

*Shyam Benegal says he doesn't categorise cinema as mainstream and alternative*

## Breaking down walls is good

When Shyam Benegal – the man who established his parallel cinema credentials with *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan* and *Bhumika* – says that a film is a film, and that distinctions like mainstream and alternative serve only to pigeonhole directors, he should know what he's talking about. Indeed, he's making a powerful point. The rise of parallel cinema in India in the 1970s split the industry neatly into two camps. Inevitably, each came with baggage – firmly held views on what cinema's purpose was and on who the audience was. In the artistic and social context of the 1970s, this distinction between the two forms of cinema was useful, enabling a different treatment of issues relative to mainstream films. But that distinction has outlived its purpose now.

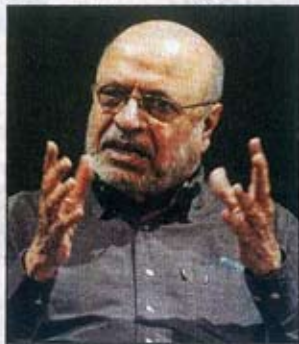
Artistic innovation is born through cross-pollination of ideas and techniques. How would one classify a Vishal Bharadwaj or an Anurag Kashyap? The former's Shakespeare adaptations would have been unthinkable as mainstream films just a decade earlier. Internationally, where does one place a Stanley Kubrick, a Quentin

Tarantino or Sam Mendes's 1999 film *American Beauty* – which won critical acclaim but also became a runaway box-office hit?

These directors have succeeded in creating something new precisely because they've refused to be categorised. By incorporating diverse influences, they've avoided the worst pitfalls of either camp: mainstream

cinema's aggressive refusal to credit its audience with any discernment and parallel cinema's intense self-absorption. And let's face it, some art-house films can be terribly formulaic and dead boring. Unless one wants to create spurious distinctions between 'good bad' films as opposed to 'bad good films', they don't really matter. Parallel cinema too can aim at a mass audience while mainstream movies can strive for aesthetic values – they're not mutually exclusive.

■ **TIMES VIEW** ■



## Alternative is distinct and superior

It's truly ironic that Shyam Benegal, among the prime movers of alternative Indian films, has come to believe that avant garde and popular films can no longer be set apart from each other. Benegal seems to overlook the fundamental differences underpinning the two cinematic genres. Mainstream cinema, more often

than not was, and still is, crass and commercial, regardless of its directors dabbling in experimental forms. The alternative genre, on the other hand, has intrinsically belonged

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to the realm of the radical and the sublime, filled with poetry, music and art. Two varying sets of aesthetics have marked the two divergent cultural products.

Alternative film directors have been dedicated to creating new cinematic forms, breaking away from the formulaic popular

genre. Torchbearers of the emblematic French new wave cinema, Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol among others, expressed their idea of realism, using real locations, improvised scripts and natural lighting. Alternative films have since mutated and transformed themselves. But their essential soul of transgressing boundaries has stayed intact. Conflating the mainstream with the alternative is simply useless.

Filmmakers like Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani have set the bar of alternative cinema high creating a 'purely cinematic object', transcending barriers of routine imagery. Kaul's cinema is identified with his imaginative use of classical music. Like Godard, Kaul began his work with the image and then moved into the text. Shahani's imagery reflects his search for alternate modes of expression free from conventional constraints. No doubt mainstream cinema is borrowing some elements from alternative films as accessories. But the end product is often chaotic sans the cerebral appeal of alternative cinema.