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Abstract

This is a book review of Rochona Majumdar, *Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

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Author Notes

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Majumdar, Rochona, *Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

To a reader interested in Indian art cinema, this is a rare book that asks two important questions: what is global art cinema in postcolonial India and what is its historical significance? Outwardly simple as they are, these questions are placed in a more complex context in the second sentence of the book: “It is also a book about art cinema as a mode of doing history in a postcolonial setting.” Implicit in the historical project of the book is the understated role of religion in culture generally, insofar as the idioms and cinematic imagery deployed invariably rework archetypal Hindu concepts. In fact, the films discussed in this book acknowledge as much: in India, especially, religious belief has historical depth and cultural representation in Indian art cinema that cannot be set apart from a culture’s aestheticization of belief. The qualification is important as we enter this fine book on Majumdar’s own terms. Art cinema in Majumdar’s thinking responded to a crisis in the Nehruvian grand narrative of the nation that soon after independence had begun to stall and stagnate. Art cinema began to address this failure long before the historians. Majumdar then turns to three masters of Indian art cinema—Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), Mrinal Sen (1923–2018) and Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976)—to “apprehend” the conflict in the Indian “postcolonial present.” “Apprehend” and “the postcolonial present” recur in the book in key places. The first is a word that captures both understanding and the dread of the future (it is a term to which Majumdar would return, giving it a lengthier explanation, in her concluding remarks), the second is defined as a “dynamic attunement to temporality” (2) in which is enmeshed possible futures. The latter may be likened to the simple present in many Sanskrit and Prakrit derived vernaculars (Hindi and Urdu certainly, Bengali possibly) which is invariably the present continuous.

But first, what is Indian art cinema? Majumdar offers an historical origin by reading it as a post-Indian independence phenomenon. This argument may be objected to by people for

whom cinema, any cinema, is, by definition, a radically “democratic” art form because it combines narrative with the moving image. Would Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) not be art cinema, or the movies of the mid-thirties (P C Barua’s *Devdas* [1935], and Himansu Rai’s *Acchut Kanya* [The Dalit Woman, 1936] come to mind immediately) made after the advent of sound? Possibly, but not quite, argues Majumdar, because any engagement with art cinema must take into account its prior presence in other world cinemas, and especially the cinema of continental auteurs like De Sica, Fellini, Bergman, Goddard and Renoir. It follows that for a “national” art cinema to come into being the aesthetic principles or laws that governed global art cinema had to be understood both creatively and critically. Creative understanding implied knowledge of the film-making techniques of these masters and critical understanding meant the creation of the right kinds of reflective judgment on art cinema. Clearly, the latter could not be simply impressionistic judgments on aesthetic value; they had to be linked to a determinative judgment that had taken shape in the global patrimony that came with the continental auteurs. A body of “enlightened aesthete citizens” had to be created.

And here, as before in modern Indian literature, Bengali sensibility steps in and Bengal provides the intellectual capital with which the historical crisis of aesthetic modernity in postcolonial India could be addressed. In this argument, Majumdar’s three selected Bengali filmmakers “informed” their works with the idea of creating, in the first instance, good, responsible citizens who would also debate ways in which good cinema (and here they meant art cinema) made one aware of the historical present. The precondition for this—principally in middle class Calcutta—was the creation of art-house theatres and film societies where continental art films were shown and discussed. Soon, however, the socio-critical project of producing good, critically self-aware, denizens was left behind as Ray, Sen and Ghatak, especially in their city (Calcutta) trilogies, delinked art cinema from a secular teleology aimed at creating an enlightened collective citizenry. Instead these films expressed, aesthetically, the

synchronic present, the here and now, that had to be “apprehended” in all its aesthetic potentiality—complex, contradictory, despairing but also uplifting as it was—through the internal design of films. In Ghatak, for instance, one gets the sense of an ongoing and persistent trauma of the partition of Bengal into Indian Bengal and Pakistani Bengal (later Bangladesh), in Sen the permanent condition of youthful anger not in its ennobling popular form (as seen in Bollywood’s Amitabh Bachchan figure) but as a marker of social impotency, and in Ray one gets a turn to the aesthetic itself as a self-validating creative act where time is stilled. There is, in other words, no one or singular narrative of the Indian “postcolonial present.” The transition to modernity had yet to be fulfilled, is the argument here.

