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Dilip Kumar: An Auteur Actor

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Abstract: Dilip Kumar has been praised for his sublime dialog delivery, for his restrained gestures, and for his measured and controlled underplay of emotions in tragic stories as well as in light-hearted comedies. His debut in 1944 with *Jwar Bhata* (Ebb and Tide) met with less-than-flattering reviews. So did the next three films until his 1948 film, *Jugnu* (Firefly), which brought him recognition and success. Unlike his contemporaries such as Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand, who propelled their careers by launching their own production companies, Dilip Kumar relied on his talent, his unique approach to characterization, and his immersion in the projects he undertook. In the course of his career that spanned six decades, Kumar made only 62 films. However, his work is a textbook for other actors that followed. Not only did he bring respectability to a profession that had been shunned by the upper classes in India as a profession for “pimps and prostitutes,” but he also elevated film-acting and filmmaking to an academic discipline, making him worthy of the title ‘Professor Emeritus of Acting’. Rooted in the theoretical framework of Howard S. Becker’s work on the “production of culture” and “doing things together,” this paper discusses Kumar’s approach to acting, character development, and the level of his involvement and commitment to each of his projects. The author of this article argues that more than the creative control as a producer or a director, it is the artistic involvement and commitment of the main actors that shape great works of art in cinema. Dilip Kumar demonstrated it repeatedly.

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Ever since the invention of moving picture in the late 1890s, movies have been labeled as a global mass medium. Through the iconic figures of the silent screen – such as Mary Pickford as ‘America’s Sweetheart’ or the lovable tramp portrayed by Charlie Chaplin, and during the talking-pictures’ era, from the Jungle Boy and James Bond to the Superman and the Spiderman, movie screens around the world have presented images created by Hollywood. It had been difficult for European countries to compete with the studio system of Hollywood until after WWII when the European governments, in order to protect and rejuvenate their local film industries, imposed restrictions on American movies.¹ It was now harder for the Asian and the African movie-producing countries to gain any distribution or recognition in the US or Europe. Both India and Nigeria produce more movies annually than Hollywood or Hong Kong, yet most European and North American movie audiences would be hard-pressed to name an Indian or African movie director or movie actor. As is commonly the case for the distant and developing countries, their achievements and accomplishments go unnoticed. The same is true of film artists and filmmakers from those countries; they remain unrecognized and unnoticed by the Western audience.

As Ernest Hemingway commented, “Chekhov wrote about 6 good stories.... But he was an amateur writer” (cited in Chung 2010). Despite Hemingway’s labeling, Anton Chekhov redefined the short story and playwriting. Chekhov’s characters were not driven by their circumstances (the plot), but by their innermost desires and fears. It was Chekhov’s plays that became the foundation of method acting. Sim-

¹ These came in the form of screen-time quotas, restriction on the number of films that could be imported, and the profits that could be taken out of the country. See Guback 1969.

ilarly, it was an untrained (amateur) actor in India, Dilip Kumar, who laid the groundwork for a style of film acting that became the reference point for actors in the subcontinent. An acclaimed screenwriter and social critic Javed Akhtar has argued that Dilip Kumar employed “method acting” before Marlon Brando did in the 50s (Ahmad 2019). Indian film director Satyajit Ray credited Dilip Kumar with being the ultimate method actor, who influenced generations of actors in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh – three countries that account for nearly one-fourth of the world population.

This paper is an effort to draw the readers’ attention to the work and contributions of the Indian film actor Dilip Kumar, who holds the Guinness World Record for winning the most (seven) Best Actor Filmfare Awards² and one for Lifetime Achievement in a career spanning more than fifty years. In his career that ran nearly sixty years (from 1944 to 1998), Kumar appeared in sixty-two movies. In itself, the quantity is not impressive, as his contemporaries such as Raj Kapoor or Dev Anand had much greater output.³ However, it was Kumar’s approach to filmmaking as a collaborative art – and his involvement in all aspects of a project – that helped him leave his special stamp both on his films and the Indian cinema as a whole. His scrupulous attention to detail and the desire to immerse himself in his characters have both been his trademarks. This paper is limited to the elaboration on Kumar’s early films, i.e. from 1944 to 1961.

² *Filmfare* is a popular English-language tabloid-sized magazine about the Bollywood cinema. Established in 1952, the magazine is published by the Worldwide Media, a subsidiary of The Times Group. *Filmfare* Awards are the Indian equivalent of the Oscars, i.e. the annual Academy Awards given to individuals in recognition of their work in cinema.

