

‘Beep’- the Sound of Erasure:

The Censored Text as an Aesthetic Device

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Abstract

This paper is invested in exploring the sensory affect that is created through censorship. It is invested in unravelling the complex interaction between the films of Anurag Kashyap and the institution of censorship, the sensibilities of which are capitalized and appropriated into the aesthetic effect of the film. It also looks at how such a deployment constructs the cult of a transgressive auteur. I argue that the deafening ‘beep’ that screams of the otherwise silencing practices of censorship is what guides the way to unraveling the subversion of censorship in the filmic text. Taking cue from Žižek’s *Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006) which looks at cinema as the ultimate pervert art, telling us how to desire, this paper asserts that censorship doesn’t erase the profane, instead it points to its very utterance. I argue how Kashyap’s films’ profilmic text becomes the site of censorship standing out as material evidence to its very censoring. The ‘beeped’ or censored word becomes a provocation focusing attention onto itself by mobilizing its unspeakability through marketing the product as “controversial”. I posit that Anurag Kashyap capitalizes on this recognition. I look at the force of publicity that is created by censorship in Kashyap’s public discourse on censorship,

in his negotiations with the CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification) from before the planned commercial release of his first directorial venture *Paanch* to his ongoing battle with the CBFC over refusing to use the court mandated no smoking warning in ‘*Ugly*’ (2014)¹.

Keywords: Kashyap, Auteur, Censorship, Affect, Cult, CBFC.

Introduction

There were a great many censor problems that the film encountered. Thus, the maker had to go through the entire process of ‘beeping’ the film where certain words weren’t even allowed to be voiced. (*Paanch Goes Beep*, 2004)

The above excerpt from a newspaper clipping is part of a statement released by Tejaswani Kolapure the lead actress of *Paanch*, Anurag Kashyap’s directorial debut that never saw the light of theatre projectors. Having generated heavy online traffic in discussions over the botched release, the reason for its non-release is drowned in the cacophony surrounding its three year long negotiations with the censors. The process of ‘beeping’ that Kolapure refers to is of intrigue. The deafening beep that screams of the otherwise silencing practices of censorship is what guides the way to unraveling the subversion of censorship in the filmic text.

Slavoj Žižek in the *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (2006) claims that, “Cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn’t give you what you desire - it tells you how to desire”, my assertion here is that censorship doesn’t erase the profane, instead it points to its very utterance. The profilmic text as a site of censorship also stands as material evidence to its very censoring. For the ‘beeped’ or censored

¹ Yet to be commercially released but has already made its way to Cannes in Directors Fortnight in 2013 and is set to open the New York Indian Film Festival in May 2014.

word becomes a provocation, focusing attention onto itself. In this paper I look at censorship as the auteur's interaction with the text and as evidence of the auteur's understanding of the sensibilities of the censors. This very knowledge as well as the auteur's understanding of the effect of the censored text is used to incite sensorial affect through its aesthetic deployment, which through the ensuing argument we will find is critical to forming his particular Camp.

I argue that the profane is consciously woven into the text to be censored so as to make obvious its very presence. Later I will also look at the purpose that such a deployment fulfills in sowing the seeds of the cult of a transgressive auteur.

Following Kashyap's journey² in the Hindi film industry is much like tracing the quintessential heroes' journey—an outsider making his way through the “bullies” (Juneja, 2007) of the industry, only to firmly plant himself within their midst in two short decades to emerge as not just an auteur, but an entrepreneur fostering young directors under his two production houses and numerous joint ventures. This paper has been divided into sections bringing to the fore moments that have been critical to the construction of the auteur's transgressive aura.

The first section is dedicated to his first public encounters with the censor board where I attempt to draw out the charm of the censored beep in its appropriation by the auteur. The next section delves into the significance of Kashyap's Camp identity. In the *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* Lalitha Gopalan points to the mobilizing of a fan following of auteuristic

² An undergraduate awkward teenager who never spoke to girls, Kashyap was introduced to the world of performance through the theatre group *Jana Natya Manch* and ended up watching 55 films in ten days at the International Film Festival of India (in '93) only to find himself in Bombay within five months nursing starry eyed dreams of making movies. Working on the essential heroes' journey, he is faced with one obstacle after another—his first film (*Paanch* 2003) falls into trouble with the censors and then finds itself without a producer destined to lurch in pirate circles, his next venture (*Black Friday* 2007) too is stopped short of its release only to struggle against the censors for another ten years, his next film is shelved as the lead backs out six days before shooting (*Gulaal* 2009), his next release finds critical acclaim but bombs at the box office, the film after this fails to leave a mark amongst the critics or the box office (*Return of Hanuman* 2007) and finally a tryst with substance abuse and one broken marriage later, he finds success in his fifth release (*Dev D* 2009) and he never looks back.

