

THE CIRCULAR TROLLEY

Duration in Cinema

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Everything is always in the middle – (dialogue from *Rati Chakravyuh*)

The duration of a shot – not merely its length, but its stretch – has been one of the cinema’s great enigmas. For a decade after the movie camera was invented, filmmakers did not know how to cut and, more relevant, did not see the point of cutting. After all, for Lumiere or Edison, the cinema was the shot, self-contained, capable of capturing the universe on its own.

Then of course came the great arts of editing. With time was also discovered the past, memory, history and so forth. And then came a third moment, combining the first and second: when time could be found through space. Modifying Tarkovsky, sculpting – not with time, but through space to find time. And so duration.

This new discovery has however proved to be a two-edged sword. Duration was, first of all, a very fragile thing. More than that, it opened up a terrifying prospect, one that Laura Mulvey names as ‘Death 24x a Second’ – in other words, that all time recorded when a camera was switched on became a record of impending catastrophe: a catastrophe that could only be kept at bay as just long as the shot could sustain life.

Even the cinema’s great durationists – the Pasolinis, Rochas, Jancsos – would however have thought the idea of

hanging in there for a hundred-minute single take as plain inconceivable, maybe also plain crazy. This was only partly for technical reasons, a celluloid magazine’s length having a comparatively short time limit. But even the ten-odd minutes that a 35 mm magazine could run was pushing the envelope, taking us to the limits that opened up a dangerous recognition: that when duration ends, the time that remains is dead.

Today of course anybody can keep a movie image recorder switched on for hours on end. But such time is literally empty time incarnate, its best example millions of hours of closed-circuit video recording nothing at all. Just as splicing two shots may have once seemed an empty and even pointless act, today the act of switching on a camera has itself emptied itself out with its ubiquity.

If you are Ashish Avikunthak, therefore, what you need to do today is very complicated, and your act resonates through at least three epochs in the cinema’s history. First, you return meaning to the act of switching on your camera, which means breathing life into space – it’s your cameraman who does it for you, really – and thence bring time back. But that’s not the real challenge: it’s what follows that is. For, second, you then keep time alive only as long as you possibly can: this is what defines its

duration. But this turns out to be a zero-sum game, for when you cannot do so any longer, time will instantly empty itself out like sand in an hour-glass. In front of your eyes. Because, third, in the era of all-seeing technological reality, when duration is over, while the camera may well roll on, it will soon find itself capturing nothing. Death will have taken place.

The Last Supper

In the beginning was the dead air
We gave life to it

We float in dead air so that it can live

This is a film of one such death: or more accurately, thirteen such deaths. At midnight during a lunar eclipse, six young newlywed couples and a priestess meet after a mass wedding. This will be their last conversation, and after it lasts for some time, they commit mass suicide. This is how the film is described. And it doesn't begin to capture the sheer drama of it.

The original image has these young couples gathered together on their wedding night, sitting together in a circle, in the courtyard of a rajbari where their group wedding must presumably have occurred, and in their full regalia, taking part in an adda. The tight circle signals both a collective ritual act as well as a game. The conversation moves randomly. One of Avikunthak's sources was The Last Supper, and so we must assume, with the original legend, that in these random conversations the death itself was foretold: that with it would have been a denouement, and a farewell also.

The usual questions come up: why was I born? When will we all die? And the awareness, that Pain gave birth to me/

Pain will also kill me, from which emerges a debate and an unusual conclusion: that the end is more important than the beginning. Yes! Says one, the end is very important. From that a further realization: If we don't forget then we will never remember. Remember to forget.

An entire universe of stories is now opened out. As these stories come and go, what we get is nothing less than the very insides of tragedy, the form being dissected as though with scalpel and scissors. They are random, seldom with an end, moving in some kind of free-associative form in a sequence, which sequence itself will be revealed as a game.

Did Ram ever kill Ravan? Or was it a hoax, since Sita wanted to live with both Ram and Ravan? What was having sex with Ravan like, with his ten heads and his hundred fingers touching her everywhere at once? Why, one asks, did Radha dream that Krishna killed her? Because he loved her? Because he could not kill her when she was awake? And what did he do after that? He went, says another, 'in search of peace to the never-ending city', There he fought wars with his own brothers and finally, in depression, he committed suicide.