³ During the 1950s and the 1960s, Dev Anand, Raj Kapoor, and Dilip Kumar were the three top leading actors.

From Muhammad Yusuf Khan to Dilip Kumar

Muhammad Yusuf Khan alias Dilip Kumar was born on 11 December, 1922, in Peshawar, British India (now Pakistan). His father, Lala Ghulam Sarwar, was a fruit merchant, while his mother, Ayesha Begum, was a housewife. Khan was the fourth of twelve siblings. During his school years, he became a close friend of Raj Kapoor. Kapoor's father was a stage actor, and the three Kapoor brothers went on to become superstars in the Indian movie industry in Bombay. Khan had no interest in – or inclination for – movies or acting on stage. After a brief career as a canteen operator for an Army Club in Pune (India), Khan moved to Bombay, where he met the owner of the Bombay Talkies Company, Devika Rani (Lent 1990). The Bombay Talkies had established itself with light comedies (Chakravarty 1993:42). Rani was impressed with Khan's command of English and Urdu, and encouraged him to work as a dialog writer. Soon after, she offered him a contract as an actor and suggested he should change his name to Dilip Kumar – a name that was much easier for Indian movie audiences to remember, and short enough to fit on the movie marquees.

Devika Rani introduced Kumar to her company's most successful movie director Amiya Chakravarty, who cast Dilip Kumar in a supporting role in *Jwar Bhata* [*Ebb and Tide*], a 1944 production of the Bombay Talkies. Without any interest or training in acting, Kumar received less than flattering reviews. Baburao Patel, the undiplomatic and corrosive editor of the now-defunct *Filmindia* magazine, called the movie amateurish, unoriginal, and, unexciting. Patel wrote in his review that the story of '*Jwar Bhata*' had been many times on the Indian screen. He saw Kumar's character as anemic, gaunt, and reminding

one of a "long-ill-treated convict who has escaped from jail. His appearance on the screen creates both laughter and disappointment. His acting effort in this picture amounts to nil" (Kahlon 2019). Several years had passed before Patel reviewed his opinion on the actor. The film was not a commercial success, though Amiya Chakravarty and Dilip Kumar would collaborate in the years to come.

In 1945, Devika Rani and the Bombay Talkies cast him in another movie, *Pratima*, opposite a successful leading lady, Swaran Lata. Not unlike *Jwar Bhata*, this movie too did little for the studio or the actors, and went unnoticed. Rani had faith in Dilip Kumar's potential and put him in *Milan* [*Union*] (1946), an adaptation of a short story by Rabindranath Tagore. The movie was acknowledged mainly for its music and cinematography. However, groomed by the movie's director, Nitin Bose, Kumar's acting began to take shape. Kumar recalled in his autobiography:

While working with Nitin Bose during the making of *Milan* (1946), I understood how vital it is for an actor to get so close to the character that the thin line between the actor's own personality and the imagined personality of the character gets blurred. [...]. An artist can never be bigger than the source – literature. (Dilip Kumar Interview 2018)

Kumar and Bose would also partner on two important projects in the years that followed.

Cinema – a partnership of collaborative arts

Cinema is a medium of convergence. It brings together music, literature, architecture, design, theater, and dance. Many musicians perform together to produce a piece of music that can then be used

as the theme or background music for a movie. Visually, what is seen and heard on the screen is the work of the writer, cinematographer, editor, a host of performers, and countless technicians as well as their director. The work of a cinematographer depends on his/her lighting crew, the crane and camera operators, and the laboratory that develops and prints the movie. An actor's performance, in turn, is the outcome of a collaborative effort of the actor, the writer, the director, the sound recordist, and the editor. Similarly, a dance sequence in a movie is not only the work of a dancer or a group of dancers, but a collaboration of the choreographer, the music composer, and the entire crew that films and edits the sequence.⁴ This is how various art forms converge in cinema, making it a hyper-collaborative art. It is, therefore, a misstatement to credit an individual for the creation of a movie or any other work of art, e.g. when auteur theorists claim that a movie is the expression of its director's vision.

