

# Contemporary Realism in Hindi Cinema

Prof Rajbir Singh

IMCMT, Kurukshetra University

In his *Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson discusses the problem of defining realism. Realism, according to him, is mostly defined in oppositional terms: realism as opposed to idealism, fantasy, melodrama etc. hence it is difficult to settle on an agreed definition. Jameson goes on to offer a historical definition: he defines it as the project of early modernity when enlightenment and secularization were essential for the project of rationalizing the old order.<sup>i</sup> In 'The Existence of Italy' Jameson offers us to think of the trilogy of realism-modernism-postmodernism in not only historical but also thematic way, thus allowing to see film director Alfred Hitchcock's work as accompanying all three elements across his oeuvre.<sup>ii</sup> While Jameson is aware, through Sartre, that mimesis has a critical direction, that realism is not libidinally invested into the order which it depicts, he cannot resist the counter thesis that somewhere realism contains a critical attitude. One only has to remember the works of Hindi writer Premchand or the Kannada writer U. R. Ananthamurthy to confirm this opposite idea: Premchand rarely practiced anything but realism and yet he is remembered for his trenchant critique of the Indian society (perhaps Sa'adat Hasan Manto can be an even better example of realism-as-critique, nonetheless there is a kind of spectrality that can be associated with Manto's very brute realism). The purpose of this essay is to weigh these contentious interpretations of realism through a discussion on certain 'realist' works. The choice here is *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), actor Irrfan's *Hindi Medium* (2017, dir. Saket Chaudhary) and Amit V. Masurkar's *Newton* (2017).

*Hindi Medium* is today remembered as one of Irrfan's famous works. The central theme of the comic film is about the school education of a little girl (Pia) who is born to a rich trader (Raj Batra played by Irrfan) and his wife (Meeta, played by Saba Qamar). Upon the insistence of his wife, Meeta, Raj leaves his family home in Chandni Chowk and settles in the posh locality of Vasant Vihar so that they can qualify for the interview for the admission of their kid to a reputed private school. Their wish, however, gets farther and farther away from realization as they fail in their knowledge of English language resulting in Pia not finding a seat in the elite schools. Raj learns of a trick to get Pia into a school, by posing as economically disadvantaged parents whose kids can get across due to reservation. However, he quickly learns that forging documents alone will not do, he would also have to live like a poor man in a slum area. The comedy unfolds in the repeated failed attempts to get across the line, and in the increasingly authentic poverty-stricken lifestyle the couple have to enact. Eventually, they are able to get Pia into their desired school but soon they are exposed by one of the very slum neighbours who helped them through their drama of poor life. Ultimately, Raj takes his daughter to a poor government school and donates a large sum for the resurrection of the school.

Is Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur* a 'realist' film, or is it an allegory? Perhaps it would be more pertinent to see it as an allegory, even a counter-allegory as that, simply because of the historicity of its subject-matter: the film is perfectly readable as a correction of India's growth story that was much hype in 2010s. The plot of *Gangs of Wasseypur* is not simply a vendetta story spanning three generations, it is as much about what in old fashioned vocabulary can be called as a critique of political economy: the various shifts from colonial exploitation of the mining resources and cheap labour to the legitimate 'business' of iron and steel in small town India represent perhaps the classic story of industrialization from nineteenth century Europe and North America, however, without the same material benefits accruing to the lower strata of the society as anywhere. This, perhaps, is the 'postcolonial' point that the film makes. In Vera Dika's words, the film deploys "a kind of 'faux realism,' a surrealism if you will, composed of a grainy, repulsive visual surface depicting deteriorating locations and people"<sup>iii</sup>, or what Pierre Nora has referred to as "places of memory".<sup>iii</sup> In psychoanalytic terms, the film *Gangs of Wasseypur* attempts to represent the Real which, as we know from Lacan, cannot be represented. The result, therefore, is a trauma that cannot be narrated but only alluded to. This perhaps leads us to the contentious claim that capital is the Lacanian Real.<sup>iv</sup>

However, political economy is not the only concern of the film: it is also what Freud called as 'private life' whose privacy is only subjective. The various familial relations – of fathers, relations among sons and mother, wives and cousins – reveal that the family itself is the illusion that the real of the capital seeks to misrepresent. What the nation fails at, the family seeks to cover through its various disguises. A simple experiment will reveal this: what if the ending of the *Gangs of Wasseypur* does not happen with the avenging of forefathers' death, but the two rivalries start on to collaborate? Indeed, this is hinted at in various ways: collaboration indeed turns out to be more important than revenge. With *Gangs of Wasseypur*, realism assumes the dimension of the revelation of the tragic circumstances through which excluded 'turn' to crime: crime is not something that is a moment of exception (Agamben), it is the very composition of social reality. While such a depiction of the Indian society is indeed a brave move for the ideologically invested Hindi cinema, the very dramatization of the horrors result in a new spectrality which accords an aesthetic dimension of the

horror film kind. The emphasis then shifts from the horror of everydayness of the everydayness of the horrors, that is normalization of the extreme violence that is inflicted upon the lower strata of the society.

