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Looking at History a Little Differently

Madhusree Dutta on making her return to filmmaking after twenty years, narrative possibilities and filming between multiple countries

*Barbara Wurm: We are happy to be presenting **FLYING TIGERS** here in the Forum. It's a huge production, so deeply and evidently long-researched, yet also expansive in its appearance. I would like to begin by asking how long you were working on this film.*

Madhusree Dutta: Barbara, you have been involved in this for so long, and you know that we actually make one narrative, right? I mean, all our works are, in fact, various renditions of one narrative. So if you ask about research, specific research, such as what **FLYING TIGERS** is, or what the war history is – anybody can do that online. But if you ask, what is the narrative research, then I think it is a lifelong research. In a way, it is autobiographical, including my life and works in Germany. I placed myself in the film, because I thought it was a very particular time and space in which I was situated, and from which this story is told. This film comes twenty years after my last one. I had more or less come to terms with the fact that I was a former filmmaker, and I was quite comfortable with that. But my friend Merle Kröger, a novelist and dramaturge, said to me at a

particular point, 'Madhu, I think it's time to make a film.' I started thinking about it in 2022. So three years, to be precise.

Yun-hua Chen: A lot has happened in the world during these twenty years and I was wondering how those years were for you in terms of your understanding of documentary, feminism, archiving, and memory.

MD: First of all, I was petrified – not about narrative style, not about whether I could think through a film or not. Filmmaking is primarily a practice. It is also about software and technology. Technology can influence, even alter, the narrative strategy. Technology had changed so much in these two decades. Would I be able to cope with it? Would I be able to speak to my technicians? Did I even know the terms? It sounds ridiculous when I say it now in an interview, but I think it is a common anxiety among older artists: Am I still with the times or have I fallen by the wayside as technology has advanced? That was the major issue. Narrative was not very worrisome, because, as this film shows, and many films around it show – not only films but also artworks, novels, literary works, and music – the privilege of a single-discipline narrative is over, which is actually great fun. Narrative-making has become more challenging and more exciting. Actually, there are some very disturbing trends too. You are asked to provide a three-minute bite, quick information, keyword-based narratives. These are problematic areas. But at the same time, you cannot make a documentary or write a novel in the same way anymore. It requires more formal challenges. That is where I hoped the world would arrive when I was regularly making films. After twenty years, when I returned to filmmaking, I realised that it had reached that point. That was very reassuring. It is much easier to work in an experimental form now than it was twenty years ago. In a general sense the world has become more form-conscious.

YC: This hybrid form – how was the process of making it? How did you script it and how much was improvisation or re-enactment?

MD: In a way, it is one hundred percent scripted. But the characters are real, so I cannot give them dialogue. Based on my understanding of their personalities, I decided where and how they would appear at a particular point in the film. Then they filled that space in their own terms. I collaborated with my protagonists. I shaped the framework, then discussed the film with them, and we decided together.

BW: The film was produced in many places, in many countries. How do you generally proceed when working on location? How much influence do line producers or people around you have on the film?

MD: It is a little different in each place. Germany and India I know well, so there I do the first layer of production. But for China, the full credit goes to Xiaodong Guo, the line producer. There were visa issues between India and China, so I could only be there for one month, from research to finding characters to shooting – all in one month. I had to come back with twenty minutes of the film – how do you do that? Yet, the China episode turned out to be one of the best sequences. The credit goes to the local unit in China.

BW: Absolutely. From a German perspective, Pong Production, who you worked with, is a very distinctive production company. How much influence or dialogue was there with them during the making of the film?

MD: From the very beginning, we made this film together. This collaboration exists because we have been in dialogue for twenty-five years. We have done many other works together – trans-national curating, editing books, archiving etc. In fact, Philip Scheffner and I made a joint film in 2005. That was even before Philip made his seminal film *THE HALF MOON FILES* (2007). At the time, Philip was also a young filmmaker or a beginner, you could say. So, we have been friends/collaborators for long. In fact, I knew Pong before it even formally started. So if I were ever to make a film produced in Europe, it would be a natural choice to go with Pong.

My task is to make people look at history a little differently, but not too differently.

YC: In the film, you talked about the surplus trade market as a by-product of the Flying Tigers that actually corroded the Nationalist government in China and resulted in their rapid defeat. I find all the butterfly effects in the film so interesting – it almost feels like a detective story. Did you feel like a detective while making the film?

