

## **Interview with Anshul Tiwari**

James Rowlinson

Anshul Tiwari's film *Rosario* was awarded first prize in the IAFOR FilmAsia Open Film Competition 2012 in the under twenty minutes documentary category. The following interview was recorded in Singapore on 15 February 2013.

**Keywords:** Independent filmmaking, documentary aesthetics, Singapore film industry, censorship.

**1.) Tell me about your background and training in filmmaking? Who are your biggest influences?**

I come from a small town in India, where watching movies is the main source of recreation for us. I used to watch a movie every week in the theatre, so that's how I started loving films. From the age of eleven or twelve, I harboured dreams of maybe one day being a filmmaker, or maybe being in the movies. But you know, in India you have to ensure you make a living and I am an engineering graduate. I finished my engineering degree in 2004 and moved into a job, but immediately started looking for options for getting into filmmaking. I did several short courses all over India – I made short movies on a Handicam, and I think from there I realized I had to give a bit more formal shape to my filmmaking, so I took a year-long course on documentary filmmaking. Afterwards, I was determined to keep making movies and I produced short films – hiring the crew, the cinematographer, the lighting and everything. I had my first taste of professional filmmaking in 2008.

I have admired different filmmakers at different stages of my life – each of them have influenced me and given me inspiration and direction. My love of film started with Indian filmmakers like Kundan Shah, Ramesh Sippy and Chetan Anand – these are men of extraordinary persona and vision. Then I discovered French filmmakers like Maurice Pialat, and later, American filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch. I love a great many filmmakers. I especially love new wave filmmakers from Latin America, India and South East Asia. I admire the films of Kim Ki-duk and Mike Leigh. Some of Leigh's films end a bit too simplistically – his problems are deep but his solutions are too simple. But I think that is how we want our lives to be, or at least, that is how we hope things were. I also look up to the Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi. *Children of Heaven* and *The Song of Sparrows* are very interesting films. I am drawn towards Iranian films because you still feel there is honesty in the storytelling – they avoid certain negative aspects of Hollywood and they are not overly dictated by the technical side of things – the best cameras, lenses, lights, etc. As regards Indian cinema, I have always admired the work of Shyam Benegal.

**2.) How would you define the art of filmmaking? With which art, or arts, does filmmaking have kinship?**

I don't think there can be a general answer at all to this question. For me, films are closest to music. There is certain mystery behind why a certain kind of music is appreciated by some people, while rejected by others. That said, it is the vision of the individual that gives filmmaking kinship to one art form or another. Recently, I saw *Children of God* by Kareem Mortimer. If you pay attention to the cinematography, you will find yourself entering into the skin of the characters and becoming very intimate with the places represented. And yet it is a very poetic rendition of reality. Another example is M.F. Husain's films, such as *Gaja Gamini*, which can be said to be 'painterly'.

**3.) Please tell me about the conception of *Rosario*. How did Dennis Rosario come to be the subject of your short documentary?**

I met Rosario inside the tunnel. I'd stop there to listen to his voice, his music. Those songs weren't familiar, but I liked his voice. He wasn't just repeating the same beat – he was actually trying to entertain people. I would see people stop by and chat up with him, lending him their newspaper. And he knew names, he knew their families. I was drawn to his personality, his outgoing nature and wanted to explore more. We began chatting. He asked me what I did so I told him about myself. And

he just said very bluntly, ‘Are you looking for a subject to make a film on? I have a friend who is a guide in Singapore night safari.’ I didn’t know what to say to him. Maybe then he sensed something inside me and said, ‘Do you want to make a film on my life?’ I said, ‘Do you want to see yourself in a film?’ And he said, ‘Well, I don’t mind. But I don’t know what you expect from me.’ I left the conversation at that. I had bought this camera a few months ago and I was looking for more subjects to shoot and I thought, why not give it a try? It turned out to be a different experience from what I had imagined.

**4.) Is Rosario’s philosophy on life (‘don’t worry, be happy!’ etc.) akin to your own way of seeing the world?**

My own life is about juggling the personal and professional, life and career. I get tense. I lose my appetite. I lose my peace of mind. Filmmaking, as a process, can actually be nothing short of harrowing. Yet there is only satisfaction at the end. Yes, I feel that my filmmaking is very similar to how I see my life; which is, full of struggle and a quest for peace and satisfaction that is only granted to you once you have gone through the pain of doing the hard work. Nothing that is worth doing comes easy. And nothing that is easy is worth doing anymore. I see my life as a constant learning curve, going upwards, never reaching a plateau. And when you are learning, you are always dealing with the pain of doubting yourself, of second-guessing, or being in the unknown. It is the feeling of overcoming the unknown that gives you satisfaction at the end.

