

Introductory Remarks for the Raj Kapoor Retrospective

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Raj Kapoor (1924-1988) was one of the leading lights of Hindi cinema during its Golden Age from about 1940 through the 1960s. He was born in what became Pakistan after Indian Independence and Partition in 1947. He won many awards, including nine Filmfare awards, two nominations for the Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, and one of India's highest honors, the Padma Bhushan. He was honored with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for contributions to Indian Cinema. So legendary was his stature at the end of his career that the Wikipedia entry on Kapoor even today tells a tale apocryphal and melodramatic enough to make a Hindi film director blush: that Wikipedia entry suggests that Kapoor died at the very moment that the Phalke award was being conferred on him by the President!

Kapoor was no isolated genius. He came from and occupied an important place in the first family of Indian cinema, and in the world's largest film industry. His father was the eminent Prithviraj Kapoor; his siblings Shashi Kapoor and Shammi Kapoor were major film stars; his children, Rishi Kapoor and Randhir Kapoor, and grandchildren Karishma Kapoor and Kareena Kapoor have been significant presences on the silver screen. Certainly he became an icon in his own right. But before that he was a member of the activist Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), formed in 1942, five years before Independence. Theatrical instincts and deep ideological convictions developed in his collaboration with the IPTA would inform all his work in the cinema. Although he began in the movies as a humble clapper boy, Kapoor became the paradigmatic auteur. A major director and head of his own studio (RK Films), and a mega star, he enjoyed considerable artistic freedom. He oversaw every detail of the process of filmmaking, including music, for which he had a natural ability and talent. This talent remains unusual even among directors of Indian films, with a few exceptions such as the great Satyajit Ray.

Not only did Kapoor help define Indian cinema's generic rules, but he also tested their limits in ways few directors could get away with. In *Barsaat* (Rain, 1949), for example, there are two paired shots of different women sensually caressing their lovers' feet, but in both cases the gestures signify in complex ways—they are neither merely erotic nor simply submissive. In other films Kapoor was even more provocative, presenting female actors in very revealing costume, and in one case nude. But the eroticism was never gratuitous. His films were innovative and daring, situated at the crossroads between popular and parallel cinema. His technical achievements in staging, music, picturization and his interrogations of received social mores, even in an early film such as *Awaara* (Vagabond, 1951) remain cinematic touchstones. When he visited the Soviet Union in 1954 for the release of *Awaara* there, Kapoor was lionized as Tavarish Bradyaga, or Comrade Vagabond. His films were popular in other parts of the world too, including the Middle East, Africa and China; Boris Yeltsin as well as Mao Tse Dong were reputed to have been able to hum melodies from Kapoor's films.

One of the benefits of this retrospective is that it can allow us to see continuities as well as developments, obsessions but also contradictions in the director's body of work. By way of an introduction, then, I'd like to draw your attention to a few of these remarkable continuities. One could begin with *Aag* (Fire, 1948), Kapoor's directorial debut from the very first year after Indian Independence. The metaphor of aag as desire's fire reappears in *Barsaat*. *Aag* also introduced the persona of the underdog clown or tramp that would burgeon into perhaps Kapoor's central motif, not to mention the actual term "awaara," which would become the title and pivotal theme of the film *Awaara* three years later.

In addition to such thematic vectors, continuity is also threaded through Kapoor's films more subtly. For instance, a song from *Awaara* reappears 28 years later as a melody played by the wedding band at Rupa's wedding in *Satyam, Shivam Sundaram* (1979), creating a musical link between films with related clusters of themes. In *Mera Naam Joker* (Call Me Joker, 1970), one of the women who loves the protagonist Raju reminds him of "an old song," again from *Awaara*. But in this film Kapoor also goes a step further: in extraordinary fantasy sequences, he interpolates actual snippets from his own earlier films, particularly *Shree 420* (Mister 420, 1955), thus conjuring a visual intertextuality with *Mera Naam Joker*. Yet this intertextuality is not just adventitious. Although presented in *Mera Naam Joker* through "fantasy" interludes, these song and dance sequences comment on the diegesis, supplementing or embellishing it.

Indeed, in all Kapoor's films, the fantasy sequences taken individually are units of considerable interest, some quite brilliant. Particularly impressive are the title song sequences "Awaara Hoon" in *Awaara* and "Mera Joota Hai Japani," the famous ditty from *Shree 420*. Music, then, and the fantasy sequences more generally, are important connective threads in Kapoor's oeuvre. Tracing these threads is not just

a cinephiliac obsession. It connects communities of ordinary fans, many of whom avidly consume popular Hindi films and songs as moveable feasts and related passions. It is also a pleasure that we can participate in, during this retrospective.

