

Looking through the Lens of Dialogue

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If we are looking for faith in this world, it is clear that it does not come just from words and promises, but from our actions and how well we are able to connect to each other, our ideas and our actions. Dialogue could happen just with a smile, a touch or an eye contact and, at times, all this adds a lot to it. It happens when we do things together like cooking, working, playing, painting, etc. Dialogue can help us see things differently; it can expand our imagination or help us learn and unlearn, open new windows to looking at ourselves and the world around us. Often, there is a visible dialogue and, another layer, the invisible one — just like often real learning is something which is invisible. At times, one can have conversations but no real dialogue. From my experiences, dialogue definitely does not happen when there is lack of spontaneity and honesty, or when there is hierarchy.

All around the world, people believe that a humane and non-violent world is possible. They feel the process is more important than the ends. With this base, they are trying to create and regenerate spaces for genuine interaction. I would like to explore whether video can be put to use in such spaces to support and generate multi-layered dialogue. It is true that the cost of the video technology itself restricts the number of people who can have the opportunity to use it. But I would like to ask, if given access to video, are there any possibilities of using it in, for example, conferences, workshop situations or other gatherings? Can it become a tool to make the dialogue more participatory? And can it even transform the meeting spaces themselves, thereby opening up the possibility for new perspectives?

Re-Framing the Context

In order to understand how we can use filmmaking for dialogue today, it is important to see how it has been used in the past, here in India.

For a long time, documentary filmmaking was a forte of the Films Division (FD), a department of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry of the Indian Government. The FD used to make newsreels to be shown before the screening of commercial films. It was compulsory for the cinema theaters to show them. Part of the ticket sales had to go to the FD for the exhibition of newsreels. So, in effect, when people were paying for the film, they were also paying to see the compulsory government propaganda. I remember seeing, as a child, a film on Bhakara Nangal Dam and the scene of its inauguration, where the gates of the dam are opened and water starts to rush out. Most of the FD films operated in the genre of ‘voice of god’, where voiceovers play an important role. Such films state everything, so they often don’t leave any space for the viewer to think; what is being shown is the only ‘reality’.¹

Interestingly, since the FD was directly under the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, the viewpoint of the films used to change with the change in political power. For example, during the Emergency, S. Sukhdev directed Thunder of Freedom, which shows how the country was beset with the problems, such as communal riots and violence prior to the proclamation of the Emergency, and how things had changed for the better during Emergency. After the Janata Party came in, Sai Paranjape made Freedom From Fear, on human rights violations during the Emergency and the re-emergence of people's sense of freedom, when there was no Emergency.

¹ At the same time, Jean Rouch in France (and others) was showing another kind of ‘reality’; he was creating *cinéma verité* (‘true cinema’), which involved taking the camera onto the street and interviewing to people.

The spread of television in a major way in the 1980s was followed by a generation of ‘independent filmmakers’². Since the video cameras were silent, it was possible to take interviews. A form of filmmaking emerged, where, in the name of objectivity, opposing views were put up one after the other. Sometimes, the positions of the directors were predetermined, and they looked for opinions to fit the different views; it was just a matter of having smarter people on their side. However, some filmmakers were honestly attempting to use this form to look at the world, but they could not get out of the propaganda mode of filmmaking. Like so many people in the ‘development sector’, they have good intentions but are always looking for quick-fix solutions. They were not asking fundamental questions, but rather using the same old thinking to resolve problems.

I am not saying that all interviewing is problematic. Interviews can become intimate conversations, which make films very interesting. A good example is the film Kamala Bai by Reena Mohan. Reena is able to establish a personal bond with Kamala Bai, an elderly Marathi stage actress. Her own closeness brings the viewers close to Kamla Bai.

Once, my friend Fareeda, who also makes films, mentioned that the moment a camera comes between two people, it has the tendency to be a wall. I think it depends on the energies created by the interaction, which can transform the wall sometimes into a window, a mirror or a door. All along, a few filmmakers have done experiments, taking their films out of the ‘voice of god’ or ‘sound bite’ genres. They invite us to think in a different way; they offer breathing space for the viewer, freedom to draw one’s own meanings while seeing the films.

For example, in the Shark Callers of Kontu, director Dennis O’Rourke shares the lives of the villagers of Kontu, Papua New Guinea. They go to sea in frail canoes to call, trap, and kill sharks by hand. Now, after a hundred years of colonization and missionary activity, only a few men still understand the magic rituals of shark calling. O’Rourke made the film at the pace of the village, giving time for each shot to show the rhythm of their day-to-day lives. He showed many different aspects of peoples’ lives but refrained from giving a definite conclusion. It was left up to us, the viewers, to interpret and make meaning.