Since these films have anticipated the insights of historians and provided “a particular form of knowledge about the postcolonial condition” (20), Majumdar must undertake a survey of the arrival of the “idea” of art cinema in India. Anglo-Bengal is as old as Anglo-America or Anglo-Australia and Anglo-Canada, possibly a little older. Bengal was thus receptive to ideas that grew out of serious theorizing about world art cinema. Calcutta film clubs, formal and informal, and theatres—the work of the British film society activist Marie Seton in India is exemplary in Majumdar’s account—began to seek answers to the defining question: What constituted “art cinema”? The film around which the question registered the most exciting discussion was Satyajit Ray’s phenomenal *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*, 1955), a film that made it to Cannes film festival in 1956 thanks to the persistent efforts of Marie Sexton who, writing in 1974, said that in the previous 18 years she had spent eight of them in India. *Pather Panchali* triggered serious discussions about realist cinema, the cinema of humanism, cinematic quality, film appreciation, visual composition, and the point of view of the camera eye, often in the comparative context of film classics such as De Sica’s neo-realist *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).

Ray's success and his continued "presencing" of quality "art cinema" had a powerful impact on Ritwick Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, two directors who along with Satyajit Ray form the centre of Majumdar's study. Both Ghatak and Sen admired Ray but began to work with cinema that was more politically and socially engaging. They felt that Ray's humanist streak and turn to high modernist principles of aesthetic expressionism both disavowed the reality of national stagnation and failed to grasp the mythological substratum of the Indian collective unconscious. Ghatak himself had narrowed that collective unconscious to a specifically Bengali one where the Jungian archetype of the eternal mother (in the form of the goddess Durga) played a decisive role. In the Bengali imaginary, moreover, there was always the ghost of Tagore and the mystique of literature generally. Eschewing cosmopolitanism and a sense of the universal language of art cinema, Ghatak infused his works with vernacular energies drawn from regional myths and folklore. These qualities lead Majumdar to make an important claim: the topic of Indian art film must acknowledge the pioneering status of Ghatak. Ray himself had emphasized the story-telling function of cinema and had eschewed experimentation for its own sake even when this formalist reading of aesthetics in many ways contradicted his own cinematic innovations on camera work, music and the creation of mise-en-scenes with highly charged emotional resonances. The first part of Majumdar's study ("The History of Art Cinema") with which I have been concerned thus far now turns to the idea of "new cinema" and Majumdar uses Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) to negotiate Ray's insistence on the primacy assigned to the narrative function of cinema.

Whereas for Ray art cinema should possess an organic cohesion so as to realistically and truthfully portray human behaviour, for Mrinal Sen realism was one of a range of codes deployed in cinema. These codes require constant change and reflection because any code that makes its way into the popular imagination would be readily (mis)appropriated by commercial, mainstream, and here principally Bollywood cinema. And so the question facing art cinema is

the old Salman Rushdie chestnut “how does newness enter literature?” reformulated as “how does newness enter cinema art?” The reformulation, however, is not meant to separate literature from cinema because the impetus of art cinema invariably comes from its association with literature. This was true of Ray, and continued to be true of Ghatak and Sen.