filmmakers like Ketan Mehta and Ram Gopal Verma who not unlike independent filmmakers gain currency by controlling their productions to create a distinctive style. She sees their films as being able to read the spectators' desires as much as their ability to read into their creations by keeping in mind the cinephiliac tendency to scrutinize and deploy a system of signs beyond the narrative. She sees this as creating a potential space for Camp and cult followings which can also tell us how the Kashyap Camp is created and mobilized. The section after this is dedicated to his dialogue with censorship, at first through the affective potency of the censored beep in *Paanch* (unreleased) and later by reading *No Smoking* (2007) as reactive to the agency of censorship. In a brief textual reading of sequences from both films I notice a shift in Kashyap's engagement with the censors where in the latter I witness a more textured engagement than the former, as he steps onto the mantle of the censors. This layering is reflected in *Gangs of Wasseyapur* (2012) where again I witness a thematic continuum of the same. From here I move onto reading his author function as it moves beyond his filmic text and furthers his performance of the transgressive auteur in public discourse. The last section examines the figure of the bootlegging auteur and the potential of this figure in forming cult fandom.

The charm of the 'beep'

I begin this inquiry by studying the inception of the auteur's discourse with the censor board that begins with the awaited release of his directorial debut *Paanch*. This, as we will see, has implications on not just his particular body of work but also textures our understanding of the state's relationship with its citizenry, for

Examining Hindi filmmakers' discourses about censorship complicates our understanding of the institution of state censorship and reveals how its concerns move beyond the restriction of expression or the regulation of content and become centrally involved with the production of citizenship, class identity, and subjectivity in a postcolonial setting. (Ganti, 2009:90)

In her ethnographic study of the Hindi film industry, Tejaswini Ganti argues that there is an internal self-censoring amongst the Bombay film fraternity that can be traced back to a developmentalist ideology, which informs state policy and molds subjectivities in postcolonial India. Characterizing such a condition she contends that there is an internalized sense of backwardness or underdevelopment when compared to the west that is evident in the industry's self-representation as well as representations of its audience. Filmmakers view the masses as passive, easily influenced consumers of media, attributing a hypodermic effect to media and thus sanction censorship as a necessity in order to reign in the all-powerful forces of media.

Their engagement with censorship is further complicated in the Bombay film fraternity's strive towards self-censoring. Since the 1930s in an attempt to sanitize their image and distance themselves from the industry's historic links with nefarious elements of society there has been a drive among filmmakers to create an image of legitimacy for the industry which reflects "the Bombay film industry's desire for respectability and acceptance within Indian middle-class and elite social spheres". As a result, there emerged themes, that in keeping with the strive for propriety, the Hindi cinema did not want to talk about. Ganti elaborates how from the mid-1990s the self-representations of the film industry have been marked by a narrative of increasing respectability accruing to the profession. In this narrative, filmmakers assert that the Bombay film industry is becoming respectable because of the middle- to upper-class backgrounds of new entrants;

filmmakers also make distinctions between legitimate, committed filmmakers who make films for the sake of storytelling and entertainment and those who make films for reasons that are morally suspect (2009: 89).

The morality that is being questioned here can be contested itself, however, in this drive to create a sanitized image of itself, Kashyap stands out like a sore thumb. If the developmentalist mode that Ganti argues is evidence of the Indian state's nationalist project and fuels the modernist project in India, Kashyap's provocation of the same points to a moment of the contemporary that is finally detached from its modernist predecessor. Kashyap's cinema reeks of squalid neo-noiresque decay, the implications of which are far reaching in creating contemporary subjects that stand in defiance of their modern censored counterparts. Kashyap describing his motive behind writing:

Mainstream Indian cinema is about happy endings, it's about making people happy. I always wanted my films to be real, based on life situations people don't like talking about. That's where the basic idea for most of my films...comes from. (Rana, 2013)

Kashyap's particular brand of "real" can be best described through a highly stylized reemergence of noir through his body of work. He emerges with a distinctive neo noir aesthetic³ while exercising the auteuristic stylistic privileges that such a sensibility allows for. His own auteur style is doubtlessly evident through his expressionistic rhetoric as well as his themes. The disillusionment or incoherence that is characteristic of noir⁴ is evidenced in his form as well as narratives. Kashyap

³ Mark T. Conrad emphasizes how unlike the classical noir films where the term "noir" was only added in retrospect, neo noir filmmakers chose to consciously work within the noir framework and are aware of the implicit meaning that 'noir' encapsulates (2007).

