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The Oscillating Note in the Age of the Great Dumbing Down –

Film Appreciation in the context of Art Education in schools today

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Cinema as a club activity and a learning tool in the classroom space.

“To try is art. To find is aesthetics”

While J. Krishnamurti, the noted philosopher, says ‘Art is putting things in their right place’, Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish master of minimalist cinema, on being asked if he thought art was useful to human beings, said bluntly - ‘It has to be, it has to be, otherwise we might as well go to hell!’

Cut to the present day.

Late one evening, amidst all the inanity called the IPL cricket, asked by Harsha Bhogle on TV if he were to bowl in the IPL today with its quick fire or rapid fire format, would he still flight the ball to the kind of batsmen that he would be bowling to, spin wizard E.A.S. Prasanna retorted that it never mattered to him and never did as to who he was bowling to; all that mattered to him was whether he could deceive the batsman in flight, whoever he was. So long as he could do so, he would flight the ball!

Spin bowling to him was not about merely flighting the ball or tossing the ball up as much as the constant attempt to deceive the batsman. To Prasanna, spin bowling was all about deception and flight. The aesthetics of his art of bowling – flight and deception!

And what did he think about the state of off spinners in the country today? asked Harsha. The great sage of spin bowling replied: ‘Spin bowling is all about self-belief and confidence without which a spinner cannot grow and become a master of his craft. The present day spinners lacked self-belief without which deception in flight is not possible’.

But what has spin bowling to do with educating art in schools?

I think the corner stone of education in school is whether at the end of it, a child can leave with a sense of self-belief, esteem – confidence being an outcome of this – to face life. An encounter with art provides a window. And in art perhaps, children can be sensitised to the aesthetics of form and content as a process of exploration.

We live in times when children have access to excessive and varied information flow of all sorts and much of it is being ‘dumbed down’ – made easy to digest – to facilitate ease of access. In the process, what is often sacrificed is the challenge to the child’s ability to imagine, read between the lines and to realise that stories, narratives do not necessarily have to end with clear denouements. Also, the quantity and the quality of the information flow is such that the child’s mind is engaged in choosing and processing the information thus leaving little scope for examining, weighing the nature of the information critically and analyse as this takes time and that is a luxury one can ill afford in today’s context. We live in an age where time is a factor that imprisons and controls rather than liberate and, therefore, one has to come to the point quickly and say it crisply!

So, in an age of rapid and easy paced growth of information, whose primary function seems to be to make things easy to decipher and ready to be processed,



‘dumbing down’ that is, it is relevant to ask: Why is it important to sensitise children to art and its appreciation in schools? Educating children to come into contact with art offers an opportunity to address the nature of it, its qualities which perhaps are the very opposite of the common denomination: observation, sharing in depth, reflective, quietude, silence, taking time over something.

It is in this context that offering film appreciation in schools becomes relevant and important. Cinema, the youngest of all art forms, which is a sort of synthesis of all other art forms that have preceded it – music, dance, painting, drama – is unfortunately stuck with a millstone round its neck, that of providing entertainment. Films must move and entertain, or are expected to, at least. This pervasive demand on the nature of cinema is such that it contributes significantly to the ‘dumbing down’ effect referred to earlier that perhaps deadens young minds that are ripe for sowing and on the cusp of blooming. Education seems a continuous process of reflection and search for the right seeds to be sown in the young minds. Art education is perhaps one such attempt at school and a film appreciation club is an outcome of such an exploration. It offers a window of opportunity that challenges this paradigm – ‘dumbing down’ – that is, by providing children with an opening whereby, they get a taste and a chance to encounter art by watching world cinema. It is an occasion for children to see the works of artists who have dared to differently use the medium of film. They become familiar with the works of artists who tell stories with imagination, using the medium of cinema for purposes other than only entertainment and business propositions; artists who have pushed the frontiers of the medium. What does this process of familiarization with different styles and from different cultures do to children’s minds then?

The renowned Indian film maker, Satyajit Ray, has said that ‘If film is an art form, then aesthetics ought

to emerge from it’. Is it possible through film appreciation to educate children on art by exposing them to a kind of cinema other than the mainstream entertainment that is constantly available to them – to sensitise them to the aesthetic that is present in the films they get to see in the film appreciation club; films that they would otherwise never get to see, perhaps? Aesthetic may be described as a set of principles that make something beautiful, which enhances the enjoyment, the nuances that go into making something unique thus offering a chance for children to learn and appreciate. For instance in Satyajit Ray’s *Aparajito*, the boy Apu’s growth from childhood to becoming a young adult is underscored by – the depiction of Benares that fills the boy’s world, his relationship with his widowed mother that is marked by an initial bonding to the widening chasm that separates them finally, his desire to go to school and later to leave his village, his final hours with his dying father marked by care and affection amidst the sound and fury of the festival of lights and his encounter with death as a young lad – all these are themes that are universal but, it is the way that Ray depicts these themes that is striking as the hallmark of an artistic quality.

A film appreciation club at school in the context of art education thus provides children a chance to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility and an alternative to mainstream culture. Art implies form and content, where ‘form’ would mean, how an artist in this case



A scene from Satyajit Ray’s ‘Aparijito’



the film director, uses the tools available at hand like sound, music, editing, cinematography etc. in cinema while telling the story; and ‘content’ would imply the quality of the narrative itself – the way it unfolds and develops, the characterisation that include the nuances of the unfolding theme, drama and emotion. The process, by which this familiarization happens over several screenings of different films as it gradually develops and unfolds in children, is the discussions that follow film screenings on form, content and genre. Slowly, as children are exposed to films from the world over and understanding seeps in over time, one could say that this extends their aesthetic horizons, enabling them to cultivate a taste for the finer aspect of the art form they get to see.

While in the classroom, watching films or specific scenes/sequences helps children imbibe the necessary skills of analysis leading to their understanding of the finer aspects of cinema – identifying and understanding the central idea or theme; the use of sound, music, language, on-screen and off-screen effects that convey the idea and the specific ways different artists use them that lends to their individual styles. These skills – analytical and critical thinking - are required and come into play in the classrooms and are vital not only in the understanding of their texts but also the quality of writing that follows. The

discussions that follow the film screenings enhance the children’s critical thinking skills in observing and identifying such aesthetic attributes. For instance, the theme of desperation and struggle in Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* takes place amidst the post-world war gloom in Italy. The increasing despair of the father in search of his stolen bicycle that he so badly needs for his job and in the process his humiliation in the end, unfolds in front of his young son. The boy’s increasing impatience and anger at his father’s methods to recover his bicycle is contrasted by the desperate situation the father is in demanding desperate measures. The discussions that follow after a film help children to get to know the nuances and subtleties of artistic expressions thus enabling them to enlarge their sensibilities in the field of art. The in depth sharing and observation that happens after the film screenings during discussions brings about a sense of self-belief and helps build their confidence through the mutual sharing that takes place. Children become aware that other cultures across the world with their differences can also be right. The films from world cinema they get to see provoke children to categorise, infer and think on matters that have native as well as global significance - an experience that ultimately helps them to be reflective, which perhaps is a natural corollary of art education.



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