**5.) Please tell me about the technical process. How did you render the colours (greens, yellows, reds) so vividly? Was the music recorded in-camera or post-synched? What are your favourite kinds of shots? Did editing pose any problems?**

I shot this on a Canon EOS 7D DSLR at 24 FPS (frames per second), going as wide as I could go with my aperture. Some shots were taken at 50 FPS and slowed down in post-production. I wanted to see the background during the interviews, so I shot at a narrow aperture. The music was recorded using a Zoom sound recorder and synched later. The night shots were planned separately as B-roll footage. I had scouted a lot of places in Singapore, and I wanted to shoot late at night, once the lights are switched out. My favourite shots are the close-ups and moving shots, in which I tried to create a dolly or track movement without actually using one. In total I had ten to twelve hours of footage, which I had to reduce to seven minutes.

I have learned some of the most important lessons in life as an editor. If you can help it, don’t edit your project. My original story was much different. I had a feeling that I had shot much, much less than I should have. I originally planned to cut a short two-minute piece and create a reel to show it to investors, raise more funds and make a feature length documentary film. Even now, I don’t think it’s a bad idea. But because I thought it was going to be a two minute film, I wanted to stylize it much more, doing a lot more work in post-production, and that is a reason the post-production didn’t take off immediately. I moved to a feature film (*A Gran Plan*), and only came back to *Rosario* after a gap of ten months. When I got to edit it, I felt as if I was looking at fresh material. This helped the project, since I began to see the potential in the work. Editing, after all, is less cerebral than emotional – it is alchemy.

**6.) I noticed you employ deep focus and quite emotive music during Dennis Rosario's interview segment. Can you comment on these choices?**

The choice of music emerged later when I began to hear Rosario's voice on different pieces of music. My idea about storytelling is that the viewer should actively participate in the process of storytelling. These days, audiences have gotten used to being spoon-fed, generally by means of the music; i.e. the audience is supposed to laugh in this scene, or cry in that scene, because the music says so. Filmmakers know that even if they don't have anything good on celluloid, they can manipulate their audience through music, and it works. Conventions and standards have been set standard for what people will and won't like, and it's not good as a culture.

**7.) How 'rehearsed' was Dennis' performance? Is it at all improvised?**

He was interviewed by my creative producer Smita. I purposely asked her to interview Rosario, since she comes across as a much more humane person on such occasions. Moreover, her interview skills are much more refined as I get so caught up with capturing the visuals and audio that I am unable to make the eye contact needed to elicit correct emotions.

At times, I made him perform for the camera. The music was the reason I was drawn to him – its rawness, and as I wanted to give that feeling that you are listening to it on the street, I didn't want it too polished. So I kept something of the 'hiss' picked up in the sound recording. Although the conversation began slowly, he became relaxed so we just let him talk. When you share your feelings with someone who gives you their full attention, it is easier to remain honest.

I believe, moreover, that there is such a thing as an honest and dishonest filmmaker. I know, for instance, of this documentary filmmaker in America who wanted to make a statement on the fast-food generation – his idea is that there is a fat, dumb generation of children who can't follow instructions. He had to get permission from parents, of course. Later, however, the kind of music he used and the editing made it look much worse than they were. The parents didn't know that they had signed up for that. So this is where honesty comes in. Couldn't he say the same thing in a different way? To me, this was making a mockery of someone to make a point – it felt dishonest and I was repulsed by watching it.

**8.) Can documentary film show the world 'as it is'?**

It is hard for a documentary to depict the world as it is. The camera is a powerful and frightening device. It alters reality. Then there is the whole element of selection and rejection during the editing process. You can't finish editing a film if you are caught up in the confusion of reality. Ultimately, film has to manipulate.

As a filmmaker, however, you want to tell reality as it is. But as soon as you bring a camera in there, you have to accept that it is going to play some part. People stare at the camera and start to change their behaviour. When I filmed special needs children, for instance, I thought that they would not be affected by the camera, but as soon as I put the camera there, they started asking if they could do this and that on camera. So, the camera alters reality. Even if you tried to capture reality as it is, well, eventually you have to accept that when you are telling a story on film, you are compressing reality. You have to choose some parts over others – otherwise films would be never-ending! Most filmmakers aim to depict a stylised version of reality. Personally, I am most drawn to the space

between documentary and fiction. It is not docu-drama – it is not about recreating or re-enacting, but rather, creating a version of reality. Your narrative choices are inspired by the real depiction of events.

**9.) With regard to *Rosario*, what do you think of the alternative aesthetic, namely that documentary should show the world ‘warts and all’, and actively probe and challenge the status quo, even if this means being negative or polemical?**

In the case of Rosario, he’s had a good life. He isn’t a drifter – he chose to live and perform on the street. He receives government help. I don’t know if he has enough savings, but I realized he was making enough to get by. I realised that the man is lonely and that he hasn’t had an audience in a long time, but he’s not going through a really tough time.