⁴ In his essay 'Notes on Film Noir' Schrader points out how *Film Noir* cannot be defined as a genre for it is not dictated by conventions of setting and conflict, but consistent in inducing a particular tonality and mood. He discusses the various thematic elements that he attributes to *Film Noir* while drawing out its stylistic elements that invested in simulating reoccurring themes emphasizing loss, nostalgia, insecurity, feelings of alienation, paranoia and pessimism in an environment of crime and violence, resulting in disorienting the spectator (1972).

marks the arrival of a thematic shift in Hindi cinema that positions itself as the grotesque underbelly of its predecessor. Noting this shift in modality in her work on the cinematic rendition of the cityscape of the metropolis of Bombay, Ranjani Mazumdar notes how:

This is a cinema that exists on the periphery of Bombay's cinematic excess where the "blindness" generated by habitual cultures of seeing is rearranged to make the spectator see what has not been seen before. The ordinary and extraordinary worlds of the films forge an aesthetic in sharp contrast to that of melodrama...This is a cinema that embodies the crisis of the human and produces the family as an unstable category, defying the moral universe of melodrama. While melodrama as a form has had a rich history in India, giving shape to several critical narratives, the current crisis clearly needs a different kind of engagement. (2010: 154,180)

The kind of engagement that Kashyap's cinema was to command, that he himself was to enter, has led to the realization of certain novelties in the function of censorship in public discourse. William Mazzarella and Raminder Kaur (2009) undertake an ethnographic reading of censorship in public culture, drawing out the multiple modes of control exercised by "semi-clandestine" censors. They also point to "the drama of legal process, in which the forbidden word must be spoken again and again precisely to establish its un-speakability." (2009: 6) They recognize how this un-speakability is mobilized in marketing to make a product more desirable by marking it as "controversial". I posit that Kashyap capitalizes on the recognition of this attribute of censorship.

Kashyap attempts to release his directorial debut in a climate of compliance and support for censorship. Instead of debates over free speech and creative freedom, the debates over the function of the censors have been formulated around their redundant approach to censorship or their

pedantic readings of the filmic text. Where a certain degree of self-effacing is internalized by other film makers, Kashyap plays on the wanting vacuum left behind in the debates over censorship and takes a position of vehement opposition to censorship. When his contemporaries argue over the ineffective methods of censoring, Kashyap lobbied for free speech from the very beginning. He exploits the industry's lack of foresight in recognizing the force of censorship as a tool of publicity and also exhibits a marked understanding of the lucrative potential that lies in public negotiations with censors.

A large part of Kashyap's image as a filmmaker as it stands today is drawn from his constant public conflict with the CBFC (Central Board of Film Certification), his dialogue through published articles, his blog (anuragkashyap.tumblr.com) and his now defunct Twitter account ([#UglyAnurag](https://twitter.com/UglyAnurag))⁵ as well as the coverage that he receives in the media that is then multiplied through social media in the form of re-tweets, reposts or trending articles. All this material thus forms an intrinsic entry point to understanding how Kashyap's stardom is created. His public performance can be traced back to his first encounter with the CBFC, where newspapers in the country were flooded with headlines detailing the negotiations that ensued over censoring his first film. After three years of negotiations with the censor board, Titu Sharma the producer of *Paanch*, in unwittingly setting him up as the poster boy parading the cause against censorship, proudly claimed:

My writer-director, Anurag Kashyap, was determined not to succumb to any pressure for a censor certificate. No matter how long it took or what effort it entailed, we were determined not to change a single frame. And eventually, with a

⁵ He deleted it after lashing out at the selection committee when *The Lunchbox* (2013) failed to make it as India's official entry to the Oscars. (Firstpost.com, 23 Sep 2013)

more reasonable board, the battle was won. It will release without a single cut.

