

## Interview

Girish Shambu

**The Cine-Files: How important are “close readings” to film studies? How do close readings better help us understand cinema? What is at stake in the close reading?**

**Girish Shambu:** Let me try to answer by first sketching a context. I’ve always been interested by the question of whether there is a *proper positioning* of a critic (or scholar or viewer) with respect to a film. By this I mean: Where does the critic situate the film with respect to herself? Does the critic, in the face of an admirable work of high art or popular art, *look up to* the film and, with great humility and patience, analyze and explain its workings? Or does the critic have a different responsibility entirely: to seize, *from on high*, a film from a sea of cultural artifacts, and put the film “to use” by applying a theoretical or interpretive tool to extract social or cultural or political meanings from it? The former approach is often nearer to “close analysis” while the latter is more representative of the influence of “Screen theory” and, later, cultural studies on film studies.

I think there are two reasons why reflecting on this question about the positioning of a critic is valuable. First, it makes us realize that we’re not dealing with an either/or question. Surely a critic’s role, broadly interpreted, includes doing both—developing rich appreciations of great works, but also recognizing that films can be productive sites of ideological analysis. Second, each approach has the ability to enrich the other. The judicious and innovative application of theoretical tools can enhance close analysis, while the attentiveness of close analysis can deepen the ideological critique brought to bear on a film. Thus, what this question opens up for us is the insight that many of the best critics occupy a forever *shifting position* with respect to a film.

Ultimately, the great value of close analysis might be to remind us all of something crucial that goes unacknowledged by most film criticism: *the super-plenitude of a film*. The best close analyses show us how rich and deep just a few images and sounds can be. A typical narrative film has hundreds of shots and cuts, hundreds of thousands of frames, and works on multiple levels simultaneously (narrative, character, visual composition, camera movement, sound design, editing, and so on). The best, most exemplary close analyses also serve as a useful, constant reminder, by extrapolation, of the truly mind-boggling complexity of a single, complete film.

**TCF: Do you recall a close reading of a film that particularly illuminated something about cinema for you—something that couldn't have been understood without that frame-by-frame attention to detail? Please tell us about it.**

**GS:** One of my most treasured close readings of a film is Raymond Bellour's essay "The Film We Accompany," in which he analyzes Ritwik Ghatak's melodrama *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960).

On the one hand, it is a paradigmatic example of close analysis. On the other hand, it is a profound meta-critical piece on the evanescent nature of the cinematic and film-critical experience.

For Bellour, there are many kinds of encounters with films. There are films that are seen; those that are recounted; and those that are critiqued and analyzed. But here he is concerned with a specific kind of critical encounter: that of *accompanying* a film from beginning to end, performing close readings of key moments, traversing the entire length of the film. The word "accompany" refers to traveling alongside the film for its entire duration, but it also has another meaning: allowing the film to speak to the critic as an equal (as a *companion*), guiding the critic in his project, rather than simply serving as the object of choice in the critical-analytical project. Further, each time such a close reading – let me call it a *close accompaniment* – is performed by the critic, it is a unique and non-replicable experience that takes place at a certain point in time, during a certain encounter with the film. The next time Bellour returns to the film, he implies, the resulting analysis might be different. He writes: "The after-films are in suspense."

Bellour also means to quietly draw a parallel between the process of close accompaniment of a film and the experience of a teacher in a classroom. His approach models a process by which the teacher *rediscovers* the film in the classroom, remaining open to contingency and chance in the act of 'listening' to the film anew as it unfolds *this particular time*. This is a liberatingly un-programmatic way of staging an encounter with a film one has seen many times before, in or out of the classroom situation. It keeps both the film and the teaching situation open and mobile and full of potentiality.

**TCF: How does close reading change in the digital age? How can the close reading method adapt to a digital format? How do digital technologies allow us to engage in "direct" criticism that bypasses traditional written criticism?**

**GS:** The emergent form of the video essay (what is coming to be known in academia as videographic film studies) allows the creation of criticism with the tools and resources of cinema itself. In the wonderful essay "Double Lives, Second Chances" at the journal *Frames*, Cristina Álvarez López, the Barcelona-based critic and editor of the online cinema publication *Transit*, distinguishes between traditional print-based criticism and video essays in the following way: written texts *evoke*, while video criticism *invokes*. For her, the discourse of the video essay originates from – "inheres in" – the images and sounds of the film itself. She also usefully points to the fact that films themselves have led the way in this field: the techniques and innovations of video essays can be traced back to such disparate forebears as the split screens of De Palma and Fleischer; the montage and superimpositions of Godard; the text-image-sound relationships of Marker, etc.

She concludes by observing that video essays are not only made possible by new media technologies. Like print criticism, they equally owe their existence to the *desire* of the critic: “the good critic is always going to seek out one thing above all others: the need to make things *appear*, to conjure them, whether in the mind of the reader or in the eyes of the spectator.”

I think that video essays also make productive use of another desire: that of the cinephile viewer/reader. Cinephilia is not about being merely pleased and charmed and diverted by movies. It is a powerful, affective relationship to images and sounds. There is a great, primal cinephilic energy of attraction that is contained in the circuit that connects the cinephile-viewer to images and sounds. Video essays have the wonderful advantage of being able to access and deploy this energy of attraction *directly* in their address to the viewer. They are capable of providing a specific kind of affective charge (which can then be used for rhetorical purposes) that print criticism can’t quite do in the same way. This is not to say that video criticism is better, or more powerful, or has greater potential than print criticism, but that it can, like print criticism, offer certain singularities of approach and effect, and this can only contribute to enriching the critical field at large.

Let me end by offering links to a couple of must-visit websites created by the indispensable Catherine Grant: Audiovisualcy and Film Studies for Free. Along with her Twitter page, they feature numerous links to good examples of video essays on the web.

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