Vaidyanathan critiques as the “strained and positively gory aestheticism that results in a complete failure to engage seriously with the moral intentions of the film.” The film is shot in a subjective manner, giving the audience the feeling of what it may actually be like in a poverty stricken life. In one scene in particular, Apu and Durga are caught in a rainstorm under a tree. This scene uses sound to the fullest extent to really make the audience feel the calming and soothing relaxation of the rain. Even though this rain storm leads in the death of Durga, it does not in any way shape or form feel like foreshadowing. It feels like Satyajit Ray is creating this world for the viewer to be lost in. Instead of creating a piece of entertainment for the viewer to enjoy, his goal seems to be to completely transport his viewers to his world of Bengal.

Although *Shri 420* and *Pather Panchali* are completely different films, it is clear that they are sending similar messages in different ways. Both films were released in 1955 which makes the fact they share similar themes and subject matter only logical. India was a relatively new country with its newly gained independence and everyone was dealing with the same issues throughout the country. Whether in Bombay or in Bengal, Indians are the same and they have the same heart. The fact that these two films can get across similar messages while doing it in an entirely different way reinforces the power and reach of cinema. The messages that Ray is sending to his audience could be lost under the wraps of the neorealism he is trying to achieve. In comparison, the messages that Kapoor is sending to his audience could be lost under the heaps of entertainment and laughter his films brings to the table. It’s really a matter of the subjectivity of the spectator who is experiencing the film. At the end, they are the ones who truly uncover the

meaning of the film or don't uncover the meaning at all. Film is truly one of the most subjective art forms and that is what makes it such a special thing. It is incredible how films are malleable enough that two films could be made at the same point in history, deal with similar themes but somehow have completely different aesthetics from each other. In conclusion, film can convey messages on multiple different levels regardless of genre or aesthetics. *Shri 420* and *Pather Panchali* are prime examples of the power and influence of cinema in any nation or society.

Works Cited

- Crowther, Bosley. "Movie Review: Pather Panchali." *New York Times*. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.
 <<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9806E5D6163DE73ABC4B51DFBF66833649EDE>>.
- Ganti, Tejaswini. *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 1-55. Print.
- Majumdar, Neepa. "Pather Panchali: From Neo-Realism to Melodrama." *Academia.edu*. Web. 1 Dec. 2014. <http://www.academia.edu/3756372/Pather_Panchali_From_Neo_Realism_to_Melodrama>.
- Pather Panchali*. Perf. Kanu Bannerjee, Karuna Bannerjee, Chunibala Devi. 1955. Film. *Shree 420*. Perf. Raj Kapoor. Yash Raj Films, 1955. Film.
- "Pather Panchali." *IMDb*. IMDb.com. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.
 <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048473/>>.
- "Shree 420." *IMDb*. IMDb.com. Web. 1 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048613/>>.
- "Shree 420: Raj Kapoor's Masterpiece." *OverBlog*. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.
 <<http://www.letstalkaboutbollywood.com/article-14777347.html>>.
- "Shri 420 Film by Raj Kapoor." *Shri 420 Film by Raj Kapoor*. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.
 <<http://www.uiowa.edu/~incinema/shri420.html>>.