

Introduction to Film Studies
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Lecture No. # 06
Character as a plot element

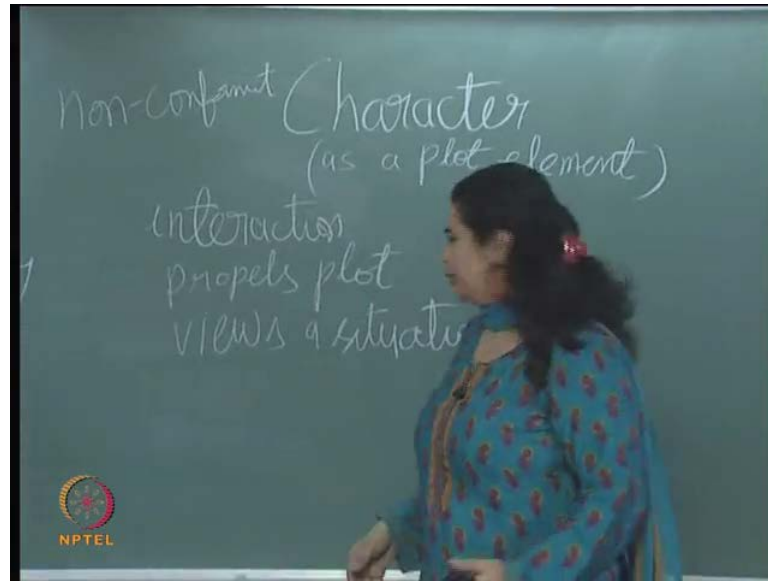
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Good morning. We begin today's class and yesterday we were talking about conflict as a plot element. Today, we will be looking at character as a plot element. So, I have before you four characters from four different classics: Annie Hall, Diane Keaton of course as Annie Hall, Holly Golightly- Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffanys, Juno from Juno and Audrey Tautou from Amelie. So, if I ask you what is character and when you look at these four female characters, what do you understand? Why are we interested in characters at all? Do you need to have interesting characters? What would you say to that Siddarth?

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What could be those other elements of character is all about interaction with other characters, anything else?

(()) to interaction.

Yeah, yeah, you contradict to him but then you give me some plots, contradict later. Give me your own point or your own view on what is the character?

Character can actually be something there actually propels the entire plot.

Character, this is important, he is the theoretician in the making; character propels plot. Character perceives or views the situation, anything. So, why are these characters so important to us? Anything that is common among all these characters.

(Audio not clear)

Good. There are non-conformists, unique individuals, very often eccentric. So, all that contributes towards lending a touch of interest to these characters, so characterization say there has been lot of writings on characterization, but what makes a character interesting is... As can you think of more characters apart from these that come to a mind when we think of great characters on screen.

(Audio not clear)

One flew Over the Cuckoo's nest, Jack Nicholson in the movie, is a memorable character, Michael Corle is a memorable character from some other movie, Tony Montana is memorable character from Scarface, yeah and anything else? I mean, you all watch movies, any number of...

Anthony Hopkins Hannibal Letter yes, that is the memorable character. Closer home our own Munnabhai series; what makes Munnabhai series that popular? Not the plot; the characterization, and if you look at all great characters, they all is standout, because of one is the way they perceive society, perceive situations and also the way they interact with others. So, you know that also matter, so if they are unique characters, they standout, that is just a very simplistic introduction to what makes characters interesting. Now, many a times what happen is appearance of character, they are extremely important. Characters become important, because of their appearance.

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Appearances make them standout. Fargo and Erin Brokovich, now what is so important about Frances McDormand appearance in Fargo; she is pregnant, she is a small town police officer, she is pregnant, does she look like a police officer from any angle? Well perhaps in her clothes, she has the uniform, but apart from that does she subscribe to the norms of a standard police woman? No, she does not, she stands out. Who would expect a pregnant female police officer investigating a very brutal murder. Though thus appearances does matter, how? What kind of look you give to a particular character that

also contributes towards making of a character. Julia Roberts in Erin Brokovich, it got her the academic award. Why does she stand out by way of her appearance; she is after all a social activist, environmental activist, but what is the way she dresses up?

