

# Poetry in Cinema

## A conversation with Mark Cousins

Aryanil Mukherjee

**Mark Cousins** is a documentary filmmaker, author, curator and wanderer. The creator of *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, *The Story of Film and Children* which premiered at Cannes in 2013, he has directed documentaries on subjects ranging from Neo-Nazism to Iranian cinema. He has also co-directed four innovative film events, and the 8 ½ Foundation with Tilda Swinton. Mark is an Honorary Doctor of Letters at the University of Edinburgh. Between 2014 and 2015, I carried out an intermittent but prolonged electronic conversation with the auteur on the relationship between poetry and cinema. Mark was frequently globe-trotting all this while as the time stamp on his responses indicate.



AM: There seems to be some consensus among western scholars of cinema, especially those interested in the interdisciplinary arts, that *film* began as a documentary on outer human living but soon reflected inwards, turning intensely and abstractly poetic at times, but by the 1930s *cinema* was completely hijacked by narrative story-telling.

Documentation of human life marks the early films of the Manaki brothers, Kino Pravda, Flaharty etc. etc. But as we get close to the end of the 1920s we notice a great shift in content/style among the stellar filmmakers of the time. Let's examine this Luis Buñuel quote from the 1920s – 'The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply' – we clearly hear a voice speaking for surrealism here. I'll refer to a

few specific films (many of which you cover in your documentary *The Story of Film : An Odyssey*) – Bunuel & Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou*, the films of Abel Gance aided by poet Blaise Cendrars, Fernand Leger’s *Ballet Mechanique* (also collaborated with Cendrars), very early endeavors by D.W. Griffith (*Sands of Dee*, for example, which is based on a Charles Kingsley poem) and Jean Cocteau.

The place of poetry on the silver screen shrunk as a result. I’d like to start by inviting your comments on the observation.

**MC:** I don't agree with the idea that cinema went from exterior realism, advanced to the height of poetic interiority, and then declined in the 30s. These elements exist in movie history, but not successively. They are concurrent. Yes, there were periods when the exterior overrode the interior (the 1950s? the 1970s?) and vice versa (the 1960s? the 1920s?) but our fascination with cinema derives from the fact that it is both, that it is reality-dream. In the 30s, for example, we had *Goldiggers* of 1933, *Limite* in Brazil, Mizoguchi and Prevert...brilliant treads of the line. Think of the opening shot of the handbag in Hitchcock’s *Marnie* - brilliantly resonant. What other art-form could do that?



The Goldiggers (1933)

The confusing factor in this is - commerce. When movies get more mainstream, they seem to lose their desire to be art but, as we know, the mainstream is a very Freudian forest.

[Edinburgh, Scotland: 5:27AM June 5, 2014]

**AM: Let's take D. W. Griffith for example. He is believed to have been a poetry lover since his teens; wanted to get published as a poet, but failed to impress the influential poetry editors of his time and repeatedly took refuge in the poetry of Whitman and Kingsley in his films – especially when trying to portray the image of the “sea”. Any thoughts on Griffith’s poetry on the screen?**

**MC:** I didn't know that DWG was into Whitman, but it makes sense: that intellectual searching, that belief in purity (which is great and awful), that hint of the pulpit.

Griffith was definitely a naturalist. Like the great Swedish directors before him, he was entranced by the fact that cinema could capture the wind in the trees, the burnished morning, the gloaming. he was a master of metonymy and rhythm, but particularly metonymy. He gives us a brilliant sense that the corner of the world that he is showing us represents something bigger. The halo lighting and iris masking that Billy Bitzer and he were so fond of is, surely, their way of saying "what you glimpse in this glowing circular space stands for what we have screened out." Just as written poets exclude, so does DWG.