He is the only God who committed suicide.

How did he commit suicide?

Is that important?

No, it is not important.

All we know that he was last seen driving a car leaving the never-ending city.

The phantasy of abstract stories gives way to autobiographical phantasy, about how I came to be: because my father may have raped my mother. My father, says one, was a 'manly soldier' who wanted a healthy son,

and so he forced himself on my mother, one night. He only knew how to have sex and shoot with a Light Machine Gun, since he was an infantryman, and during sex he only thought of shooting the Pakistanis.

I become the world around me.

In the season of fornication, the city was rioting. It was the season of rioting. It lasted till we were all dead
It was the season of slaughter
In the season of rioting I killed my daughter
And hung myself
I also fell in love... and killed my daughter
Because my brother raped her
His cries made her weary. I was that child...

Amid the phantasy is the banal: I used to go to school in a school-bus, reminisces one of the newly married: the bus was among those made in a garage behind my house, fabricated with tin and wood. In that rickety bus I would read Enid Blyton.

Memory

There is the pointless debate, with which all addas are full: when Sachin Tendulkar got out first ball at Eden Gardens, there was a near-riot. No, it wasn't Tendulkar but Gavaskar, and when he got out, the crowd called his wife, sitting in the stadium, a whore. Did India win or lose? Autobiography, phantasy, popular culture, all fuse into a single memory:

Rahul falls in love with Simiran in all the films
Vijay is always the dying Amitabh Bachchan
It was me and my first lover. All I remember were her

orgasms. We met every Tuesday evening

We bunked classes and went to Victoria Memorial
She was a beautiful girl

I could not eat anything that shed blood. I thought I ate myself

I don't remember the day Indira Gandhi died.
But I remember the day Rajiv Gandhi died
I don't remember when leaders were killed
But I remember when the superstar died

There is an entire section on Bengali movie star Uttam Kumar: a long one, as befits a Calcutta adda, even one as macabre as this. When Uttam Kumar died, the city came to a standstill, schools were closed, the radio played mournful music.

Mother was crying. My mother was a small time actress. She had acted in his last film. The scene was shot at Hotel Hindustan International. It was the scene of the heroine's birthday

The inevitable phantasy that must follow: 'I don't remember her name', says one, 'but she was very young. 'She was very attractive, I am sure she slept with Uttam'.

The topic turns to suicides. 'Madhumita committed suicide', says one. Didn't she die in a train accident? No, it was suicide. 'I was there at the metro station' After school the metro station was crowded. People said she slipped and fell in front of the train, but I saw it – she deliberately jumped. How, asks another, can someone so young commit suicide? One says knowledgeably, 'one day while playing she told me she did not want to grow old'.

Many of these stories reprise others that have appeared in his earlier films. A clear ancestor to the relationship between the moving image on celluloid with death is Vakratunda Swaha and the Girish Dahiwale sequence, of the Ganesh visarjan, which was the only shot he took before Dahiwale himself committed suicide. The effort to stop the relentless movement forward of time by playing out the specifically cinematic phantasy of getting time to move backward, is seen both in Vakratunda Swaha and his Katho Upanishad's last episode. There is the ruined house, the rajbari – apparently the Chatu Babu Latu Babu Rajbari in North Calcutta also known as the site of one of Calcutta's earliest Durga Pujas in the late 18th C. There is also the Kalighat 'fetish' that peppers his films. All these will take a considerably longer essay to explore than the present one.

The End

But let me end with thinking through the 'end'. When the end is nigh, or is actually taking place '24 x', when does the end end, so to say? An adda usually ends when people have to go home, the last bus is due, or more likely when the adda has run out of steam. But when does a shot end?

This is a problem that earlier had surfaced when watching the second episode of Katho Upanishad, and also recalling an interesting observation Mani Kaul had once made to me, on how hard it was with a very long shot to cut it at all: how much harder it got as the shot lengthened: more than say five minutes made the problem practically unmanageable. He was speaking of *The Stalker*, and said that Tarkovsky usually solved the problem of cutting very long takes by creating a trick 'diversion': where something 'happens', a sound or movement, and in the middle of that he sneaks in a cut. I was thinking of this when, ten or

fifteen minutes into the second episode, I suddenly asked myself: was this still really the same take, or had a cut been slipped in, somewhere? If not, then as the shot wore on, the suspense grew – when would this end? When the magazine, or in this instance, the hard disk space, ran out?