Fashionable (())

(()) fashion, but also not high fashion, yes.

(Audio not clear)

Yeah, that again goes against the type. See you do not expect a social activist to be dressed the way Julia Robert dresses, otherwise it would give a very common place appearance, she does not stand out, but in order to make her stand out, you have to give a certain unique attributes and the looks that count. Any other example that you can think of? Characters are also determined by their accents, dialogues, the vocabulary, the kind of grammar they speak and what do all these things suggest? When Munnabhai speaks in a particular accent, what does it tell you about him? Where does he come from?

So, the socio- economic educational back ground, and where does the comedy arise in munnabhai series? Placing that kind of a character completely incongruous situation yeah , you would not expect that the doctor or medical student to dress or to behave as to speak in (()) and that contributes towards lending the uniqueness to the character; in congruity. Educational back ground of course, and then your accents and dialogues also give away the mental process the character goes through.

So, for example, when we are talking about accents and dialogues and how they contribute towards making a character, there is another movie named Possession. Is anyone familiar with this film? Gwyneth Paltrow and Aaron Eckhart.

(())

No, in this she is a Phd Scholar and he is a research associate, and they are doing research on certain 18 th century poets, it is a their romance runs parallel with those two characters they are working on. So, their dialects and their accents differ from the way, the couple in the earlier generation behaved and spoke, that also because see when the younger generation is shown to be more vernacular in its speech, whereas the previous generation is more formal, and that is what gives out the difference between the two.

The characters are often determined by action; external action as well as internal action. We have been talking about external, internal even when we were discussing conflict. Conflict could be external; do you remember what those external forces? Against nature, against powered structures, we looked at the example of one flew over the cuckoo's nest, that is again rebelling against a conformist society, so that is external rebellion; internal rebellion or conflict, we also saw in films like the taxi driver. So is character.

External action, Schwarzenegger, will you find internal action, that would be extremely in congruous, (()) do you have something to say to that? When you go and watch a movie starring Schwarzenegger, in which there is lot of internal action then that must be an exception, but when you go for Schwarzenegger movie including the recent expendables and also the most recent one, the last stand yeah, so he does not disappoint.

He will disappoint when we start having internal dialogue or become existentialist hero, so he is no (()) hero, you expect something from Schwarzenegger and guess, we are also talking in other words about a stars image. A star image also contributes towards the action he performs. I am not saying action hero, what, how he acts on screen, so doing what comes naturally to the character. For internal action, think Antony Perkins from Psycho, you can also think of Anthony Hopkins, the other Anthony in the Silence of the lambs, plenty of internal action.

Now, for example, when you look at this still of Antony Perkins, standing below this huge stuffed bird, what does it tell you? May be at that point in the movie it does not tell you anything, but when you finish watching the film, when you completely watch, when you are done with the movie, does this mean anything to you, the image of the stuff bird, no one seems to have watched psycho.

(())

So he is the predator, and this Hitchcock gives you that clue from the beginning of the movie, predatory as well as the idea as stuff bird. At the end, we will realize that his mother is also as stuffed mother as stuff figure.

(Audio not clear)

Yes very good, face is covered in shades of light and darkness, yeah so we are not able to really understand what this character is all about. These are the clues film makers give. Internal action, we have been talking about, are you talking to me, Robert Deniro talking to himself, having lot of action, but much of it is also mental process, otherwise you see, if you watch taxi driver and again I urge you to watch taxi driver, you will find that this very little violence on screen except in the climax where he goes on rampage killing everyone in that brothel. Otherwise, you do not find any physical violence in the movie, much of the violence comes through the characters body language.

The music, again the way lights, you know, the interplay of light and darkness. Harvey Keate, again from another Martin Scorsese movie Mean Streets, lot of internal conflict, and therefore, representing internal action. He is the gangster, at the same time he is stand between his loyalty towards his masters, the gangster masters, the gang lords and his friends, as well as his religion. Therefore, we find him very often doing penance by running his fingers through burning candle, through burning match strike, like self punishment. This is something tells you lot of about it internal action. Watch Mean Street, if you have not already.

