

cinema

What Makes the Aussie Films Tick

by Fayza Haq

WAYNE Levy, an Australian author of twenty books on film, television and video and a maker of fifty video films, was here in Dhaka, for the fifth time, to hold a workshop on TV, film and video making. This was held at the Goethe Institut.

Talking to 53-year old Wayne at the terrace top of the Goethe Institute, discussing the secret of the success of films like "All Rivers Run", "The East of Eden", "A Town Like Alice" and "Crocodile Dundee", touching on the plot and acting, says, "Those you've mentioned are well-known feature films which we call television mini-series, and are particularly Australian. What comes across is the harsh Australian landscapes — wide open spaces and the Australian easygoingness and the humour of the Australian people — Can I tell you a little story? My family and I were in the middle of the Sahara in a little Nubian village. There were four girls in purdah. We were talking to them and they asked 'What country do you come from?' We said Australia, and the Nubian girls remarked, 'Return to Eden' with excitement. Can you envisage people living in the middle of a desert seeing an Australian film? We have a laidback style (easy going, no overacting). There is also the funny man as in the Indian movies, in some of the Australian tele-movies but not in the feature films."

What makes "Man From the Snowy River" popular even in Bangladesh and India — is because the people are weary of the metropolises — and long to be far from the madding crowd? "I think that Australians love television series about the outback bush. In Bangladesh and India it is hard to escape from other human beings as there are so many people. Twenty miles out of Melbourne I can be by myself. In fact I have taken Indian and Bangladeshis but they've somehow felt uneasy, which I find incredible. As for "Man from Snowy River" it is based on a famous poem by A B Patterson (Banjo Patterson). There was movement at the station for the word had got around the cult from all regret had got away. Long narrative poems that most Australians know and love dearly form the basis of the work. The Australians were a little bit hurt the Kirk Douglas was chosen to play one of the major parts in the feature film, and a television series."

"Thornbirds" was made in USA but a lot of people were very disappointed with it. How does he feel about the treatment of an Australian story and why does he think that it was not a success? Wayne explains, "Richard Chamberlain played the main part when he wasn't at the height of his stardom. At that time his face too was overexposed. People tended to think of him as 'Dr Kildare' rather than the main character of the story. He is also not a very strong masculine acting figure which you needed for the film. It was a mere B

grade film."

What is his opinion of SBS, the channel for foreigners in Australia and how does he compare it with the channels for Asians in UK? "Our Special Broadcasting Service is the one channel in Australia that shows Egyptian, Indian, Turkish, Lebanese, Bangladeshi, Italian, and all the ethnic group movies and television series. They say that SBS has the best evening news because it is an hour of infotainment. The news is hard and fairly interesting. I think the Australian SBS is modelled on channels in England for the Asians. I myself have not seen these UK productions."

Lately there is an Australianism in the films from Down Under. Which elements constitute this distinctive mark: artistic interpreting of the closeness to life? Wayne replies, "We've just had a marvellous film released called 'The Castle'. They want to extend the airport where every man's home is his castle. The main character will not sell his dumpy old home for thousands of dollars because he lives there. He loves watching the aeroplanes and he grows his own vegetables and he's got his racing dogs. His family is very eccentric and they go to the High Court of Australia to stop the government from destroying their house to build the airport. It is a comedy. In fact, it is the funniest Australian film that I have seen for decades — and it made Australian \$10 million in its first release which is just unheard of. Australia at the moment has made some beautiful films 'Kiss or Kill' and 'Love Serenade', and there is a resurgence of small budget excellent Australian films."

