

In the Light of Experience: An Indian Cameraman

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Abstract

Light invites an epic scale of imagination. Focusing on the thought and work of a contemporary Indian cameraman, this article explores experience of light in cinema. I examine practical struggles to engage light's movement and potency, in relation to cinematographic problems of composition, effect, and aesthetics. Relying most closely on ethnographic fieldwork with a studio set constructed for a 2010 Tamil feature film, the article devotes sustained attention to the interplay between luminescent philosophy and practice—to interrelated forms of thinking and working with light.

Keywords

Cinematography, light, visuality, experience, ethnography, Tamil cinema, studio, image



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Night and day, moon and sun, the invisible and the visible—experience of light seems always to shuttle between these poles. Passage between them is sometimes gradual: step through the doors into a vast, black space, and as the aperture of your pupils slowly opens, the span between light and darkness grows in depth and texture. Then there are those movements so fast that they remain imperceptible. A shutter steadily beats, open and closed, and a world comes into flickering life. The night of the cinema hall has often been likened to the darkness of the womb. But the world into which its projector delivers us is composed of nothing more than shadowy impressions. The universe shines with more light than you know. Suppose you had a guide, a professional seer. Suppose there was a cameraman at each threshold between night and day.¹ Focus, pan, and close in with him, and what else might you learn to see?

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Night has fallen on the colonial world of *Madrasapattinam*.² The day of India's Independence from Britain—August 15, 1947—is just a few hours away. Activists of the Indian National Congress Party are massing outside of Central Station, awaiting the victorious return of their leaders from Delhi. Their white tunics glow softly in blue under the moonlight. The arches of the station flood the courtyard with a yellow radiance, a portent of the coming dawn.

A young man and woman duck and weave through the milling crowd, looking for each other. Amy Wilkinson, daughter of the Governor of Madras, is desperate to remain here somehow with her Indian lover. He, Parithi, is a Tamil washerman with a penchant for wrestling. The station at night is a medley of deep shadows and bright pools of light. As the police try to chase her down, Amy finds refuge behind one shadowy pillar, then another, before breaking into the moonlit streets of Madras.

The colonial city is a space meant to be grasped and enjoyed with the eyes, brimming with bright advertisements, sculpted facades and prospects, and ornate architectural motifs. Countless gas and electric lamps draw attention to these details.³ Amy has toured the city with Parithi, capturing its many spectacles with a handheld Agfa camera. She knows it well.

Now, everything seems to lie with the light yet to come. There's a song in the air as they run hand-in-hand through the dark streets of the city, pursued by gleaming bayonets: "Life will go on when that moment dawns, when this endless meld of light and dark gives way..." Look again at those white-clad men massing on the station courtyard. The light is playing on them, acting through them, bringing this moment and all of its promise into reach.⁴

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Light invites an epic scale of imagination. There's the sun, that vast sphere at an inconceivable distance, responsible for almost everything you see. There is also the modern image of humankind as *naturalis lux*, as a being of light, radiating the truth of the world.⁵ Think of the clock tower beaming into the night atop this train station in colonial India: only one among many manifestations of the European Enlightenment's promise to shed light on the true nature of things, through precise methods of attention and examination.

These methods in modern times have relied upon visual devices of various kinds: scientific technologies of vision, instruments of ambient lighting, media such as cinema that bring together these devices in an encompassing play of light and shadow. Light has been pursued to the infinitesimal scale of the photon, and yet its ultimate nature continues to elude our knowledge and control. Our eyes are both active and passive, aggressive and receptive, bending light to their purposes but also struggling with the force of what they see. The light of the world envelops and encompasses the light of the mind.⁶

Here are two men, for example, a director and a cameraman, looking over a sketch. The image outlines a space yet to be built, the set that will eventually become *Madrasapattinam*'s train station. The director speaks in a lively and dramatic fashion, drawing vivid images of the drama that will unfold here: Parithi and his gang are running to the platform /cut/ the station master holds up his hand /cut/ the train for Delhi left hours ago /cut/ Parithi looks very sad /cut/ then he sees Amy hiding in a train /cut/ he runs to catch her /cut/ ...