The proof text of the aesthetics of this new cinema and what form newness took in art cinema is then examined by Majumdar through a careful analysis of Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*. Supported by the Indian Film Finance Corporation, *Bhuvan Shome* presented itself as a radical departure from the kinds of humanist realism found in Ray's films. Sen used freeze frames, animation, voice over, dramatic montage shots and juxtapositions to advance a narrative of accommodation and readjustment on the part of an intellectually privileged, somewhat aloof, and even imperious member of the educated but inward-looking Bengali class, the *bhadralok*. Like Ray and Ghatak, Sen too based his film on a story but his treatment of the original by Banaphool (1899–1979) oscillates between the realist and the parodic or comic. Bhuvan Shome, the representative of his class, has something of an epiphany during his encounter with the village girl Gauri (the relationship has obvious sexual overtones) who persuades him to dress up as an Indian villager for a bird shooting trip. Gauri takes the eponymous figure through a haunted bungalow and desert scapes before a flock of swans and flamingos is seen and a bird is shot. The bureaucrat would undergo a change and, returning to his office after his hunting trip, he reevaluates his previous non-contingent (and therefore absolute) moral standards by rewarding Gauri's husband, who was known as a “bribe-taking functionary.” The change in moral stance or values does not of itself bring about the sense of newness one associates with Indian new wave or radical cinema. What is new and avant-gardist is not the theme but its stylistic representation in cinema through new ways of charting the narrative. What is then foregrounded is precisely this sense of newness where the postcolonial mimics cinematic modernism but articulates it differently. This difference—a sly mimicry that

also participates in *différance*, the deferral of mimesis—is seen by Majumdar as the sign of newness entering the postcolonial space even as a positive definition of newness is eschewed. Satyajit Ray, to whom aesthetic sensibility requires organic unity and an expression of humanist realism, had described Sen’s foundational work scathingly as “Big Bad Bureaucrat Reformed by Rustic Belle.” India’s greatest cinematic auteur, for once, got his reading of this path-breaking film spectacularly wrong.

Radical cinema is not to be seen as a sudden moment of eruption or flowering; it grew out of a number of factors that came together soon after Indian independence. Majumdar traces these in the final chapter of Part I of her work. Film societies played a key role in this flowering for without them Majumdar declares “there would have been no art cinema,” the latter a descriptor she uses interchangeably with “good cinema” and “new cinema.” The societies and their patrons were conscious of the value of art cinema in raising social and political consciousness, a simple enough aim but understandable in India where cinema was primarily a projection of make-believe worlds. Two different understandings of “good cinema” surfaced in postcolonial India and both are associated with the first ever international festival of films hosted by India in 1952. The first twenty years of Indian art cinema (1947-1965) was an exercise in educating people what good taste and aesthetic judgment were. The latter was principally a mode of bringing into Indian viewing practice habits formed by the European masters of art cinema. In a sense this was very much an art for art’s sake phenomenon. Post-1965, however, an understanding of or an engagement with cinema and ideology became more important and urgent. The art filmmaker now was seen to have a larger political responsibility which was also an ethical responsibility. Whereas the first phase of the appreciation of art films in India grew out of the formation of film societies and a fan base and emphasized aesthetic judgment with reference to such European auteurs as Godard, Renoir, De Sica, and Rossellini, the second phase began to acquire a sharper and more urgent political edge. The cinema of

Ghatak, Sen, and Ray could now be read as political cinema. Three events were critical for the latter awareness: the Naxalite agitation (1967–71) that affected Bengali intelligentsia, the 1971 Bangladesh War, and the declaration of the national emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Good films, it was now argued, could not be decoupled from these political upheavals. Nor could they remain neutral when it came to problems such as “unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, violence, war, the plight of refugees, class differences, and other such issues” (115). The desire for political cinema rather than “superb craftsmanship” became important and Ray himself began to be seen as something of a “bourgeois filmmaker” with his tendency to aestheticize social horrors through his “impeccable cinematic sensibility” (120). Unsurprisingly, Calcutta film societies and aesthetes generally began to reevaluate Ritwik Ghatak, a filmmaker whose works allowed critical spectators to combine taste with political awareness. In the second part of her book, Majumdar then turns to the city trilogies of Ghatak, Sen, and Ray to examine the role of film art with reference to the larger and more urgent questions about the nature of the nation state.