What, in his opinion, makes a good film, and what does he think of the Oscar awards and the Cannes film prizes: are they really deserving or is there a lot of manipulation and internal politics involved? Wayne says, "I've never been to Cannes. There is a lot of glamour, partying and publicity but there is a lot of internal manipulation too, in my opinion. As for a 'good film' — I think a good film talks about human beings. Although Jane Campion's 'The Piano' won prizes galore, sadly for me as an Australian it is not an Australian film. The Australians put up the money but Jane Campion is a New Zealander. The lead actor Harvey Keitel is an American. The star is also from USA. The little child is a New Zealander too. Film schools like the Australian Film and Television school like the Swinburne Film School in Melbourne, the RMIT, the Deakin University Media School are training our directors history, classics of film and we are engendering a great love of film and media before they go out and direct. Our directors would be watching a lot of films before they even get behind the camera. You've got to have a love of communication with the people with the medium of film. The National Institute of Dramatic Art is turning out excellent actresses like Miranda Otto, who starred in 'Love Serenade'. I think the Australians have a seriousness about acting and film directing. Australian film crews work

very quickly and very hard. Arts directors, cameramen and lighting people have good quality and are moving in to USA for the big dollar. Most of our film directors who make films have been to the film schools," Wayne explains.

What then has he to say about good directors, decades back, who have not had academic training in films? "In the early days our film directors learnt on the job as our film schools have started only recently in the 60's. Today there are ten media communication schools around Australia," he replies.

Can low budget good films be made? 'The Castle' was made for about Australian \$400,000 when it made Australian \$10 million, as I said before. I

worm.' I got Satyajit Ray's 'My Years with Apu', a Penguin book for Tk 120. I could not put it down. It was marvellous. All the Bangladeshis that I have been teaching film video to, I say, 'If you want to learn about your film culture buy 'My Years with Apu'. Back in Australia some of the illustrations are Ray's own sketches is marvellous to show how a film is put together. His films like 'Pather Panchali' are absolutely poetic. He is an unusual film maker. In so many of his films there is no singing or dancing. He is definitely not a typical film maker. I love his trilogy. As for Ritwik, I saw one of his films recently. I found it extremely humorous. The one I like is Mira Nayar who

Bombay, I saw 'Dilwale Dulhanti Ley Jaenge' and I enjoyed it too. My wife and I see movies every week. I love the escapism. 'L A Confidential', which starred Russel Crowe had similar appeal for me. I go to the subcontinental films for the pace, humour, and music".

Have there been any films about Aborigines? "There are not many films that I know about Aborigines. At the Dhaka Film Society I am showing the famous '56 film' directed by Charles Chauvel called 'Jedda'. Jedda was the first Australian film about Aborigines as people. A bush man takes a girl from a station (cattle farm). Their mixing of blood is considered taboo as she was brought up by the white people and he lived a wild existence in the bushes. It was the first time that we saw aboriginal actors on the screen," Wayne informs me.

Why is there the vogue to see old black and white films when technicolour films are there? "Perhaps this is nostalgia but remember that black and white has the beauty that colour cannot always capture," Wayne replies.

Are people making better films now compared to the 60s and 70s in Australia and in Europe? "I'll only talk about Australia. Our films in Australia are better, the music is fantastic as in 'Strictly Ballroom' and 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert', which is about three gay fellows who get a bus and go around Australia singing and dancing. If you're gay you don't normally go to an outback town. However, everybody loves them and thinks it's amusing. 'Priscilla', broke new ground in showing gay people as nearly normal," Wayne comments.

Are tele-films having an adverse effect on big screen performance? Wayne says, "No, the Australian actors move easily from television screen like Russel Crowl and Miranda Otto Paul Hogan, the star of 'Crocodile Dundee' and directed it as well started off as a TV comedian. A lot of the Australian actors certainly move to the big screen and then back into the mini series."

How would he put the relationship between the tele-films and the big screen films? Wayne says, "Personally I feel that a tele film is a bit slower. To me they aren't cut quickly as a big feature film. I am not much of a fan of the tele-movies. The production values are better on the big screen much money has gone into the production, sound and lighting. The big screen film is made over a longer period whereas the tele-film is made quicker. I think there is more heart in the feature film."

