Ritwik Ghatak’s Cinema of Partition

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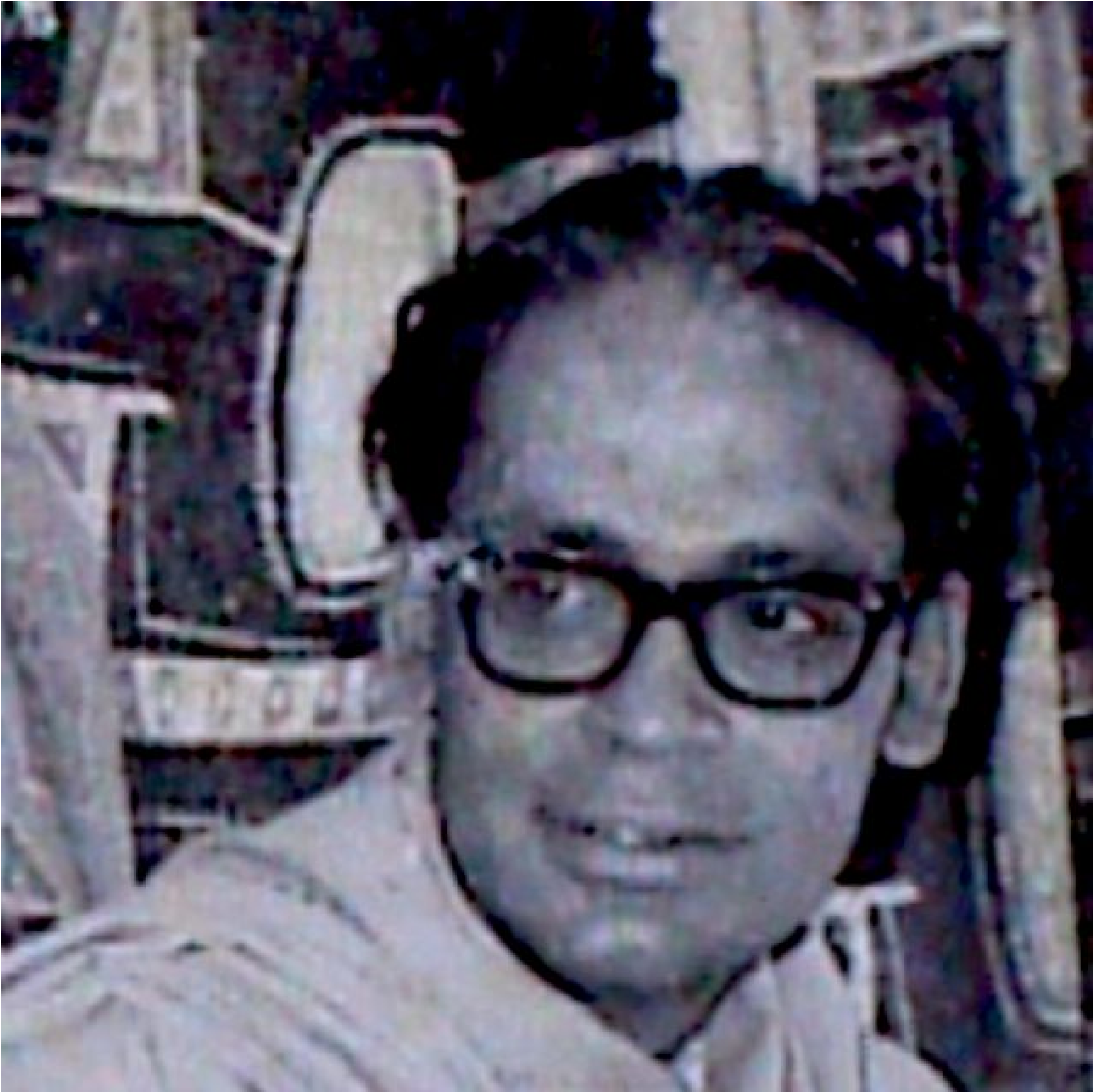

AT A CRITICAL POINT in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*/*The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960), the Bengali filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak's best-known and most commercially successful work, the aged patriarch of the family at the center of the film turns directly toward the screen and, in a moment of unexpected theatricality, shouts, "I accuse…!" The force of these words, hurled (in English, breaking from the film's vernacular Bengali) at the audience and punctuated by the speaker's gesticulations and a pointed finger, is almost immediately blunted when his son retorts: "Whom?" The old man despondently lowers his finger and mutters, "Nobody." It is highly unlikely that Ghatak was unaware of the historical resonances of the *J'accuse* at the heart of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. However, where Zola's famous cry elicited fierce

responses both celebratory and condemnatory, Ghatak's politics of despair imagined a fate worse than either: how does one adjudicate blame and point the finger when there is no singular figure to embody the crime?

Born on November 4, 1925, in Dhaka (East Bengal, present-day Bangladesh) to an upper-middle-class family, Ritwik Ghatak received an education and came of age as a refugee in the colonial Calcutta, India, of the 1940s. He experienced firsthand the successive migrant and refugee crises resulting from the British-engineered famines of 1943, which directly caused approximately three million deaths and led to generation-spanning conditions of catastrophic poverty; widespread social upheavals due to World War II; followed by massive violence along communal lines during the Partition of India in 1947, when, as part of Britain's relinquishment of control over India, the nation was carved up into India and Pakistan, while the province of Bengal was sundered into primarily Hindu West Bengal and primarily Muslim East Bengal. Ghatak's response to these calamitous events was to commit to Marxist thought and praxis, which he did by working with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) — the artistic and cultural organ of the Communist Party of India — in varying roles as an actor, director, and playwright from about 1946 to the mid-1950s.