"It'll be deadly, that emotion," the director says with an almost gleeful smile, describing how the dejected washerman will feel at the sudden sight of his young English lover. "It'll be grand," the cameraman assures him, in a measured and confident tone.

What does the cameraman see, as he listens closely to the director's story? The station at night is a patchwork of light and shadow. All of its tension seems to be held along one edge: the shifting line between what he can see, and what he can feel though it's invisible still. He sees Parithi's eyes flickering despondently across the span of the station, then suddenly alighting upon Amy's presence in one of the compartments. The character's face gleams with relief.

"We'll play it on Parithi," the cameraman tells the director. Reflected in his mind is the light playing on Parithi's face. Flooded with the sense of this light, the cameraman realizes that you do not need to see Amy to know that she is there. Everything else begins to fade into the darkness around the frame.

The cameraman's task is simple: not to shed light on what remains invisible without his help, but instead to bring into focus and reach the light that is already there.⁷

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Cinematography is identified in Tamil cinema as *olippativu*, literally an impression or recording of light. The term itself is highly suggestive: cameramen work to capture something already in motion, light that comes from somewhere else. In mythological or devotional films, rays of light are sometimes depicted as streaming from the eyes of gods and goddesses.⁸ Whether or not they attribute its power to such divine origins, cameramen here work with light as a potent substance: flowing, leaking, seeping, spilling, always edging beyond their control.

Studio floors are scarce, sets costly to build, electrical lights and staff expensive to hire. Most shots begin with the light available in a given environment, to be filled, bounced, filtered, or reflected as possible and necessary. Control is a persistent concern. More than anywhere else in a film production, the fortunes of the camera crew depend upon the vagaries of natural elements. Day by day, countless moments pass as camera assistants gaze into the sky with polarized eyepieces, waiting for clouds to open into some degree and quality of light.

Given these circumstances, I was all the more surprised to see a glossy black invitation lying on a desk in director Mysskin's office one afternoon, emblazoned with the confident slogan "Lightning will strike!" The event advertised was the Indian launch of a lighting system developed in Hollywood nearly 20 years before, a high-wattage electronic special effects device called Lightning Strikes. *Madrasapattinam*'s cameraman, Nirav Shah, was spearheading the launch, along with an entrepreneurial team calling themselves The Lighthouse.

The launch was held on a studio floor at Prasad Studios, the walls painted with thick, dark clouds. Many Tamil directors, cameramen, and other technicians were on hand, seated before a bank of press videographers in the back. Standing onstage beside a broken pillar and a lone tree, Nirav orchestrated a demonstration of the system. Until now, he observed, they had all been flashing an arc light to simulate lightning—the light would build and fade slowly, and was difficult to cue with a shot. Lightning Strikes,

however, promised “lightning at the right time. Exactly at the right emotional moment you want it, you can have it.”

Nirav called out, “Strike!” with dramatic emphasis, and almost immediately, we were all cast in the flickering intensity of a white burst of light. The American inventor of the device, David Pringle, came onstage to echo what Nirav had said: “The light is very bright, very controllable, and makes dramatic scenes more dramatic, scary scenes more scary, explosive scenes more explosive.” They dimmed the lights to bring the studio floor into darkness, and played promotional clips from many of the Hollywood films that had used the system.

I slipped out of the studio just as Tim Robbins was escaping from jail on a stormy night, hands raised triumphantly against a lightning-ridden sky. I found myself wondering whose triumph was being celebrated on the screen, and on the stage. Is this what cinema ultimately promised, ever more mastery of the world through a fuller mastery of its light?