What are the more popular Australian films, comi-tragedy, suspense or romance and who are the great Australian directors? Wayne says, "Richard Franklin who wrote a book with me many years ago, called 'Fred Ott Sneezes for Edison', a text book for students of film and television, directed a marvellous film called 'Hotel Sorrento'. This is about Sorrento, a place just out of Melbourne. I don't think there are any great Australian stars (Mel Gibson has gone to USA). A big body of actors are moving from film to television as we are not

making enough feature films. They have to work in the mini series and the feature film to earn a living. That is why the Australian actor is adept at moving between the two different mediums."

What, in short, is his advice to film makers in Bangladesh? Wayne promptly says, "Well the people I'm teaching at the moment, I wrote on the board for them the other day, 'If you want to be a television director, read about film, go to the commercial movies, read, watch and learn about your own Bangla history. Read about Satyajit Ray and Ritwik — the Indian film industry, so that you have a knowledge of your culture. You must also watch commercial television to know what is going on. You should not be pretentious and say 'Oh, they're not very good.' You study the production values and use them or change them for your own ideas in your own manner of making a feature film."

How did he come into the film world, after all, he has written 20 books on film making? "I came into film making when I was about five. My uncle, Colin Bishop, was a movie projectionist, who would take me to the movies on a Saturday and Friday night, and my job was to press the button to open and close the curtains. At the end of it, when he was rewinding, he would let me cut out little frames of film that I loved. From that point on, I was fascinated by films. My son, who is studying law in Melbourne University today as a film producer. He and I, we occupy ourselves with film memorabilia and we collect movie posters. Last week, in Dhaka, I went to an Old Dhaka film theatre and I bought Bangla movie posters for only Tk 4 each. They were fantastic works of art with sensuous scenes. These posters will not be in the films because of your conservative Bangladeshi culture. There are also the censorship laws."

Wayne has a daughter too, and his hobby is reading extensively. "I love movies as much as I love the printed words," he comments. "I read fiction as well as the odd film history book." He travels widely in his teaching work. He has worked in USA for a year and in Singapore for another.

"Going home to Australia we travelled through Europe in a car for three months. When I worked for two and a half years in Indonesia, I went to Egypt on a holiday through Asian Mass Communication Information for the last 12 years, I've been going to Singapore, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. I give video workshops in Asia," Wayne added, about his personal life.

Wayne was here specifically not only to conduct a workshop this time, but also to make "Cholera and Shigella Epidemics" at the ICDDR,B with Worldview assistance. His favourite documentary, incidentally, is the one he shot at Timor with S T Lee, who was doing cleft lip operation in a rural hospital with an earth floor.

Such foreign experts as Wayne Levy are surely welcome and useful in Dhaka for the film and video world.