(Bhattacharya, 2010)

My provocation here is to read the publicity that is generated around the censoring of a film much like one would read the rumors that are consciously generated by the producers of Lotte Hoek's Bangladeshi films. Hoek traces the exhibition and reception of the 'obscene' through the phenomenon of the cut piece by reading Bangladeshi cinema's B circuit. She sheds light on the novel conditions of exhibition and reception of the obscene mainly by following the trajectory of *Mintu the Murderer* (2005), taking it as indicative of a particular breed of films. These films feature suggestive posters which are indicative of the high dose of sexually explicit cut-pieces that help generate larger audiences (Hoek, 2010: 55). She remarks how,

To boost their returns, theatres relied on the association of "obscenity" that movies such as *Mintu the Murderer* evoked. The posters and photosets for the film ensured such associations and guarantee an audience for the film. (2001: 63-64)

The "obscenity" referred to here are pornographic cut-pieces spliced onto rolling film during its projection. While there is an implication to the cut-pieces in the posters and photosets, the media coverage gathered by censorship, specifically *Paanch's* censorship, explicitly details the alleged profanity and gore that had been scrutinized by the censors. Much like the jump cut that cues the possibility of a cut-piece insertion, the failing of which leads to the audience booing the projectionist, the beep too becomes a bitter reminder of the object denied. I argue that the lure of the forbidden content is incepted only after it has been deemed inappropriate by the censors. For if it was not for the beeps, the colloquial "profanities" would presumably cease to generate shock after the first few utterances. The beep is a visceral reminder of the obscene. Much like the cut-piece in Hoek's narrative that is inserted hurriedly in the brief window of opportunity that her exit from the

hall provides, the audience of a censored film too addresses the cut piece created and denied by the beep.

Making the censored text scream

The extra filmic space, the tools of promotion of a film (trailer, press conferences, appearance by the director, producer, stars etc.) as well as exhibition spaces, all add to the cinematic experience. Cinema becomes a dynamic space only when they all come together. It is these elements that distinguish it from videos on satellite, the internet, rented home videos etc. Cinema's effects on its audience have been a field of much introspection since its advent. The CBFC website too takes note of such extra diegetic elements when it claims that:

Film censorship becomes necessary because a film motivates thought and action and assures a high degree of attention and retention as compared to the printed word. The combination of act and speech, sight and sound in semi darkness of the theatre with elimination of all distracting ideas will have a strong impact on the minds of the viewers and can affect emotions... (Background, CBFC website)

When the question of censorship is then looked at with the knowledge that the Censors themselves take note of the sensory aspect of cinema I wonder whether they overlook the affect generated by their own censoring. The decision whether to beep or cut out censored texts lies with the filmmakers. This brings me to question if the very act of allowing for such novelty, in either beeping or muting the obscene, is a conscious decision on the part of the censors to leave the censored text as a proof of their functioning as gatekeepers of morality in the society?

The censors' engagement with the text becomes imperative for our understanding of cinema's affect. In the introduction to his book, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) talks about the "aesthetic specificity" of VHS viewing practices drawn from the most paused moments where tapes had been worn and the noise, the fuzziness of the video, what he calls its "charm" was evidence of its veneration. The glitches in the medium are evidence of its interactions with its audience, smudges of its encounters. In addressing the relationship of films with the State, Lawrence Liang explores the affective and libidinal dimensions of what happens when censors watch an erotic film. According to him, that is where the desires of the law reside (2000: 403). He lays bare the legal skin that encounters the bodily engagement that film demands- that of excitement, horror and shock- "media forms produce a theory of law which opens out the world of law to the world of the sense." (Liang, 2013: 66) Through an aesthetic reading he brings to light the sensuous relationship between the law and media.

My argument here is that much like Hilderbrand's VHS glitches, the censored text, when it is 'beeped', is proof of its sensuous encounter with the law. I go a step further in marking the beep not just proof of its provocation, but as a preemptive measure in having been placed with the intent to be censored. Its charm is drawn from Kashyap's understanding of the mode of functioning of the Censors⁶ as well as the power that censorship unwittingly gathers in its publicity.

In order to decode the 'sensation' that is created through censorship, a distinction needs to be drawn regarding the way that different modes of censorship affect a viewer. Unlike the 'no smoking' warning that distracts the audience from the narrative of the film, the 'beep' only calls attention to itself by accentuating certain words- which though jarring, doesn't draw attention away from the narrative. It instead creates a cinephiliac intrigue similar to "a cinephiliac mourning over lost

⁶ See Ganti 2009.

footage” (Gopalan, 2002: 21). Sensation as a term is being used here to recognize the sensory affect that one experiences while watching a censored film as well as the effect that the public discourse on censorship has on a viewing audience. The role of the audience as we will see becomes inextricable in matters where the reception of the film and more importantly, its camp⁷ status are concerned.

