

THE POLITICAL CINEMA OF MRINAL SEN: A STUDY OF REALISM, SOCIETY, AND VISUAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract—Mrinal Sen is regarded as one of the most influential filmmakers of the Indian New Wave movement. His films are known for their political consciousness, social critique, and innovative cinematic language. Unlike conventional mainstream cinema, Sen used film as a medium to question social structures, class divisions, and political realities. This research paper examines the role of realism, political engagement, and visual narrative in Mrinal Sen's cinema. Through the analysis of selected films, the study investigates how Sen combined cinematic experimentation with social commentary. The findings suggest that Mrinal Sen transformed Indian cinema into a platform for critical reflection, making significant contributions to both national and international film culture (Sen, 2002; Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

Index Terms—Mrinal Sen, Political Cinema, Realism, Indian New Wave, Visual Narrative, Social Critique

I. Introduction

Mrinal Sen occupies a unique position in Indian cinema. Along with filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, he played a crucial role in shaping the Indian New Wave movement. However, unlike Ray's humanistic realism, Sen's cinema frequently engaged directly with political issues, social inequality, and urban alienation.

His films challenged audiences to think critically about society rather than merely consume entertainment. Through experimentation with narrative structure, editing, and visual style, Sen developed a distinctive cinematic language that reflected the social and political realities of post-independence India. This paper explores the relationship between politics, realism, and cinematic form in Mrinal Sen's work.

II. Background

The emergence of Mrinal Sen coincided with significant social and political changes in India during the 1960s and 1970s. Economic inequality, political unrest, and urban transformation influenced both his worldview and filmmaking practice.

Sen became associated with the Indian Parallel Cinema movement, which sought alternatives to commercial filmmaking. Influenced by Marxist thought, Italian Neorealism, and international political cinema, he developed films that questioned dominant social structures and encouraged critical reflection.

III. Case Studies

Film A: Bhuvan Shome (1969)

Often considered a landmark of Indian Parallel Cinema, the film combines satire, realism, and experimentation. Through visual innovation and social observation, Sen critiques bureaucracy and authority.

Film B: Interview (1971)

The film explores class identity and consumer culture in urban India. Sen employs documentary techniques and self-reflexive narration to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality.

Film C: Calcutta 71 (1972)

This film examines poverty, political unrest, and social inequality through multiple interconnected narratives. It remains one of Sen's most overtly political works.

Film D: Akaler Sandhane (1980)

The film investigates the relationship between history, memory, and representation. Sen combines realism and meta-cinematic techniques to explore the impact of the Bengal Famine.

IV. Analysis & Results

The analysis reveals several defining characteristics of Mrinal Sen's cinema:

- Strong engagement with political and social realities.
- Use of realism as a tool of social critique.
- Experimental narrative structures.
- Blending of documentary and fictional elements.
- Emphasis on class, inequality, and urban transformation.

The selected films demonstrate that Sen used cinema not only to represent reality but also to question and analyze it.

V. Discussion

Mrinal Sen's films challenge conventional notions of storytelling by encouraging viewers to reflect critically on society. His work demonstrates that cinema can function as an intellectual and political medium capable of addressing issues such as poverty, injustice, and social change.

Unlike mainstream narratives that prioritize entertainment, Sen's films often create discomfort and reflection. Through innovative visual techniques and political engagement, he expanded the possibilities of Indian cinema.

VI. Experience & Reflection

As a cinematography student, I find Mrinal Sen's work valuable because of its relationship between form and content. His films show that cinematography is not only about visual beauty but also about communicating ideas and social realities.

Studying Sen's cinema has broadened my understanding of how framing, editing, and observation can contribute to political and social commentary. His approach encourages filmmakers to engage critically with the world around them.

VII. Conclusion

Mrinal Sen remains one of the most important voices in Indian cinema. Through political engagement, realism, and cinematic experimentation, he transformed film into a medium of social inquiry and critical reflection. His work continues to inspire filmmakers, scholars, and audiences, demonstrating the enduring power of cinema as a tool for understanding society.

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