

FILM STUDIES



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL2: 2 (ISSN 2454 - 9495)

JANUARY 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

The Film Praxis of Dr. Swarnavel Eswaran

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Swarnavel Eswaran with the faculty and research scholars of the Department of Film Studies, EFLU, Hyderabad

Dr. Swarnavel Eswaran presented two lectures at the English and Foreign Languages University – Hyderabad, on the 5th and 6th of October 2017, at the invitation of the Department of Film Studies (School of Interdisciplinary Studies). His lectures on the *Digital Era and Documentaries* and *Cinema and Translation: Adaptation and Remakes* demonstrated the value that film practitioners can bring to the discipline of Film Studies in India. Dr. Eswaran honed his filmmaking skills at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), and then went on to pursue his doctoral degree in Film Studies from the University of

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Iowa. Currently, he is an Associate Professor both in the Departments of English, and Media and Information at Michigan State University as well as a prolific documentary filmmaker. Dr. Eswaran takes advantage of this dual training by coalescing his intimate understanding of the processes of film production with the structures of film history and theory to achieve a rigorous cinematic praxis. Viewing cinema from this perspective allows academics to engage with the realities of film production, bridging the tremendous gap between theoreticians and practitioners. This praxis also makes it possible for Dr. Eswaran to confidently comment on a wide cross-section of film practices including documentaries that innovatively use low-end digital technologies, classic adaptations that are layered with cultural specificities and B-movie adaptations that subversively appropriate foreign generic tropes. Dr. Eswaran's perceptive and witty lectures enthused us with his passion for seeking inspired moments of innovative filmmaking. Dr. Eswaran concurs with the eminent Tamil cinematographer, P.C. Sreeram's assessment of the digital cinema that "Everything looks good, but everything looks the same". Rather than seeing this as a critique, Dr. Eswaran uses it as a point of entry into understanding digital film aesthetics. By tracing the evolution of the digital camera, predominantly used by documentary filmmakers in India, Dr. Eswaran notes that there was more room for experimentation with the image when the technology was still in its infancy. Now even a phone camera can capture a high resolution image and as a result the dominant realist aesthetic is being enforced through the technology. Dr. Eswaran cites the Tamil social activist documentary *Naali / The Stream* (Dirs. Murugavel and Lakshmanan, 2012) as exemplary of how low end technologies could be used to disturb the homogeneity of the cinematic landscape by enabling the indigenous people of the Nilgiri mountains to recount their lived experience of displacement. While the handycam rendered a certain immediacy to the footage, from a purely logistical point of view, it only became possible to record these subaltern histories because the 3CCD prosumer video camera was affordable and easily transportable. Ironically, the same handycams were employed by NGOs, corporations, and the government, to make digital 'documents' that push their agenda by accusing the inhabitants of violating the ecosystem. Consequently, *Naali's* subversive use of technologies not only challenges the dominant history and narrative of the displacement of indigenous

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people but is also a formal critique of the naturalized digital ethnographies that impose the dominant ideology. By making visible the medium's imperfections like the graininess and



hand-held jerkiness in their documentary *Murugavel* and Lakshmanan actively chose to disturb the conventional film aesthetics. Dr. Eswaran also recounted a more personal history of the evolution of the digital camera by tracing his own experiments with the new medium. His first foray was through the use of a tourist camera owned by a friend who travelled with him to his home town. *Thangam* (Dirs. Eswaran and Freccia, 1995) follows a young girl as she rebels against the monotony of rolling *bidis*. At the time, the

filmmakers had only a limited number of tapes but this restraint pushed Dr. Eswaran to take risks and in the process familiarise himself with the limits and potential of the digital camera. He also had to learn how to operate the digital editing console which took a long time, but it allowed him the space to meditate on the nature of the digital image. The film was later produced by RAI-3, an Italian television channel because they were impressed with what Dr. Eswaran achieved with this extremely low end digital camera. Next Dr. Eswaran experimented with a high band digital camera to document an ancient musical-storytelling tradition and the caste politics associated with it. Although while shooting *Villu /The Bow*, (Dir. Eswaran, 1997) the focus was on getting a clean recording of the music and interviews, through a fortunate accident there was an excess bleeding of the colours in the footage which added a layer of texture to the film. A more recent documentary *Migrations of Islam*, (Dir. Eswaran, 2013) cuts together the experiences of American Muslim students. As each student narrates their personal story, the deviations or pauses are edited out resulting in many jump cuts. Instead of overlaying the audio with B-roll footage, as is the common practice, Dr. Eswaran chose to stay with the same shot of the student's testimonial and the decision to not hide the cuts is telling. The documentary also includes cell phone recordings of performances

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by students that deal with issues faced by American Muslims. This is in keeping with Dr. Eswaran's penchant for tapping the rawness of such low-end technologies.