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Nirav was someone I already knew quite well, as he had shot five of the films that I had been shadowing over the last few years. We first met in 2007, when he was shooting Vishnu Vardhan’s *Billa* in Malaysia. On my first day with them, a fierce rainstorm suddenly engulfed the Buddhist temple complex where they were working. They waited at first for the storm to pass, then decided to improvise a few shots of the heroine practicing t’ai chi against the driving rain and mist. “In Hollywood,” Nirav speculated, “they get their own sun if they want. They’ve got the time, the expertise, the money.” Circumstances here demanded more accommodation to light and environment: “a little bit of control, and a lot of acceptance,” the cameraman said.

I learned more about this attitude one sunny day a couple of years later. We were standing on the marshy fringes of Pozhal Lake, north of Chennai, where he was shooting for a film called *Tamil Padam*. They had just staged an altercation on the edge of the water, a crane-mounted camera gliding in low over its glistening surface. Equipment and crew were all perched in ankle-deep water, because their cables could extend no further. Nirav rehearsed the swooping movement of the crane’s rig with his own extended arm and hand. He called for a polarizing filter to deepen the clear sky’s blue and to cut its reflection on the lake. He noticed a fallen tree trunk, and had it planted vertically to break up the open wideness of the space. And then, on one of their longest takes, a crow came sailing through the frame. “Super,” the cameraman said to the director. “It’s come together beautifully. Even that crow came in.”

None of this was planned in advance, Nirav confessed when they broke for lunch. He had not even seen the place until this morning, and had to guess what equipment he might need for the day. “It’s an Indian way of accepting what is there in front of you,” he proposed, as we picked our way along the low grass on the edge of the lake: “We are reacting to the moment, reacting to the location, reacting to the light... Everything is working out on its own.”

For the cameraman, this approach was “a spiritual thing,” brought on by the exigencies of filmmaking. “The film industry does that to you,” he said. “Day by day, you live in the moment. You develop a Zen-like attitude.”

I was not sure what he meant by Zen, and nor, most likely, was he.⁹ Still, I knew that knowledge of the world had long been taken to demand a certain kind of vision in diverse strands of Indian religion and philosophy. In Indian Buddhist literature, for example, the mind is described as essentially luminous by nature, its ordinary obstructions and afflictions susceptible to the piercing light of wisdom.¹⁰ This idea

seemed to have something to do with how Nirav spoke of seeing past obstacles, working with a more expansive awareness of what was present.

“This doesn’t happen every day,” Nirav admitted. Nor was he always as pleased with what happened as he had been that morning. These were lessons that had come with time. “You reach a point where you can’t crib anymore. Then you say ‘Fuck it! I just want to be happy about what I’m doing.’” That afternoon at Pozhal Lake, he and the others worked as long as they could, until a sudden downpour forced an abrupt end to the shoot.

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In all honesty, Nirav was hardly the poised and pious sage. He often seemed restless and distracted on sets, reaching immediately for one of two phones at each break between shots. He was also an incorrigible flirt, with a boyish and irreverent sense of humor. I remember one stunt that consumed him for an entire day on a tea estate in southern Kerala, involving a recorded fart, a maxed-out loudspeaker, and a shy young assistant director who was apparently having gas trouble. “See how we’re spoiling the peace of the hills,” Nirav said to me with a devilish smile.

How could I reconcile such gags with his penchant for philosophical musings? “Both are true, both can exist in the same space,” Nirav would assure with a look of earnest innocence.

The question might arise, no doubt: was this guy just bullshitting me? Still, in the many months over many years that I hung around him as he worked, not once did I try to look through his viewfinder at the world visible through it. Unlike almost anywhere else on a working film set, here was a viewpoint that seemed fundamentally sacred, private, inviolable.¹¹

Here is how Nirav said he had fallen into cinematography: he had studied commerce in a Chennai college for just a few months, before dropping out to try to make films. To direct, he would have had to apprentice for at least seven or eight years before getting a break, while he would likely have to assist with a cameraman for no more than five. “I’m the type of person who gets bored very easily,” he told me, and so he approached P.C. Sreeram for a chance to assist him.

