

Three Idiots

A Trip of Discoveries and Enlightenment

by Irenna Chang



Three Idiots, © photo: rapid eye movies

Summary:

Three Idiots is a Bollywood blockbuster hit which invites the audience twice for a journey. First, the protagonists search for their lost buddy Rancho. Second, the film introduces a journey through the Indian educational system and questions the moral and idols of learning.

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The metaphor “life is a journey” appears so frequently in poems, TV programs, and other media that it almost becomes a cliché, depending on the context in which it appears or is used. Life and journey resemble each other in two major aspects: both are unpredictable and offer people lessons in the process. These similarities can also be found between life and film, as well as film and journey. Since film is an art form that mirrors life, the experience of watching a movie is likened to journey into a world constructed by artistic imagination. Film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state well: “a film takes us on a journey, offering a patterned experience that engages our minds and emotions” (2010:2). The experience is certainly patterned (the imaginative world is constructed and presented in a certain way), but audience members’ levels of psychological involvement varies from “scopophilia” (objectification of the image on screen), “identification with the image seen” (Mulvey 1975:60), and “suture” (Hayward 1996:371),¹ subject to film styles and factors such as viewers’ gender, class, race, and ethnicity.

Rajkumar Hirani’s film *Three Idiots* (India 2009) is a movie that sutures or “stitch[es] the spectator into the film text” (Hayward 1996:375) because, in this film, viewers become travel companions of Chatur (Omi Vaidya), Farhan (R. Madhavan), and Raju (Sharman Joshi) rather than remaining onlookers of what happens to these men or identifying with any of them. In her review of *Three Idiots*, Kaveree Bamzai (2009), Managing Editor of *India Today*, claims, “From the moment the Air India aircraft takes off and R. Madhavan (Farhan) unbuckles his seat belt, the movie takes flight.” Bamzai’s statement nicely captures what the film does to its viewers: it takes the audience on an exciting trip of discoveries and enlightenment as they, through sight, join Farhan, Raju, and Chatur on a journey in search of Rancho (Aamir Khan), Farhan and Raju’s buddy in college who disappears after graduation. To achieve this effect, Hirani relies heavily on cinematography, characterization, and pattern of development to create two modes of traveling for these men and viewers: physically taking a car trip to find Rancho while mentally traveling back to their college days (or school days).

Illusions of participation

The car trip to find Rancho starts at the airport, where the camera positions the spectators first as fellow travelers of Farhan and then of the group. Long shots of an India aircraft gliding toward the runway are intercut with medium long shots of the aircraft's interior showing cabin crew closing overhead bins to get ready for takeoff. This is where viewers first see Farhan in a medium shot answering a cell phone call during takeoff despite warnings from one of the flight attendants, as if they had boarded the plane with him. This phone call completely changes Farhan's itinerary. Viewers, along with all on board, are deceived by Farhan who fakes an illness to force the plane to return to the gate so that he can get off the plane. Audience members, then, see Farhan, unwilling to spend time to find a cab himself, deliberately getting into a cab which is supposed to pick up another passenger of the same last name as his. Once Farhan is in the car, the cab driver's face is shown in a medium close-up as he turns to talk to Farhan. The camera angle and framing used in this scene create an illusion for spectators: they are in the cab with Farhan. After Farhan picks up Raju, medium shots of both men in the back seat talking to one another create another illusion for viewers: they are in the front seat, turning their heads to look at the two exciting friends while they are heading to the Imperial College of Engineering to meet Chatur and, supposedly, Rancho.

The illusion is sustained after they arrive at the campus of the college, but it disappears for a moment to prepare viewers for the next stage of their journey. When Farhan and Raju get off the cab, a following shot filming the two men from behind is used to maintain the illusion, showing them running up stairs and climbing a ladder as if viewers are following them. However, the



Screenshot Three Idiots (source DVD Big Home)

illusion temporarily disappears when a high angle shot is used to film these men running up stairs from a window of the tank, as if someone is peering down at them from above. When they are about to reach the top of the tower, a helicopter shot shows Chatur waiting for their arrival in a complacent and triumphant manner. Then the camera gradually zooms in on all three of them, contrasting the confusion on Farhan's and Raju's faces (because Rancho is not there) with a sly smile on Chatur's face, who without turning his head greets them with a demeaning tone: "Welcome, idiots!" Now the title of the film, *Three Idiots*, is explained for the first time. If Farhan and Raju are "two" of the three idiots according to Chatur, Rancho must be the third, but why does Chatur call them "idiots"? It takes the rest of the film to answer the question.