Often the song sequences are consumed as independent segments—as songs and video clips—by Hindi film fans, and as with most popular film soundtracks, the songs are played individually on the air or distributed legally and illegally. The credit for the musical and dance elements, however, must go less to the director and more to singers, lyricists, set designers and choreographers, including Lata Mangeshkar, Mukesh, Asha Bhonsle, Manna Dey, Hasrat Jaipuri, the Russian Madame Simkie and especially Shankar-Jaikishen. But the art in Kapoor's artifice should not be given short shrift. Among his most unwavering commitments was to craft, to the art of cinema. And these commitments are also filaments of continuity throughout his career. Kapoor's art direction can be astonishingly inventive. One of the most remarkable examples occurs in *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*, for which he created an entire waterfall complete with rocks and pool on his own estate in Loni. There is also a tremendous flood in the film, one of the most believable in Indian cinema—in part because there was a real and devastating deluge that almost submerged the set. Undeterred, Kapoor insisted on incorporating the flood into the *mise-en-scène*, capitalizing on what today's journalists might have called a "perfect storm" of events.

Kapoor's films often promote the social value of art. In *Aag*, painting and the theater are forms of art at the very core of the film, which Kapoor wants us to see as a work of art about art. *Barsaat*, similarly, foregrounds the power of music. The protagonist Pran plays a melody on his violin that irresistibly draws Reshma to him, at the risk of scandal, from her very traditional father's home across the lake; this popular melody is also what reunites the lovers after a forced separation. Though lighting, costume, and special effects are important in Kapoor's directorial repertoire, music as a form of art enjoys pride of place, with not just a narratological function but also an auratic status.

If Kapoor can be called an artistic auteur, he is equally a didactic director. His cinema is a cinema of ideas. Kapoor's early black-and-white work constitutes an homage to the Italian neorealist director Vittorio de Sica, and recalls Orson Welles and Frank Capra. Several of his films also evoke German expressionist cinema, but also gesture towards Fellini's *La Strada*. One of his most enduring commitments was to a social pedagogy and cultural commentary encoded in the very "entertainment" his films consciously purveyed. His films' popularity and tendency to melodramatic excess should not occlude but rather highlight their trademark yoking of the two contradictory ambitions, entertainment and public education. This was a defining challenge not only for Kapoor's films but also for the whole subcategory of the "Hindi social," something I have written about elsewhere. Thus Kapoor blends burlesque with a deep concern with issues of class and the legal system in *Awaara* or in *Boot Polish* (1954). Other films turned on a denunciation of political corruption and gender hypocrisy, as in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (*Ram, Your Ganga is Polluted*, 1985) while also cramming the plot with song-and-dance "attractions." But his most effective vehicle for social commentary remained his carefully cultivated underdog persona as an Indian Charlie Chaplin—a counterpart of the Trickster figure or the Shakespearean Fool, an outsider within the culture who speaks the truth that might otherwise be unpalatable or difficult to express. This motif and figure was the durable linchpin of Kapoor's oeuvre, beginning with the "vagabond" or "savage" of *Awaara* but also finding successive incarnations in the mischievous and eponymous tramp of *Shree 420* or the tragic clown of *Mera Naam Joker*. Significantly, *Mera Naam Joker*, which was a box office flop when first released, went on to become not only the most profitable film of his studio, RK Films: it also remained the director's own favorite film.

Kapoor is not satisfied just to comment on the mundane and sometimes unpleasant reality. He also wants to offer a simulacrum of what is elusive in that reality: love, beauty, happiness, and pleasure. It is this tension that animates the brilliant dream sequence in *Awaara*, but also the dramatic conflict of *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*, introducing Zeenat Aman. This beautiful actress plays the role of an unfortunate woman, Rupa, whose face is horribly disfigured by a burn. Her lover, played by Shashi Kapoor, is confronted with an almost Socratic, phenomenological conundrum: how can a woman be both blessed with a beautiful voice and cursed with such inauspicious deformity, evidently the stigmata of divine displeasure? Kapoor asks his viewers to re-examine their received ideas of beauty and fate.¹ But the real psychological interest of this conceit emerges when, with a kind of perversity Hitchcock might have savored, the hero disavows the reality and insists on superimposing his fantasy on that reality, hallucinating a perfectly formed Rupa, whose name could be translated as "beautiful" but also as "form," while rejecting the deformed but real Rupa, who is already his wife.

Given his commitment to social realism it is no surprise that Kapoor is obsessed with class. Thus in *Barsaat* Kapoor highlights class differences to dramatize the conflict between village and city, the local and the cosmopolitan, but also their cohabitation in Indian modernity.