Wayne Levy

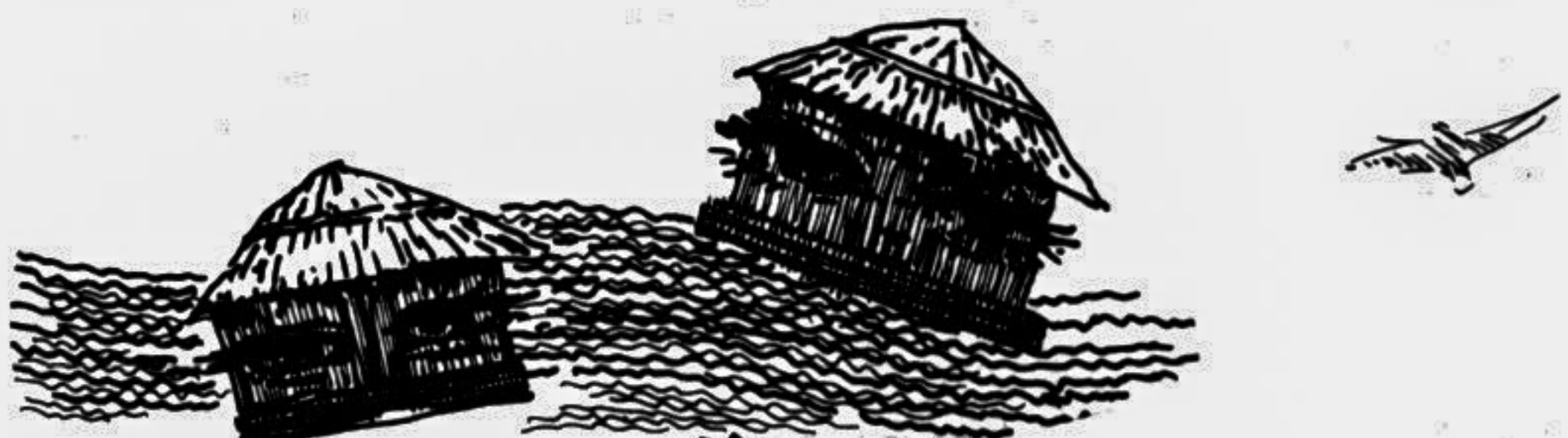
has recently directed 'The Kama Sutra'. That's breaking taboos because it is about lesbian relationship in an Indian society. Which is very sensitively treated. It was beautifully photographed. In Bombay I met Shakhkar Kapoor, the director of 'The Bandit Queen'. It was heart-wrenching and heart-rendering. The film was bold and the colouring was beautiful. The acting too was excellent."

What is his opinion of the Indian commercial films? Wayne says, "You might think I'm mad but I love seeing Indian movies, although, I don't understand much Hindi or Bangla, but I'm looking forward to seeing an Indian film 'Border' in Dhaka. Last year in