What kindles viewers' desire to find the answer to the question by continuing the journey is the way Hirani delineates how Farhan, Raju, and Chatur respond to the news of Rancho's whereabouts. Our first meeting with each of them fills us with devouring curiosity to learn about their stories and to meet Rancho ourselves. Farhan, in order to reunite with Rancho, fakes a medical emergency, which puts him at the risk of being sued by the Air India and other passengers. His reaction indicates he will do anything just to get a chance to see Rancho again who obviously is a very important person to him. Similarly, Raju's response to the news is also very dramatic. In a hurry to join Farhan, he not only forgets to bring his socks, but most importantly he forgets to wear his pants. Like Farhan, he does not want to miss the opportunity to see Rancho again after losing contact with him for several years.

Chatur's reaction is also stagy, though he holds a different opinion of Rancho. When Farhan and Raju arrive at the tank and ask him where Rancho is; instead of answering their question, he shows them photos, from his cell phone, of expensive facilities (a heated swimming pool and a living room with maple flooring) of his 3.5 million mansion and a picture of his luxury car (Lamborghini 6496 cc). He indulges in showing off his riches and material success to Farhan and Raju. When they are puzzled by his behavior and ask him to explain his motive, the shot cuts to a flashback showing Chatur challenging Rancho to meet him at the tank of Imperial College of Engineering ten years later on September 5th, to see which of them is more successful than the other.

Then, it cuts to Chatur telling Farhan and Raju that he wants them to “[c]ome and see. Where [he has] reached and where [Rancho] rots.”

By portraying these men’s reactions in an exaggerated and humorous manner, Hirani ignites curiosity for Rancho in viewers. From the very beginning of the film, Rancho’s identity is surrounded by mystery. Before his appearance, audience members cannot help but ask, “Who is Rancho? Why does Farhan fake a heart attack during takeoff so that he can get off the airplane and go see Rancho with Chatur? Why does Raju temporarily lose his composure and forget to wear his pants when he is in a hurry to join Farhan and Chatur on a trip to meet Rancho? Also, why is Chatur so eager to humiliate him? What has happened between him and Chatur that spurs Chatur to challenge him in such a manner?”

Present/Past

To provide answers to these questions in an intriguing but clear manner, the director makes the present events alternating with the past events. The organizational pattern may look fixed and unvaried; it works well to keep audience members interested in these men’s stories because the past events (shown in flashbacks) are triggered by the unexpected situations encountered by the characters during their trip. Below is an overview of present and past events that help answer the questions or move the plot forward:

A. Present events:

Believing that Chatur has found Rancho, Farhan and Raju change their schedules to go to the tank. However, they are exasperated when they find out that Rancho is not with Chatur. Chatur soon persuades them to join him on a car trip to meet Rancho.

B. Past events:

How Rancho impresses them with his great brilliance the first night on campus, these men’s family backgrounds, lessons from the director of the college, nicknamed “Virus” (Boman Irani), the event that provokes Chatur to challenge Rancho, how Rancho meets his love Pia, Virus’ younger daughter (Kareena Kapoor), the death of a fellow student (a victim of Virus’ teaching philosophy).

C. Present events:

Farhan, Raju, and Chatur arrive Rancho's home and are surprised to find that the real Rancho is not the Rancho they knew all these years, so they continue their journey.

D. Past events:

How Farhan and Raju, under the influence of Rancho, dare to pursue their dreams by breaking the norm, the sacrifices that Farhan, Raju, and Rancho have made for one another.

E. Present events:

Farhan and Raju unexpectedly discover that Pia is getting married that very day. They rush to her house and persuade Pia to run away from her wedding to join them on a road trip to meet Rancho.

F. Past events:

How, on a stormy night when the power goes out, Rancho helps Mona, Pia's sister, (Mona Singh) give birth to a baby boy by applying what he has learned in school, which makes Virus pass on the pen (given to him by his teacher and also his predecessor) that symbolizes excellence to Rancho.

G. Present events:

They arrive at the school founded by Rancho, but Rancho is not there; Rancho and some of his students are having a field trip by a blue lake; Pia kisses Rancho when she learns that he is still unmarried; Chatur is shocked to find that Rancho is Mr. Phunsukh Wangdu, a world-class inventor, with whom he tries to sign a business contract.

Journey into the unknown

The pattern of the development of the plot shows that Farhan, Raju, and Chatur may know a lot about Rancho than the audience does, but they do not know anything about Rancho's present condition just like viewers. In addition, the trip is full of the unknown just like any trip because the director does not disclose any information beforehand to these men, nor to viewers. Thus, the arrangement of the order of the events creates a sense of immediacy in spectators, making them travel companions of these men rather than remaining uninvolved in what happen to the men during the trip.

