

Scene for Phalke – Giant Camera Episode

The crows buzzed maddeningly overhead. It was a hot summer afternoon. It was a small but crowded street with vegetable sellers, small shops, houses, people milling around, animals vying with humans for space, street performers, handcarts, horse carts, bullock carts and the such. Amidst this tumult of human life a strange procession wended its way through the street arousing both the curiosity and fear of those around. It was a man with a giant bellows camera. The camera was mounted on a camel cart and he was intent on documenting all of human life as he saw it pass by him. This was not an unusual idea in the nineteenth century but to do it on such a scale certainly was.

But that was the period when such inventions and their effects were bewildering to people. They perceived it as the incarnation of the devil himself come to swallow up their souls. Regardless of the effect he and his contraption were having on the people the camel cart and camera crawled its way through the street. He had his eye glued to the eyepiece except for those moments when he stopped to coat yet another plate with a silver or bromide salt in the makeshift darkroom tent that partially obscured the rear of the cart. In fact to the onlooker all they saw was the camel and the giant camera with its rear shrouded in a kind of black tent. Something almost having no human agency but a contraption with a will of its own.

He was mesmerised by what seemed to be coming through the lens towards him. A juggler danced his way through the lens and in the blackness of the large bellows he saw coloured balls whirl through the air and seemingly defy gravity in the hands of a loincloth clad juggler. The silver of the film seemed to adhere itself to two of the balls while the third remained a glowing fireball red. The silver balls started to reflect the other scenes that seemed to swoop in. As he imagined the washing of the plate the curved distorted image on the surface of the silver balls turned into a scene of a crowded street where space lost its linearity and seemed to curve away from itself. The red ball rolled back into this image and then faded out as the next silver ball zoomed in to fill the screen with the distorted image of a person whose body curved into a never-never land. The person was dressed in green and white and was carrying a basket of vegetables on his head. Stretched out of proportion and with the movement of the cart, snake gourds become real life grass snakes that seemed to twist themselves around his head in an ethereal dance. There was now the juggler juggling this image in the frame, the image dancing around with the movement of the ball and the red ball almost metaphorically bloodying each frame. As with old cameras, the focus was always shifting and these images faded away but blurring as they did so.

As the cart moved on slowly and he replaced plate with plate a vestigial silver ball seemed to turn into a flat sheet of shimmering glass half mirror half lens. Its surface seemed to both reflect and be transparent. Through this he saw images of himself inside the camera and also the strange image of a street urchin seeming to walk into this image. The urchin seemed metaphorically some kind of reflection of his childlike adventure. The eyes of the child filled the screen and he saw himself being sucked into this image taking him into another world where he was walking as if through mirrors each mirror bringing

with it another reflection of the life outside. For a brief moment in this image he would see images of his hands coating the photographic plates, next washing them, next for a brief moment the fixed image. The images on this series of six mirrors (say) could be those of a close up of a house where there are people sitting outside watching the street fading to sepia, next this morphs through the next mirror into an image of a bale of straw carried in an elephant's trunk, which then morphs into an image of a turbaned man with a large moustache, which next morphs into the image of a piece of fabric that flutters sinuously in the wind and then morphs back into the semi transparent mirror where he suddenly sees imprinted on it a sepia toned image of himself which has turned into a dwarf. The dwarf gestures as if as a magician and seems to cast a spell which breaks the reverie like state that he is in.

We then cut back to the camera lens and are sucked vortex like into a dazzling world of the various images we have seen in this sequence floating about on photographic plates which reflect the entire street the cart has walked through. The balls come back as a metaphor and we see the juggler not only juggling the balls but also the images. The juggler exits from the interior of the camera through the lens and all the images float out slowly after him.

We cut back to the camel cart and then zoom in to the interior of the tent where we see him dazed and exhausted, sitting on a stool with a photographic plate in his hand which is the sepia toned image of himself and we zoom into the eyes of this image and through these eyes to the reality of the street outside.

Leela Mayor
Baroda, 4th November 2006.