Sreeram was one of the most creative and influential living cinematographers in India, a man who had trained most of Tamil cinema’s leading contemporary cameramen. “I don’t know anything about film,” the young man admitted to the veteran when they first met. Sreeram told him to come back in a few months. And so Nirav waited. He began to watch films, and to buy up old issues of *American Cinematographer* on the pavements of Mount Road, where they were dumped and sold in bulk by weight. “I had a lot of catching up to do,” Nirav recalled.

I had met Sreeram myself a few times. “I was a very disturbed boy,” the senior cameraman once told me. As a child, he had found solace and company only in the photographic “camera diaries” he had recorded for himself. Later too, he said, “Whatever happened was within the four frames. Cinema was the only way I felt at home.” There was something spiritual in this for Sreeram, “another energy” that pulled him ever deeper into the world. But this was something he did not want to talk about. Words were “bullshit,” not to be trusted—as the mystic J. Krishnamurti used to say, Sreeram reminded me, “the description is not the described.”

Nirav himself was born and raised as a Svetambara Jain. Overhearing dialogs between his grandmother and others, he told me, he had contemplated “giving up this material world” in his early teens to become a Jain renunciant himself. But then, “somewhere down the line I realized that if I leave everything and go now, I wouldn’t have left anything. It would have been renouncing nothing.”¹² The younger

Nirav concluded that he would have to live out more of this life before trying to give it up. And now he was fully caught up in its momentum.

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Colonial Central Station is rebuilt for *Madrasapattinam* on two different sets. The exterior façade and hallways are built on an open lot at Mohan Studios, station walls raised with wooden scaffolds and framed with thick, canvas cloth. With design elements gleaned from historical works and photographs of the existing station, the art direction team builds the bottom half of the massive building at 100 percent scale. The top half will be superimposed later onto shot footage by a visual effects company based in Mumbai.

“You wouldn’t have expected something so humungous,” Nirav says as we walk through the half-finished structure, jostled by the clanging of wood and metal. He spends many minutes looking up at its soaring armature. “You have to be true to the lighting of that period, you have to imagine what it would have been like,” he explains. As we step across the plywood flooring of the set, under the waning sunlight of a cloudless evening, Nirav imagines harsh spots of individual light cast upon this surface, surrounded by expanses of deep shadow. “The sources back then were just bare bulbs,” he reminds me.

As an Indian director of photography, Nirav’s responsibilities are technical as well as conceptual, encompassing the selection and position of individual lighting elements. Back on the set a few nights later, Nirav and his camera crew undertake a “test run” to examine the workings of their patchwork light design. At first, they position a 5000-watt arc light behind one central arch within the station, using much smaller lights under the other arches beside it. A light meter reading suggests that this approach will be too limiting, and Nirav decides to use a number of the more powerful arc lights to bounce brighter patches of light throughout the station.

“We should do it simply,” Nirav tells one of his assistants, a young man who has been working with the cinematographer for the last two years. Bakyaraj is a shy and taciturn sort. Walking around the set with his head craned upward, eyes squinting into the light, Bakyaraj passes on instructions to the foreman of the lighting crew. These men tie up lights to the scaffolding with thick lengths of braided cord, making their own judgments concerning the proper height, angle, direction, and placement of individual lights. Bakyaraj shows the foreman what is wanted, cupping his fingers slightly and moving his hand forward at an angle, as if it stands for both the source of each light and the direction of its movement.

As night falls once more, the station’s arches glow in the yellow light of the workmen’s lamps. “Unbeatable!” director Vijay exclaims, enthralled by this glimpse of what the space might come to look like. Nirav, meanwhile, continues to pace through its corridors and hallways, looking up and around at its visual textures and shadows. “The first time you walk in, it looks huge,” he says. “Then it becomes smaller, and smaller, and smaller.”¹³

It is already time now to begin shooting, but the lighting crew is still working to bring light to rest on the various surfaces of the station. For the cinematographer, these sweating and anonymous men seem to be little more than the luminous devices they manipulate. “PAR can, come to the center... Softie, come... Come a little more... Yes, ok... Camera, come...”