Howard S. Becker (1986), who advanced the idea of "doing things together," approached art as a "collective action" and studied it as an occupation, arguing that a work of art is formed through the coordination of many individuals, and without each of the individuals who produce materials necessary to construct art, it becomes difficult if not impossible to create art. Becker emphasized how the division of labor played a role in the creation of works of art, i.e. that it is the work of many individuals which results in the production of the tools and routines of the artist. The list of credits that ends a typical Hollywood feature movie grants explicit recogni-

⁴ For instance, see the dance sequences in Busby Berkeley's MGM films such as *Footlight Parade* (1933) and *Dames* (1934); Robert Wise's *West Side Story* (1961); Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies such as *Top Hat* (1935), *Swing Time* (1936); John Bordham's *Saturday Night Fever* (1977); and, most recently, *La Land* (2016), directed by Damien Chazelle.

tion to such a finely divided set of activities (Becker 1986:21). Through the cooperation of a large number of persons, any work of art one can eventually see or hear comes into being and remains in existence (Becker 1982). Using a 1978 American movie, *Hurricane*, as an illustration, Becker elaborated:

The film employed a director of photography, but Sven Nykvist did not actually operate the camera; Edward Lachman did that. Lachman, however, did not do all the jobs associated with operating the camera; Dan Myhram loaded it and, when the focus had to be shifted in the course of filming a scene, Lars Karlsson "pulled" the focus. If something went wrong with a camera, camera mechanic Gerhard Hentschel fixed it. The work of clothing and making up the actors, preparing and taking care of the script, preparing scenery and props, seeing to the continuity of the dialogue and the visual appearance of the film, even the management of financial matters during filming—all these jobs were similarly divided among a number of people whose names appeared on the screen. (1982:7-9)

Becker also pointed to the importance of shared meaning ascribed to the value of a work of art. In addition to doing things together, the sociologist believed that all participants in the creation of a work of art had to share a common understanding of the worth and value of that work.

Howard S. Becker's "sociology of work" and the Indian cinema

Becker shifted the spotlight away from individuals and to social structures and relations, which allows for the social forces at play in producing works of art (Cole 2019). Becker held that works of art "are not the products of individual makers, artists who possess a rare and special gift" (1982:35). Instead, as

the author argued, “All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people” (1982:1).

Dilip Kumar did understand the insightfulness of Becker’s notions of the “production of culture” and “doing things together.” When Kumar’s fourth movie, *Jugnu* [*The Firefly*] (1947) became a commercial success, he realized that he needed to be more than merely an actor for hire. From that point forward, he accepted only one movie at a time and only if he could be a part of the entire creative process, i.e. from scripting and casting to editing (Rangan 2014).

I had made up my mind in the early years of my career itself that I would not accept a film for the remuneration offered. The script and the director had to meet my expectations.... I remained selective in my choice of scripts and directors.” (*The News* 2013)

In the introduction to Dilip Kumar’s autobiography, his coauthor, Udayatara Nayar, describes how Dilip Kumar went beyond being merely an actor, highlighting his management skills in particular. She writes:

As the young actor progressed from *Jwar Bhata* (1944), his first film, to *Jugnu* (1947), his first hit at the box office, he began to grasp the essential secret of making a successful film. By his own study and observation of the process of film making and marketing of the end product, he arrived at the conclusion that an actor’s responsibility did not end with his work as an actor. The actor had as much of a stake in the quality and finesse of a film, which ensured its commercial success. It meant an efficient and dedicated management of the infrastructure and resources of the production as

well as creative management, which started with the writing of the script and the screenplay. (Kumar 2014)

The writer, producer, and music composer Naushad Ali, who produced two of Kumar’s movies— *Babul* [Paternal Home] (1950) and *Uran Khatola* [*Flying Cart*] (1955) – said the following in a video interview directed by Aman Chadha:

From very early in his career, the special thing about him was that whatever role he was doing, he would study it and become absorbed in it. He studied his part meticulously and didn’t accept a second film while he worked on the first. He used to memorize his lines the night before, he would rehearse his lines and action in front of a mirror. He was dedicated to his art. He deserves to be called a true artist. He could communicate with his eyes only, or with his facial expressions. In *Kohinoor* [*Mountain of Light*] (1960), he was supposed to play the sitar. He practiced the movement of his fingers on the instrument for two months until his fingers bled. On the day he did the scene, I met him for lunch. His fingers were bandaged. I ask him what happened to his hands. He told me that he just got done doing the close up of his fingers running over the sitar strings. We had offered to use the hands of the actual sitar player, but Dilip would have none of it. He didn’t want a double. He wanted his hands to move on the strings like those of a Sitar player. (*Bollywood Aaj Aur Kal* 2020)

As his filmography in Appendix I reveals, Kumar repeatedly paired with the same directors, writers, players, and music composers. Music plays a pivotal role in the success of Indian movies (author). During his formative years, four of Kumar’s movies were scored by Anil Biswas. Three were composed by S.D. Burman, three by R.D. Burman, and four by C. Ramchandra. In his later career, three

of the films were scored by the Shankar-Jaikishan team, three by the Kalyanji-Anandji team, five by the Laxmikant-Pyarelal team, and fifteen by Naushad Ali. A similar trend is also apparent in Kumar's collaboration with writers and directors. In a 2010 interview, Kumar said that his favorite directors were:

Amiya Chakrabarty, Nitin Bose, Bimal Roy, Zia Sakhadi, Mehboob Khan, K. Asif, and, last but not the least, Tapan Sinha. They all understood my full depth as an actor and extracted the best out of me. (Gupta 2010)

On his own, Kumar made a study of the production process of American movie studios and learned about the division of labor, streamlining the process, and managing all aspects of a movie as a "product." Kumar applied the same practice and principles of management to filmmaking in India at a time when the terms "sociology of work" and "management" had not yet entered the Indian consciousness. Reflecting on his involvement in movies beyond being an actor, Kumar said: "Nobody taught me this, but I came to the conclusion that I should consider a film in its entirety as a product" (Kumar 2014). His advice to filmmakers is no less Aristotelian: "The attempt should always be to make a film with good stories, sound conflicts, characters that make it entertaining."

The making of Dilip Kumar – 'the Tragedy King'

While working as a writer for the Bombay Talkies, Kumar visited the sets of films that were in production in the studio. He watched an older actor, Ashok Kumar, act for the camera in a natural and relaxed manner. Ashok Kumar told the young fellow actor

that acting in front of the camera was "not acting but feeling" (Nazir 2019).

Kumar has called himself an "accidental" actor. The source for this inspiration may have been Ashok Kumar, who had a lasting influence on the young and upcoming star. The 'Tragedy King', as Kumar came to be known, had been unconsciously developing method acting before the term itself was even coined or applied to movie work by Stela Adler and Elia Kazan. Kumar explains his approach to acting in the following way:

I do not approach the character as a different person. If you are directing the drama, there may be 20 characters in your drama. As the director, you are dealing with all 20 of them. But as an actor, I only have one character to play. If you choose me for a character who is 30 years old, as a director, you can only give me data beyond 30 years. It is my job to prepare the character's data until the age of 29, within the framework of your story. It helps me understand the foundations of the character.... My "method" is simple. For instance, if the director comes up to me for a scene and says 'This is your mother. And she is dead'. But I know this is not my mother. This is the actress, Lalita Pawar, and she is just acting. And every faculty of yours is against the idea that this woman who is lying down is your mother and she is dead.⁵ In a situation like that, regardless of whether you think she is your mother, your imagination needs to function, asking, 'What if⁶ she was my mother? What then?' And that is when the brain starts to bring in memories of your own mother, and sometimes directly, sometimes in-

⁵ This was an actual scene that Kumar played in *Daag by Stain* (1952).

⁶ This is the magic *if* that has guided the *Method Acting* as taught by Stela Adler and Elia Kazan.

directly, puts you in touch with your emotions. (Kumar 2014)

Such a judicious and intelligent ability to dissect and comprehend characters comes from his lifelong love of studying literature and poetry. In his autobiography titled *The Substance and the Shadow*, his wife, actress Saira Banu, revealed that Kumar “spent hours reading the literary giants of the West and East – Writers as varied as Shakespeare, Chekhov, O’Neill, Dostoevsky, Conrad, Tennessee Williams, Premchand, and Ghalib”. As to his preference for types of roles, Kumar says:

I like all forms of acting. I like doing comedy. I like doing tragedy. I like doing these different characters because it is a drill. It builds character, shapes your work, skill. Otherwise, you become a one-dimensional personality. From the perspective of individuality, or acting, it helps you become a better person.... With every film, I discovered my own potential as an actor. Every film added to my understanding of the medium. (cited in Nazir 2019)

It was *Babul* [*Paternal Home*] (1950) – a movie directed by S.U. Sunny – that sowed the seed for establishing Dilip Kumar as the ill-fated lover and a tragic hero. In *Babul*, he is caught between the affections of two women. On the surface, the movie seems like a simple love story of a village postmaster Ashok (Dilip Kumar), who wins the hearts of two women, played by Nargis and Munawar Sultana. The subtext of the movie, however, is an exploration of deeper issues. Sultana represents modernity, while Nargis stands for tradition. Neither is painted negatively. The two women also embody class differences – Sultana is a rich landowner’s daughter, while Nargis belongs to a poor family. Kumar loves Sultana, but feels an obligation to help Nargis’ father. He sacrifices his

feelings and love for Sultana, and agrees to marry the poor girl connected to the rural life; the girl symbolizes a young India that was being led by the socialist leader Jawahar Lal Nehru, struggling to establish the new nation’s place in the post-WWII world order.⁷

Babul is also the movie that finally convinced Kumar’s harshest critic, Baburao Patel, of Kumar’s acting abilities. In his review of *Babul*, Patel wrote, “It is a great work and the ease with which Dilip Kumar portrays the role makes one wonder whether the man himself has lived through similar moments of pathos and frustration in his private life!” (Farookh 2020).