Names of characters, the way film makers name characters, also tells you a lot about the characters. So, Holly Golightly says a lot, she goes like this; she does not want to carry baggage of the past. If you read the novel, Breakfast at Tiffanys, she has the past, but she wants do away with that. So, names are often evocative, names are often symbolic. They can also be ironic. You can name of person of particular quality and the person characters could be exactly opposite for that but then that lends an ironic touch, a funny touch. Names also connotes, you have done denotative and connotative course. The Saint, Val Kilmer, of course it is based on comic book series, but have you watch the movie, The Saint, Val Kilmer's Saint, you must watch it. It is not such an old movie, may be of 1990s. What is the saint all about? Is he a saint? He is a master thief and a master in disguise.

Hrithik Roshan character in Dhoom was based on the saint, he is an expert thief, he works alone, and he changes, disguises in a flash of a second. Name of the character, for example, Daniel Day-Lewis is hawk eye, playing an Indian, a Native American, in the Last of the Mohicans, as hawk eye and what does hawk eye mean? One who has a penetrating insight, as well as he never misses a shot. He is an expert in both these

things, reading people, as well as, never missing a shot. Ben Stiller in Meet the Parents and the series and you know what his name connotes in the movie.

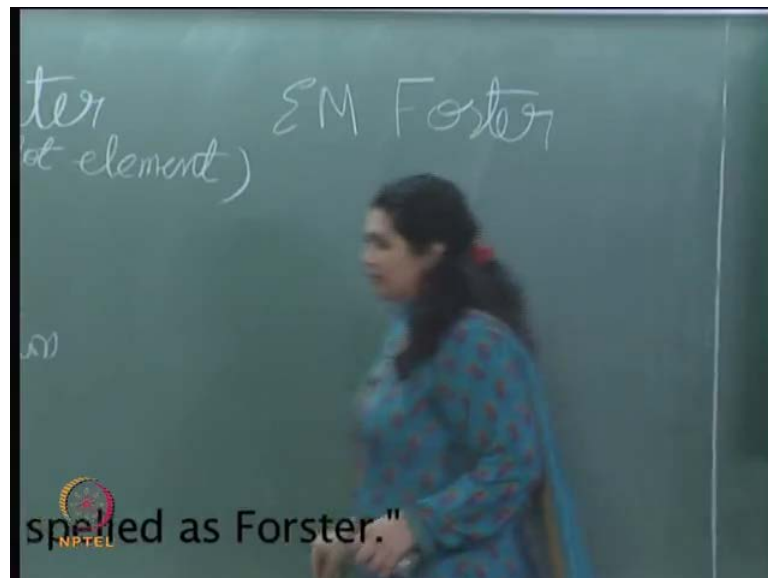
Characters can also be seen through multiple perspectives, another feature of character. Well you see, you are something or you mean something to your parents, you mean something to your friends and you mean something else to your teachers, the multiple perspectives. Character seen through different points of view, and we have seen some very good example in Citizen Kane. How many of you have watched Citizen Kane? Quite a few, please watch it all over again for this course. So, what does Citizen Kane, what is the quest all about? Rose Bud to understand what the exact meaning of the word rose bud was, as uttered by the dying publishing tycoon, Charles Forster Kane, what did it mean?

And there is a journalist, throughout the movie we have quest for discovering the meaning of this word rose bud. So, why he is trying to decipher the meaning of rose bud? He comes across a series of people who give multiple points of view on whom, on Charles Forster Kane, what he meant to them? What he was all about? So, was he a saint or a sinner? We never know. Velvet Goldmine is very knish kind of movie. Is anyone familiar with that? I thought, because it is a Christian Bale movie, Ewan McGregor and Christian Bale and Velvet Gold Mine is about the pop culture in 1960s Britain and there is journalist played by Christian Bale who investigates the life and times of popular rock star. It follows the same trajectory as Citizen Kane.