The moment after “the small dark room” in the large dark cinema hall is of intrigue. The law as the guardian of morality claims to know how images work and presume their influence. It judges the appropriateness of images and those that it deems censored are replaced by a legal text. It is the effect of this text that I explore. Instead of reading censorship as a force acting from the outside, taking a page out of Gopalan’s articulation of a certain internalized negotiations I too come from a position where:

Instead of seeing censorship as *post facto* interference from the state, I suggest that film-makers spend considerable energy in incorporating censorship regulations during film-making, in an attempt to pre-empt sweeping cuts that would drastically affect the flow of the narrative. (2002: 20)

But I ask what happens when this very same understanding is turned on its head? In Kashyap’s deployment of the same, Gopalan’s “interruptions” are inverted, where by an attempt to pre-empt censorship, more “explicit” material is woven into the body of the narrative, intentionally to be beeped out knowing the jarring effect this would have. The *coitus interruptus* still exists, but within the diegesis- where the camera no longer withdraws or cuts to shots of ‘waterfalls, flowers, thunder, lightning, and tropical storms.’ Instead, the presence of censorship is hyperbolized in the beep that ensues- creating a hyper awareness of the profane. As Gopalan observes:

⁷ Camp as defined by Susan Sontag is an unmistakably modern sensibility that bases itself on a “love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not.” The term is being used here to indicate a postmodern interpretation of the same which in contemporary times has seen a revival garnering cult followings.

The relationship between the state and the film industry reveals a spectrum of negotiations- from an obedient nationalism to a flagrant flouting of regulations- that fuels the production of images on the screen. (20)

I begin from a position of recognizing Kashyap's engagement with the censor board as playing a part in a conscious attempt to gain popularity as a transgressive auteur, furthering his Camp status. In order to maintain his relevance as a gritty filmmaker, his public dialogue with the censors becomes pertinent in the notion that, where his style is kitschy, his dialogue with the state steps in as part of his performance— his Camp. What becomes censored is all the more relevant. This is most obvious when in *Paanch* the first beep is simultaneous with a police officer telling Pondy, “*ae gali mat de*” (hey don't swear). This very self-reflexive trope of the agents of the state carrying out the function of the censors (herein police officers) returns again in another sequence where the band is performing a song about going up against oppressive regimes and Luke, the front man of the band is curtailed by cops. The song carries over to a sequence where they find themselves singing to a live cheering audience but where again they are denied the fruits of their labor. We also return to the same police officer from the former instance where he reprimands Pondy again, beeping him and then removing him from the scene following onto the next sequence where he is escorted by a uniformed policeman where the sequence is silenced entirely. The beeping of censored words have been deployed very cautiously where the initial beeps are only in sections where they are enforced by state representatives, bringing sharp focus onto the working of the law within the diegesis, reminding us of the state's disciplining.

Kashyap recognizes the potency of the censored object to generate a sensory affect which he then exploits by creating a debate by intentionally weaving in over the top randy content in his text.

Where there can be no denying of the restrictive and often silencing tendencies of censors, he makes the censored text scream.

This becomes more than evident while staring at a copy of the script submitted to the censor board. The evidence of censoring screams as loud on paper as it does on screen. With the number of omissions marked (in the characteristic circling of the word that still allows for one to decipher the omission) it becomes clear that Kashyap consciously integrates material in his text that would raise the hackles of the censor board. When words like *Choot*⁸ and *Raand*⁹ are written in the script, one could argue that they are written with the intent to be censored— an exaggeration in line with his Camp sensibilities. It becomes important here to note how *Choot* and its derivatives appear fifteen times in the *Paanch* (unreleased) screenplay submitted to the CBFC for certification.

His affinity for *Choot* and its many derivatives including and not limited to *Chootia* generously garnish the dialogues of all his films. For example the opening sequence of *Black Friday*(2004), (his second directorial venture and first release) is that of a police interrogation where the man being interrogated is also being assaulted by policemen in uniform and when he finally gives in and volunteers information about planned attacks on the Mantralaya (the administrative headquarters of the state government of Maharashtra), the Stock Exchange and the Shiv Sena Bhawan (the building which houses the central office of the Shiv Sena¹⁰ in Mumbai), the policeman slaps him and refers to him and his fellow conspirators as “*Chutioon*”¹¹. This, including many sequences of graphic police violence as well as colored dialogues, has escaped uncensored. In fact the first beeped *Chootia* only

⁸ Hindi slang for Vagina.

⁹ Hindi slang for prostitute.