Dilip Kumar and S.U. Sunny worked together on four projects: *Mela* [*County Fair*] (1948), *Babul* [*Paternal Home*] (1950), *Uran Khatola* [*Flying Cart*] (1955), and *Kohinoor* [*Mountain of Light*] (1960). Their last collaboration won Kumar the Filmfare Award for Best Actor.

Kumar’s third movie with the Bombay Talkies, *Milan* [*Union*] (1945), was directed by Nitin Bose, a writer and a cinematographer who had matured into directing. It was Bose who encouraged Kumar to underact and refrain from the theatrical acting. Kumar and Bose made two more movies together – *Deedar* [*Glance*] (1951), a noted tragedy that cemented Dilip Kumar as the ‘King of Tragedy’ (Rishi 2012), and *Ganga Jamna* (1961),⁸ for which Kumar was

⁷ While Nehru was Kumar’s hero, Kumar, in turn, was Nehru’s hero. A world-famous economist, Meghnad Desai, terms Kumar as the star of the Nehruvian era of social activism who would suffer, sacrifice, lose his girl, and die in film after film [*Andaz* (1949), *Deedar* (1951), *Devdas* (1955)], and thus earned the title of the ‘Tragedy King’ (Desai 2005).

⁸ In Hindi, *Ganga* is the great river Ganges and *Jamna* is the second major river in India. The movie was one of the biggest hits of the 1960s and one of the most successful films domestically and overseas. It also remains the most celebrated film directed by Nitin Bose.

nominated for the Filmfare Award. Acknowledging Bose's influence, Kumar said, "He changed the way I interpreted and studied my scripts and roles" (The News 2013). *Deedar* [*Glance*] (1951) is an important movie for three reasons.

First, it paired Dilip Kumar with his mentor, Ashok Kumar – the first "film star" of the Hindi cinema and the leading man at the Bombay Talkies, who had advised Kumar: "Acting is all about not acting. I know it's a confounding statement and will perplex and haunt you. But you will understand when you face the camera yourself" (Nazir 2019). It is generally agreed that in *Deedar*, Dilip Kumar – as a sightless and poor street-musician – outperforms Ashok Kumar.⁹ Ashok Kumar plays the doctor who restores Dilip Kumar's sight. Dilip Kumar opens his eyes to see his long-lost love. Nargis is engaged to be married to Ashok Kumar.

Secondly, as a poor man, Dilip Kumar loses his girl to the rich doctor, which further enhances his image as a tragic hero. If that was not sufficient, Dilip Kumar chose not to "see" in the world in which his beloved belongs to another man, and burns his eyes in order to return to his world of darkness.

Thirdly, and most importantly, his portrayal as a blind man became a model for other actors (both male and female) that were called upon to play a blind person.¹⁰

As mentioned before, Kumar's first movie, *Jwar Bhata* (1944), directed by Amiya Chakravarty, had

⁹ The film's credits list Ashok Kumar (the bigger star at the time) and the leading lady, Nargis, above Dilip Kumar's name.

¹⁰ Dilip Kumar played the blind man with his eyes open. Prior to this film actors would traditionally close their eyes in order to be able to play a blind person.

flopped. In 1952, the duo collaborated on yet another movie, *Daag* [*The Stain*], which deals with a social problem, namely alcoholism. It tells the story of a man who battles not only alcoholism but also poverty – as well as the caste system – in order to improve his status in the society and win the love of the woman he loves. Kumar's performance as a simple and somewhat naïve artist who makes clay dolls and toys, and drinks irresponsibly, serves as a textbook performance for all Indian actors who are called upon to play someone intoxicated for the first time, or someone struggling with alcohol dependency.¹¹ Under Chakravarty's careful molding, Kumar's performance won him the Filmfare Award for Best Actor. It was the very first year the awards had been held. In the years to come, Kumar would go on to win the title seven times. The movie, i.e. *Daag*, was also a commercial success – the 4th biggest box-office hit of the year, thus making up for the losses incurred by *Jwar Bhata*.