Bringing Yourself Into Your Films

Most filmmakers have the tendency to keep themselves out of the film or don’t look at their own life stories. I don’t mean that all films have to be about personal stories, but if we make a film about something ‘outside’ us, the question is how deeply are we able to relate to that world? Are we able to connect and become part of that world? Does it become a part of us in the process of making the film?

Over time, I have learned about the importance of personal stories in our films. Somehow filmmaking has been seen as a profession where some people are supposed to make films for and about others. When an academician/intellectual who has been for three years in kindergarten, twelve years in school, three years in college, two years in MA and five years in a Ph.D. sets out to write about the struggles of peasants, I have serious reservations about such attempts. In the same league, we can see a trade union leader, who has never been a worker himself, or a filmmaker, who has never done physical labor, make films on the landless laborers of Bihar. As a filmmaker, I believe I have to first draw my inspiration from the world I am experiencing in my every day life.

² Television had been in existence in Delhi since 1959. During 1972-3 it was introduced in Bombay, Srinagar and Amritsar and then in the following year to other cities.

Recently, a friend shared a script she has written for her first film. It is about the life of a girl in a Mumbai *chawl* (industry-related co-housing unit). I was curious as to why she chose the setting of a *chawl*, since I know that she is not living in one. She herself was not very clear why. Then, she told me about another idea she had, but was not sure if people would like it. It was inspired by her dream. With so many connections between her own life and that dream, I could see an honest and genuine film. When we discussed it, she said she likes it much more. When I said that I also liked it better than the *chawl* idea, she couldn't believe it. Somehow, we have been taught to ignore our own dreams and do what is acceptable to the mainstream — even when we don't believe it.

Ripples of Dialogue

I once tried my hand at drumming. Five of us used to play in a circle, and I was asked to play the simplest beat. If, at any time, I went off beat, it became obvious to me and everyone else. A friend said that I have to make my hands and body free. And as I play, I have to listen to what others are playing. My friend said drumming is like a conversation, a constant process of question and answer between all of us who are playing. Initially, I used to be conscious of what I was playing, so it would be very mechanical. One day, I forgot about what I was playing and heard the whole music instead. Then, the real fun began. My friend, Jenina, who plays guitar, says that when all the musicians come together in a spontaneous harmony, her jam sessions are like a spiritual high.

If I had to think of an image describing dialogue, I see two (or more) pebbles dropped in a pond; the ripples emerge from them and meet to form new patterns, each affecting the other and in the process creating new patterns and forms, those which could not have been predicted before. The forms depend on the how the stones were dropped, the state that the water body was in, the wind on the water and many other factors.

The time factor is not important in a dialogue. I used to have some conversations with a friend, Rohit, about seven years ago. He was working for an advertising agency in Bombay and had walked out and settled for a quieter life in Pune. He used to talk of de-institutionalization, the violence of schooling, the positive nature of *guru-shishya* parampara, as he had been learning *dhrupad* from his guruji. He was trying out unconventional ways of living and was eating only raw food. Today, when I am more interested in these ideas, my learning is opened up by what he had said at that time. In the end, I come up with my own way of looking at things. Also, what he talked of at that time stayed with me because he never tried to convert me.

Experiments with Film/Video

If we want to explore the use of video as a tool for dialogue, a comment by Jean Baudrillard on television seems pertinent to start with. He said that television, by the very nature of its technology, couldn't be a democratic medium because it works on the principle of one transmitter and multiple receivers; there is no space for reciprocal action between them. Most television programmers are aware of this. Some try to make the medium seem democratic by using methods like phone-in programs, peoples' chat shows (where they bring in a 'representative' audience) and live telecast of views from the people on the street (for example, their opinions on the government budget), etc. With this, they pretend to break the 'one transmitter-many receivers' paradigm; yet, in actuality, it still remains.

Most chat shows are not live and often 2-3 episodes are shot on one day. The anchors not only control the questions during the recording of the program by deciding who should speak and how much they should speak, they also control the editing of the program. So 2-3 hours recorded footage of a chat show is edited to less than an hour for the purpose of telecast but the way it is done makes the viewers feel that they are seeing a continuous recording and all the interactions and

discussions are spontaneous - which is not true. The same is the case with taking the opinions on the street. Somehow the documentary look of the street image makes us feel that it is authentic, but here too a lot depends on the editing as the directors have the final say. Nowadays even some detergent advertisements use this technique by shooting 'housewives' giving their 'honest opinion' of a detergent as they think that people have more faith in the 'documentary look'. The directors purposely use shaky hand-held cameras to make it look more like a news recording.