[Sheffield, England: 8:09 AM June 9, 2014]

**AM: Continuing with the thesis that unsuccessful poets have sometimes turned to filmmaking in the early years and have pushed its artistic boundaries in unique ways, let me refer back to the Luis**

Buñuel quote– ‘The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply’ – and *Un Chien Andalou*. We learn that the film takes its title from a failed book of poems written by the filmmaker and apparently Dali suggested the same title for the film. Buñuel’s son, in a recent interview, admitted that his father who grew up on the same street with Dali and Lorca always wanted to write, paint and sculpt but soon realized he didn’t have the gene, pulse or diligence for any of those arts. Juan Luis Buñuel goes on to say that if the medium was invented 30 years later his father would have died unknown. You discuss 3 timeless visual “free-associations” and an example of innovative editing from that 1927 film in *The Story of Film*. Would you say *Un Chien Andalou* was a poetic equivalent of what the surrealist poets & painters were doing at the time on paper/canvas? Was it “poetic” for the avant-garde film grammar and rhythm it brought forth or was it for another reason?

**MC:** I find it helpful to ask myself what *Un Chien Andalou* isn't, what it least resembles. It is certainly not theatre, certainly not Jane Austen or Flaubert. It doesn't flow. It is spikey. It doesn't creep up on us, or "build" in any classical sense. It seems untroubled by any cautious need to creep up on our sensibilities.



A scene from *Un Chien Andalou* (1927)

Out of these avoidances, its Molotov cocktail poetics emerge. It is poetic in that its internal connections are intense, surprising, distilled, not taken for granted. It is poetry in that it is highly worked, in that its surface isn't quotidian, in that its meaning doesn't emerge in the way that emerges in more bourgeois art, through the course of a pleasant evening.

In all these ways, *Un Chien Andalou* shares much with the surrealism of other art forms of the time. It is born of the same spirit, the same understanding of the relationship between form, society, boredom and innovation.

[Sheffield, England: 11:37 AM June 13, 2014]

**AM: As we get to a portal of thought where cinema and poetry move back and forth clouding each other, similarities in their languages immediately seem to come at us. Most easily metaphors and symbols. In that regard, would you say *Un Chien Andalou* played heavily with a film-language that even written poetry was slow to invent? Critics talk about surrealist motives for obvious reasons, but was it not more of “dadaist” cinema?**



A scene from *Un Chien Andalou* (1927)

**MC:** Yes, we can talk about the symbolism of cinema and other tropes from literature. But what is striking in *Un Chien Andalou* is that terms from written poetry need to be adapted or stretched in order to describe well their filmic equivalent. This is I think because the denotation in film is so compellingly there; it refuses to melt before our eyes in order that the connotation can take over from it. The image is too alive, too precocious and steroidal to allow the little matter of its referent to have equal say. The meaning process in cinema is too young, as it were. Its grapes are not ripe. For this reason I agree that *Andalou* is more dada than surreal. It isn't making meaning as much as detonating the buildings that already exist in order to clear the ground for meanings that might follow.

**AM:** There is a scene where a man tied to a piano tries to reach for his girl and is pulled back by two priests. Juan Luis Buñuel said people were constantly building symbols for those objects and characters – the man as “artist”, the piano as his “art”, the girl as “love” and the priests as “religion”. And yet all that enforced dream symbolism didn't help alleviate the semantic shock. How would you look at such scenes today?

**MC:** I would say that Buñuel's explanation of the man and piano and nun scene is the 'paper' or 'spoken' meaning of the scene. It sounds right. But watch the scene and it is more about a piano and a girl and nuns than it is about what they symbolise. That's the brilliance of cinema and its curse.

**AM:** You brilliantly discuss in *The Story of Film* how technology, generational motives and the times have changed film language. Have you noticed similar pattern-transitions in film-symbolism, let's say in a general way?



**MC:** It's hard to generalise about this. Symbolism in Hindi cinema, for example, has always been pretty outré. But I would say that there was a trend from the mid 20th century onwards towards ellipsis, towards representing a thing by its absence or opposite. Call this modernism perhaps or filmmakers detaching themselves from the way meaning works in



books. There was certainly a process where cinema was reaching more and more for the metaphysical, the abstract, the void.

[Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Scotland: 13:20 PM June 26, 2014]

**AM:** Picking up your earlier comment on the film-language of *Andalou*, that - “The image is too alive, too precocious and steroidal to allow the little matter of its referent to have equal say” – I’d love to add a comment by Satyajit Ray we grew up with in Kolkata. Ray said in an interview conducted by a film-club journal in the 1960s - what literature had achieved in terms of language in 600 years from Chaucer to Joyce, the film has surpassed it in a matter of 60 years.