However, the movie that defined Dilip Kumar as 'the tragedy king' was *Devdas* (1955), based on a famous Bengali novel of the same title by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. The story had already been adapted for stage, movie, radio, and television in the sub-continent more than thirty times. According to the *Wikipedia*, it is the most filmed story in India. The 1955 version was directed by Bimal Roy, who had served as an apprentice for Nitin Bose on the 1935 version of *Devdas*.

In this movie, Kumar's affection falls victim to the caste and class system. The titular Devdas belongs to an upper-class Brahmin family. He is in love

¹¹ A landmark film about alcoholism is *The Lost Weekend* (1945) by Billy Wilder, a film about an alcoholic writer. It went on to win four Academy Awards – Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

with Parvati, a girl from a lower caste. His family disapproves of the marriage and Devdas, following the cultural traditions, is unable to stand up to his family. He leaves his village and goes to Calcutta. Meanwhile, in the village, Parvati is married off to an older man. In the city, Devdas takes to drinking and finds refuge in the arms of a courtesan, Chandramukhi, a dancer and entertainer¹² who falls in love with him. She is “the fallen woman with a heart of gold.” He uses and abuses her, but due to the social traditions, he cannot accept Chandramukhi as his companion/wife. He drinks with a suicidal ambition. Chandramukhi is unable to make him stop. Realizing that he is nearing his end, Devdas returns to Paro’s village only to die at her doorsteps. He does not get to see her, or she him.

The novel was and remains a strong criticism of the caste system and the arranged marriages in India. With Dilip Kumar’s performance, the story of Devdas has become the *Romeo and Juliet* of the Indian culture. When Bimal Roy approached Kumar with the project, the actor was unsure, as the 1935 version had been a big hit and had elevated cinema from mere entertainment to a medium of social concern and literature. Roy urged Kumar to read the novel that was published in 1917.¹³ Kumar recalls in his memoirs:

I read the novel quite a number of times. Familiarized and refamiliarized myself with the novel, it also helped me to read his other novels too. The characters, the culture, the ethos that was depicted in the novel *Devdas* grows on you, and you could develop a relationship

¹² Traditionally, in the Indian cinema, this has been a thinly veiled euphemism for prostitution.

¹³ Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (1876–1938) wrote *Devdas* in 1901, i.e. when he was 25 years old. However, he was unable to find a publisher until 1917.

with that way of life. So, gradually I got familiarized myself and identified with Devdas. (Kumar 2014)

Bimal Roy (1909–1966), who was inspired by Italian neo-realism and Vittorio De Sica, was a master at casting and extracting the best out of every actor. In a career that was cut short by cancer, Roy won eleven Filmfare Awards: four for the best films and seven as the best director – a record that remains unbroken to this date. Kumar acknowledged that he learned a great deal about acting and restraint in displaying emotion from Bimal Roy. Kumar wrote: “I think Bimal Roy was one of the most significant motion-picture makers, not only of the ‘50s but in the history of Indian cinema” (Kumar 2016).

Kumar rendered a memorable performance as an indecisive Devdas who destroys his own life as well as that of those who loved him. Yet, there is no hint of self-pity or despondence in the doomed Devdas. For his work on the movie, Kumar was awarded the Filmfare Award for Best Actor. A nearly seven-minutes-long scene where Kumar (as Devdas) offers justification for his alcohol abuse¹⁴ is as much a part of Indian culture as Clark Gable’s final line in *Gone With The Wind* (1939) – “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn” – and Humphrey Bogart’s “Here’s looking at you kid” in *Casablanca* (1943) are for the Western audiences.

Dilip Kumar’s iconic portrayal of Devdas as a tragic hero with yet another failed love has become a cultural staple of the Indian folklore. Ever since Kumar’s Devdas, any lover suffering from or agonizing over his lost love has been labeled as suffering from the “Devdas Syndrome.”

¹⁴ The monolog goes like this: What does a foolish person drink to tolerate life? I drink to breathe... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlnoKzGiDc>.

Kumar and Roy worked on two other movies, namely *Yahudi [Jew]* (1958) and *Madhumati* (1958). The former one dealt with the persecution of Jews by the Romans, while the latter one, containing a touch of noir, dealt with the theme of reincarnation. *Madhumati* was Roy's most successful film. It won nine Filmfare Awards, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Music Director, Best Female Playback Singer, Best Dialogue, Best Art Direction, and Best Cinematographer, which equals the biggest number of awards for a movie at that time. It also won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi.