The Ghatak chapter in Part II, entitled “Ritwik Ghatak and the Overcoming of History,” is where Majumdar examines Ghatak’s Partition Trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (*E-Flat*, 1961) and *Subarnarekha* (*The Golden Line*, 1962). Ghatak’s themes are serious and deal directly with the trauma of the partition of Bengal in the lives of refugees. Cinematically, however, Ghatak departed from the “protocols of cinematic realism” (128) by infusing his works with levels of poetic intensity, archetypal imagery, and song sequences hitherto missing, to the same extent, in the works of Satyajit Ray. In popular Indian cinema the song text functioned as a parallel text alongside the narrative, sometimes advancing it, often functioning as a filler but also capturing emotional intensities along principles established in Indian classic *rasa* theory where a text evoked a variety of emotions in a reader. There is much in this chapter on Ghatak that requires a commentary

because Ghatak's films represent a more complex engagement with art cinema by Indians generally. I want to focus on Ghatak's use of songs that "rupture the present" by imbricating it in another tradition. Songs, of course, are also poetry and poetic discourse does not lend itself to an easy representational paraphrase. The title of *Komal Gandhar*, the e-flat note, the *komal ga* on the Indian harmonium so fundamental to folk ragas, is indicative; Majumdar reads Ghatak's films as evocative instantiations of the prose poem, related to music and art. The figure who looms large in Ghatak's imagination is, of course, Rabindranath Tagore. In *Subarnarekha* at key moments there is the haunting presence of Tagore's prose poem 'Shishutirtha' ('The Child,' 1930). Lines from the poem are cited by characters and each citation deepens the sense of the film's tragic ending. In the three films examined in this chapter songs transcend the temporal register of the narrative by being both inside a film and outside of it: inside, because it is part of the narrative diegesis, but outside because it has an autonomous presence sometimes prior to the film (if the song is a poem by a poet). Ghatak's *Megha Dhaka Tara*, for instance, has five musical interludes made up of "two classical Indian ragas, one *rabindrasangeet* and two folk songs" (142). What I find fascinating in Majumdar's treatment of songs in this film is her insight into the power of songs in deploying mythic archetypes that form a kind of cultural substratum of Indian quotidian life. The central archetype is that of the Mother figure as both the benevolent Durga and the vengeful and fearful Kali. The ambivalence, captured in the songs, mark out the tragic life of Nita, the sacrificial figure in the refugee family. In this respect songs powerfully foreground Ghatak's understanding of a filmmaker: to make a film is to be a poet.

I have commented on Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*, a film examined in some detail by Majumdar in the first part of her book. Her aim there was to place the film in the context of "newness" where the art of cinema (with its many visual possibilities) engages with the received tradition of formal realism. In particular Majumdar's reading of this film signals the

creative use of what Satyajit had dismissed as pretentious “gimmicks.” Regrettably, I have not been able to view carefully Sen’s Calcutta trilogy because, in the absence of English subtitles, my understanding of Bengali is limited to recognizable Sanskrit words in the language. However, the radical use of camerawork is unmistakably present as well as a departure from the realist protocols of Ray so evident especially in Sen’s Calcutta trilogy *Interval* [1970], *Calcutta 71* [1972] and *The Guerrilla Fighter* [1973]. These films were made in quick succession about the plight of the youth in Calcutta. Hence the title of the chapter on Sen: “Anger and After.”

I therefore turn to the final substantive chapter of the book, the chapter on Satyajit Ray. Given his powerful presence as the great auteur of Indian art cinema who believed in art as aesthetic experience, not necessarily linked to a teleological historical project—a point in many forms made by Majumdar throughout the book—a reader may have expected a reading of Ray’s city trilogy as irrelevant, dated, and perhaps even irresponsible because there is no real engagement with the failures of the nation state. Instead what we find in the chapter on Ray is Majumdar’s best writing, which demonstrates her genuine love of art cinema and of Ray’s monumental achievement.