I feel if video is to be used democratically, it is important to truly break the 'one transmitter-many receiver' model. We need to create a space where it is equally accessible to all those who are sharing the space. By 'equal access', I don't mean that all the participants behave like newsreporters, throwing questions insensitively at each other. Rather, I mean that each person involved has the opportunity to genuinely attempt to engage with video, as a means to know each other and understand the world around them. I once heard someone say that the problem is not that the media is manipulated, but rather it is who is doing the manipulation. I don't agree with this assessment. As long as the intention is manipulation, no matter who is doing it, it is problematic. When we use video in conferences and workshops, we have to be careful that we don't overdo it. We don't want it to kill the spontaneity of the space. Many of us have experienced the intrusiveness of video: the moment a camera is placed in space, it affects what is happening there. People tend to become conscious of themselves; then their representation becomes more important than what they really are. I have seen the crudeness of this during the making of the marriage videos, where people are ready to destroy the pleasure of the present for the sake of posterity. It happens without a camera too. When I was in school, the teacher would sometimes come and stand behind a student to see what s/he was writing. It would definitely change what s/he would write at that moment. Being watched takes us in the performance mode.

The question is, can we shoot something without changing the character of it? If we are sensitive, we will become aware of the camera's intrusiveness and work accordingly. Sometimes when people see cameras, they get used to them quickly. In other situations, it may take a long time. Often people have all kinds of notions of their image and looks. They are shy to look at themselves as a video image; they feel that it's not the way they look in real life. After seeing their image in video, some people feel freer about their body and looks; others may close off. It will also depend, to some extent, on the sensitivity of others in the group. If someone makes an adverse comment, it will exaggerate a person's self-consciousness and can make s/he feel even more closed.

I would like to suggest some experiments on how to use video to support dialogue in workshops, conferences and meetings. These should be modified, of course, depending on the situation and spaces people are working in. It would be best to develop them with the active participation of the whole group:

1. Interviews

Often meeting spaces, despite their best efforts, do not encourage everyone to share their valuable insights. Some people are shy or may not speak for other reasons such as implicit power dynamics. However, they might be able to talk much more freely in front of the camera through an interview.

While interviewing, a tip is to have the least number of people in the room to make the person more comfortable. Also, the better you know the person, the more likely they will feel free to speak in front of the camera. Once, a peer had interviewed the cook of the girls' hostel (known to everyone as *Tai*). I had known and interacted with *Tai* for almost three years. But the interviewer's own relationship with *Tai*, plus the kind of questions she asked, brought out so many things that it seemed to me that I didn't really know her. An interview also has the added benefit of making a space for people to reflect on their own lives; the process can help them understand themselves better. It can also help others know them better. If the group wishes, further discussions, based on

these conversations, could be made an integral part of the workshop.

However, nothing is universally applicable. At times, it is difficult to speak spontaneously in front of the camera; the moment you switch it off, the person starts to speak enthusiastically; and when it is on again, they again are not able to speak comfortably. Sometimes people give very standard and safe responses in front of the camera. So the person who is initiating the dialogue has to be quite sensitive; s/he also needs to learn how to ask the right kind of questions and in the right way. The questioning process can also be discussed by the group when they are looking at the footage.

2. Soliloquies

You may also try to station the camera in a particular place. Then, people can on their own go and speak in front of it. They could talk about what they want to share with the group, or could respond to a set of printed questions, or could themselves raise certain questions to be explored later. This use of video may also help people get over their inhibitions of speaking in a group. It may make it easier for a future time, when they might wish to say something in front of others.

3. Video Magazines

A video magazine could be made every day or once in two days. It could be seen at the start of the each day's session. Small groups could be in charge of shooting the various events of the day, and then either sharing the raw footage, or if possible, editing it into a simple form. These short video magazines could record some highlights of the group's activities/insights. A simple but effective question to gather short opinions is: "What is one thing that you are taking away from this day?" The small group members could take turns by changing their roles as cinematographers, editors, production persons, assistants, etc. Making a video magazine also helps to build relationships among the group. These video magazines could also support the individual and group harvesting and reflection of knowledge and understanding. If people are collaborating on a project, a video magazine can also be a collective expression of their team effort.