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So Parithi and his friends rush into the station, fearing that Amy has already left by train to Delhi. They push their way through the chanting crowds of activists. “What platform to Delhi?” one of the young men runs to ask a railway officer.

There is a massive wooden board looming over the tracks and platforms, listing the various trains. At first, this is all you can see. Then you begin to look slowly over the board.

There are three long rows of lamps, suspended from cords above the platforms. There is a thick, grey plume of smoke, curling into the dim rafters. There is a round white clock, which reads 11:20. Then you see the black locomotive pulling into the platform to the right, round face lit with a blinding sphere of light. Waiting to greet the train are porters in red; they look like small and humble figures from up here. Parithi and his friends suddenly appear to the left, casting long shadows as they race along the tracks.

The train comes down one side of what you can see, while they run up the other side. As your perspective on the scene continues to rise, one more lamp descends smoothly from above, reminding you again that you are looking down from the high vault of the station. Rows of lights form lines of perspective, converging on the tracks lost to darkness at the distant heart of the image. For a moment—and no more, as your vantage point will shift very soon—you feel as though you are inside some intricate and beautiful piece of machinery, gears and counterweights turning and pulling against each other with a smooth and balanced consistency.

The image is composed on a small studio floor at Prasad Studios, the second of the two sets that double as Central Station. Work on the space continues even as shooting begins here, the set crew hoisting up black light boxes, painting lines of PVC piping to double as the railway tracks, and positioning blue screens against the studio walls for the visual effects work that will lend the station its interior scale and depth.

Nirav shouts out instructions through a surgical mask, meant to ward off fumes still evaporating from the freshly painted locomotive. At first, he is frustrated. “You can’t really enjoy it,” he says, complaining about the painters and carpenters bustling throughout the compound. “I need to be able to see the frame. I need everybody out of it and to be able to see it for a while.”

The shot list for Scene No. 69B, fixed to the clipboards of the assistant directors, marks the need for an image that will stage the drama within the station—

5. Empty frame. Camera on left platform. Back shot of Arya and gang running on the platform. A train is seen arriving camera right.

But the decision to use the wooden board to slowly reveal the station’s interior from above is one that is improvised on the fly. The cinematographer selects a 14 mm wide-angle lens to convey the breadth of the space. “Fantastic, sir!” the director exclaims, throwing his hand around Nirav’s shoulder. “You’re trying to frame it like you’re shooting a landscape,” Nirav later explains. “That’s the thought behind it; you want that scale, like you’re shooting a mountain.”

Listening to Nirav, you might think of painting. Cinematography has often been described as a kind of “painting with light”—such, for example, was the title of the handbook written by the renowned cameraman John Alton in 1949. The set crew preparing the walls of this very studio floor had daubed with a flat matte blue the dark stormy skies painted for Nirav’s Lightning Strikes demo a few days back. Is Nirav “painting” with light when he composes scenes such as this one? “I haven’t done it yet,” he says with a laugh.¹⁴

There are Tamil cameramen who describe themselves as sculptors or painters of light.¹⁵ Many others have come into cinematography from photography, and remain in the habit of seeing photographic frames wherever they turn. Nirav, meanwhile, has a different sense of what he is meant to see and do. “I am a storyteller,” he says. “I will react to the story; I will react to what the story needs.”

Here, for the cameraman, what is needed is a visceral reminder of their story’s epic scale, something conveyed most powerfully through a slow unveiling of its span. “These fuckers have done the whole Central Station,” Nirav imagines his audience saying. “You have to do this sometimes. The Titanic, it’s such a big ship, it’s sinking, people are dying...”