Newton (2017) is a story of Newton Kumar, a sincere and idealistic government clerk, is assigned the task of conducting elections in a Maoist-affected area in Chhattisgarh. Despite the dangers and challenges, Newton is determined to fulfill his duty with honesty and integrity. Accompanied by a team of security personnel, including a seasoned army officer Aatma Singh, a local government teacher Loknath, and a tribal woman Malko, Newton sets out to set up a polling booth in a remote village deep in the jungle. Upon reaching the village, Newton encounters apathy and fear among the villagers, who are more concerned about their safety than participating in the democratic process.

Despite their reluctance, Newton persists in his efforts to convince them to vote. As the day of the election approaches, tensions rise in the village, exacerbated by the presence of armed rebels who threaten to disrupt the polling process. Newton and his team must navigate through the volatile situation while upholding the principles of democracy. In the midst of chaos and conflict, Newton remains steadfast in his commitment to conducting fair and free elections. Despite facing numerous obstacles and setbacks, including threats to his own safety, Newton refuses to compromise on his principles.

What is common across these films is a sense of 'realism'. However, this realism comes across in different ways. In Hindi Medium, the reality effect generates comicality. One cannot but feel sorry for the parents who are ready to go to any length to send their daughter to a quality school. However, one also laughs at their hypocrisy. In one of the poignant scenes, the inspection team which visits their house to check upon their lifestyle discovers packaged water, which they should not be able to afford. Upon questioning, they come up with no good excuses but they are saved by their poor neighbours, who think that the family must have been recently impoverished. Through this comedy, the sordid tale of 'pauperization' (instead of proletarianization) that is evident with the neoliberal era gets reversed: it gives the impression that really not all is so bad with the economic story of the country: there are those who feign poverty to get the undue benefits. In another scene, Raj's learning of a labourers' job is shown as a kind of traumatic event, but traumatic from the perspective of whom? It turns out to be the spectator, who is probably not that poor. What is also equally comic, if not more, is how the family learns to behave like the rich when they are culturally 'lacking': the anxiety of class is now ascribed to the anxiety of culture. This is a crucial shift in the realism of today.

Newton offers the most interesting 'realism' of the three films. The comic dimension of the film is really subversive precisely because it aims for modesty of its object. The titular character 'Newton' is named so because he found his family-given name 'Nootan' to be feminine. In one of the important scenes, Newton's senior officer (played by Sanjay Mishra) explains to him the importance of his name: Newton mattered because he bound everybody by the same rule of mathematics, thereby democratizing society. He also admonishes Newton for his 'superiority complex' because he prided himself too much for doing what he ought to have done. However, the best fun of Newton happens precisely because Newton goes to the very end of performing his duty: he takes the ideological message of the Indian political system literally. In this way, he ends up 'over-identifying' with the ideological message, and thereby becoming subversive. In theoretical terms, he acts as a corrector of Foucault: Michel Foucault had famously posited that power and resistance are caught in a deadly mutual embrace, that one reproduced the other. Newton shows that there is one specific kind of resistance which is not circular: that of over-identification. If one takes the purported claim of the system all too seriously, then the system rightly perceives this as subversive. The whole comicality of Newton happens because Newton insists upon doing his job, when he is expected to just take his salary for nothing. Thereby, he becomes as dangerous, perhaps more, than the Naxalites which are in armed conflict with the state and whose background is what defines the filmic context.

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<sup>i</sup>Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013).

<sup>ii</sup>Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (Routledge, 1992).

<sup>iii</sup>Vera Dika, "Returned Genres: The Dream Has Ended" in *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 73; Nora, Pierre. "Memory and History." *Les Lieux de Mémoire Representations* 26 (1989): 7.

<sup>iv</sup>Toscana, Alberto. "To have done with the end of philosophy." *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 9 (2000): 220-238.