Moreover, the arrangement of the events also shows that *Three Idiots* is a narrative film that examines two serious topics – success and education – through telling the story of three college friends (Farhan, Raju, and Rancho) and Rancho's intellectual foe (Chatur). Although this film is didactic in nature,

it does not preach the message. Rather, viewers are invited to ponder on the two topics from two perspectives – one represented by Chatur and the other by Rancho – throughout the trip. Unsurprisingly, the rivalry and animosity that Chatur feels toward Rancho are introduced at the beginning of the film. In fact, it is a stroke of genius that Chatur is the initiator of the trip to find Rancho. As a successful first generation Indian immigrant to the U.S., Chatur, with a Bachelor degree in Engineering, has attained the American dream and cannot wait to prove to Farhan and Raju that he is more successful than Rancho. He is so proud of his achievements that he does not hesitate to call Rancho’s buddies “idiots” when they arrive at the tank.

Chatur’s smugness forces us to examine our own definitions of success and the correlation between success and education. Does success mean becoming rich and owing lots of expensive things? If we accept this definition, shall we believe that Chatur is the winner and that Rancho is the loser? Chatur’s photos seem to prove this. Nevertheless, is there a possibility that Rancho’s success will surpass Chatur’s expectations? The fact that Farhan and Raju are not intimidated by Chatur after viewing his photos tends to support this presupposition, though their behaviors may reflect a different definition of success. So, the gathering of Farhan, Raju, and Chatur at the tank of the college not only prepares viewers for the road trip to find Rancho, but also help them get ready for a journey of the heart.

As indicated by the pattern of development discussed a couple of paragraphs earlier, the first mode of travelling works as a context and the second mode as a channel for the director to examine the two topics (success and education). The problems related to the two topics are well accounted for by Rajeiv Masand (2009), an Indian film critic and entertainment reporter for CNN-



Screenshot Three Idiots (source DVD Big Home)

IBN, in his review of the film: “Loosely based on Chetan Bhagat's pulpy best-seller *Five Point Someone*, *Three Idiots* takes light-hearted but pointed jabs at the Indian education system, raising pertinent questions about the relevance of learning by rote, the obsession with high grades, and the dangerous repercussions of parental pressure to pursue traditional streams.” The issues pointed out by Masand here have great influence on Chatur's, Farhan's, and Raju's lives, as well as their academic performances and career choices; Rancho is the only one who is immune to these.

Who is the idiot?

All three issues are introduced in the first series of flashbacks and are elaborated in subsequent flashbacks. To demonstrate the two perspectives on education represented by Chatur and Rancho, an event dealing with the issue of “the relevance of learning by rote” will be used as an example here. Following is what happens when Chatur and Rancho are still freshmen:

In a class, the professor asks the students: *“What is a machine?”*
(*Though a couple of students raise their hands, the professor calls on Rancho to answer the question.*)

Rancho replies: *“Sir, a machine is anything that reduces human effort.”*
When the professor tells Rancho to elaborate on his answer, he says, “Anything that simplifies work, or saves time, is a machine. It's a warm day, press a button, get a blast of air. The fan...A machine! Speak to a friend miles away. The telephone...A machine! Compute millions in seconds. The calculator...A machine! We're surrounded by machines. From a pen's nib to a pants' zip – all machines. Up and down in a second. Up, down, up, down...” (Rancho pulls his jeans' zipper up and down to illustrate his point, which causes students to roar with laughter.)

Infuriated by his answer and behavior, the professor throws a piece of chalk at Rancho's face and asks him again: *“What is the definition?”*

Rancho replies: *“I just gave it to you, sir.”*

The professor asks: *“You'll write this in the exam? This is a machine – up, down...”*

Then, the professor says: *“Idiot! Anybody else?”*

At this moment, Chatur raises his hand and recites the definition he has memorized from the textbook: *“Sir, machine are any combination of bodies so connected that their relative motions are constrained and by which means, force and motion may be transmitted and modified as a screw and its nut, or a lever arranged to turn about a*

fulcrum or a pulley about its pivot, etc., especially, a construction, more or less complex consisting of a combination of moving parts, or simple mechanical elements, as wheels, levers, cams etc."