The city trilogy examined in the chapter entitled, “The Ultimate Filmmaker: Ray’s City Trilogy and the Crisis of Historicism,” are: *Pratiwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*, 1971), and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975). They are character studies bereft of “historical movement” and concentrate instead on a moment of stilled (or stalled) temporality. As such, one could argue that against Ghatak and Sen’s emphasis on historical crises and their traumatic repercussions, Ray’s works simply repeat his emphasis on the aesthetic moment for its own sake. To redeem Ray, Majumdar redefines him as an ethnographer who documents “the contemporary as deadlock in the nation’s history” (190) and in this way he critiques and refashions the long tradition of Anglo-Bengal. There is, then, no

turning away from historicism, as Ray recasts historical temporality as a long Anglo-Bengali present where youth, anger, and poverty plague the postcolonial. Ray, therefore, chronicles history without proffering solutions. The artist turns into an ethnographer who is engaged with an impasse in the here and now. Cinematically, to capture the dense nature of that impasse, Calcutta is effectively split open, its drabness, its thick atmosphere, and its claustrophobic surroundings presented through a black and white palette. The old *bhadralok* (privileged, enlightened class) and the new *boxwallahs* (the anglicized Bengali professional working in elite British firms) of Anglo-Bengal are examined with reference to the lives of all three key protagonists in the Calcutta trilogy (and all male, let us not forget) who are incapable of handling a new capitalist modernity—and they flounder. All Ray could do is record the present, recognize the present as an impasse, stress the moment but offer no future. He can only offer, as Majumdar concludes, “an aesthetic expression of a sober, postcolonial temperament” (221). Within art inhere permanent values that are part of a culture’s determinative judgment. To know the present and to express it in art is to Ray the higher calling.

In her Epilogue to the book, Majumdar declares that art cinema in India disappeared quite abruptly around the mid-1980s. The first blow came with the restructuring of the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), a body that had hitherto directly supported Indian art cinema. NFDC’s new theoretical understanding of cinema was that the success of cinema generally would foster the growth, alongside it, of art cinema—which Majumdar holds was mistaken. Majumdar also cites the Indian Government’s financial support in 1980 for Richard Attenborough’s epic rendition of the Mahatma in the film *Gandhi* (1982) as the final nail in the coffin. Additionally, with the opening up of the Indian economy, the dividing line between art and commercial cinema became blurred and what Majumdar calls “India’s media ecology” underwent a dramatic change. These are valuable pointers to the demise of Indian art cinema, but I would point to something else in the Epilogue. Referring to a 2011 meeting in which

several Bengali filmmakers came together to suggest that the defunct Calcutta Film Society should be revived since it played such an important role in “Kolkata’s [Calcutta’s] hallowed intellectual tradition,” Majumdar comments, “Art cinema was pitched to the public as an integral part of Bengali heritage, whose memory is nostalgically invoked as that past recedes from living memory” (227). This is a key observation and it takes me to Majumdar’s overarching analytic defined as “apprehension” by which she meant, after Lisa Wedeen, a mode of capturing or understanding, as well as anxious reading. The anxiety that remains hidden in the book is a kind of failed declaration. The book is really a careful (and brilliant) reading of a particular sensibility and this sensibility is a Bengali (not trans-Indian) sensibility which, in the end, produced “Indian” art cinema. And when other regional and national (Bollywood) cinemas turned to “art cinema” or attempted to incorporate elements of the latter in their various cinemas, they have done so as an act of plagiaristic or suggestive homage to this Bengali sensibility. The sensibility, as I have already noted, grew out of an Anglo-Bengali culture which is as old as any other borrowed Anglo culture in a British postcolony. Without an understanding of that sensibility, which a non-Bengali speaker has to learn by painstakingly watching subtitled Bengali art cinema before he or she can seriously engage with this very fine book, a proper understanding of “Indian” art cinema is near impossible. Majumdar does not make this “deep structure” of Indian art cinema explicit. Her silence on this notwithstanding, a careful reading of this scholarly work gives remarkable insights into why Indian art cinema in the end remained a borrowed European form (within a Bengali sensibility) and not an art form that could claim to be trans-Indian, where the cultural practices of an ancient and continuing civilization, in a distilled form, produced a specifically “national” art cinema.