But coming back to symbolism in Hindi cinema, I’d like to ask if cultural alienation sometimes leads us to creative misreading of cinematic symbols? And if that can at times lead them to appear a bit gonzo? An example – poor woman visits a girl friend and finds a stunted vase on the sill filled with rice grains, she looks at it with bright eyes. Her expression might confuse the average Western eye; one might think of “greed”, but that vase is a Hindu symbol of family bliss and the warmth in her eye only expresses a certain respect for the visited household.

**MC:** Absolutely. Hindi cinema is particularly prone to such misreadings as, famously, it tries not to be too culturally specific, it tries to float above ethnic and linguistic specifics and be about "all India". Such floating means that its signs are relatively untethered, that they have loose or ambiguous relationships with their referents and, so, foreigners can make of them what they will, without too much steerage. This is an essentially Freudian situation - denotation and connotation having a disguised or disavowed relationship with each other. Hence Hindi cinema is the most Freudian of film traditions.

**AM:** It is almost telepathic you should say that, I was reading Roland Barthes' essays on films of late where he talks about the same – about the meaning of images, asserting that in the cleavage between the denotative and connotative messages, there is a third message – one without a code. Is that where a meaning producing or imagining mechanism begins? The so-called poetic space begins to develop?

**MC:** I don't remember the passage from Barthes to which you refer, but I love it. The meaning process has its gaps, its losses of consciousness, its senior moments when it suddenly loses sense of where it is. Sometimes it takes meaning, or our processing of it, a while to come to, after it's been stunned by Dali, or Glazer's *Under the Skin*. Is that what Barthes means about the bits without a code? Those moments in cinema (they are frequent in *Goldiggers* of 1933) where the meaning seems, like in Hindi cinema, to be off the grid...

**AM:** ... and does this third space provide scope for creative misreading?

**MC:** To misread is to disrespect or to mock, in a way - it is seriously un-Confucian - but some films seem to be asking for it. I do not subscribe to the idea that misreading is always good, iconoclastic or punky. Lots of the problems in the real world arise from us not taking the time, and making the effort, to understand other meanings, social ideas, etc. Misreading becomes lazy, postmodern, sedentary and incurious.

[Sweden: 10:20 PM Oct 4, 2014]

**AM:** Poets and painters were probably the first initiators of avant-garde cinema where they attempted to release the image from its circus tent into a larger space, but one of maddening congestion. We think of the usual suspects here - Dali, Buñuel, Griffith, Cocteau and other wild experimenters of the Kuleshov editing technique who were trying newer meaning production by disrupting the usual sequence. But perhaps Fernand Léger introduced the first all-pervading cinematic symbol in *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) – the “wheel”. Apart from being a living metaphor of the “circle of life & arts”, it became a greater symbol of the moving image itself. Léger took the idea of the “wheel” from a Blaise Cendrars poem. Any thoughts on that film? Could you think of another use of such grand metaphors or symbols from the pre-world-war cine era?

**MC:** Yes, wheels are a big deal in *Ballet Mechanique* and, yes, I agree that they seem to be referring to the excitement of cinema itself. People often say that trains are the big symbol in early modernist cinema, but for me it is the eye. The eye shots in *Ballet Mechanique* are fantastic and most of the avant-garde films have close ups of eyes or sequences about eyes. Cinema brought new seeing. It made seeing sublime. The co-arrival of electric light, film, cities, fun fair rides, trains and the flaneur made seeing the king or queen of the senses. There was no seeing like this seeing. We were blind, now we saw.

**AM:** You know, last year Bengali parallel filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta, an accomplished poet himself, told me he heard from someone that Vladimir Mayakovsky also made films. Do you have any idea about that?

**MC:** I know that he wrote and acted in films, but can't recall hearing that he directed too.

One of his films is on YouTube.

[London, UK: 8:15 PM Jan 31, 2014]

**AM:** Are there other films made before the 1940s that might qualify as “poetry” or “poetic”?

**MC:** Limite from Brazil, Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poete*, the films of Jean Painleve, Sjöström, Dovzhenko, early Ozu, Alice Guy, Cavalcanti, Keaton, etc. etc.



A poster of Limite (Brazil, 1931)

**AM:** Now to what should have been the opening question of this segment. What according to you makes a film (or maybe a particular aspect of it) "poetic"?