Characters can be static, for example, Brad Pitt character in A River Run through it. Has anyone watched the movie? A River runs through it, is one of its earlier movies and it directed by Robert Redford. So, he plays a Paul, he is impulsive, drinks too much, get in card games, and wants nothing more than to stay in a small town of Montana and working for news paper. There is not much happening in this life. He does not want anything; static character. The dynamic characters are affected by plot development, so it is static characters do not undergo any personality changes in them and on the other hand dynamic characters do. They become wiser, mature more, responsible, and we often use the term call as self-realization. So, that you find in the characters of dynamic people, the self-realization, and this is the kind of character, which is important in serious film, serious drama.

You cannot have serious drama if you do not have very good characterization, but comedies thrive on static characters. If people start changing in comedies then there would not much of comedy there. Think of any static character, which you know, which never fails to amuse you. Mr Bean, Rush Hour, and Mr Bean is the very good example, when you go and watch Mr Bean, part 1, part 2, part 3, he goes on a holidays to Paris or whistlers mother, where ever he goes we expect the same, even the appearance, he clothes never change, his body language never changes and you expect that because all those things lead to comedy, but it is not the case in serious drama. We have given the theory of round and flat characters by whom? Give me any idea, who gave us the theory of round and flat characters in a book called aspects of the novel.

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Yes E M Forster in aspects of the novel, gives us two kinds of characters, round and flat. Forster tells us that flat character are two-dimensional, that mean they do not have or they are not multi-faceted. They are predictable. I am going to ask you people keep taking down notes, but do not participate in all that, I will ask you; give me some example of who you think of flat characters. (()) of something, I am going to all of you within a second.

Flat character lack psychological depth and complexity, they are often clichés, representative characters, clichés, stereotypes. Now, think of certain examples. I am going to give an example, but I want answers to come from you. Flat Characters...

Vietnam War movies.

Vietnam War movies.

(Audio not clear)

And dude's friend is a flat character. Mr Wolf in Pulp Fiction, Mr Wolf does not have that much screen time, but yeah and he is there for a reason, there is no complexity, right. I would even say Uma Thurman character in Pulp Fiction, it is very two dimensional, even Tarantino role in Pulp Fiction, anything else from our own cinema, our regional cinema or Bollywood, (()) everyone is a flat character. Give me all these every ones. If you think all the characters in our cinema are flat, so give me some examples.

Most of the woman casting in the side roles, even in the central roles, (()) a standard heroine in a standard film is always the flat character. We know the routine things, so we do not get it in to details about that what heroine is expected to do. Dynamic characters, immediately we can think of Marlin Brando, in the Kazan's On the Waterfronts, please watch it during this long week end. Rebel without a Cause, James Dean, in fact it is very interesting to note that dynamism on the screen, dynamic characters start getting noticed especially with the advent so called method acting, so both Brando and Monte Clift, as well as James Dean to an extent, they were all method actors, trained in Stani Slavsky method of acting. We will be talking about that at some stage.

Campy character, very flat... How many of you watched the movie called Disco Dancer, Mithuns Disco Dancer, have you? Then please do watch it, it is very incongruous in a film studies, this kind of a course, suddenly I talk about disco dancer, but do watch it and it will you great inside in to Bollywood camp, but it all the features of the camp. A camp can also be serious, camp need not be confused with cult, somebody was talking about this camp cult, not necessarily, but yes, characters are pretty flat because that is what camp is all about and the beauty of camp is that all characters are flat.

So from flat to round, round characters again are also dynamic. John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever, how many of you have watched this movie? Watch it all over again, the uncut and abridged version. We will talk about the film after the end of this class. Just hang on, do not leave the class before this. Robert Deniro, for example, in Raging Bull, the dynamic characters, they have multi faceted characters, round

characters, they are many aspects to the character. You cannot say exactly this is the good guy or bad guy; they are in shades of grey. That is what I mean by round characters and there is also progression in the characters, by the end of the film there is the progression, there is something you know the character has learned about himself and about life and about other people.