4. Into the 'Real' World

Often conference spaces tend to get restricted by physical boundaries. Even if they are not held in a closed room, there is usually very little interaction with the local neighborhood. Moving outside may open up unknown possibilities and add fresh insights to the discussions and activities of the workshop. People could create small films, which try to relate what they are doing in the workshop with the outside world. For example, the Swapathgami Network's "Businesses We Believe In" meeting explored the possibilities of setting up organic businesses and learning various skills from each other. During the discussions, Sanjoy mentioned that there are few employment opportunities for those with degrees but hundreds for those without degrees. At that point, we could have tried an exercise where people could go outside the venue to find and shoot one business which they would like to do or that inspires them in some way: a short film on a tea shop, sugarcane juice stall, or a fruit vendor, looking at their life, their work, etc. could be seen and discussed with the group.

5. Sharing Videos

Participants can bring some videos of their work or other discussion points to be shared in the workshop. For example, if someone organically farms, they can bring and show footage of their experiments. One friend, Sarita, had mentioned a *vaidya* in Pune, who kicks and slaps people in order to cure them. She wants to make a film on that and share it in conversations on health. In conferences on education, KB Jinan, another friend, has shown footage of a child playing with a knife. The child's comfort with it has challenged many people's notions of childhood. Sharing such experiences, which cannot be brought physically to the workshop space, will add a lot.

6. Multiple Perspectives

Ask various people to shoot the same thing. Of course, everyone will shoot it differently. Through

further discussions, people will see the multiplicity of perspectives and the subjectivities associated with them. More importantly, different people can make short films or simple assemblies, thereby bringing multiple perspectives of the same event. In editing the footage, many different versions can be made. For example, some of us had shot the *haat* (monthly organic market) at Shikshantar, Udaipur. Then, each person decided to make their own version of a film. Guddi opened with the shot of the book stall, maybe because these days, she is also writing a Mewari book. Nirmal, who likes to do pottery, started his film with the shot of two girls using the potters' wheel. Both films have a different perspective and will generate different responses.

7. Games

You can also invent a game, where the camera is fixed and each person goes in front of it to say something or do a gesture, dance, sing, talk, perform in rigmarole. Another game could be pass the camera around the group circle; wherever it stops, the person has to take a shot.

More Than the Technology

Apart from encouraging dialogue, all such experiments would be a learning experience, both in terms of filmmaking and in understanding media manipulation. For example, often people don't question what is shown on television news; they believe 'seeing' is 'knowing'. Filmmaking shows us how shots are manipulated to tell a particular story. We can also analyze films. I have seen films which profess to be critical of violence, but in their construction, framing, camera angles, editing, pace, use of sound and music, they are actually endorsing violence. Even those who are otherwise critical of violence are not able to see that in these films (instead, they appreciate them). By doing these exercises, we can hope it will help us develop our defense mechanisms so we are more critical of manipulation by media.

The camera can be used like brush too. In this case, the image becomes an expression. In driving, one changes gears but is not really conscious of it. With clay, the experience is unmediated and we do not really see our hands; it is more a matter of touch and other senses. According to Raoul Coutard, a French cinematographer, the technology should similarly become invisible in the process of filmmaking. We have to forget the technology and instead look at reality. In the process, we create an image which has its own reality. In such cases, the process and viewing the image later on can help us generate a deeper dialogue with ourselves and others. Where the image surpasses its reality or physicality and becomes something else, at those points that cinema can touch someone deeply. In some films, the experience of viewing is beyond all explanations; it touches the heart, just as a good music composition makes us feel elated.

Just as there is pleasure in seeing something, the process of making too is also pleasurable. One has to get over the fear of right and wrong, the worry of everyone getting the same meaning of what I am saying. As a filmmaker, I have to respect the right of different individuals to draw their own meanings from that shot, sequence or film. In fact, if everyone sees the film in their own way, if the film gets out of the linearity of one meaning, it is something to be cherished by the filmmaker.

When using the video camera, we have to be aware of the nature of the film language and be open about it. Our own ways of looking at and making films have been shaped by mainstream audiovisual media, so we might need to unlearn some things. Some may want to experiment and create a new kind of framing. Or while editing, others might use standard kinds of shots in ways that create new meanings. Or all of us may try to get out of the tendency of explaining everything. Often, I have noticed that when I frame some thing, by mistake, my hand touches the camera and the frame changes. The new 'accidental' frame, which may be marginally different, is even more interesting. I have seen sometimes that four-year-olds, if given a camera, come up with most amazing viewpoints and perspectives in their shots. It is interesting to see how people who have been exposed to television, and those who have not, shoot the world around them. We have to try to

become aware of the extent of schooling done by the media on us.

There is no one film language; it is not some mathematical equation. Figuring out your own language is a process, and if we honestly work on it, then every film will be a unique expression. I wouldn't say film/video is a powerful medium. But it is *a* medium. So we have to explore its inherent nature and try to relate with it, in our own ways, as honestly as possible.

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