

## Why I Can't 'Read' a Film

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The deadline is approaching and I'm looking at my DVD library in sheer desperation. Is there one film I can pick out to review/ revisit and turn out 400 plus words in double quick time? I suppose I can. That is, after all, what film reviewers do day in, day out. I'm tempted to say I envy them, except that I don't.



Do I turn to my carefully preserved (though partly unread) copy of James Monaco's 4 decades old book and try and get some inspiration about How To Read a Film? What does 'reading a film' mean anyway? I quail before the disapproving glances of the Chomsky- s amongst us... but indulge me for a moment. Take a book. We 'read' a set of symbols, which we call letters, which combine to form what we call words, which in turn combine to form what we call a text. And this text holds some kind of meaning for us, evokes some kind of response in us. Two things here. Firstly, we are able to find our way through these symbols because we've been taught a particular language, the rules of the game, as it were. A fine Shakespearean sonnet would remain a jumble of meaningless shapes to a person who's not been taught English or who's illiterate. Secondly, that fine sonnet is not complete in itself. To be sure, we marvel at the way old Will wove the words together. But we savour even more the feelings, emotions and thoughts that the words conjure up. In other words, the true meaning of a text seems to lie outside the text itself.





What happens in the case of a combination of pictures, some moving, some stationary, usually accompanied by sounds, which we call a film? Do we need language classes to read- or better, make sense of- a film? And is a film that we see an end in itself or merely a stepping stone to some kind of higher truth? It is possible, after all, to argue that since we're seeing and hearing people, places and things of the kind that we do in everyday life, it should be possible to find meaning within the frame itself without having to step out.



Back in the day, I used to chat with Satyajit Ray about various things. If memory serves me right, he seemed to be clear in his mind that he considered the educated, mainly



urban Bangali middle class to be his primary audience. What about inner, deeper meaning, I asked, no doubt a little self- consciously. I drew a parallel with the appreciation of Indian classical music and the concept of the 'rasika'. A lot of us (including me) like listening to Karnatik and Hindusthani music and enjoy it on the surface. Nothing at all wrong with that just as there's nothing wrong in viewing a Ray film and loving just the story, the performances and so on. But isn't a rasika, with her understanding of an inner grammar, able to go deeper and evaluate the structure and rhythm of a recital and, importantly, the quality of interpretation of a raga?

His response was that in his cinema, largely narrative in nature, there had to be the space for both kinds of audiences. One would view and enjoy a film on the surface, as it were. The other would dig deeper and find added meaning in snippets of dialogue, in certain close-ups and in the way some shots were strung together. So, to carry on with the 'reading' metaphor, the two sets of people would be reading different books.

And what about another kind of cinema? What about people like Cocteau, Buñuel, Tarkovsky, Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Mani Kaul and others one can't recall right now? Storytelling isn't their intention. Playing mind games with the viewer is. Their work would probably have no meaning unless you breathed meaning into it, unless you read, interpreted and signified, without ever being sure that your meaning was someone else's too.



Speaking for myself, I can only say that my favourite films are the ones I try and see again... and again; sometimes to savour particular moments, sometimes to rekindle emotions and sometimes to try and find out more, to re- read. I wouldn't be able to make a list because sometimes they pop up in the mind at unguarded moments. And I certainly wouldn't be able to write about the why- and- wherefore in any articulate kind of way.

So there you are then. Where does that leave us? Back where we started?





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**Dhritiman Chaterji** is one of India's most versatile and respected actors. His acting career began in 1970 as the protagonist of Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary). Selective about films, he never plunged into a hectic life of movie-acting but carefully chose genres, roles and styles giving performances that cover a wide range of cinema - from arthouse and experimental cinema to short films, documentaries and even mainstream Bollywood blockbusters. Dhritiman has also worked in English language films with well-known filmmakers such as Deepa Mehta, Jane Campion etc. He has received numerous acting awards in India and has been on the Jury of the Indian National film Awards. Dhritiman pursues a parallel career in stage and voice acting, advertising, social communications and documentary filmmaking. He is also an amateur photographer, a voracious reader, occasional writer, anchor and reciter.

