

# Bengal Bicycle Diary

Exotic countries are the easy victims of a touristic contextualisation. Their cultures, people and places break the stereotypes of our own lives even while they reinforce them. The easiest way to describe the otherness of a different culture is to identify it with our own, reconfirming the matrix of our own values, and containing the difference as a 'local speciality'. The archetypal tourist has never left home even as he or she travels.

Angus Reid is aware of these pitfalls. His deliberate strategy is to disassemble the images drawn from a bicycle trip through India. This fragmented jigsaw is interlaced with notes from a private diary, written during the trip. There is a palpable tension between the images themselves and the attempt to structure the film - in montage, in the presentation of successive chapters - and this foregrounds the mechanisms of sight, of interpretation and the possibility of a view that is free from prejudice.

Sight itself is emphasised in various ways: in the view of people directly into the lens and the motif of the all-destroying '3<sup>rd</sup> eye' of Shiva. The visual sense is deliberately disconnected from 'thinking' in order to preserve the innocence of the first impression, to excavate what space may exist between 'seeing' and 'interpretation'.

This spontaneous reflex is both the method and theme of the film and creates its very shape. It is emphasised by the experience of illness that the cyclist is going through, and that the filmmaker announces in the opening title. The fever renders familiar things new and disables any complex interpretation, and it is presented as an ideal catalyst of the immediate, permitting a mode of representation that does not prey on the identity of the filmed subject.

The bicycle assumes a similar function. Unlike the temporary home and hiding place offered by planes, cars or buses it does not conceal the rider. Rather it breaks down the distance, throwing the body/camera into a space full of accidental encounters and dynamic images. Movement becomes a cherished disordering that breaks down the hierarchy of places, people and objects, clearing away filters of interpretation and simply encountering the subject. When the bicycle stops the image becomes static and the frame immediately threatens to stereotype the image into touristic cliché.

**Bengal Bicycle Diary** opens up a new India for the viewer by evading a precise definition of what that appearance may mean. It opens up the subject through a slit of subjective experience that does not aspire to generalisation. Its uniqueness lies in the staying power of these fleeting impressions.

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