There is a link between the two kinds of ends. In Rati Chakravayuh a memory game is played, both in the beginning and the end, In the game, a relay follows, where one person says a word, say A, the second follows with a second connecting word that continues the chain of thought, say AB, the third goes on with ABC, and so forth, until some one, perhaps saying ABCDEFG stumbles on the sequence, and loses. Given that the most famous, perhaps the origin, of this Memory Game may have been Satyajit Ray's 1970 film *Aranyer Din Ratri*, where a group of four Calcutta men and two women play one involving famous names through the ages, I had assumed this to have been a direct reference. (It turns out that this wasn't, which was a bit of a bummer for me, but since I took the trouble to access and watch *Aranyer Din Ratri* in full as I prepared to write this short essay, I shall take the risk and make my argument anyway).

In his landmark essay 'Ray's Memory Game' (2012) Sibaji Bandyopadhyay comments that the longer the game lasts, the longer gets to be the tally sheet. In Ray's film, 'each new call makes the tapestry of names more colourful, and correspondingly, the business of remembering increasingly taxing'. The 'catalogue that the victorious keeper of records maintains is flawless –neither is it haphazard nor is any item missing from it'.

Avikunthak's game is different: here nobody forgets, everyone is word-perfect. What is taxing, and the man who is being taxed, is the man behind the circular trolley:

cinematographer Basab Mullick tracking, panning and dollying, wondering no doubt through the hundred-odd precarious minutes whether his own end would survive that of his fictional protagonists. (The thought may well have also passed his unnamed trolley pusher's mind). As the camera moves, and the actors play out an elaborate ritual, its movement is like a game of Russian Roulette: for the game can last only as long as the duration of the shot lasts. The 'take' may itself have been something of a ritual, I imagine: the actor might have stumbled on a dialogue nearly into the end of the shot, making them do it all over again, and again. I understand they took three complete takes, and one incomplete one. With each completed shot, in the act of its completion, would lie the death. Of the fiction, of the couples in frame, of the shot itself, and of the time-memory that had, like dying embers, briefly flickered to life.

Both approaches, for all their difference, however find themselves asking the question that Bandyopadhyay too asks: how to deal with memory in the cinema? Isn't it very difficult, if not impossible? 'Isn't the fact of a meaningful cinematic representation of memory perplexing? Being an audio-visual medium, isn't cinema itself inimical to the exercise which Ray sets for himself in *Aranyer Din Ratri*?'

Given that 'frank nakedness' is at best an 'elegant chimera' of fiction, it is often the case, says Bandyopadhyay, that what one age believes to be expressly manifest, 'exposed' for eternity, appears impregnable to another –

the taken-for-granted 'natural' irradiance itself may, at some point in history, become so mystifying as to suggest, in lieu of the fixed destination, a fresh departure.

Can the cinema, he asks, make such a departure?

Given that the cinema has shown its ability to clog both communication and production, and thereby remembrance, can the cinema properly have 'an agenda of its own'?

Realism cannot do it: the last person who can entertain any kind of totalizing ambition is the filmmaker who dares to label himself a 'realist'. Such a filmmaker has no better option than to don the robe of a jester, the practical person who understands and acknowledges freely that all moves intended as retaliations are 'merely circumstantial, commonsensical retorts employed under pressure of time'. Since to be forgetful of one's own finitude is death, it follows that only jesters, or those who play out their ends, are alive.

But what is the agenda here? It remains in a curious way an open question, with perhaps an answer in both ritual and sacrifice, from both of which the cinema has over its existence sought answers. And perhaps that does remain the curious, unanswered, final question in a film that ends in mass-suicide: and where the relentless circling trolley ends with one final Memory End-Game that goes like this:

One participant: In the end was darkness and light, soil, fire, ego, and death.

Second participant: In the end was darkness and light, soil, fire, ego, death, and sex.

Third participant: In the end was darkness and light, soil, fire, ego, death, sex and Kali.