The scene that etched Kumar's name in the collective memory of the Indian movie audiences is the one from the 1968 movie *Aadmi [Man]*, where his performance dwarfs all other actors. Here, Kumar plays a cripple who is confined to a wheelchair. He describes a shockingly tragic instance from his youth to his wife about the death of a young girl, Meena, his subsequent affection for a doll that substituted Meena, and his rage that made him kill his childhood friend who tried to steal the doll. The purpose of the scene was to foreshadow what was to follow in the movie; however, the scene has become the most talked-about scene of the movie.¹⁵

Though it should be acknowledged that it was the director's imagination that created the scene, there is no denying that it was Kumar's mesmerizing dialog delivery that lifts the scene into a hauntingly charged experience that remains preserved in the viewers' memory. However, the scene contained a dozen other significant elements, e.g. the words by

¹⁵ There are numerous parallels in the American films where a film is remembered for a particular scene, e.g. the "shower scene" in *Psycho* (1960), a crop duster chasing the protagonist (Cary Grant) in *North by Northwest* (1959), and James Cagney pushing a grapefruit into Mae Clarke's face in *The Public Enemy* (1931).

the dialog writer, the background music that highlighted the lines, the choice of camera angles, and the editing of pictures and sound. All the elements – combined with the range of Kumar's facial expressions and tonal inflections of sarcasm, pain, guilt, and rage – rendered a hauntingly captivating scene (Mahaan 2010).

During the pre-production stage of *Ganga Jamna* (1961), the only movie that Kumar produced, he called upon Nitin Bose to direct. It is the story of two impoverished brothers. One is a police officer, the other a highwayman. Kumar's real-life brother, Nasir Khan, played the younger brother, Jumna, and Kumar played the elder brother, Ganga, the bandit. For this movie, Dilip Kumar abandoned his native language, Urdu, and learned the Awadhi language. An avid admirer and a highly accomplished actor, Amitabh Bachchan, who is an Awadhi speaker from Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, said he was amazed to hear Dilip Kumar's pronunciation and delivery of every nuance of the Awadhi dialect. In order to prepare for Ganga's death scene, Kumar ran around the studio's premises to the point of collapse. Many years later, Dustin Hoffman would do something similar for *Marathon Man* (1976).

It is not without reason that Dilip Kumar is considered to be an institution in himself, a "school of acting" that so many actors have drawn their inspiration from (Ahmad 2019). Dharmendra – a highly successful actor during the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s – inspired by Kumar's performances, reflected poetically: "Dilip Kumar is the brightest star whose shine I stole to light my desires" (Ayaz 2018).

Ganga Jamna earned Kumar his eighth Filmfare Awards nomination for Best Actor. He would go on to earn eleven more nominations with three more

wins before retiring from acting in 1998. Among all his movie, *Ganga Jamna* is his favorite. He calls it “essentially my baby.” The movie became a trendsetter in the Indian cinema. Dilip Kumar’s performance as Ganga inspired many other Indian actors, one of them being Amitabh Bachchan. The movie’s theme also generated many replications. The screenwriting duo Salim–Javed wrote several movie scripts, exploring “the two-brothers plot” in hits such as *Deewar* [*Wall*] (1975), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), and *Trishul* [*Trident*] (1978). There were rumors that the movie was directed by Dilip Kumar.¹⁶ It remains Nitin Bose’s most celebrated movie.

Shah Rukh Khan, who is considered to be the biggest star in Bollywood at the time of writing this article (2020), received the following piece of advice from Kumar during the 2001 Zee Cine Award ceremony.¹⁷

No actor can be bigger than the substance which he portrays, For any good or an enduring performance, Shah Rukh. You have to have a good story, good character equations, sound conflict, and enough opportunity for you to then wade through it. Because then you have substance to deal with, not just shadows. (Ayaz 2018)

Dilip Kumar approaches his autobiography the same way, i.e. from the outside in, and with similar meticulousness. He builds his story brick by brick, the way he had built his characters, carefully choosing what he wants to show people and carefully concealing the rest (Rangan 2014).

¹⁶ Kumar has systematically refuted that rumor. He has said, “The director, Nitin Bose, was 64 years of age when we were making the film and it was physically difficult for Bose to supervise the demanding shots involving horses, horse carts, and trains. For such scenes, I guided the film crew as I have done in many other projects in the past.”

¹⁷ See Cine Awards 2001, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb7YGoITpkw>.