That said, I had to trust my judgement in a few instances. I saw him quoting the Bible; but as I didn’t want to give a religious hue to the film, I stayed away from those bits. Rosario also said a few things about the system. You see, he’s been in Singapore for the past forty years and he said that when he was young, there were promises made that weren’t kept. He had a few complaints – that the government should not do this and that, and that they never change. He said that he had been thrown out of places because he hadn’t applied for a licence, and that if he was living in a different country, he would have more opportunities to play. So he had these complaints, but I chose not include that in the film – he wasn’t comfortable having them in the film either. There are a few things you can’t say.

**10.) Let’s talk about censorship. Does the government impede independent filmmaking in any way?**

My take on this is that if there is censorship, filmmakers should find a way to get around it. The government has allowed a lot of ideas that are mild – films like *Rosario* won’t be censored. The issue of censorship is linked to funding. The government is very strict about the subjects it will give support. I have heard instances on MDA (Media Development Authority) banning the screening of films that may harm the sentiments of a certain communities on the grounds that they are racist or prejudiced. There was a film – *Sex, Violence and Family Values* – which was banned last year, despite it actually being a self-funded project. As Singapore is a mixed society, you can’t say certain things about certain communities – even in jest. Their approach is not one of tolerance. Sometimes people want to make a point using sarcasm or satire, but they are not allowed to, and I think that is something that should change. But independent filmmakers always find ways to make films – this is part of their education. That said, I am against filmmakers getting extra publicity for their works because of run-ins with the Board of Film Censors.

**11.) Your films, signed ‘for a change’, are in the service of many good causes: health and hygiene, development in S.E. Asia, safe sex and family planning, community initiatives for disadvantaged children, etc. As a filmmaker, do you feel that you have a ‘duty’ to support these causes?**

I don’t feel duty bound to my causes. I feel empathy and love, but I have never felt duty-bound. I’m not an activist. I find interesting stories – my goal is to tell that story honestly. I don’t start out on a film thinking I have to give something for the cause - I start out hoping to tell a good story and then see what comes out of that. Sometimes you can hope for many things – that it will change people – but then nothing happens. Sometimes you create a work and the unexpected happens.

**12.) What is it like to be a filmmaker in Singapore? Is there a vibrant filmmaking community here?**

Singapore has a young and vibrant filmmaking community. There is a lot of energy in the filmmaking community. Lots of people are making short films who are all still in their prime, in their 30s or early 40s, and so have lots of potential. In the recent past, filmmakers such as Eric Khoo have enjoyed international success.

The government supports indie filmmakers by providing grants through the Singapore Film Commission and Media Development Authority. However, as mentioned, in order to get funding in Singapore a film project has to relate to local issues, communities or culture. For a feature film, the crew has to be predominantly Singaporean, and again, you are bound to subjects about your local environment. Some of these ideas are quite good, but some are quite frustrating.

While there is no shortage of filmmakers making good short films, this is not the case for feature filmmaking. A short film can be made over a few weekends, whereas a feature film needs a dedicated, month-long shoot and proper funding. People arguably pay too much attention to the industry side of things – screenwriting, directing, camera, sound, etc., rather than to the art of storytelling. They want to be gaffers, cinematographers, sound men, etc. This means there are very good technical people available. But a very well-made, technically competent film may not necessarily be an effective film – because film is more than that. They are so busy out looking for a ‘job’ that they tend to forget that filmmaking about finding and telling experiences and storytelling. On the other hand, you see in more mature industries like in the USA, UK, India and China, people trying to come through as artists, not just as technicians. While people are not currently doing enough, I hope that in due time we will see better stories and better storytellers.

**13.) What are your future projects and ambitions?**

My target is to make a feature-length documentary. I am fleshing out a couple of ideas, writing documentary scripts and applying to the US and Germany for funding. I know people who have started a television documentary channel in India and who are building a network of filmmakers. This is something I hope to be involved in. In this part of the world, I participate in film festivals to get exposure and funding. I am drawn to an initiative called the ‘Indian Memory Project.’ A lady in Mumbai has collected scrap books and albums from people’s personal lives, going back fifty years or so. She has created sets of stories based on these artefacts.

Most recently I have been working on a docu-drama which recreates events from last year. A group of school students aged between ten and twelve noticed that their school cleaners were not respected enough – that nobody pays attention to them, to the point where they are almost invisible. The kids thought this was kind of disrespectful and made this campaign to raise awareness. I thought there’s a good story there, so I lined up a couple of meetings with the children and began filming.

I hope to have funding for a film about the food situation in Singapore. There are a number of people who depend on being given food by charities. There are food banks for this purpose, but big supermarkets like Cold Storage continue to throw food away within their expiry date, refusing to allow impoverished people access to it.