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Love Poems by Rebecca Haque

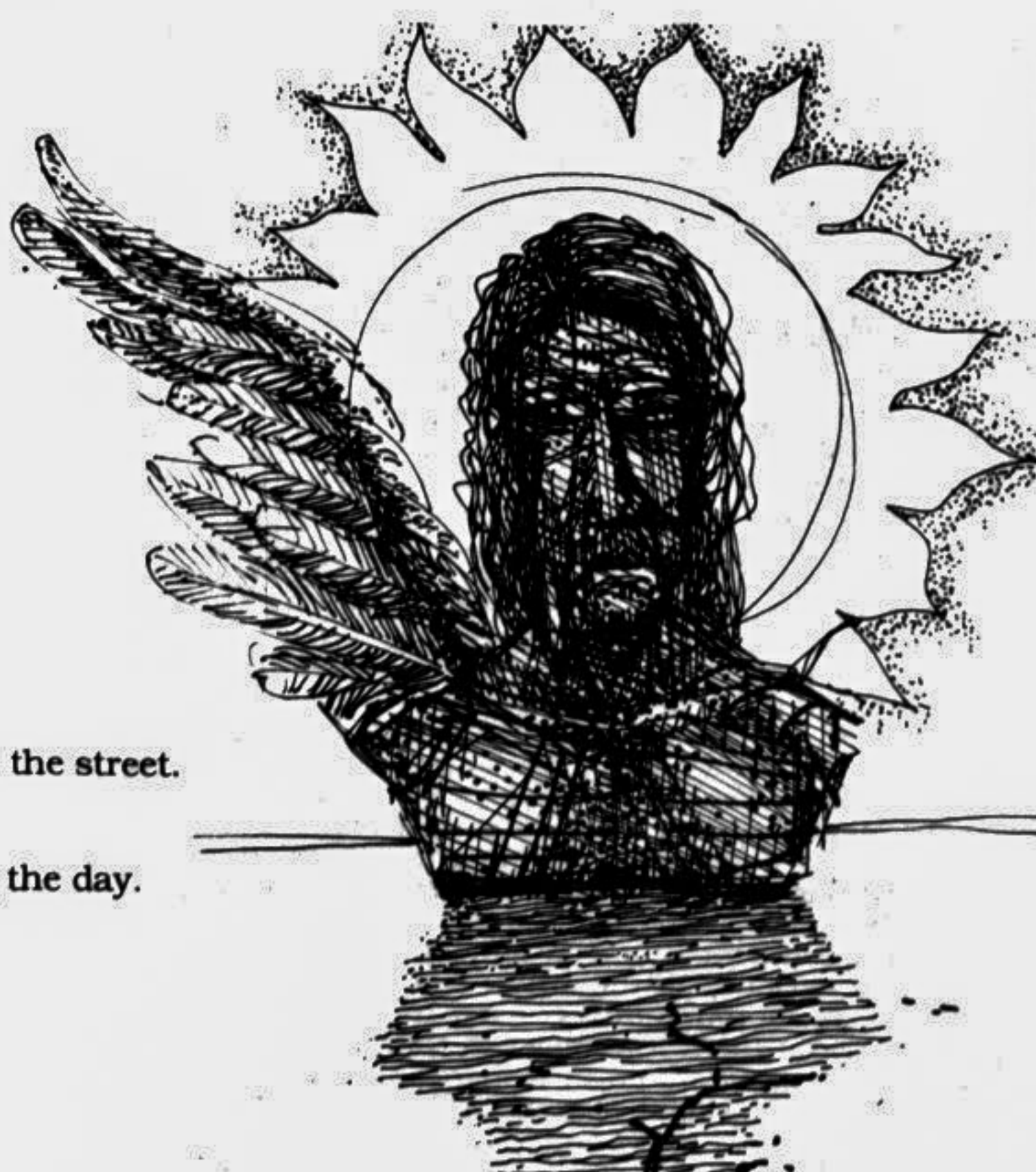


Transference

Tennis shoes,
That did it.
Finally broke the camel's back,
The last straw.
He wore sneakers all the time,
I loved that about him the most.
"Casual elegance," he always said.
I believed it, and still believe.
But my eyes now see other shoes,
Not his black, casual sneakers,
But your groovy white tennis shoes!

In Love

When one is in love
One does not see the much,
Does not see the man making water in the street.
One looks up.
Sees the floating pastel clouds during the day,
Sees the stars and the floating
Palm fronds during the night,
And sees the majesty of the
Celestial spheres,
And yearns, yearns, to merge
With the divine harmonies.