¹⁰ The Hindu nationalist political organisation founded by Bal Thackeray that originally emerged from a movement in Mumbai advocating a pro-Marathi ideology demanding preferential treatment for Maharashtrians over migrants to the city. It has since tied up with the larger Hindu nationalist agenda aligning itself with the Bharatiya Janata Party and has been linked to multiple instances of communal violence including the 1992-1993 Bombay riots.

¹¹ *Chootiya* in the plural.

appears in the second half of the film when a character reacts to his hired labor's complaints. Similarly, in *Gulaal* (2009) the only word (presumably the same) that is beeped is when it is directed towards a reference to Gandhi.

Kashyap's play with censorship has become distinctive of his auteurial voice, echoing through each film. As Mazumdar notes:

Anurag Kashyap's early years of struggle when he first arrived in Bombay made him see the world from a very different perspective. The film industry's inability to experiment with new ideas and his battles with the censor board and the courts over his earlier films (*Paanch* [2003] and *Black Friday* [2004]) shaped the psychological landscape of *No Smoking*. (2010: 153)

In *No Smoking*, the censorship of the text takes place at multiple levels and its site shifts from the erotic to the sordid. The only sex scene is indicated through a close up of Ayesha Takia's hand clutching the cover while the audio leads us to believe that she gives in to her husband's hankering, only to be interrupted by a fit of coughing that leads him to want to smoke. Gopalan's *coitus interruptus*¹² comes into play in a classical close-up of her hand, where the camera shies away from more explicit details. Unlike the films that Gopalan's observation stems from, instead of cutting away to scenic landscapes, here the audio plays on, lending the audience an extra moment of being privy to what has otherwise been denied traditionally through such self-censoring, only to pull it away very consciously through a spat of coughing. The body takes center stage, where the auteur through the trope of smoking draws the spectators' attention to the very wanting that such censoring creates.

¹² She uses the term to signify the censoring of the female body in Hindi cinema where the camera shies away from the erotic to cutaways of waterfalls or flowers instead of lingering on the body itself. She sees this as characteristic of Hindi cinema's own self censoring.

Kashyap's play with censorship becomes more intriguing in *Gangs of Wasseypur*. In the sequence where Faizal confesses his sins to Mohsina and she in turn whispers hers in his ears, we are not privy to that information. A hierarchy of knowledge is created where the characters of the pro-filmic world do not trust its audience with its secrets. In a similar refrain the background music blares loud when Direct tells Faizal the plans of his assassination. If one were inclined to read his filmic text through a lens of censorship such deployments can be read as the auteur's mistrust of the institution of the censors as well as the function of cinema itself. In the films there is a sequence depicting self-flagellation which immediately precedes the only sex scene that hints at a woman's pleasure. We can read this as the auteur's intervention as an ironic apology before being self-censorship. This is perhaps why every sex scene in the film happens behind closed doors. Such an auteorial deployment ties in with Ganti's earlier argument regarding filmmaker's self-censoring and find Kashyap parodying the same.

The Transgressive Author's Functions Beyond his Films

Kashyap's discourse on censorship moves beyond his body of films. His use of the word *Choot* becomes even more intriguing in the light of an article, '*All Atwitter*' in the Indian Express, (4th January 2013) where in a climate of uproar against Yo Yo Honey Singh's lyrics, Kashyap takes on the moral policing outrage that has erupted on social media. In his ponderings his understanding of the affect incited by the word *Choot* becomes clear.

Where does the song "C***t" come from? It comes from repression. It's the lament of a boy who has been rejected by a girl and is expressing his feelings musically. It might be a crass song but crass also has the right to exist. (10)

His understanding of the pulse of the audience is clearly articulated when he goes on to explain how,

As a country, repression is one of our biggest problems. You can't tackle repression with suppression...I made *Gangs of Wasseypur* and people were laughing at all the wrong places. Mostly at the *gaalis*. Where did that laughter come from? While watching a horror film, people laugh out of fear but in this case they were laughing out of repression. Saying the unspeakable got them laughing.

In an almost empathic tone with Honey Singh's moral exile, he goes back to his struggle with *Paanch* and draws from his image (while no doubt reviving the reader's memory of the same) as a 'victim' of censorship stating that:

I've gone through this grind for 20 years. I made *Paanch* and people said the same things about me that they are saying about Honey Singh. I've also been banned but I still make the films I want to. I have suffered it.

Thus it becomes clear from the above that Kashyap has an astute understanding of *gaalis* and the functions they play, but what is relevant is the effect that the knowledge these censored *gaalis* have on the audience. He thus stands in stark contrast to Ganti's subjects where she notes how "much of the discourse about censorship presented in this section is centrally concerned with the subjectivities, sensibilities, and conduct of filmmakers rather than audiences" (110). Kashyap's entire formulation seems to have come into play keeping the audience precisely in mind.