My question to you about the character form very popular, every ones favorite, Ocean Eleven, Ocean series, what are they? How would you classify? Flat, but then that adds to the beauty. Flat character, I mean you expect this character to behave in a way to speak certain one liner. Otherwise, there would not be any ocean series. Each character is a stereotype. It represents a type, right? They tell you something and you expect. In the second series, if they start doing against this type, you will be disappointed, I am sure.

So, you want the same things to happen repeatedly in every sequel. Therefore, when we talk about or when we come to the discussion on the sequels, film sequels, we expect the same kind of characterization but all sequels are not necessarily flat characters, for example, again God Father had several sequels. Stereotypes, tell me what is a stereotype in a movie, like hugely popular movie, like Devdas? (())

(())

It does not get more melodramatic than what we saw in that movie. The alcoholic lover, I mean we all love such lovers, right, who give up their life, and future, and all ambitions for the love of their life, and of course, you have the golden hearted courtesan, the prostitute with the heart of gold. That is the trope that is a cliché, but then it is not the cliché common only to our films, the western also had plenty of characters, the clichés.

Remember, we were talking about the blonde and the dark haired girl; the dark hair girl would always have dubious morals, but at the end would always take the bullet on the heart for the hero. Characters are often enigmatic, interesting characters, for example Juliette Binoche character in Chocolat, not much is known about the past, the background, where they come from, how they are going to end, they are mysterious.

Can you think of more mysterious characters? The joker in the Dark night, see joker is not physically powerful at all. He gets bashed up all the time by the dark knight, but what makes him such a formidable opponent? The mind games he is able to play and of that in

the sense we are on the topic of Joker. Joker is the good example of the unreliable narrator. Can you give me some examples why? (()) Do you know how I got these scars? At one point he tells Maggie Gyllenhaal character that his wife was the gambler, and her face and he gives you the entire story in order to appease his wife, he carves his own face and that is how he got these scars. At another point he tells someone that his father gave him some scars, son, why so serious, let us put a smile on that face and that is how I got the scar and at the end he wants to tell the batman, you know again the mind game, do you know how I got these scars and we all know the answer to that. So, he is the unreliable narrator. We do not know his past, we do not know anything about him and he does not give any clues, so unreliable narrator with an enigmatic past.

Characters as dramatic foils to each other, Harold and Maude have you watch the movie? She is 80 and he is 20, she is in love with life and he is in love with death. They fall in love and it is not a platonic love, let me tell you. If you watch the movie and she is 80 and he is 20 and they have a love affair, Harold and Maude. But still it is very enigmatic and very dramatic characters, contrasting characters and very interestingly done sketch of two kinds of people.

I often think of this movie whenever I watch Zohra Seghal on screen, the way she banter with other characters, she is a very interesting actor, and so if you have watched Saawariya for instance, have you? Is there anyone? Do not get put off by Saawariya's reputation. It is a very esthetically, very well made, very well acted, very well shot, very well presented film. People snigger, we had Ravi K Chandran with us, remember who did the cinematography of Saawariya, and he told me the Saawariya has been taught in many American Universities as the part of the cinematography course, and it is very well done movie.

People just talk without watching this movie, so Zohra Seghal in Saawariya is a very interesting character. Even if you watch her, playing with Bachan's mother in Cheeni Kum, full of life and always very dynamic. You do not find out that conventional, flat melodramatic mother. Characters acting as foils to each other, two types of personality you know, one is good and one is evil, one is strong and silent and other guy is vivacious and talkative. Can you think of any example? Sholay, the most popular bollywood film, Jay and Veeru are foils to each other. (()) Good cop and bad cop, Seven, it is a good study. Lethal Weapon is a good study of foils.

A foil often is the trope in buddy films, as we were just talking, like good cop bad cop. 48 hours, Midnight Run with Robert Deniro, Rain Man with Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman. Character acting foil, if both of them are alike, it be a boring fare after a while. The plot arises; the interest in the plot arises, because the way the characterization is done. If you watch both these movies, Midnight Run and Rain Man, you take away the contrast in the characters then much of the plot would be lost.