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Now, Amy has slipped out of the train compartment where she was hiding. She does not know yet that Parithi is also here, looking for her. But then she spots the troop of policemen who have also been searching for her. The station is crowded with others who have spilled out of the train, and she can duck and hide among them. Although it is nearly midnight, bright lights beam from the walls and the rafters overhead. What will she do? She darts from pillar to pillar, in and out of the crowd, until she breaks into the moonlit plaza outside.

This is the movement that Nirav must convey. The scene is brimming with excited political activists, charged by the promise of independence. But the light is also acting in powerful and unexpected ways. “See those shadows acting on the floor, where that guy is walking?” Nirav observes, as we pass together through the set. What will the cameraman do with this play of light and shadow? “These things are never written in stone,” he says. “You go along, and keep changing the strategy. But your basic idea remains the same.”

Beginning with the framework of lights already fixed throughout the outdoor set, the cameraman plots what more are needed for the backdrop of these particular shots. “I think they would have had lights in the corridor,” Nirav speculates. “Now, I can decide, how much the light should come out. Or how much of the outside light should hit it.” He squints through a cupped hand to see what passes beyond the square black fabric of one skimmer. “I’m just seeing what the light is doing,” he explains. “When you see it with the naked eye, there’s too much other stuff.”

He calls for the camera; here is what you will see through its rectangular frame. Amy ducks out of view behind the first pillar, then suddenly creeps up along its shadowy face. There is a small, 300-watt arc light trained on this spot, its illumination broken up by lines of darkness through the use of a “shadow cutter.” You can see the policemen and others passing in and out of small pools of light on the other side of the pillar. “She’s hiding from them. Just trying to create a little bit of drama with the shadows,” Nirav elaborates.

As Amy runs to the second pillar, the shadow of a wrought-iron fence reaches across the station floor, cast by a platform-mounted light on one corner of the set. Another smaller light makes a bright spot through which the policemen run, followed quickly by Amy. She remains fully within this beam once she reaches the pillar, where you can see concern play over the whole of her face. “Shadow, shadow, shadow... And then you will see her properly,” Nirav explains. “This is mainstream cinema. You want the audience to fall in love with the heroine.”

Amy catches her breath for a few seconds at the third pillar. Her face is bathed now in a beautifully soft light of a different texture than anything else in the station. This is moonlight, cast at first from a helium balloon suspended high above the station courtyard, then supplemented—when the balloon mal-

functions, inundated by the seasonal rains—with another day light hoisted high above the scene by crane. “She enters this blue light for a bit,” Nirav suggests—“and then she disappears.”

“Light itself is always invisible,” physicist Arthur Zajonc has written.¹⁶ Mystery pervades the medium. We never see light itself, only the things upon which light falls so unevenly. And they too, in turn, reflect some of its fickle powers. Just beyond Amy, Parithi, and those policemen you see, the cameraman is also chasing something. It comes in and out of range, in and out of focus, in and out of darkness as he works. The feeling of the film: it is there, but remains elusive. “The tension was there,” he says, stepping away from a viewfinder trained onto one of these pillars. “I could feel it.”

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Then comes that song, as Amy and Parithi flee through the dark streets of the city. “Light will come in the east once more, as morning puts an end to the black darkness,” a chorus of voices promises in a stirring and defiant mood. Layers of smoke and shadow create a moody atmosphere. Most everything happens with a haunting slowness, dim and blurry figures moving against nebulous spheres of white light. The lovers leap over a high wall back into the deserted station, running along the tracks, alongside a train, and then over its compartments.

“I love shooting in the dark,” Nirav says while they set up these shots one evening on the Prasad Studios floor—“I could do this for days.” Amy and Parithi run along a smoky platform lit from behind with one, unseen light: a 4000-watt Arri flicker-free hydrargyrum medium-arc iodide (HMI) daylight. You see no more than their silhouettes and shadows against that harsh and searching light, which casts a white glow on the walls of the train compartment. “I could have lit the shit out of that place,” Nirav says, but he’d tried to make the lighting as “pure” and “uncomplicated” as possible in pursuit of this drama. “Whatever you can achieve with ten lights, there’s a possibility you can achieve it with just one light, in the right spot,” he tells me.

