

Beware Not to Kill Time: Four Young Filmmakers in New Delhi Challenge Our View of Temporality

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“(…) Il y a la durée – oh non pas quatrième mais première dimension. Ces pommes, ces serviettes, ces dunes s’écoulent. Ces hémorragies de lumière en nous sont inappréciables. J’ai dit durée. Il y faut du silence…” *Dominique Noguez, Le Cinéma Autrement. 1987: 353-54*

Two girls and two boys pose for a still picture, embraced by David MacDougall. This is the image under the opening title of the film project, *Delhi at Eleven*. There is in this image a sense of eternity and a special joy, a restraint but a durability, a posture that is not simply posed. The children are aged eleven, as we learn from the following title, but "Delhi at Eleven" could just as easily be referring to a time of day or night. The title plays with this ambiguity: we become intrigued by the fact that children make films and that perhaps these films can tell us something about another kind of space-time, another age-span in the making of films; for it is the case that for many children from disadvantaged social classes, eleven is an age that implies responsibilities that belong both to adulthood and childhood.

The project's approach and its use of video cameras help to reveal a parallel world of knowledge possessed by these young children at an Indian state school. The methodology put in practice by MacDougall, together with his assistants, the teachers, and the children themselves, provides a way of allowing this knowledge to be transmitted to others—both adults and non-adults—in a phenomenological sense. It builds on training the viewer's perception to become broader, which in turn implies that perception is a larger corporeal endeavor than merely seeing, or optics, or even thought. It is an invitation to analyze what we do not know—as the first child, Ravi, suggests at the beginning, with true anthropological awareness of the variability of contexts. This can be achieved only by understanding that both individual personalities and individual bodies are involved in the inquiry, and by being sensitive to the varied ways in which time is constructed through the different children's ways of shooting and editing.

What we see is the result of full immersion, playfulness, and disciplined learning, but also a way of surrendering to all this, creating, in the best examples, a flow of time that is both individually shaped and common to the experience of space-time particular to these children. In other words, we are invited to share a representation of the world that makes sense to them first and foremost, and about which we could never otherwise gain the same insight. The four children's filmmaking places us in a comfortable position, not too close or too distant. This is achieved by the subtle suggestion that we must surrender some of our preconceived ideas about what is going to happen. We are invited to abandon any pre-formulated judgments, such as that the films are wonderful considering they were made by children, or that they were manipulated by adults afterwards, or that they are simply going to be boring exercises. In fact, full immersion in the four videos, following from such an open approach, makes us realize that strikingly different phenomenological experiences of time can be achieved by using a very basic technology of the sort offered these children. It is having a particular attitude that makes this possible, brought about by the meditative and exploratory approach that the children develop in their own ways. Here cinema becomes an exploratory means of rendering duration in motion (as noted by Deleuze 1986, Tarkovsky 1986 and Gangar 2006, to name just a few).

This type of direct cinematic technique has a distinctive ability to render its maker highly responsive, because real events are not often repeated, nor are they particularly staged, and the filmmaker is usually quite alone with a hand-held camera. Moreover, in the hands of barely-trained filmmakers, this technique can become an improvised, performative device, attached to the body and choreographed through the body's motion—not “Improvised” in the superficial sense of reacting naively or impulsively, but more in the sense of learning a corporeal technique, such as playing jazz or dancing.

MacDougall has achieved an apparently modest objective: to show us something of the state of mind of some eleven-year-old school children by introducing them to a responsive and interactive camera style. He has done so, taking the risk that nothing may come of it because no real documentary films may result. For nobody in the scholastic system seems to put much pressure on girls and boys from disadvantaged social classes to engage in creative activities unless this is likely to lead to a job. There is little interest in encouraging them to express themselves freely or to learn to perceive the reality around them more clearly. These children, however, appear to have enjoyed the opportunity to do so, and one wonders if the world of work will now look the same to them, as a result of the new awareness they have gained. In a sense, then, this poetic exercise has a political dimension. From that perspective, it is apparent that MacDougall's project is more than a "modest" endeavor.

The makers of these films make us realize what it is like to enjoy the freedom to be self-reflexive, to acknowledge one's life conditions by making documentaries about one's own environment, employing one's own imagination. David MacDougall has offered us a method that empowers children instead of simply fulfilling the expectations of adults or mainstream culture. The children learn how to follow a process. The way in which the children summarize their aims is very telling and reveals how aware and articulate they are. It shows an intelligence and concern in mediating their enterprise that is their own and not the hidden agenda of anyone else.

These four students have fulfilled such an aim, and with the help of MacDougall and a few others they have produced four very creditable digital film essays. They each have their own gaze, their own point of view, their own interests and ways of making images. They share the same methodological objective: to explore their environment—physical, aesthetic, and behavioural—and to explore the Self as a socially constituted and socially constituting being. At the same time, they have immersed themselves phenomenologically in a particular cinematic rhythm and tempo, built upon their individual perspective and use of the camera and editing. This type of cinema can produce sociological insights because the camera is able to delineate the particulars of well-established social structures: in this case, the house, the shop, or the nearby street. What they achieve seems based on intuition and spontaneity as much as on reflection and analysis. The children in fact are part of these environments; they are part of the social relations that constitute them, and they contribute to the project of depicting the unknown through their familiarity with them. It is not simply a matter of being a native and producing a so-called ‘emic’ response. It is the child's achievement in being accepted as a legitimate observer, capable of expressing what they see, that gives them the ability to throw a fresh light on things that are felt to be already fully known.