Characters can also be caricatures, not just the stereotypes, for example, Gloria Swanson character in Sunset Boulevard. She lives, she is an actress, passed her prime, she lives in the ivory tower, oblivious to the fact that nobody wants to watch her films any more. She keeps watching her old films in her home theater all the time and obsessed with herself. Therefore, caricaturing an actress past her prime and they could be comic as well as tragic figure as in Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard.

So, leitmotif, just to give you indication of what a leitmotif is, well leitmotif could be a repetition of the single action or just a phrase or the idea of the character and often it adds value to the character. Rajini tossing the cigarette, Salman Khan doing things with the Ray Ban sun glasses are leitmotif. The people want to watch that however flat character you may think, like Chulbul Pandey is, you know the leitmotif add to his character.

But that is the trade mark, even the pieces of music could be, joker music for example, batman music, there are all indicative of character. They evoke this kind of character. James bond, of course, we all know the music as a leitmotif and a catch phrase is again indicates the character. I will be back, and then Bruce Willis in the latest version of the expandables says this time I will be back.

Character can be allegorical; they refer to certain kind, certain types in the particular socio-historical period or context. For example, Garry Coopers role in High Noon, indicative or symbolized those people who where black listed during the Mccarthy period. In the movie he plays the sheriff where he is ostracized by his town people because of certain fear, certain malicious gossips about him, but later we have realized that he was in the right. So, that is an allegorical character.

Character can be moral, can have moral dialectics, very ambiguous or can represent certain philosophical truths, and what movie that comes to your mind, I mean I can think

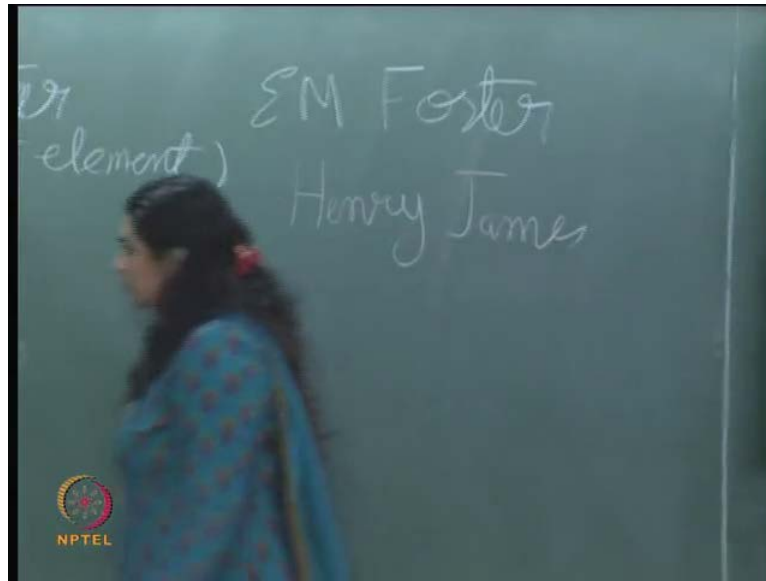
of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, *Wild Strawberries*, extremely philosophical, existentialist. The seventh seal, how many of you watched Bergman at all, *Wild Strawberries*, watch it, go through the movie, you will understand. See, do not go by formidable reputation again and again, I talk in this cause about Chulbul Pandey as well as Bergman, so what the moral you should take up away from my course. Be open minded, I mean you can talk about disco dancer as well as you can talk about *Being John Malkovich*. So do not look down up on any kind of cinema as well as, do not get put off by certain kind of cinema.