The image is beautiful in its darkness, like so many of the stark pictures that compose this song. I remember Nirav telling me about his fondness for the work of cinematographer Gordon Willis, widely known as a “Prince of Darkness.” I also remember what he had said about V.K. Murthy, a pioneering Indian cameraman whose moody and impressionistic visuals owed much to the aesthetics of German Expressionist cinema.¹⁷ Nirav candidly admits that these techniques are not his own: “Whatever I’m doing is a sum total of everything that I have seen till now, stuff that is there, subconsciously there... every film, every photograph that I’ve ever seen.”

Visual impressions have been made upon his mind, the cameraman suggests, without his having known or realized this—this is also how he understands his own images to work. “Why should I tell you that you should feel a certain way?” Nirav asks. “I should make you feel that way, without your knowing it.” This, for the cameraman, is what the play of light and darkness can do. “Generally, the audience first notices the brightest spot in the frame. You direct the audience’s eye towards something,” he says. “It’s a psychological game. As a cameraman, what you’re playing with the audience is a game.”

What Nirav says reminds me of certain arguments made about the psychology of cinema. In an influential essay published in 1970, for example, Jean-Louis Baudry described cinema as a world fashioned for the eye of a subject. The camera creates a unified point of view: something much more than physical, consolidating the very identity, activity, and understanding of its onlookers. This, for Baudry, was the foundation of cinema’s ideological efficacy. Though they do not know it, cinematic spectators are “chained, captured, or captivated” by the light they find reflected within its dark chambers, by its “moving beams from an already veiled light source”.¹⁸

This is no doubt part of what is happening in this song from *Madrasapattinam*, which celebrates the beauty and poignancy of a nation's birth. But there are countless other things happening here as well. Look again at the light. "You have black and white happening at the same time," Nirav observes—"You're not really sure what is happening."

Here, as he does so often, Nirav speaks in the second person: you... You are not really sure whose perspective and experience he is speaking about now, that of the camera, or the cameraman, or the audience, or the story, or the characters, or the tracks and platforms through which they run. All of this is possible, likely, implicated in what he says. The space of the game collapses. Everyone is lost in the depth of the image.

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"Victory to Mahatma Gandhi!" the director calls out on his mike, leading his freedom fighters through the station once more. Then he suddenly remembers today's date, August 15. "Freedom day," he says with a laugh of surprise. "We're shooting on the same day." The time is 11:40 pm. Within the confines of the studio floor, days and nights keep bleeding into each other.

Nirav's eyes are red with exhaustion. On breaks, which come unpredictably, he has been following a discussion thread on the CML-PRO cinematography listserv with his iPhone. "The set is running late, the actor's thrown a wobbly and the director has opened his second bottle of whiskey, yet you need to light the next scene," a Dutch cinematographer writes. "Do you have any tricks, cultural, drugs, alcohol...? What do you do?"

There is a long response by Oliver Stapleton, a British cinematographer known for his work on films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Grifters*. Writing from Melbourne, where he is shooting for Guillermo del Toro, Stapleton observes that "Great cinematography pretty much always comes from people with artistic vision." At the same time, he advises, "Don't behave like a painter in a loft." The tumult and commotion of the set must be approached with disciplined and unflappable mental distance, and here, like many others on this discussion thread, Stapleton affirms the value of Zen and other lessons of "the Eastern Masters."¹⁹

"I haven't ready much philosophy, I've never read anything," Nirav admits, as we walk together from Prasad Studios to the outdoor set across the street, talking about these remarks. And there is no "school of photography" to which he cleaves. "Trying to keep your life simple, trying to keep your lighting simple," this is as much as the cameraman is willing to put forward in the form of principles. "I think if it's going to be taught to you, it won't stay with you for too long. If you arrive at it on your own, I think it'll last much longer."