The professor is so pleased with Chatur's answer that he responds: *"Wonderful! Perfect. Sit down."*

When Rancho tells the professor that he has *"said the same thing in simple language,"* the professor tells Rancho: *"If you prefer simple language, join an Arts and Commerce college."*

Rancho explains: *"But sir, one must get the meaning too. What's the point of blindly cramming a bookish definition?"*

The professor rebukes him: *"You think you're smarter than the book? Write the textbook definition, mister, if you want to pass."*

Rancho tells the professor: *"but there are other books...";* however, without hearing one more word, the professor tells Rancho: *"Get out!"* Rancho is shocked, but he leaves as ordered.

When Rancho comes back to fetch his book, the professor questions him: *"Why are you back?"*

Rancho replies: *"I forgot something?"*

The professor says: *"What?"*

Rancho responds: *"Instruments that record, analyze, summarize, organize, debate and explain information; that are illustrated, non-illustrated, hard-bound, paperback, jacketed, non-jacketed, with foreword, introduction, table-of-contents, index, that are intended for the enlightenment, understanding, enrichment, enhancement, and education of the human brain through the sensory route of vision. Sometimes touch."*

The professor pauses for a moment and then asks: *"What do you mean?"*

Rancho answers: *"Books, sir."* (Students respond with another roar of laughter.)

The professor says: *"Couldn't you ask simply?"*

Rancho says: *"I tried earlier, sir. It simply didn't work."*



Screenshot *Three Idiots* (source DVD Big Home)

Apparently, Chatur is the champion student in the professor's eyes because he can recite word-for-word the definition of "machine" found in the textbook; whereas, Rancho is an idiot because he does not memorize the definition from the textbook. This is where the title of the film is explained the second time. This scene demonstrates that memorizing every word from the textbook without comprehending its meaning is encouraged by the professor while Rancho's ability in critical thinking and applying classroom knowledge to real life situations is not appreciated.

The professor is not the only one in this prestigious college who has a wrong idea about education and success, the director of the college who students nicknamed "Virus" also fails miserably. The speech he gives to freshmen every year is quoted as follows:

A koel bird never makes her own nest. She lays her eggs in other nests. And when they hatch, what do they do? They push the other eggs out of the nest. Competition over. Their life begins with murder. That's nature. Compete or die. You also are like the koel birds. And these are the eggs you smashed to get into ICE. Don't forget, ICE gets 400,000 applications a year and only 200 are selected – You! And these? Finished. Broken eggs. My son ... he tried for three years. Rejected. Every time. Remember, life is a race. If you don't run fast, you'll get trampled.

This kind of teaching philosophy only promotes egocentricity and hatred in students' hearts rather than cultivate their love for learning and respect for fellow human beings. Another film critic, Mayank Shekhar (2009) makes an insightful comment on the kind of education this college offers its students:

The campus here could be any Indian college. Usually a dreaded professor, referred to by his initials or acronym, walks around to dry you out of any interest in learning. I had someone called KRC. These boys have Virus. [...] Rancho evaluates through him a cruel, classist examination system

that passes off as an education system. Not surprising, this rote-learning, even from India's best institutions, produces more a bureaucracy to serve the corporate and banking sector, than any original thinkers.

Shekhar's statement sheds light on the problems raised by the film. Learning by rote extinguishes any spark of interest that students have in learning, and the pressure of getting high grades and meeting parental expectations create robots rather than inventors in the college that is supposed to be a cradle for excellent engineers. By insisting on being an idiot (I'll Do It On my Terms), Rancho has offended the professor, Virus, Chatur, and those who support this learning method; nevertheless, he also has won the friendship, respect, and love of Farhan, Raju, Pia, and other characters along the way.

Conclusion

The theme of travelling and looking for a long lost friend or family member is not new or uncommon in film. What is fascinating about *Three Idiots* is the impact it has on viewers via what is revealed during the two modes of traveling. There is no doubt that Rancho/Wangdu is an icon of high intelligence and extreme success – he graduates from the Imperial College of Engineering with honors and becomes a great inventor (companies compete again one another to buy the patents of his inventions). Though this Indian film depicts the value system embraced by many people of diverse cultures and nationalities, it does so with commentary. By suturing viewers into the film text (taking the audience on a journey to discover who Rancho really is), the director invites viewers to reflect on their own beliefs in how teaching, learning, and success are achieved, as well as what education and success mean to them.

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Filmography

Three Idiots: India 2009, dir. Rajkumar Hirani, Hindi and English.

Notes

- ¹ For theories explaining the relationship between the spectator and film, please refer to works by film theorists such as Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, Jackie Stacy, and Jean-Pierre Oudart. In this paper, I do not intend to enter their conversations, but found their concepts useful in explaining different levels of viewing experience.