Its Bergman, I think it will go over my head. Its Kurosawa, it will be slow. It is Satyajit Ray, oh my god, he will be all about some grouse poverty, starving children, famine, and all those, it is not like that. That was the scenario only in *Pathar Panchali*. Many of Satyajit Ray's movies deal with very rich people. You can watch them as well, for example, *Charulatha* or *Jal Sagar*, all these are very, so do not go by stereotypes about people, films and film makers. Watch everything with open mind, so watch Bergman, and watch the *Wild Strawberries*. If you not face booking at the same time as a watching movie, not attending to your cell phone, you will find it lot of things which are interesting.

Being John Malkovich, what it is about? (()) Entering into another person's head and what is that to do here? It is not possible, it is actually an allegory. What happens when you start obsessing with people, obsessing about someone, and then the aftermath of it? Any comments at this point, any characters and any interesting characters you would like to tell me about. *Travis Bickle* is many things, high on internal action, internal conflict, as well as external conflict, and action, and he is the highly existentialist character. He looks for a meaning in a meaningless world and that is the *Travis Bickle* character. Unfortunately, he never got any all those great awards for his acting, but I think he deserved it.

(()) *Apocalypse now*, are you talking about Brando or Sheen, why you think (()) character in *apocalypse now* is interesting? Have you watched *apocalypse now*? It is a very complex role and very well done. Watch it. He almost had, that is the inside story, he almost had heart attack while preparing for the role. You can really imagine the intensity.

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Another great theoretician apart from E M Forster is Henry James, in his Art of Fiction; mentioned something about telling character and showing characters (()) while doing Henry James with you did I ever talk with you telling and showing characters? Can you re-collect anything?

(Audio not clear)

Yeah, good.

Telling characters are when a writer or film maker tells you or gives you a lot of details about that character that means he is telling you all about it you need not rights of brains about understanding that particular character. It happens very frequently in novels, in plays also, where all the clues and all the description are given. You know she is sensual, he is greedy. The writer is already helping you to make up your mind about the character. Showing is no detailing, you just have to understand.

Six degree of separation by John Guare, well Guare takes the trouble of telling you anything about his character except a particular character is black American and that is all he tells you, the color of the skin. The others are rich white people; you have poor white people as well. That is all he will tell you, but he never tell you how to interpret them. That is left to you, but there are people to tell you exactly what to think of particular character, so that was common device in most of art cinema, especially the

cinema till the 1990s. Now, we of course, are having lot of improvement in the screenplay, writing etcetera. There was the time when to establish the character, what would the film maker do? He is good guy, simpleton. What will a good guy do? (()) All good deeds in the world, every good deed, basically he will sing a song.

In the song he will do all the good things, he will help a blind man cross the road, he will give his coat to a shivering man, he will give away his last penny to a starving child beggar, whatever. He will do everything, so whatever you are being told look here, you are looking at a very nice guy. The bad guy would be there and he is a rich man invariably. In cinema of particular period, all bad people were rich people. They would always drink. They would always smoke, they would always be watching cabre dance in a CD bar and in a five star hotel. Just telling us, look this is bad and this is good. Showing character the film maker leaves to you to make up your mind, for example, consider Love, Sex and Dhoka by Dibakar Banerjee.

He does not tell you, I mean there is a guy who records for the camera certain intimate x with the girl. You are never told that the boy could be so creepy. It goes with the flow and then it happens and we are left to decide our self what to make out of this boy and this girl. That is showing character, director would not go to extremely length to tell you what to make out these characters by telling and showing. (()). Whose character is that? Do you think that we are, I mean, if you are told that certain things about Kevin Spacey that he is poor crippled or what will you do? Cripple sit in the corner while we rob the place and that is misleading us. That is a very intelligent device. The entire plot is all about deception.

You are talking about unreliable narrator.

Funny games

No, David Lynch movie, Mullholand Drive.

You see again it is an enigmatic character, it is also philosophical character. The other girl is almost a foil to her; that is now Naomi Watts and the other actor. What is our name in David Lynch Mullholand Drive? Mullholand Drive for obvious reasons happens to be favorite of this institute. All the boys talk to me about Mullholand Drive. For the

last seven years I have been hearing this, so that mean there is something about the movie. So, we will meet on Monday, thank you very much.