This foray into Indian film is the result of a series of serendipitous encounters that share a common denominator: cinephilia. The first cinephile is Martin Scorsese, who in 2008 was working on a documentary about George Harrison and through Ravi Shankar discovered the musical film Kalpana, written, directed and choreographed by Ravi’s brother, Uday Shankar.

Discovered by Anna Pavlova in the Twenties and praised first by European audiences and then in India, Uday Shankar – of whom James Joyce wrote: “He moves on the stage like a demigod” – made Kalpana towards the end of his career. The visionary and artistically innovative film was extraordinarily successful and then completely vanished from the screen. In 1967 Uday Shankar sent an internegative of Kalpana to the National Film Archive of India in Pune un internegativo di Kalpana, al fine di conservare il film e di permettere la stampa di nuove copie da proiezione.

For many years a lawsuit prevented Kalpana from being screened. Finally in 2012, thanks to the immense support of another cinephile, Shivendra Singh, the World Cinema Foundation restored it, ensuring the work a second life on the screen.

Shivendra Singh is also the director and producer of Celluloid Man, the history of Indian cinema through the portrait of Paramesh Krishnan Nair, a historian and cinephile of international fame, student and friend of Ritwik Ghatak, founder of the National Film Archive of India (of which he was director for over three decades), curator of the first Indian retrospectives on Bergman, Kurosawa, Wajda, Jancsó, Zanussi, De Sica, Fellini, and Antonioni.

Our tribute is completed by the much awaited restored version of Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star), a masterpiece by Ghatak, described by Serge Daney as “one of the five or six most beautiful melodramas of film history.”

Cecilia Cenciarelli
MEGHE DHAKA TARA
India, 1960 Regia: Ritwik Ghatak

- T. it: La stella nascosta. T. int.: The Cloud-Capped Star. Sog.: da un racconto di Shaktsipada Rajguru. Scen.: Ritwik Ghatak, F. Dinen Gupta. Mo.: Ramesh Joshi. Mu.: Jyotindira Maity. Int.: Supriya Chowdhury (Nita), Anil Chatterjee (Shankar), Bijan Bhattacharya (Taran, il padre), Gita Dey (la madre), Gita Ghatak (Gita), Dwiju Bhawal (Mantu, il fratello), Niranjan Roy (Sanat). Prod.: Chitrakalpa. Pri. pro.: 14 aprile 1960 - DCP. D.: '126'. Bn. Versione bengalese / Bengali version - Da: National Film Archive of India - Restaurato nel 2012 da Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna presso il laboratorio L’Immagine Ritrovata a partire dal negativo camera originale, dal negativo suono e da un controtipo positivo combinato proveniente dal National Film Archive of India / The restoration was carried out by Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna at L’Immagine Ritrovata film laboratory in 2012. It was based on the original camera negatives, original sound negatives and a combined dupe positive coming from the National Film Archive of India.

Il linguaggio cinematografico è un linguaggio universale e, allo stesso tempo, profondamente nazionale. Vale a dire che bisogna far fondere queste due dimensioni l’una nell’altra attingendo ai simboli e agli archetipi del nostro paese. [...] È perché, sì, evidentemente, io mi ispiro ad alcuni modelli stranieri. Bisogna rubare ai grandi maestri, a quello che c’è di universale. Una certa dose di assimilazione, un’altra di sintesi, ecco di cosa è fatta questa ricerca. Noi abbiamo cercato di creare una corrente. Ma eravamo solo degli individui, come tanti uccelli solitari. All’epoca, la situazione del paese rendeva impossibile ogni movimento unitario. Io sentivo le cose alla mia maniera; gli altri alla loro e tuttavia c’è stata sempre un’unica e comune ricerca.

Ogni artista ha il dovere di preservare la propria capacità di stupore, di rimanere interiormente vigilante ed eternamente vergine. Senza questa facoltà gli sarà impossibile compiere grandi cose. Il sottile segreto che si nasconde dietro ogni atto di creazione consiste sostanzialmente nel soffermare il proprio sguardo su ogni cosa, nel fissarla in una silenziosa meraviglia, nel lasciarsi affascinare da qualche oggetto passeggero o nell’abbandonarsi alla pienezza del piacere, poi dopo lungo tempo, venuta la tranquillità, nell’estrarre questo sentimento intimo dal granaio del proprio spirito, dargli una forma e sfofiargli la vita. In un modo o nell’altro, ogni artista riesce a trasportare con sé la propria infanzia, la conserva nascosta in tasca fino all’età adulta. Se gli sfugge, non è più che un vecchio barbogio; ha cessato di essere un artista e diviene un teorico. L’infanzia è uno stato mentale estremamente fragile, uno stato di ripiegamento in se stessi, alla maniera di quelle piante selvatiche e delicate che appassiscono al minimo contatto. Al contatto grossolano del quotidiano, l’infanzia si sfalda, avvizzisce e perde la sua energia. Ogni artista ha forzatamente conosciuto questa esperienza.