In an article issued after reports of scenes having been cut on the demand of the censors, Titu Sharma claimed that– “the new board chief, Vijay Anand, agreed with our view. So, not a single scene has been cut. Only a word has been beeped out.” (Gupta, 2003) This word is presumably one that occurs fifteen times and instead of being cut is beeped. The experience of watching the film that emerges from such negotiations is a distinctive engagement marked by the staccato of the censors’ beep. Owing to its circulation amongst the circuit of digital pirates, the spectators of the film are scattered in time and geographic location, but their space as a collective audience remains. It is in this space where we see the formation of cult belongings in the digital realm. The action of this audience is witnessed in their active role in the circulation of the film.

The Bootlegging Auteur

The notion of paid use and access have been articulated in their polarity by Hilderbrand who draws a sharp distinction between bootlegging and piracy in that the latter intends to reap profits while the former draws from an instinct of access. He explores bootlegging as a “set of practices and textual relationships that open up alternative conceptions of access, aesthetics and affect” (2009: 6, 365). However, what is lost in such a myopic articulation of profit is the phenomenon of the cult.

Various streams on the internet have alluded to the likelihood of the film having been released onto the pirate networks by Kashyap himself. Kashyap claims to have been aware and having given consent to the film’s release online.¹³ Thus here the auteur is the bootlegger and there is a creation of access as well as profit. The intangible profit, though incomprehensible in monetary terms initially, is

¹³ In conversation with Anurag Kashyap, November 2014.

reaped from the creation of an online pirate fan following. This league of enthusiasts consists of loyalists that then create and propel online momentum regarding Kashyap's each and every move.

Such a formation itself stands to debunk Hilderbrand's assumptions of VHS being an inherently more democratic medium when compared to the digital. As he argues, the home video emerged amidst debates on its conspicuous legality and has "always been out of control". In the shift to the digital he draws our attention to technological locks, licenses and copyright laws that render illegal some uses of media that were common in the analog age. He problematizes the notion of access that is attached to digital media and draws attention to the restricted access of new media consumers. Discussing agency, he points to how digital media, in being dependent on multiple layers of encoding, restricts users in purely legal premises. He finds that the notion of fair use copyright exemptions are endangered by what technology now allows for. What falls through the cracks in such an argument is the space of the auteur-bootlegger. The notion of legality (though defunct in pirate circles) is complicated when such a figure appears and legal locks have far from restricted access. In this case in particular, the auteur has commanded complete control over his text (perhaps even more so than a commercial release would have warranted) and what must instead be questioned then, is why when he (if he) chose to release the film, he chose to release the censored copy?

Coming back to the phenomenon of the Cult, one of the effects such a formation has is that any coverage of Kashyap, his ventures or even his own statements, blogs, article or tweets are multiplied and reposted across the internet in various websites, social networking sites, film club blogs, personal blogs and twitter handles, amongst others. This creates an archive of material tracing Kashyap's each and every move, his progression through the years, in an unending stream of hyperlinks allowing even for information posted by him in his now defunct film blog,

passionforcinema to survive in multiple tribute blogs. Besides providing data for studies such as this, these blogs also function as constant reminders of Kashyap's public discourses.

Public announcements about negotiations with the censor board become a form of promotion and creates public interest in the film before it hits the theatres. In the occasion of the failure of the film's release in commercial theatres, it is this awareness that gives the film its momentum in pirate circles. This becomes clear when *Paanch* (2003), which never saw the light of a commercial release, enjoys a devoted cult following of cinephiles the world over.

Carrying the traces of its encounter with the law in the only available version of the film online, it demands a hyper awareness regarding the profane. This brings us back to Kashyap's use of Camp and his motives behind a deliberate presence of censorship. This is in line with the creation of a cult following, explained in the following quote:

The old-style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of Camp, appreciates vulgarity. Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of Camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves. (Sontag, 1966: 181)

This very "stink" plays center stage in Kashyap's cinema. In an interview with Steve Rose, his conscious fracture from the 'development discourse' becomes obvious and his understanding of the same explicit when he argues how "Indian films have this obsession with hygienic clean spaces, even though the country's not so clean". Rose points out how in contrast to the popular wave of Hindi cinema, *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) is a gruesome, unhygienic, multi-generational crime epic – and is leading India's new cinematic wave. In the interview, Kashyap goes on to describe how in an

attempt to show an India not filmed earlier he chose to shoot on busy streets and industrial wasteland. Taking the “stink” quite literally, he describes how in sequences involving the butchery “the smell was so bad. While we were shooting, 60 buffaloes and a camel got slaughtered before our eyes.”

