

Revisiting 'Against Interpretation': Reading 'The Lunchbox' as a Crisis in Art Criticism

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Abstract – *This paper attempts to read, explain and justify the suitability of reading Sontag's 1961 essay 'Against Interpretation' using a Bollywood movie The Lunchbox as a case in point. The reason for studying this movie is, even though it has an ambiguous ending, but the beauty portrayed on screen was enrapturing and enthralling. My paper does not attempt to praise or criticize the film but to celebrate the enrapturing and enthralling beauty it portrayed on screen. Should we watch films, as Sontag suggests, or should we interpret them? There is no need for politics in these pictures, no need for conceptual drag cloaking the images. The movie is an art, art about a life in art. Art has an aesthetic purpose more than utilitarian.*

Keywords: *Against Interpretation, The Lunchbox, Art Criticism.*

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INTRODUCTION

There is no unanimity of opinions among academicians, critics, filmmakers or audiences about the artistic dimensions of cinema. Nonetheless, cinema is a form of art- high, mass or popular. This paper attempts to read, explain or justify the suitability of reading Sontag's 1961 essay 'Against Interpretation' using a Bollywood movie *The Lunchbox* as a case in point. The reason for studying this movie is because even though it has an ambiguous ending, but the beauty portrayed on screen was enrapturing and enthralling. My paper does not attempt to praise or criticize the film but to celebrate the enrapturing and enthralling beauty it portrayed on screen.

What captured my interest in reading Sontag's essay concerning a film is because 'film' as a medium of art became relevant only during the time Sontag was writing and perhaps being the only art form whose origin we can trace. It is interesting to read 'this synthetic medium' in which a multitude of artistic elements- narration, performance, music, photography, audio-visual are juxtaposed, therefore being much more than just a casual or mechanical recording process.

Sustan Sontag's in her essay 'A Century of Cinema' points out:

It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral -- all at the same time. Cinema had apostles. (It was like a religion.) Cinema was a

crusade. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.

When I was coming out of the cinema after watching the movie, everyone came out talking as to what the movie was trying to say and what the end could mean. Since the movie was quoted as 'high art', the audience felt a compulsion to give their opinions as if just absorbing the beauty of the movie and not asserting their opinion would make them any less of an intellectual or an art lover. But a true art lover would feel the artwork more than think about it.

The problem with interpretation is that it does not contain the whole artwork in detail, that is, it plucks the elements out of the work of art. The idea of metaphorical interpretation originally came up with biblical texts which could not be read without looking into the past but the exercise passed on as lineage to other pieces of art for centuries to come with cinema being the recent and spacious medium assuming that everything that is constructed is allegorical.

On the surface *The Lunchbox* is a story of a young, lonely housewife Ila who tries to add some spice to her conjugal life by cooking delicious food for her neglectful husband. Somehow, the delivery goes astray and lands with a widower Saajan. Soon an unusual friendship starts between the two wanderers through an exchange of notes in the lunchbox. Formal examination of the movie suggests that it is interesting to note the genre of the movie which is quite different from clichéd

'romance'. The film has developed a new genre for itself which is that of 'epistolary romance' with an epistle becoming a privileged space for self-expression of the male and female protagonist in private spaces. Its interesting to note the peculiar features of the narrative where each character lives in a Bombay of their own and honesty and specificity of the details of the movie in being 'local' - recording the city in all its immediacy, giving us slices of actual space and true duration putting us in a position to discover our link to primordial experience. Unlike other arts, cinema goes beyond convention to reacquaint us with the concrete reality that surrounds us but that we seldom notice.

The female protagonist Ila's whole story is set inside an apartment. Her apartment does not look like a set that has been showed up but a home that is lived in. How effortlessly Ila brings in the physical realities of a Marathi woman into her character whereas Saajan and Mrs Deshpande are stuck in a different era which is shown using the innocent magnificence of old Hindi shows and collection of old movie songs audio cassettes. The movie does not use lyrical composition and sticks to the mere background score. Here lies the brilliance of the movie because in the case of lyrical compositions or songs, the ability to give text meanings by the audience which they might not intend to have is particularly strong. This is because lyrical compositions rely on the semantically inexact media of words for their expression.

Whilst Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA' was originally performed with bitter irony, 'It is about growing up working class, being shipped off to fight in Vietnam and coming back to nothing', the Republican Party later attempted to use it in the campaign for the 1984 presidential election. These studies all demonstrate the power of audiences to invest a text with meaning and to use it in new and creative ways. They illustrate the necessity of considering, or at least being aware of, the reception of a cultural product in any given study, the social practices through which a given text is consumed, received or appropriated by audiences, and any secondary socio-cultural phenomena that may occur as people interact with the text. Even the Dabbawallas are singing in their language and no subtitles are available for their folk song. This appears to be a conscious attempt from the director to not reveal the lyrics of their composition because they are very personal to the Dabbawallas and derivation of multiple meanings in a way would have culminated in withering away of the actual meaning that in effect would have resulted in withering away of the aesthetic experience of their music. As Sontag puts, it "makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories."