Similarly in *Awaara* class struggle is refracted as the main impediment to the love between the main characters; it is also an analog for the dialectical opposition between indigenous cultural identity and Western influences.

Mera Naam Joker too turns on the problematic of class difference. Raju is the son of a circus clown who inherits his father's profession. Playing the clown himself, Kapoor delivers a social critique about the lies society is founded on, and the lies that ordinary Indians must live to struggle against poverty and hunger. Raju admits lying to gain entry into circus employment, and his testimony is deeply moving to the Soviet visitors to the circus. He is found "guilty of being humane." We might say that Kapoor's broadest commitment is to being thus guilty of humanity.

Class difference is sometimes imbricated with ethnic or even racial difference, as in the blockbuster *Bobby* (1973), where a rich Hindu businessman's son falls in love with a servant's Goan Christian granddaughter. Similarly in *Mera Naam Joker* the eponymous Joker falls in love serially with three women from different class, ethnic or racial backgrounds, including a North Indian Christian and even a Russian woman.² Hilariously but meaningfully, Raju the Indian joker is mistaken for a Russian. Kapoor pointedly uses this device to communicate his message of transnational solidarity in a time when postcolonial India's Nehruvian orientation was more to the Soviet Union than to the United States. This no doubt contributed to Kapoor's being welcomed in the Soviet Union as "Comrade Vagabond."

Another important cluster of topoi in Kapoor's films emerges as his complex representations of masculinity and femininity in the new India. His images of the modern Indian male, and explorations of relationships between men, are often structurally critical: the rake and the sincere lover, the law-abiding citizen versus the vagabond. Kapoor's representation of women was if anything more complicated—sometimes approximating a proto-feminist sensitivity, but at other moments verging on sexual objectification or prurience. Indeed one critic suggests that Kapoor manifested "the carnality of a schoolboy." He did seem to delight in tempting the censor with his highly sexualized representations of women in a range of films. Yet his broader ambition was to interrogate social institutions and arrangements such as marriage, patriarchy, the dysfunctional family, and the policing of sexuality. In *Mera Naam Joker* for instance, he introduces the character of Meena as a single woman who must masquerade as a boy to protect herself from a misogynist and patriarchal culture. But the most complicated female presence in Kapoor's work and life was always Nargis, the actor with whom he had an intense on- and an off-screen relationship.

This retrospective, which incidentally looks forward to the approaching 25th anniversary of Kapoor's passing, promises to be a treat for cinephiles and lovers of Indian cinema but also a fascinating cultural introduction for others. Tonight's film is *Shree 420*, or *Mister 420*. The title derives originally from section 420 of the Indian Penal Code under which felonies such as theft and deception are prosecuted. In common parlance, though, this number has become a catch-phrase, referring to any kind of mischief. Generically then this is another manifestation of the wise, tragic or otherwise complicated clown figure that was so dear to the director's heart. For Kapoor this fool taught laughter not against life but for and with life. In this spirit I hope you will enjoy this film and the rest of the retrospective.

And now, on with the show.

1 Rajeev (Shashi Kapoor appears—at just the right moment of course—as her prospective mate. His first encounter with the beautiful but scarred Rupa is at a railway station, relatively dark though it is, it is still surprising that he does not even see her, when she is almost in touching distance. His first encounter after that is with her voice; the village has become accustomed to her singing in the early morning. Rajeev appreciates the beautiful singing, but his mistaken premise is that only a beautiful face can be associated with a beautiful voice. Raj Kapoor's self-appointed task then is to show how he and therefore the viewer must disabuse him or herself of that mistaken presence. Of course the process occurs in stages. Some of them are mirth-producing, such as the occasion on which Rajeev attends a village fair hoping to meet the village girl Rupa with whose voice he has become smitten. He assumes she will be beautiful, but his limited understanding of what is beautiful is already signaled when he walks into a fairground display of distorting mirrors. He turns away in horror and fright from his own distorted reflection, as though he were surprised by the distortion—this itself is surprising in an engineer who clearly has been instrumental in the construction of the dam whose inauguration he has come to the village to attend. He reveals that he "cannot tolerate any form of ugliness." The film clearly presents this as the flaw in the hero's character. Pointedly he is asked, if he were to face ugliness in real life, how could he expect to face it?

2 In *Bobby* it is arguably even the central theme, for it is the chief impediment in the film's story. The protagonist Raja is the scion of a businessman and his wife, but was brought up by their Christian nanny, Mrs. Braganza. Importantly, Raja feels closer to the servant, who loved him like a mother, more than to his own parents. Raja's father denies the match between Mrs. Braganza's granddaughter Bobby and Raja precisely on the grounds of the difference in class between the lovers.