In keeping with his interest in film and ethnography, Dr. Eswaran's lecture on adaptations and remakes emphasised the importance of the cultural translations rather than concentrating only on the linguistic concerns. Although the goal of translations is often to make invisible its own process, so that it does not read like a translation but like the original, with cinematic adaptations this becomes

difficult because of the inescapable materiality of the image. Dr. Eswaran cites Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), as a classic cultural adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that reflect on Japanese history and culture. While Shakespeare was more concerned with the human condition than the particular context from which his characters arose, Kurosawa's central character Hidetora is an archetypical Sengoku warlord who as a result is far more cruel and unsympathetic than Lear. Dr. Eswaran observes that for Kurosawa the adaptation provided an opportunity to thoroughly examine his country's violent past, its notions of masculinity (Hidetora is betrayed by his sons in contrast to Lear's daughters), its parables (by literally testing out the one about how a bundle of arrows cannot be broken) and the significance of Buddhism. While acknowledging Kurosawa's formal use of the colour red and contrasting shot sizes to mirror the chaos that brews within the story, for Dr. Eswaran it is the added layers and nuances of the cultural specificities that elevates it from being a mere adaptation to an original masterpiece. Moving closer to home, Dr. Eswaran examines the Madras studio films of the 1950s and 1960s where the politics of the Tamil Dravidian movement played a crucial role in determining the kind of films that were produced. Interestingly however, Dr. Eswaran finds that the films were a bricolage of influences,

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unabashedly incorporating into their Hollywood remakes, the songs of the Revolutionary poet Bharatidasan and often mixing classical continuity with Soviet montage techniques. This is



further detailed in Dr. Eswaran's book *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema* (Sage Publications, 2015) which seeks to identify the specificity of Tamil cinema and examines its complex relationship with Hollywood as well as popular Hindi films. At a regional level, the Tamil B-movies, especially M. Karnan's Westerns have become cult classics for their inventive appropriation and simultaneous subversion of the generic codes and tropes of Hollywood Westerns. For instance, *Kaalam Vellum / Time will Prevail* (Dir. Karnan, 1970) features all the usual tropes including guns, horses, cowboy jackets and ponchos, recreated Morricone's soundtrack with local musicians and was shot in the iron ore mines and bauxite hill ranges of Salem to parallel the iconic landscape of Monument Valley. While Karnan capitalises on the sensational attractions of sex and violence that is common to both the Westerns and the B-movie aesthetics, he also exploits the melodramatic potential of the popular narrative of a family wronged by a landlord. The melodrama allows for the privileging of cultural specificities including folklore and ritualistic customs as well as emphasising the centrality of the women, whose unabashed expression of love and desire, upturns the macho masculinity that is the basis of the Western genre. At the same time, Karnan's aesthetical choices, including the use of the fish-eye lens or the bold use of montage, subversively rejected the deep focus and smooth continuity of A movie aesthetics. In this regard, Dr. Eswaran's expert understanding of the techniques and technology of filmmaking plays a key role in recognising these moments of cinematic innovation. Apart from being an academic and filmmaker, Dr. Eswaran is also an astute and engaging teacher. This came through in his informal discussion with research scholars of the Film Studies department, whose project proposals he patiently listened to and then offered perceptive comments. The difficulties he faced during his own transition from filmmaking to academia makes him exceptionally empathetic to scholars who are daunted by the research process.

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Dr. Eswaran helped to conceptualise our projects and recognise the need to stay on track. While encouraging us to push beyond the limitations of the discipline, he pointed out the need to acknowledge the work of eminent film academics. We will always be grateful to Dr. Eswaran for his valuable insights and for his generosity in sharing with us all that

he gained from his interactions with fellow filmmakers and academics.

*Gauri Nori is a PhD scholar at the Department of Film Studies, EFLU- Hyderabad. She has received a Masters in Literature and Film Adaptations for the University of York, U.K. She is currently researching experimental cinema from India.

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