

Laudatio Aparna Sen

Good afternoon,

I have the pleasure and honor of introducing and celebrating the films by Bengali film director Ms. Aparna Sen about whose work I have been writing for almost two decades. As you will see very soon Suman Ghosh's documentary *Parama: A Journey with Aparna Sen* will provide you with a very good introduction into the many facets of her personality as an artist, actress and political activist. Therefore, I will focus a bit more on her work as a filmmaker in my speech.

Aparna Sen's first film *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) about an aging Anglo-Indian teacher called Violet Stoneham introduces the often lonely and isolated women we will find in most of her films. In this work though, Ms. Stoneham is as well part of the vanishing minority of Anglo-Indians who were discriminated against by the British colonial power, but also later on after India became independent. The film introduced a new voice in cinema: Aparna Sen was a young woman, who with her first film made one of the finest, but also one of the most heartbreaking film poems about aging and loneliness in film history.

Aparna Sen considers her second film *Parama* (1981) her "most feminist" film. It is about a frustrated middle-aged married woman from the middle class who has an affair with another man. At the time the film was released, I heard that some people were disgusted by the fact that the heroine is an adulteress. Strangely, my sympathy was on *Parama's* side – from the very beginning of the film. What some of the contemporary audience have ignored is that *Parama* creeps through her rooms like a prisoner, almost like an unhappy ghost, always in danger to vanish completely. Her escapade is not adultery but the desperate attempt to assert herself as a human being. On the other hand, there is small, subtle but emphatic moment with *Parama's* husband on a business trip far away from home. The kind the film shows how he looks at his secretary implies she is being sexualized by the male gaze. And there is no doubt that he would betray his wife if there was the occasion. If you call *Parama* a feminist film, this does not go without acknowledging its pristine cinematic aesthetics. Aparna Sen never made films as a vehicle for ideologies, she completely translates her ideas into a unique cinematic language. The perception of reality or how different it can be from one person to another, is one of the core topics in throughout her work. Of course, this has to do with the feminist aspects of her films but as well with one of the fundamental questions in the art of cinema. If there is to be justice in film history, we have to mention *Parama* in the same breath as iconic feminist masterpieces like Barbara Loden's *Wanda* or Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*.

I realize with a bit of panic, that as of now, I am still discussing her second film knowing that I can't focus on all of her films. With a heavy heart, I should mention at least her film *Sati* which, in its darkness, reminds me a bit of Erich von Stroheim's work; or her apocalyptic masterpiece *Yugant (What the Sea Said)* about a female artist who is struggling with her



marriage and her independence as an artist amidst images of pollution and destruction. It is probably one of Aparna Sen's most pessimistic films. *Paramitar Ek Din (House of Memories)* is another film that shows what a great storyteller she is, in this case also sophisticatedly dealing with different time levels. Jumping between past and present proves to be one of her

brilliant narrative strategies in films like *Iti Mrinalini (An Unfinished Letter)* or *15, Park Avenue*. But *Paramitar Ek Din* shows us also one of the most tender relationships between women I remember to have seen in cinema.

I sympathize deeply with all feminist aspects of her films. At the same time, I feel the strong urge to point out her brilliant skills in the arts of filmmaking, her carefully composed images, her refined arrangement of cinematic spaces. *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* is a film about local riots – AND a fireworks of sophisticated cinematic ideas. Therefore, I would suggest that we should speak about the great Aparna Sen with the same kind of 'naturalness' we like to employ when talking about filmmakers like Godard, Malick, Ozu, Ford, Ray, Ghatak, Scorsese, Hitchcock, Renoir and many others.

Aparna Sen once said something like "all great art is androgynous," a sentence that hunted me for many years. In one of her finest films *The Japanese Wife*, we see for the first time in her films a man as the central protagonist, even though raised, shaped and surrounded by women. If there is something like a male pendant to the passionate but tragic lover in Max Ophüls' *Madame De (The Earrings of Madame de)* - played by Mrs. Danielle Darrieux - it is Rahul Bose's Snehamoy in *The Japanese Wife*!

Over the years, I had many conversations with Indian friends, men and women, about Aparna Sen. While I enthusiastically celebrated her as one of my favorite filmmakers alive, I learned in these discussions why she is a role model for many Bengali Women – as an activist advocating for women's and human rights, her encouragement in the fight for women's emancipation, her work as the editor of the women's magazine *Sananda* (1986-2005), and as an actress in commercial and independent cinema - but also as in theatre.

What her films tell you about the culture she is coming from, about the fatal state of the world left me shocked, speechless and often with a broken heart. But there are also moments of beauty and hope, notions of happiness, sometimes even humour like in *Goynar Baksho (The Jewelry Box)* or in this clash of comedy and tragedy in *The Japanese Wife*.

When people talk about famous filmmakers who are also well known for their cinephilia, most people mention Wenders, Scorsese or Bogdanovich. I would mention without hesitating for a second as the first filmmaker that comes to my mind, Aparna Sen. Not (only) because of her cinephile upbringing. Not at all because she is making a fuss about her film education. And not because I remember quotes of film history in her works. But because I am haunted by very many great moments in her films that will stay with me as long as I will breathe. I will give a few examples:

Meenakshi sings in *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* a lullaby for her baby. This small moment has the beauty of a Japanese Haiku-poem; the adaptation of Tagore's famous novel *The Home and the*



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World: She transferred the novel into the present day India, governed by the right wing Hindu fundamentalist party BJP: Even though it is one of her most disturbing and probably one of the bravest political films in recent times, there is a reconciliation scene between the couple in *Ghawre Bairey Aaj (The Home and the World Today)* which has the grace of a duet from a Mozart-Da Ponte opera. There is an excursion of mother and daughter to the beach in *Iti Mrinalini (An Unfinished Letter)* that has the grace of a film by Jean Renoir or Terrence Malick. These are moments of pure cinematic poetry, and these can only come from a person with a deep love for cinema.

At the end of my speech and when honoring Aparna Sen with the *RED LOTUS Lifetime Achievement Award 2024*, let me express my hope that her remarkable films will be screened in a complete retrospective one day – with the best prints available. In *Parama: A Journey with Aparna Sen* you will see some excerpts of her films. I hope this film by Suman Ghosh will fuel the interest in Aparna Sen's film. They deserve it.

Thank you for your attention. Thank you, dear Aparna Sen, for your contributions to Indian and to World Cinema. Congratulations, Madam!

Rüdiger Tomczak, April, 26, 2024, Stadtkino Vienna