Throughout his career, Kumar is noted for his consummate skill in taking any role and bringing it to life. He has always gotten a wide variety of roles, diverse plot structures, and complex climaxes that gave vent to his acting talents. Dilip Kumar admits that he does not know how he came to be known as a method actor. “The epithet was used for me much before it was used for Brando,” as he says, adding that:

The truth is that I am an actor who evolved a method, which stood me in good stead. I learned the importance of studying the script and characters deeply and building upon my gut observations and sensations about my own and other characters. It was always meaningful for me to study even those characters who would be close to me or opposed to me. (Kumar 2014)

Conclusion

The actor and producer Dharmendra said about Kumar’s dealing with his crew members and technicians on his sets: “He greets everyone with the same humility, warmth, and smile that he offers his costars and directors.” The humility and greatness of Dilip Kumar are best demonstrated by two of his own statements:

When I look at the body of my work and the kind of roles I have played, I see my limitations. When I see the breadth and range of some of the other actors, I realize that I’m not what the media have painted me to be. I see my limitations. (Kumar 2014)

You consider me the last word in acting? In a nation that has seen great actors like Ashok Kumar, Motilal, Balraj Sahni, Uttam Kumar, and Sivaji Ganeshan, I am certainly not the greatest actor. I consider myself just a competent. (cited in Gupta 2010)

Generally, it is the directors who are credited for the entire work. However, everyone involved in the making of *Deedar* (1951), *Aan [Pride]* (1952), *Devdas* (1955), *Ganga Jamna* (1961), and many of Kumar's other movies knew the actor's involvement in writing, staging, music, and the selection of other key players. In this regard, Kumar was already practicing in the 1940s and the 1950s what Howard S. Becker would come to preach almost three decades later. Like a sociologist using phenomenology to observe and predict human behavior, Kumar did observing, and using instinct and common sense, he developed his approach to filmmaking, which strikingly resembles Becker's theories of the production of works of art and "doing things together" to achieve the common goal. Nor would it be an exaggeration to say that Kumar has been as much the *auteur* of many of his movies as were his directors.

Martin Scorsese claims that the American cinema can be divided into two periods: before Brando and after Brando. Similarly, the Indian cinema can be divided into "before Dilip Kumar and after Dilip Kumar." Indians often claim that "their gift to humanity is cultural synthesis." In making this claim, the Indians refer to the pre-British time, i.e. the time of Muslim rule – especially the Mughal era of Akbar and Jehangir (Naipaul 1977:112). A true renaissance man – i.e. a man of culture, literature, poetry, and ultimate sophistication – Dilip Kumar is India's gift to humanity, the last of the moguls with old-school values as well as a man with a vision for the future.

To paraphrase Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire, Dilip Kumar found Indian acting a brick and left it marble.

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Dilip Kumar: autor-aktor

Abstrakt: Dilip Kumar był chwalony za wysublimowane prowadzenie dialogów, opanowaną gestykulację oraz za wyważone i kontrolowane wyrażanie emocji zarówno w opowieściach tragicznych, jak też w beztróskich komediach. Jego debiut w 1944 w *Jwar Bhata (Odplawy i przyplawy)* spotkał się z niezbyt pochlebnymi recenzjami. Podobnie było z kolejnymi trzema filmami, aż do filmu *Jugnu (Świetlik)* z 1948 roku, który przyniósł mu uznanie i sukces. W przeciwieństwie do swoich rówieśników, jak Raj Kapoor i Dev Anand, którzy napędzali kariery, uruchamiając własne firmy produkcyjne, Dilip Kumar polegał na swoim talencie, unikalnym podejściu do charakteryzacji i zaangażowaniu w projekty, których się podjął. W ciągu swojej sześćdziesięcioletniej kariery Kumar nakręcił tylko 62 filmy. Jednak jego praca jest podręcznikowa dla młodszych aktorów. Nie tylko przyniósł szacunek zawodowi aktora, traktowanemu przez indyjskie klasy wyższe jako zawód „alfonsów i prostytutek”, ale także podniósł aktorstwo filmowe i filmowanie do dyscypliny akademickiej, co uczyniło Kumara godnym tytułu emerytowanego profesora aktorstwa. Artykuł ten, zakorzeniony w ramach teoretycznych pracy Howarda S. Beckera nad „produkcją kultury” i „robieniem rzeczy razem”, omawia podejście Kumara do aktorstwa i rozwoju postaci oraz poziom jego zaangażowania w każdy ze swoich projektów. Autor tego artykułu przekonuje, że to artystyczne zaangażowanie i poświęcenie głównych aktorów kształtują wielkie dzieła sztuki w kinie bardziej niż kontrola twórcza producenta czy reżysera. Dilip Kumar wielokrotnie to zademonstrował.

Słowa kluczowe: Howard Becker; Dilip Kumar; film studies; sztuka i kultura; socjologia pracy; film i kultura