Such details surrounding his process of filmmaking, his motivations, become even more significant granted their Camp implications, for as Sontag points out, “Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.” His stylization is what makes him distinctive. His own subjectivities as an auteur become glaringly evident through this very style. In *Gulaal* he encapsulates the aura of the film in the sequence where Dilip brings Anuja over to his house for the first time. They enter an open doorway framing a neon lit 69 and as they walk in Anuja swaps places with Dillip, now in the left of frame, asserting his dominance in this space. Bottles named Liberty, Constitution, Colonialism and Capitalism are stacked and the camera pans over as it comes to rest on a close up of Dillip’s eyes only to cut to Anuja rolling a joint. The gaze shifts from our perspective to his. The stage is set and all intoxicants are in place— substances and the woman, all consumables much the same. As she lights up prayer bells start ringing. Religion too is brought into the fold as the sequence cuts to a *hawan* setting with a priest chanting accompanied by the chaos of temple bells. Far from a realist filmmaker, Kashyap’s astute understanding of his target audience is reflected in his cinema which is characterized by its pastiche of influences. Despite noting how Kashyap has used the censored beep as an aesthetic device, I do not mean to imply that Kashyap has in any way escaped the insidious repression of censorship. Kashyap’s own cynicism regarding the space for cinema, his trust of the medium is brought to the fore through his work. As a text *Gangs of Wasseypur* can be read as Kashyap’s tribute to Hindi cinema where the film itself provides a

chronology of Hindi cinema. The characters are constructed as tributes to the stars of yesteryears and even their dialogues reference movie dialogues.

Moving beyond the beep, which has quite fruitfully been deployed by the auteur time and again it is essential to keep in mind how his crusade against censorship does not rest there alone. Uniformly opposing all exercises of censorship over his text, Kashyap took issue with the mandatory no smoking warning in his film *Ughy*. He appealed to the Bombay High Court when the CBFC declined to grant him a censor certificate.

Kashyap had moved court after the CBFC refused to grant certification for his film *Ughy* as he refused to adhere to the Act. The filmmaker claimed that the imposition of the rules is in violation of his fundamental rights under Article 19 (right to speech and expression) and Article 21 (right to life) of the Constitution. (Manve, 2014)

It would be callous here to assume the relationship between the state and the auteur to be restricted to a film's affect alone. Its implications cannot be covered within the scope of this paper. However, keeping the concerns of this inquiry in mind, in order to contextualize a broader perception that modes of auteur image function under, Surendra Bhatia's observations of the state-auteur relationship become pertinent:

The trick for the film industry is to challenge the government at every step. If certain service tax provisions are leading to double taxation, challenge them; if certain rules related to exhibition are inimical to good business, don't take them lying down just because the government has issued a GR to make them seem legal; challenge them and let the government know that it can't get away by harassing the industry. (2013, 15)

Kashyap deploys this very same sentiment when he asserts that

I don't want to release *Ugly* with those (anti-smoking) notifications. I have to fight till the end. I have my right to expression. I make my films and in this country, being a democracy I think I am going to pitch my fight till the end to see that what comes out of it because somewhere somebody has to stand up and fight against it. (IANS, 2013)

Conclusion

The above arguments illustrate how Kashyap manages to read into the desires of the censor board as well as an audience functioning under the oppressive regimes of censorship. In exemplifying the potential of cinema to be the ultimate pervert art we witness Kashyap's astute understanding of the sensibilities of the censors and the potential affect of the censored objects. He deploys the censored 'beep', appropriating its sensory effect in *Paanch* while strategically drawing to its function of silencing in *No Smoking*.

Such strategic engagements with his form prove as effective subversions of censorship practices. His more public discourses that have come to light most recently with *Ugly* however, are indicative of a much larger struggle with the institution of censorship inscribing its presence over the profilmic. While he has appropriated the Beep as an artistic deployment of the censor's urge to leave a reminder of their presence on the filmic text, he has used his public struggles with the 'No Smoking' disclaimer as a platform for his heralding for free speech and expression. His subversion of state censorship in the above are indicative of a larger strategic evolution in his form that propagates his

status as a contemporary auteur, the various shades of which then go on to have implications on his Camp, his cult and thus, inevitably his strategies as filmmaker.

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