

Convocation Address

(at the Film & Television Institute of India at Poona in November 1989.)

Dear Students - young filmmaker friends,

I feel honoured to have this opportunity to talk to you on this important day in your life. I am told the Governing Council felt, that the convocation address this time, should be given by a technician. So, I think I can take the liberty of sounding more like a technician, or to be more correct, more like cinematographer. In the process, if I sound too personal and somewhat out of tune for this occasion - I hope you would understand that whatever I say, I believe, is also important for you to know.

For many years, I have been associated with this institute in various ways - as a member of the Academic Council and before that, as a member of the Advisory Committee. I remember every time I came for a meeting, I had to extend my stay here, when the students would attack me from all directions - with their innumerable questions and enquiries regarding film - making. I started taking classes, played the role of a teacher, which I never thought I would do - conducted workshops, trying to tell them literally everything I knew. These classes were not confined to the classrooms alone, the discussions continued in my room, under the wisdom tree, and in the restaurants. These were really a long and never ending process – which I thoroughly enjoyed.

I thought I understood their problems very well. I knew exactly where they would get stuck and exactly how helpless they felt, because I had gone through all this myself, but without any help coming from anywhere. I remember my own days as a beginner.

My beginning, however, was very different from yours. I had to start as a full-fledged cameraman with little knowledge and no experience at all. As I was nobody's assistant, I did not even have the opportunity to touch a movie-camera before I shot my first film. And I was not privileged like you, to be taught in a film school. I had no other way, but to be a self-

taught cameraman. I had to spend many sleepless nights, trying to solve problems, which I knew I would face the next day. I had to invent simple things, which even a first year student here would know, and discover things for myself, which already existed for others. But in this process, I also invented my own methods, which became indispensable to me and also to many others later, which I would not have achieved if I were not ignorant. Actually, my ignorance was a blessing in many ways.

I may assure you that, walking out of this institute and walking into a new world, you have to be self-taught as much as I was. So, get ready to learn many more things than what you have learnt here at the institute. Yes, you are much better equipped than I was, because during your stay here you have got the enormous and unique assistance of films, books, journals, modern sophisticated equipment and the teachers here. But try to remain a student of cinema for the rest of your life.

I have come across many types of students here. Many of them were really sincere and fully committed. I can say that in every year there were at least a few students because of whom my long journey from Calcutta was justified and my stay here worthwhile. It is always rewarding later, when after a few years, you suddenly discover these students in the role of creative and successful filmmakers. I am sure, the teachers in this institute experienced this satisfaction many times.

Today, you are being initiated into a very special kind of religion and out to face the world, and if I restrict myself only to a pleasant address on this occasion, I will be doing injustice to you.

Yes, I always felt that filmmaking is a religion. I left my college and was lucky to be able to watch two great filmmakers working together Jean Renoir and Claude Renoir. I watched the shooting of a film everyday very carefully and took notes. Actually, I did not know what I was doing and I do not think I learnt much about filmmaking as such. But I learnt one thing from these masters for sure. I realised that filmmaking was like a religion to them and they were completely dedicated to it. As I watched these two great masters working - I also got initiated to this religion.

But today I realize with great pain that there are unholy forces, much stronger and too many in number, acting against my religion. I know of late I have been feeling quite frustrated and helpless, and many things are becoming pointless to me. Painfully do I realize that many a thing which I immensely enjoyed is fast losing its charm.

When we make a film we put all our efforts to improve on the quality. It is true, we cannot achieve what we aim for. But we are more or less happy with what we finally get. Striving through various stages of filmmaking, we ultimately get a print - which embodies all our thoughts and efforts. By the time we reach this stage we are completely exhausted, but full of hope - because we have not spared ourselves any effort.

But unfortunately, this is also the stage when we lose control over our own films. To reach our audience, our films pass through all kinds of people who do not have, in most cases, any love for cinema or its aesthetics. Ultimately the fate of a film depends on the mercy of the distributor, the theatre owner and the projectionist. The amount of callousness, ignorance or even dishonesty prevailing in these areas is appalling. You can consider yourself extremely lucky if your film is released in a proper theatre, and not in a slaughterhouse.

