Ashim Ahluwaliaâ??s â??Events In A Cloud Chamberâ?• to screen at Venice Film Festival

Description

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By Nandini Ramnath

There are two experimental films called *Events In A Cloud Chamber*. One was made by the artist Akbar Padamsee in 1969. The other is by Ashim Ahluwalia in 2016. The first film was a lost experiment, while the second title is an attempt at retrieval and reconstruction. Ahluwaliaâ??s project has been selected for the prestigious Venice Film Festival (August 31-September 10). It has been produced by Ahluwaliaâ??s company, Future East, and the Mumbai art gallery Jhaveri Contemporary.

The filmmaker of the acclaimed documentary *John and Jane* and the feature *Miss Lovely* packs into 22 minutes and 54 seconds the modernist giantâ??s approach to art and his two attempts at avant-garde filmmaking. The first one, *Syzygy*, made in 1969, is a formal exercise in plotting dots and lines on a blank canvas. *Syzygy* was screened to the general befuddlement of viewers who had no clue that they were watching one of the earliest steps towards creating an indigenous experimental cinema. Padamsee followed up *Syzygy* with *Events In A Cloud Chamber*, in which he created an abstract landscape though drawing, shapes made out of stencils, and photographic slides. The score was provided by classical musician Gita Sarabhai, who famously inspired John Cageâ??s composition, 4 *â??33â?•*. After Padamsee screened *Events* at a few places, the filmâ??s single print traveled to the Delhi Art Expo in the 1970s, after which it vanished.

The new film, like the old one, has been made on 16mm. Ahluwalia reconstructs Padamseeâ??s vision through a collage of images, some archival and some spectral (the contemporary portions have been shot by KU Mohanan). The film patches together a conversation with the 88 year-old artist, whose advanced age restricts him to a wheelchair, clips from home videos made by Ahluwaliaâ??s grandfather that evoke life in the 1940s, scenes from *Syzygy*, and Films Division footage on International Film Festival of India editions. These seemingly disparate elements cohere beautifully into an investigation into themes of impermanence and evanescence in art and the power of cinema to make the past come alive.

Ashim Ahluwalia

Excerpts from an interview with Ahluwalia.

An investigation into a lost film is filled with cinematic possibilities. What made you choose the form we see in â??Events in a Cloud Chamberâ???
Since *Events* is about a â??lost filmâ?• it just seemed natural to use other â??lostâ?• pieces of celluloid â?? including some 8mm home movies my grandfather shot in the late 1940s, as well as â??foundâ?• material from the Films Division archive. This footage uncovers new or hidden meanings, especially in the context of Akbarâ??s childhood or youth in Bombay â?? since no other imagery exists of that period. I really didnâ??t want to make a traditional â??talking headsâ?• documentary because it didnâ??t evoke much. On a broader level, celluloid, magnetic tape and all the things that we used to make films themselves are being â??lostâ?• â?? we just have less and less physical media now, and perhaps this is also something that *Events* is about.

Events in a Cloud Chamber (2106)

You are resurrecting Akbar Padamseeâ??s lost film as you go along, but you are also, in one sense, remaking it.
Yeah, completely. Loss is often associated with sadness, but it can also be a foundation for something

new, with the missing artwork taking on a second life, like a kind of reincarnation. For me, this was a way of situating my filmmaking within the tradition of other Indian artists, in this case Akbar, who had tried to make something so different over 40 years ago. Itâ??s just that the world wasnâ??t ready for it then. I also think that his radical, unique film was at the risk of being forgotten. I didnâ??t want that.

There is a sense of a passage of time in the film, as well as the sense of an end, in a way, indicated by the spectral imagery of a frail-looking Padamsee.
Iâ??ve always liked the weirdness of ghost stories â??haunted houses, sunken citiesâ?¦things like that. So, yeah, on the one hand, we tried to remake this phantom of a film â?? *Events in a Cloud Chamber* â?? and on another, my film became a way for me to understand what it means to be an artist as you age and near the end. More than just the disappearance of an artwork or an aborted attempt at an experimental film movement, it suggests ideas about mortality.

Itâ??s a personal matter for me because I think about my own end. I think about the end of things, like the planet for example, generally. Maybe this is not a good thing but Iâ??ve never settled into the comfort that anything we leave behind will actually be remembered. Most art and human history is lost. Just a minuscule fraction survives and yet we are so confident of being remembered. So does art stop aging and preclude death? What does it actually mean to make art or anything for that matter?

Akbar Padamsee in â??Events in a Cloud Chamberâ?? (2106)

India was wrapping its head around experimental cinema back in the 1970s. Padamsee didnâ??t make another film after his second effort. Has the scene changed for the better?
Akbarâ??s film work is still so radical that it doesnâ??t have a context or a home of any kind, after almost half a century. He was rejected both by the cinema and the artist community, and it caused him to stop making films.

Things have changed a little bit now, and there is a tiny space â?? but not as much space as there should be. I needed to make this film outside of the traditional film context, as it didnâ??t seem to fit there at all.

How and where will your film be shown in India?
I felt this film was more suited to working with an art gallery as producer and distributor. The gallery, Jhaveri Contemporary, is keen to do a show in November where they will screen the film over the

course of a week. *Events in a Cloud Chamber* is, after all, about a painter who happened to make some of the most radical films in this country, so maybe after all these decades, we kind of managed to find his work a home.

(Featured photo credit: Jhaveri Contemporary Gallery)

(Source: http://www.thereel.scroll.in)

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