Ritwik Ghatak
The language of film is universal and deeply national all at once. That is to say that these two dimensions must be made one by drawing on the symbols and archetypes of our country. [...] It is the reason why, yes, I am obviously inspired by a few foreign models. The great masters should be stolen from, what is universal as well. A certain amount of assimilation, another of synthesis, that’s what this search is made of. We tried to create a movement. But we were just individuals, like many solitary birds. At the time, the country’s situation made any unified movement impossible. I felt things in my own way; everyone else in theirs, and nevertheless there was always this one, common search. Every artist has the duty to preserve his capacity to be surprised, to be internally vigilant and eternally virgin. Without this ability, it will be impossible for him to achieve great things. The subtle secret concealed in every act of creation basically consists in pausing to observe every single thing, in capturing it in a silent wonder, in being enchanted by a passing object, or giving in to pleasure’s totality, and then after a long time, once the calm has returned, in uprooting this intimate feeling from within one’s own spirit, giving it form, and breathing life into it. In one way or another, every artist manages to carry his childhood with him, keeps it in his pocket into adulthood. If it eludes him, he is nothing more than a fogey; he ceases to be an artist and becomes a theorist. *Childhood is an extremely fragile state of mind, a state of folding in on oneself, like those wild yet delicate plants that wither at the slightest touch. Childhood crumbles, withers and loses its energy with the crude touch of the everyday. Every artist has had this experience.*

Ritwik Ghatak

Add the oblique lines, trees, river banks, the train, which seem to lose their balance due to the tension between empty and full. Add the song, its surges, its subtle plains, its falls and sudden rises, the train noise that cuts through it, dividing and accelerating the rhythm. *Add Shankar's spasmodic gestures. The slow variation of Nita's movements. Then you have an image in which, in three very simple shots, Ghatak creates a modulation fed by collisions and conflicts, here still contained, and a formal imbalance in every moment, like an echo of the historical and personal imbalance that creates the melodramatic backdrop to all his films: the partition of Bengal.*

Raymond Bellour

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**CELLULOID MAN A FILM ON P.K. NAIR**

India, 2012

Regia: Shivendra Singh Dungarpur


L’idea ha cominciato a prendere forma durante una conversazione tra cinefili a proposito di P.K. Nair e di cose stesse facendo adesso che era in pensione. Avevo frequentato il Film Institute di Pune, e per me Nair era una figura indistinta nella sala oscura, presente a tutte le proiezioni: scribacchiava sul suo taccuino alla luce di una piccola pila, avvolgeva e riavvolgeva rulli di pellicola, gridava istruzioni al proiezionista e guardava, guardava film in continuazione. Provarono sempre un po’ di soggezione nei suoi confronti, e quando cercavamo un film salivamo intimoriti le scale di legno scricchiolanti che portavano al suo ufficio. Non conoscevo nessun altro capace di dire esattamente in quale rullo si trovasse una certa scen...
The germ of an idea took shape in a casual conversation with fellow cinephiles discussing Mr P.K. Nair, wondering how he was coping with retirement. As a student at the Film Institute, Pune, I remembered Mr Nair as a shadowy figure in the darkened theatre, ever present at all screenings, scribbling industriously in a notebook by the light of a tiny torch – winding and unwinding reels of film, shouting instructions to the projectionist and always, always watching films. We were all a little in awe of him and had to muster up the courage to climb the creaking wooden stairs to his office to request to watch a particular film. He was the only person I knew who could tell you exactly in which reel of a film a particular scene could be found.

On a trip to Pune, I arrived to find that the Archive had been orphaned: rusting cans lying in the grass, thick cobwebs hanging from the shelves in the vaults and Mr Nair’s old office a junkyard. I thought about this remarkable man who had devoted his life to collecting these films and I was determined that his legacy should not be forgotten.

Mr Nair’s fascination with cinema began as a child. He was a collector even then... collecting ticket stubs, lobby cards, even weighing machine tickets sporting pictures of the stars of the day. He grew up to be a great collector of films – and so the National Film Archive of India was born. Few are aware that 1700 silent films were made in India of which only 9 survive thanks to the efforts of Mr Nair. He travelled to remote parts of India in search of rare films. On one of these journeys he was able salvage all that was left of Dadasaheb Phalke’s films. The fact that Dadasaheb Phalke is recognized today as the father of Indian cinema is Mr Nair’s doing. He was truly democratic as an archivist trying to save any film that he could get his hands on.

He has influenced generations of filmmakers especially those of the Indian New Wave like Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahane, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and most importantly John Abraham. As students, he gifted us the opportunity to watch films that otherwise we might never have had the chance to see. We found ourselves through these films that shaped our minds and made us aspire to be the next Tarkovsky, Fellini or Ray.

Many eminent members of the Indian film fraternity have come forward to speak about Mr Nair and his life’s work in the film. They speak about the great respect they have for his encyclopedic memory for films, his excitement to share a new film sometimes even at 6 am, and above all his passion for film.

As Mr Nair speaks, we see the history of Indian cinema unfold. What emerges is a portrait of a man so in love with cinema that even his family had to take a backseat to his obsession. Mr Nair is not just the founder of the National Film Archive, but a living breathing museum of cinema. Even in retirement, he chooses to stay across the road from the Archive watching over his legacy. The fact that India has a cinematic heritage at all is the single-handed achievement of this man. There will be no one like him again.

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur

KALPANA
India, 1948 Regia: Uday Shankar
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