To prove my point I may tell that some time ago, I made a survey of a number of theatres in Bombay before the release of my latest film. The survey, which I did meticulously, was an eye-opener to me and my colleagues who accompanied me. It was found that the projection standards varied immensely from theatre to theatre, and all were much much below the recommended international standard.

To give you my finding in short, the reflectance measured at the screens were 2 to 4 full stops below the recommended standard. The conditions of theatres in Calcutta and many other places are even worse. On top of that, in order to save electricity, the projectors are made to run at lower amperage using substandard carbon arcs and thus grossly damaging the visual quality of the films. For the renewal of their licence, I suppose ventilation, sitting and sanitary facilities things are never considered important enough to be checked.

It is also pathetic to note that even the various cinematographers associations and similar organisations are completely indifferent to this major obstacle standing between the filmmakers and the filmgoers.

We try our best and put all our efforts when we make our films but little do we realise that everything would be meaningless at this last stage. You would agree that taking out a single net from a light or to put one on another would be totally pointless, When the film would be shown on a projector running 4 stops below the recommended standard. I am not saying these things for people who do not take risks in their work and always play safe. But this should concern everyone interested in capturing the subtle nuances and delicate artistic qualities in their work. This is a very serious obstacle; say for a cinematographer, whose work depends on the subtle tints of a rainy day or dawn or dusk - the drama present in the scorching sun at high noon or the poetry present on a cloudy day.

I must make it very clear that when the visual atmosphere or mood of a film is damaged for any reason - it is not the concern of the cameraman only. In the ultimate analysis, such lapses are an assault on cinema and everybody involved in the film should feel upset. It is everybody's concern.

In this connection, I shall narrate an incident to you. It took place in Bombay in 1984 during the Filmotsay. Bergman's 'Cries and Whispers' has just started showing inside the theatre - before which the well known actor, Erland Josephson and Ms. Aina Bellis of the Swedish Film Institute were presented on the stage. Everybody is inside and the hall is fully packed. I am the only person sitting alone in the lobby, with a cup of coffee. This is one of my favourite films and I have always admired its exquisite camera work. I had already seen the film 7 times before whenever i got an opportunity and almost every time I came to the institute. In order to save the original print the Archive here made an indigenous print for future shows and circulation. And from this time I stopped seeing the film, as this copy did not have that quality for which I admire Nykvist, as I did not want to ruin the impressions which were in my mind. This is also the reason why I am sitting alone in the lobby and not watching my favourite film. Suddenly I find Erland Josephson and Aina Belis rushing out of

the theatre and trying to find the way to the projection booth. They are very upset as they think there is something terribly wrong with the projection. But this time the theatre projection was not the culprit. I introduced myself to them, explained the real reason and they were convinced that nothing could be done. We all had coffee and a very long chat. I do not know how Nykvist or Bergman would have reacted if they were there but I was deeply moved to note that an actor was very much disturbed, as the visual quality of his film was damaged. Not only the legendary Nykvist was wronged, but also the viewers of an international film festival were deprived of an unique visual experience.

But frankly speaking, i do not understand our filmgoers and the so-called film lovers. Why did they not react at all or complain, when daylight coming through 4 doors was constantly hitting the screen in the main theatre in Hyderabad, during an international film festival? The theatre management was indifferent even when complaints were made, and so was our festival authority. This went on for 4 or 5 days ruining the excellent camera work of many films. When lakhs of rupees were spent for fireworks and to make the city look beautiful for this occasion, the exquisite visuals of films invited from abroad suffered.