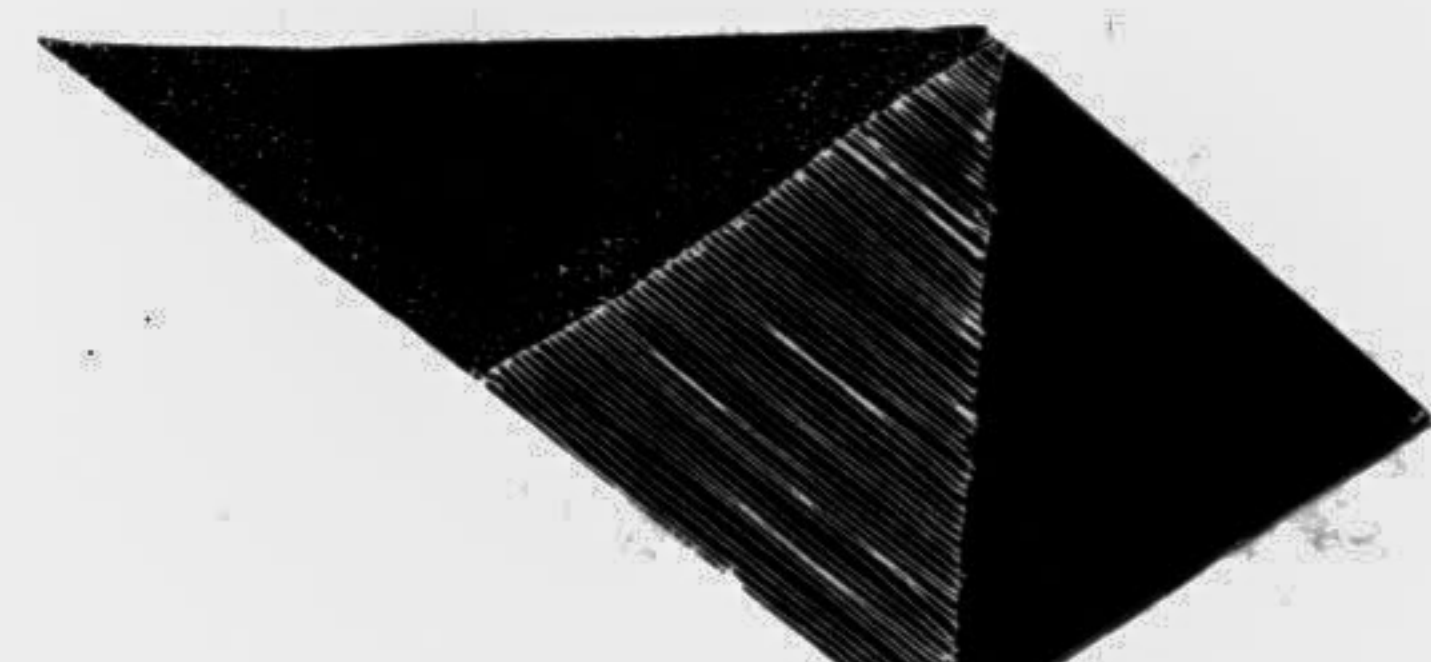
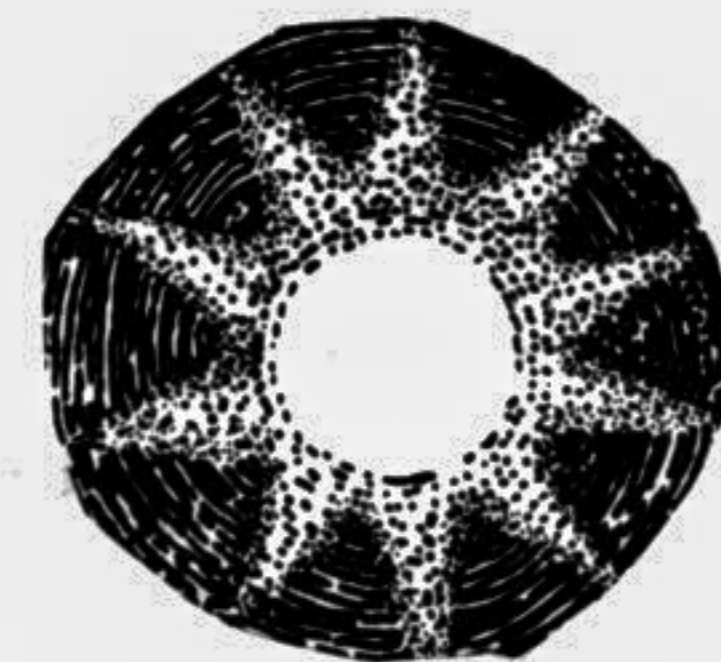
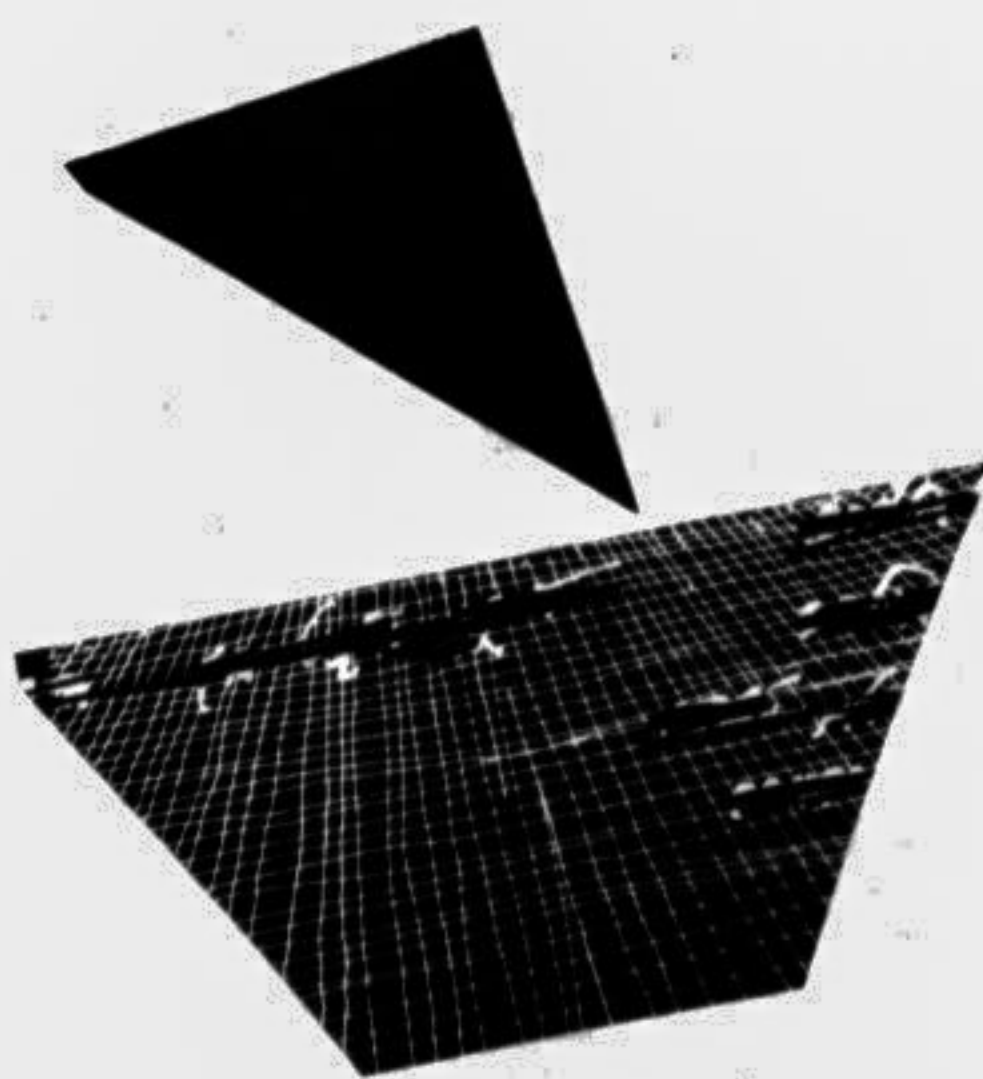


What you and I have

What you and I have is not something platonic.
You said you do not believe in it,
You do not believe in anything platonic.
Do you know what I think?
What you and I have is something more than platonic.
It's Electronic!

Serotonin Level

French kiss
Love bite
Mango bite (Indian toffee)
From your mouth to mine
Keeps my serotonin level
High.



Renunciation

Fate makes me give up my true love,
And I weep cool tears of infinite sorrow.
The tear-drops roll down my cheeks and drop softly
On my bosom.

Let them stay there,
The quietly whirring overhead fan
Will quickly dry them
And no one will ever know that I have
Quietly wept and sat and waited for the sun
To show its face.
I lift up my face,
And the cool breeze of the fan
Dries my wet, glossy, brown cheeks
Until they regain their usual matte composure.

I can now hear the sweet melody of the Fazar azaan,
Come floating, wafting, on the early morning breeze,
And I think — why, God, why?
Why did you choose me to play this cosmic joke on?

To have found my love
After so many years of Penelopean pain,
Only to have to give him up
For another's gain.