**MC:** A film is poetic if it seems detached from the way meaning works in everyday life. Prose renders the subject-object relationships as we take them to be, and makes meaning in some haste and with no great suspicion of how it is ordinarily made. Poetry takes longer, tries to bypass conventional symbolism, and tries to make you see something that you have seen many times, for the first time.

**AM:** In my community of Bengali poets and film people – actors, editors, screen-writers, directors and cineastes – a casual debate crops up at times about what is "poetry" in cinema. Some strongly opine that there is no such thing as "poetry" in cinema, it is a term we use vaguely to describe, signify or express an element or quality for which there isn't a proper cinematic language. What would be your response to that?

**MC:** I think they are talking bananas! If poetry is not in cinema, then where is it? Film is the most naturally - effortlessly - poetic art-form, because it is there and not there. It jumps the hedge of the prosaic. Poetry requires detachment. It needs you to burn the bridge. It destroys what first comes to mind, like writers in movies discard the scrunched bits of paper on which they wrote their first ideas. Poetry is better than life, as is cinema.

**AM:** In 1965, at the New Film Festival in Pistoia, Pasolini said– 'The inner law of the film, that of "obsessive framing," thus shows clearly the preponderance of a formalism as a myth finally liberated and hence poetic.' What is the historical reasoning behind the use of "obsessive framing"?

**MC:** I think that's the most complicated question I've ever been asked! By obsessive framing, I think Pasolini meant that squinting we do as filmmakers to look deep inside our film, past its fuselage. It's almost impossible not to sound vague here, and it's tempting to fall back on Wittgenstein at this point, but for Pasolini, "obsessive" means something like necessary and sacred. It's as if a filmmaker is always searching for a cinematic paradise lost, a "pure" and essential filmic way of seeing her or his subject. I find it hard to say what the historical reasoning behind this is. I think E H Gombrich unfashionable idea of "schema plus correction" points us in the right direction, in that it suggests a removal of impediments, or false stars, a discarding of scrunched bits of paper.

**AM:** Now there is a taxonomy I use to segregate what is generally termed as "poetic" cinema. I can think of four broad classes –

a) films made on or about poems (*Sands of Dee, Un Chien Andalou, Ballet Mechanique, Pan Tadeusz* and our favorite "The House is Black" etc.)

b) films based on biographies or life events of poets or where the protagonist is a poet (*Shadowlands, Tom & Viv, etc.*)

c) films that use poetic quotations directly or indirectly

and finally

d) films that qualify as a poem based on overall treatment (*Wings of Desire* and many of Satyajit Ray's films etc.).

I would like to get your reflection on such classification.

**MC:** To be honest, I only recognise the last of these. Poetry is not a matter of content, it is form. *Tom and Viv* is prose.



A scene from Pan Tadeusz (Poland, 1999)

**AM:** Could you think of other types or genres of cinema - CGI films for example - that might qualify as "poetry" or "poetic"?

**MC:** CGI is interesting in this regard because it does abstract. It removes the traces of the everyday and, therefore, has the potential to distil or heighten.

**AM:** A one-to-one correspondence often destroys possibility, so I'll avoid that, but let me ask how do you think the role metaphors play in a poem that has been translated to celluloid (I am using the word "celluloid" here literally to limit the question to pre-digital cinema)? I mean if one compares the image with the text and vice versa, the techniques of relating, equating, comparing, corresponding might turn out to assume the proportion of a whole new episteme, don't you think?

**MC:** I would say that cinema is not great at metaphor. A metaphor is poetics chopped up and served on a platter.

**AM:** A poem, except for performance or visual poetry, is primarily made up with words, composed either on paper or more impersonally on a computer screen, as in the present times. A thought, or a train of thought, a verbal expression is directly scribed by the artist herself. But a film's language comes from a plethora of things – words, text, voice, language, sound, music, light, silence, texture – clearly multimedia and it takes more than one or two people to achieve all that. How valid and pertinent, therefore, is a comparison of the two languages?

**MC:** Paper came late to the poetry business. The great pyramid of Giza is a poem which predates paper. Writing strains to make poetry, film doesn't. Painting doesn't. Buildings don't.

[Edinburgh, Scotland: 7:31 AM Feb 7, 2015]

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