For those who know MacDougall's style, it is easy to discern the master behind this workshop, but this never becomes a hidden agenda. It is not a pure projective enterprise, of a celebrated ethnographic filmmaker wanting to transmit a legacy by imprinting it on others. It is more like a form

of play (in Wittgenstein's sense), an experiment in which MacDougall himself is challenged, as non-native and as non-child. He needs, not least, the indirect support of parents, guardians, his assistants and the teachers at the school. The workshop provides a framework for this play, and it succeeds in being effective because of its contemplative approach. This allows the Self to merge with the environment, to absorb it, seep through it, and fathom it almost effortlessly. This surrendering of the Self is not an act of passive resignation, but rather a state of reception and awareness, one that allows one to remain oneself and yet acknowledge one's connectedness with all other beings.

To take an example, *Why not a Girl?*, made by one of the pupils, Anshu Singh, seems like an anthropological project. The accounts that she manages to elicit from other girls about the conditions of their lives are impressive. These produce unique insights that an adult would not be able to obtain in the same way. It is her status as an insider that allows others to become her collaborators in a common project. The film alternates between interviews, some of them slightly 'staged', with moments of observation. It positions itself at the very edge of possibility for someone with her educational prospects. The girls seem to emphasize that they have not only a different upbringing from more privileged girls, but also a different destiny, and in this film we come to understand the brief period of freedom they have before they are forced back into the home to help with domestic tasks, banished from the street play of earlier childhood. For girls, the time of childhood is shorter than for boys, as it is in many other parts of the world and in similar social classes. A girl, by marrying, will be sent to her husband's family. Girls are treated differently and often badly by even their own mothers, grandmothers, and aunties. To send girls to school is a sacrifice because of the domestic tasks that they must give up and the difficulty of getting along in their absence. Anshu's long monologue at the end of her film gives a sense of a different grasp of time, in some of the ways described above. She discovers another mode, another kind of duration, a lingering and letting go in the permanence of the act of filming. Even here, at the very end, it is not too late, so to speak. She delivers a touching monologue, in a confessional mode that also poses a question: *Why do they say all these things? That girls can do one thing and not another? Why is this?*

[CUT THE FOLLOWING?]

(T.C.31:31) *"If people say, "You don't have a brother" or "There are only two girls in your family" my parents feel offended. My father says, "We don't need this, to us girls and boys are equal. But if I start using the camera and it's dark and getting late... he says, "on Sunday you don't like to study... You do all these things that boys do." That's what's said. And Papa scolds me. But today I have come up on the roof to shoot with the camera, even though Papa scolded me, I came up here. And this time it's with his permission. What I'm saying is... the way boys get respect... Why don't we get it too? Boys play with both girls and boy, but if I do, I get scolded. And they tell me, "Play with girls. Study and don't do all this camera work. Don't play around with mobile phones. These are for boys, not for girls." My father says: "Be friends with boys, but not too much. Stay within your limits. Do what girls do. Study to become someone."*

In these films, beds can become the central arena around which everything happens in a house. Thus beds here attain the complexity of larger social arenas, invested with stories, multiple functions, symbolic values, and a specific personality. The same may be true of a place where children dance

on an unstable sheet of metal in a courtyard, as seen in Aniket Kumar Kashyap's film. The metal sheet becomes a performative space where much the film takes place. In the film, *Children at Home*, by Shikha Kumar Dalsus, a pet acquires the qualities of a human being, or for children something more. She films a dog in a way that shows the special kind of intimacy that these creatures have with children.

My Funny Film by Aniket Kumar Kashyap is a poetic endeavor, capturing some profound moments. The affection bestowed by his 'auntie' is the focus, but the film has other ineffable touches, which include Aniket's filming of himself while singing. The filmmaker approaches the sublime feminine figure of his 'auntie' with a naïve curiosity, depicting her in the style of a holy popular image, such as one sees hanging in people's homes, shops, and shrines in India. But he also registers her corporeality: she appears both self-consciously posing and spontaneous in her languor. Her neutral posture, her apparently aimless presence, simply available for exploration, shows itself in the fleeting moments that Aniket attempts to capture. His and her moods seem to mirror one another: the filmmaker also appears to be filming aimlessly, although not passively or carelessly. These nuances are important because we, the viewers, can sense both his responses and his agency, allowing us to respond in turn. His subjects are absorbed in their domestic duties, but also in their own reveries. Aniket's 'auntie' opens herself to his filming, and Aniket flirts with her as if writing a declaration of love with the camera. He shows genuine affection for her, even singing as he captures an image of her that is both human and idealized. This way of rendering their relationship, without a narrative or plot, without interviews or staging, is the quintessence of contemplative filmmaking. Because the filmmaker seems to understand the power of heightened perception that the camera induces, he can allow his way of filming to expand and fill our senses. The young boy murmurs a love song or *ballade*, now turning the camera on himself as a recording device. We know that the cinema is ever-present in Indian popular culture, and that even young filmmakers cannot be unaware of its trends and styles. The portrait of a languid girl, with her seductive gaze, her loneliness, and her beauty, combined with her words of suffering, singing of her love—this is a paradigmatic moment in Indian fiction films. At the same time, in Aniket's case, we do not have the impression that this is a simple *exercice de style*. The style has been appropriated and made personal. To be invited into Aniket's world is thus to be invited to suspend our judgment and to reassess our often threadbare adult assumptions.

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