MD: ‘A bit of a detective’ is the right phrase. In someone else’s hands, it might well have been a thriller. It has that quality. But it is a genre I have never worked on, so I did not try to fully inhabit it. Still, someone said to me, ‘So you are playing a game with your audience: You give them riddles and say, Look, how many can you solve?’ Because nothing is said outright. That is why, if you notice, I insist on dates, almost incessantly. Dates are the clues. Sometimes they appear as information cards; sometimes characters mention them. People often forget dates, they can even be hindrance to the flow of the narrative. But I repeat them again and again with the hope that someone will start getting the clues. For instance, 2011 – an apparently insignificant year but that is the time when the New Silk Road opens. Suddenly, all animosity between China and Europe is over because goods must travel. It is a highly political film. It deals with three major nation-states, actually more about states than nations. These are enormous countries. If someone becomes interested in even one decade of any of these countries, then I have done my job. My task is to make people look at history a little differently, but not too differently. Go by the dates. Go by the official dates, the war dates, the trade dates, the dates when trade laws are implemented. Follow those official timelines and then see how the stories of lived-lives emerge around them.

BW: Throughout the film, you yourself are a kind of central hub for both dimensions, the political and analytical on the one hand, and the entertaining on the other. Could you describe your conception of this as well as your performance?

MD: Thank you so much. I actually thought I was terrible on screen. I tried to get an actor to play my role. Then the others said, ‘Look, we are not actors either. The fun is that we are doing this together. If you don’t do it, then get actors for our characters as well.’ I thought, my God, how am I going to direct a Chinese-speaking actor or someone from Assam? So I dropped the idea and said, ‘Okay, I’ll do it myself.’ They blackmailed me into it! It is also stressful to direct and be in front of the camera at the same time. But whether I acted or not, I had to be a character. I belong to a generation for whom feminism was the major call while growing up. When we started making films, or even thinking about making films, grandmothers’ trunks were the central resource.

Everywhere in the world, people were opening their grandmother's trunk, finding texts and photographs, and building narratives around them. I felt it was time to take this further, to take the trunk and open it not in the attic, but in public, in the town square, so to speak. We had spoken enough about personal stories in private spaces. What about violating that boundary? You could call it an act of violence: taking these stories into public space. My mother didn't even know she was part of the Second World War, that understanding came only after her death. This is my political sense, my interpretation. You can call it subjective view or political reading. In that way, it is not really my mother's story, it is what I think is my mother's story. So, perhaps it is not a biographical film about my mother, but an autobiographical film. I had to be a character, whether I performed that myself or not. I had never done this before. Some filmmakers always place themselves somewhere in their films. I never had. This is the first time in my career that I appear in front of the camera. And just for fun, I should mention that I am actually a trained actor. I studied acting at drama school, but I have never acted professionally.

YC: Why are there so many animals in the film?

MD: I didn't begin with animals. I began with war, modernity, airplanes, trains, goods. Then animals just invaded the narrative space. What interests me is that animals and goods seem not to belong to borders. They exist at two ends of the spectrum. Animals can cross rivers, jungles, and mountains, and goods can do the same. That is why I follow the animals – the tigers, the mules – how far they travel, and how their allegiances to different states change over time.

BW: You said that Pong essentially brought you back as a filmmaker. Could you describe the years before this project – how you spent that time and what work you devoted yourself to? Because while you say that anyone can do research online, it's clear there is much more going on. You are not only a researcher, you are also an interpreter of history.

MD: It's not that I decided twenty years ago that I would never make another film. There was no such decision. I was in the middle of my career and my identity was that of a filmmaker. But I became interested in other things. I have always had multidisciplinary interests. My background is in performance and theatre, I am very close to visual art, and I am also an amateur writer. I had all these interests, and I got carried away by them. I became interested in cities that produce cinema on an industrial scale – cities where, just as coal comes out of coal-mining towns, cinema comes out of these places. Los Angeles and Mumbai (my home town) are not the only ones, there are many such cities. The scale may differ, but image production is their primary industry. If an entire city does nothing professionally but produce images, what happens to such cities? That question began to interest me deeply. At first, I thought I would make a film about it. But it became too big. Suddenly, I became a curator instead. Also some sort of archivist. The project included eleven films, but I didn't have time to direct any of them, so I produced them. There were books as well. Then it coincided with the 60th year of the Berlinale, and we presented it as an exhibition at Forum Expanded. That is how it premiered. That project took seven or eight years of my life. So when people ask why there was a twenty-year gap, I say I was not away from cinema at all. I was becoming increasingly interested in the history of cinema and the history of image-making. Then I was seriously ill for a few years and couldn't work. After that, I ran the Academy of Arts

of the World in Cologne. I thought I would write scripts there, but it was an extremely demanding job, and I couldn't find the time. And suddenly I realised, fifteen years had passed. The last five years were this film. Time passes very quickly.

YC: Before this film, you worked as a curator, as you mentioned. When I watched the film, I felt that it was like a beautifully curated collage of found memories, images, and stories. How much did your role as a curator shape the film?