The movie has a vivid juxtaposition of characters. The most significant being that of Mrs Deshpande who never appears on the screen but her peculiar

voice makes her one of the most striking characters of the movie. She technically lives in a prison but knows 'nuskhas' to all problems- physical or emotional. In fact, it is her teaching that 'the way to man's heart is through his stomach' which initiates the plot of the story. Also unique is Sheikh's character who eats 'bananas' during lunch hour breaks. Now a non-formalistic approach of reading his character would force us to think of the 'banana' as a symbol of class struggle. But if we approach his character formally, it suggests that he is a simple man, just making a way through his life. He is not influential enough to represent a theory as complex as that of Marx.

The creativity and artistry of the movie do not just lie in the vivid characters it contains but also in the variety of messages it conveys through the exchange of letters- ranging from social issues such as smoking to marriage counseling. The depth of emotions that the letters contain is remarkably portrayed. The spectator can't abstain from falling in love while the protagonists fall in love using what O'Connell's book calls "slow communication". O'Connell quotes this lovely passage from a piece by Catherine Field in *The New York Times*:

A good handwritten letter is a creative act, and not just because it is a visual and tactile pleasure. It is a deliberate act of exposure, a form of vulnerability because handwriting opens a window on the soul in a way that digital communication can never do. You savor their arrival and later take care to place them in a box for safekeeping.

However, the director claims that his purpose was never to make a movie but a documentary on 'Dabbawallas' - men clad in white kurtas, weaving their bikes through impossible traffic and swarming throngs, juggling multiple tiffins — circular silver tins with four to five compartments, each packed with food — that are destined for office buildings and school courtyards. Therefore if we sideline the 'authorial intentions' and begin interpreting the movie, in a way we are misreading the movie or reducing the movie to a clichéd romance. The project eventually turned out to be a movie but he intended to showcase the dignity of 'the dabbawallas'- the way they unmistakably carry out their jobs. But unknowingly the mistake they make or if it's a miracle introduces the magic realist element in the movie.

The Lunchbox ends abruptly, leaving room for enough to ponder upon, raising multiple questions- if on way back Mr Fernandes realizes he is not as old as he thinks or if Ila actually posts those letters and leaves for Bhutan or if Mr Fernandes actually receives the letters and therefore goes riding with 'dabbawallas' to search for Ila. Such arbitrary speculations are unrequired. The film deliberately strives to be cryptic, and it avoids narrative clarity

towards the culmination for artistic experimentation. The 'aggressive' and 'impious' interpretation of the scene of Ila taking out her jewellery has been read by critics as symbolic of giving away her conjugal bond and longing for sex outside marriage which she already suspects her husband to be engaged in. I believe such an interpretation 'violates' the sensuality of the form by assuming the latent meaning to be the true meaning. As David Bordwell rightly points out in his book *The Cinematic Text*, 'Any theory that explains every phenomenon by the same mechanism explains nothing'(14).

Anything that does not adhere to the norm of narration is flooded with interpretive analysis. For example, the credit sequence in the movie takes place after the last scene as against the first scene as in most studio narratives. Such incidents of choice are also reduced to 'codes in semiotic sense'. Neoformalists, the latest approach of viewing movies, reject many assumptions and methodologies made by other schools of film study, particularly hermeneutic (interpretive) approaches, among which he counts Lacanian, psychoanalysis and certain variations of poststructuralism. In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Bordwell and co-editor Noël Carroll argue against these types of approaches, which they claim to act as 'Grand Theories' that use films to confirm predetermined theoretical frameworks, rather than attempting mid-level research meant to illuminate how films work. Bordwell and Carroll coined the term 'S.L.A.B. theory' to refer to theories that use the ideas of Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, and Barthes.

A striking scene in the movie in which Saajan comes across a painter, whose all paintings appear to be the same but when looked closely every painting has a charming motif gifted to him by his daily life, sometimes it's a man standing near the tower, two extra birds, etc. In a way each detail in street artist's paintings informs us of the simplest kind of content, where a bird is a bird, a man is a human; a bicycle is a bicycle et al.

What I'm saying is that it's okay if we want to understand the "meaning" of a film, but when so many great films are ambiguous, maybe we need to consider that they can't be bogged down in a simple 'I have the answers!' explanation. The problem with viewers ultimately is that they spend too much time trying to intellectually comprehend films that they overlook the aesthetic potential of the image and its ability to stimulate emotional and sensory reactions. *The Lunchbox* is the best kind of film because it does not need to be understood to be loved. It only needs to be looked at. If all they do is interpret the film's content, which is to say that they try to construct a narrative, thematic, and ideological meaning out of its visual images, then they overlook the various ways the filmmakers construct the images to elicit an emotional and sensory reaction from the viewer.

CONCLUSION

Should we look at films, as Sontag suggests, or should we interpret them? There is no need for politics in these pictures, no need for conceptual drag cloaking the images. The movie is an art, art about a life in art. Art has an aesthetic purpose more than utilitarian.



Some 5,000 dabbawalas dole out over 200,000 meals a day, picking up the tiffins in the morning from women, typically, who have packed steaming, spicy dishes into each compartment: a curry, vegetables, dal (lentils), and flatbread (with some variations).

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