Two years later, we meet again one evening beside the Gandhi statue at Marina Beach. As always, Nirav has been very busy. We talk about the enthusiastic reception of his work for director Vijay's most recent release, *Deiva Thirumagal*. "You're a magician," a friend of his had apparently said, deeply moved by the film. Nirav had disagreed, and what he goes on to say about this has the beauty of philosophical vision. He speaks slowly, and quietly, as we sit together under Gandhi's looming bronze frame:

I am not a magician. I am the medium. The magic is all there. I'm not creating anything. With my limited knowledge and my limited sense, I'm trying to capture whatever is there. I didn't create the blue sky, I didn't create the green of the grass. I didn't create the clouds and all that. It's just how you look at it. If you look at it wide-eyed,

it seems magical. If you're in a fuck-all mood, it looks trashy. You can crib about it, you can say 'Ah, the light is crappy,' or you can say 'The light is beautiful.' On a 16-hour day, I can't say 'Let's wait for the right light.' I don't know if it's going to happen. The idea is to be open and receptive and alert about what's around me. Happy accidents are happening all the time. So if you're open to it, you will capture it. And if you're not, then you won't.

There is a lucidity to what he says. I have much to ponder, little to add. We chat for a few more minutes before I get into a taxi, and he wanders further down the beach. As the car pulls away from the pavement, I can see him scrolling through his phone, still restless, looking for something reflected in the light of that small screen.

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Notes

1. "Is it not obvious that the photograph, if photograph there be, is already taken, already developed in the very heart of things and at all the points of space?" writes Henri Bergson (2004, p. 31).
2. Directed by A.L. Vijay, produced by AGS Entertainment, released in 2010.
3. See Jay (1994), on the modern city as a visual space.
4. On light's agency, see Bille and Sorensen (2007).
5. For a discussion of this foundational theme in Western philosophy, see Blumenberg (1993, p. 51).
6. This distinction is developed and explored by Zajonc (1995).
7. See Deleuze (1986, p. 60), on Bergson: "This breaks with the whole philosophical tradition which placed light on the side of spirit and made consciousness a beam of light which drew things out of their native darkness... Things are luminous by themselves without anything illuminating them." *Parithi*, incidentally, can mean "sun" in Tamil.
8. See Dwyer (2006, p. 19). In such forms of *darsan* or devotional seeing, "the devotee is permitted to behold the image of the deity, and is privileged and benefited by this permission," as Vasudevan (2011, p. 114) writes.
9. See McMahan (2002) for a discussion of the appropriation and transformation of Zen Buddhist philosophy for contemporary Western audiences.
10. See McMahan (2008, pp. 55–82) for a discussion of Buddhist visual metaphor.
11. On the mystery of the f-stop as the only property of the cinematographer, see Sengupta (2005).
12. I am grateful to James Laidlaw for insight into this characteristic Jain idea. See Laidlaw (1995) for a discussion of related themes.
13. On seeing from within such a field of experience, see Ingold (2011).
14. See Alton (1995) for an example of this commonplace conception of cinematography. One of the most basic differences between painting and cinema, Bazin (1967, p. 166) wrote, is this: paintings are "centripetal" while the cinema screen is "centrifugal." The crux of the difference, for the critic, lay in the differing function of the

frame in each of the two media. The ornate and gilded frames that surround paintings turn attention inward, into the distinctive world that the picture composes. The movement of the cinema image, on the other hand, bleeds into the world that surrounds it: “what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe.”

15. I am grateful to Theodore Baskaran for his insights into this theme.
16. See Zajonc, 1995, p. 2.
17. For a discussion of German Expressionism and Indian cinematography, see Sengupta (2005).
18. See Baudry, 1974–75, pp. 44–45.
19. <http://www.cinematography.net/read/messages?id=160872#160872>

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