MD: I think filmmakers make fantastic curators. I don't particularly like saying this, but I say it often because training in filmmaking makes you inherently cross-disciplinary. You learn to connect disparate narratives and genres. Filmmaking is not a single-person art, it teaches you how to make connections – through editing, above all. If filmmakers had more time, and most don't, they would be excellent curators. My ten years of curating helped me immensely. You can see that there is a lot of visual art in the film, but I don't think it weakens the narrative. On the contrary, cinematic storytelling is strengthened by sonic interventions and visual art interventions. These elements existed in my earlier work as well, but here they are more confident, more deliberate. I genuinely believe that filmmakers are inherently good curators.

YC: But curators are not necessarily good filmmakers.

MD: No – because storytelling is another matter entirely.

BW: Mostly not at all.

MD: Friends often joke that my exhibitions look like film scripts and my films look like exhibitions.

Hybridity must be practised to be understood.

BW: That, I would say, is an inventive genre. We were also struck by the language of the film. It feels new, highly innovative. It keeps you moving, almost as if you are walking through an exhibition. It takes real skill to combine close-ups and inserts while maintaining momentum. Could you say more about the editing and the dramaturgy?

MD: I was very fortunate to work with extraordinary collaborators. My editor, Federico Neri, is based in Berlin. I didn't know him beforehand. The risk and the pleasure of this film was that I worked with people I had never met before. The funding conditions required post-production to be done in Berlin. I had never done post-production there, so I didn't know anyone. Federico's name came up. We met on Zoom. We spoke, and instinctively I felt I wanted to work with him. It turned out to be a very good decision. It was especially difficult for him because he had never been to Asia – and this is an Asian film. It has an Asian rhythm. Language is one thing, subtitles can handle that. But rhythm, speech patterns, narrative flow – those are cultural. He is Italian, living in Berlin, and he adapted beautifully. I also had two dramaturgical advisors who kept pushing me: 'do it again, do it again.' One was Merle Kröger, a novelist, the other was Bina Paul from India, who was Artistic

Director of the International Film Festival of Kerala for twenty-five years and is professionally an editor. So I was constantly goaded during the postproduction. Then there were the two songs, which I wanted to be entirely hybrid: one in the first half of the film, one in the second. Both are multilingual. They appear like popular music, people tap their feet, but the songs resist easy familiarity. Hybridity must be practised to be understood. If hybridity is the consequence of today's world order, then it must also be practised as a form. I had to explain to the composers that I did not want the song to be written in a single language. The songs change language without warning, then return, just as when you cross a river or a checkpoint, and you can never quite predict when this shift in language will happen. There is a section where Purav Goswami is working with an artistic map. He's experimenting: putting blood, colour, soil, photos, text over the maps. Then erasing them away and starting all over again. This, again, is about practising the impossibility of mapping. You perform it – perform hybridity, perform mapping with your body and within the screen narrative. I think my main task was to visualise and practice all the concepts I wanted to communicate: mixed cultures, mixed legacies, hybridity, the absurdity of borders. The concepts required some kind of body. You cannot simply state them. For example, state borders – you cannot simply cross the border physically. There are already narratives about borders – they are excellent – but we already have them. I don't go to any actual border in this film. No border is ever shown but they were performed / presented through various tangible ways.

YC: You mentioned the difficulties of crossing borders and visas. I was also curious about organisational and bureaucratic difficulties when you filmed in China and India.

MD: I had to preserve my protagonists' (including my own) experiences in the form of stories, songs, mise-en-scenes. That is my job. In filmmaking today, this is unavoidable. Even in Germany, where I have done a lot of work. Sometimes self-censorship comes even before the state intervenes. That is not wrong. If you are responsible, you consider the consequences for your subjects. If I went to China, made a fantastic film, and then people there had to pay a price after I left, that is not acceptable. Political artists always face this: How much is allowed? And how much should you push the envelop? And you worry not for yourself, but for others. That is the classical dilemma of documentary filmmaking. The challenge was to protect the protagonists and also to make the story compelling. Factually, everything is accurate, but dramatized, adapted, obscured. That way this film is also about documentary filmmaking. I want my audience to understand this dilemma and the creative strategies that are involved in dealing with it.

BW: Maybe one final question, briefly: the lens of Alzheimer's and, of course, the tiger metaphor – when did these appear? Were they a starting point or did they emerge later?

MD: The Alzheimer's element was always there. I was very close to my mother and I think it's a common story for women of my generation: As our mothers age, they develop dementia of some kind, and we try to understand them, to make sense of it. There's nothing particularly novel in that idea, but it was something that really affected me. And she actually said, 'The Tiger is coming.' Yet I never imagined the tiger would become such an important character – that was completely unexpected. It was a coincidence, but when I learned that the American army unit was called the Flying Tiger, I thought, my God, is someone up there trying to tell me

something? That revelation was as surprising to me as it is to any audience watching the film for the first time.
There are moments in this film that even surprised me during its making.

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