On 11th June this year, like millions of viewers in India, i eagerly sat before my TV set, to watch the all India premiers of 'Piravi', the film which received the National Award for the Best Feature Film this year, and which I had seen in Delhi earlier. As you know, the film is directed by Shaji, the well-known cinematographer and I thought it was very well photographed by an ex-student of this Institute - Sunny Joseph. But I could hardly watch the film and in utter disgust, like many others, I had to switch off my TV set. Lack of professionalism was evident from the very beginning of the telecast and I would say that is was a dreadful disaster. If this is the ultimate fate of a film, probably we do not need an Institute like this to train technicians.

I was not able to see the film for a second time - but sitting in Calcutta I could almost see tears in Shaji and Joseph's eyes, as they could not cross the last hurdle, for no fault of theirs. My sympathy goes particularly to Joseph, as he has just started his career, and I am sure, this was a big event in his life. I would like to know, who should be held responsible for

this disaster and is it not a crime to crush the dreams of some able filmmakers and to present a very distorted version of a very well made film to millions of viewers? As you know, this has happened many times in the past and this will go happening in future, if we remain callous and inactive. Tomorrow it could very well be you who suffer.

While I Was typing this convocation address, it was announced that one of my films would be telecast the next day. It came as a death sentence to me. But i never imagined that it could be so painful. It was like a medieval torture that will persist for the rest of my life. Those who have seen the film earlier and this telecast would understand what I mean. Most of the film could not even be seen and it looked like a 6th generation video copy.

If it was a bad print or a bad tape or substandard photography, then I think Doordarshan should not have telecast it. Is it not important to check if a programme is technically qualified before a telecast to million of viewers?

But that is not all. How can I stop here without mentioning our National Film Development Corporation and the Film Archive of India? It is not only Nykvist or Sunny Joseph who suffer in this country - there are many others in this list. NFDC and the Archive too have their share to contribute to this indifference and injustice. NFDC continues to circulate terrible copies of foreign films. These copies, like counterfeit coins are meant for circulation in the market, ignoring the ethics and technical codes of filmmaking. Circulation for educating our people and to create awareness for good cinema. A colossal farce and an offence which goes un-protested. I promise you - I am not trying to be fastidious. Anyone who has seen a film, in its original form, say during an international film festival and later the NFDC version - would definitely vouch for me. Compare the NFDC prints of 'Mephisto', 'Lacemaker', 'Mona Lisa', 'My First Wife', 'Fanny and Alexander', and many others with their original prints and you would agree that these films have been butchered. It would be really painful to accept that the people who run NFDC are so insensitive not to see this difference or they do not consider it a crime to assault the aesthetics of this wonderful art.

It would be relevant in this context, to ask about the role of an archive. Is it supposed to preserve distorted versions of many good films? The version of 'The Passion of Joan of

Arc' Which I saw the other day in Calcutta was neither Carl Dreyer's nor Rudolf Matte's creation. I do not have the language to express the difference between this print and the one I saw in the early sixties of this all time classic. Is this print going to be preserved for the future? Not only is the excellence of the original missing - what is presented to the viewers now is totally unacceptable by any standard. Are future generations going to evaluate these masters with this print?

This has been the fate of many a good film including mine. Otherwise, why do I feel embarrassed, now a days, to see my own films? What has been preserved in the Archive is definitely not my work. Is it not a gross injustice to the filmmaker? There are prints of "Pather Panchali" in circulation, which give the impression that the film was shot with sound film - while the tattered negative of this film, which supposedly put India in the map of world cinema, has been rotting for years in a government godown in Calcutta. Perhaps this negative should have been restored and preserved here in the Archive.

Dear Students, I have spoken enough and i am sorry if I have sounded out of tune for this occasion. But as I consider you as my near and dear ones, I do not want you to suffer the frustration and bitterness have gone through, whether you are a cameraman or a sound recordist, an editor or a director. In the interest of cinema and its aesthetics I want you to fight these evils, to protest against such colossal callousness and lack of professionalism. I want you to feel disturbed, because unless you are disturbed you will not have the urge to fight against these forces. Do not spare any effort in striving for the highest standards, and let not quality vanish from this country for ever.

I wish you all a very big success.

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