New York City's Film at Lincoln Center recently commemorated Ghatak's 94th birthday through *Poetry and Partition: The Films of Ritwik Ghatak* (November 1–6, 2019), a retrospective presenting seven of his eight feature films in new digital restorations and with greatly improved subtitling. An accompanying symposium at Columbia University, titled "Global Ritwik Ghatak," featured critics and scholars across disciplinary lines, including film theorists Nora M. Alter, Dudley Andrew, and Moinak Biswas; literary and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; and the Kenyan novelist, playwright, and public intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Anticipation around the event had built up for some time, and on the days I attended (November 5–6), the Elinor Bunin Munroe theater was packed. But if this, the third-ever Ghatak retrospective in the United States, was clearly aimed toward the double projects of compensating for decades of institutional neglect and (finally) securing Ghatak's place in the putative canon of global art cinema, it was hard to receive the rhetoric of globalization and canonization without skepticism. In fact, Ghatak's work resists the historicist ideology that permits the construction of categories such as "global art cinema" in the first place — something most clearly evident in the history of Ghatak's long-standing invisibility (opacity may be a better word) within Western cultural contexts.

Ritwik Ghatak died in 1976 at the age of 50, professional success having for the most part eluded him; while a troubled personal life riven by persistent alcoholism no doubt hastened his end. A 1982 column by the British critic Derek Malcolm in *Sight & Sound* recalls the enthusiastic reception accorded Ghatak's work by Western critics at a film festival in Madras. Malcolm describes Ghatak as an "intensely national filmmaker" who

was “most certainly of international calibre.” But by 1996, when the New York Film Festival presented the first retrospective of Ghatak’s work in the United States, Western cultural institutions had not yet concurred with Malcolm; the American critic J. Hoberman described the filmmaker and his work as “scandalously obscure.” More than 10 years later, Ghatak’s work remained illegible within Western notions of “world cinema” — in 2008, another critic, Jonathan Rosenbaum, deemed Ghatak a “maverick” and “one of the most neglected major filmmakers in the world.” Now, at the end of another decade, we appear to have rapidly moved from Ghatak-the-Obscure to Ghatak-the-Global.

The tendency toward complicating enduring (European) narratives of (the world’s) art and culture by belatedly acknowledging those other histories which have exceeded the reach of these narratives, while welcome, can obscure the question of just whom is being served when the subject becomes globalized. Whose narratives are enriched, reinvigorated even, by adding a bit of global flavor? And to what extent does this truly decenter entrenched narratives constructed around center-periphery axes? What does it mean to append that adjective — *global* — to the name of a profoundly modernist filmmaker and film theorist whose work confounded Euro-American aesthetic conventions of form and style; who consistently refused the seductions of a secondhand Euro-American modernity (because he readily discerned its irrevocably colonial foundations); and who remained unassimilable to Euro-American accounts of “global” or “world” cinema? It seems that, by the end of 2019, American institutions were ready to (re-)declare Ritwik Ghatak as both “intensely national” and “of international calibre,” but the temporal lag involved in this belated adulation — that also operates as a critical redressal — suggests a flaw in the system that authorizes such acknowledgment in the first place.

Contrast Ghatak against one of his contemporaries, another Indian modernist filmmaker one whose name is far more familiar to Western audiences: Satyajit Ray. For most of Europe and the United States, Ray’s is the name immediately associated with Indian art cinema. The maker of numerous commercially successful films that garnered critical and popular acclaim both within India and worldwide, Ray was recognized in his lifetime by international juries and festivals, eventually winning a lifetime achievement award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Jacob Levich, writing in 1997, summarized the contrast pithily when he named Ray the “suitable boy of Indian art cinema — unthreatening, career-oriented, reliably tasteful” and Ghatak the “problem child.” [1] The films of Ritwik Ghatak, forged in the fires of Partition and its aftermaths, with their wildly energetic riffs on melodrama and realism; militant leftist strategies and disruptive moments of Brechtian alienation; Indian folk mythologies and epic traditions; and formal and stylistic experimentation with sound and image were always going to be illegible to (Euro-American) constructions of “world cinema” alongside the mannered austerity and studied brilliance of Ray’s work, informed as much by his experience working with Jean Renoir as by Italian neorealist cinema.

For the historical formulation of categories like “global art cinema” or “world cinema” rests upon certain premises which determine how cultural texts outside Euro-American frameworks are read. One such premise, as the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty influentially argued in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), is historicism — which “made modernity or capitalism look not simply not global but rather […] something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place [Europe] and then spreading outside it.” [2] This logic of deferral translates historical time into “a measure of cultural distance,” securing for Euro-American cultural institutions the conditions for admitting a Ray but denying a Ghatak, saying “not yet.” The former *becomes* a global citizen, India’s contribution to a global cinematic modernism, because he is first *read* as such. The history of Ghatak’s reception in the West, both a prolonged deferral and a cycle of discoveries and rediscoveries, underscores the temporal asymmetries implicit in such notions of global art, which always presumes a legibility that originates within European contexts.

If Ray’s *Pather Panchali* alerted the Western world to the emergence of a modernist idiom within Indian national cinema, it — and the continuation of Apu’s story in *Aparajito/The Unvanquished* (1956) and *Apur Sansar/Apu’s Household* (1959) — also told a story of uplift. Throughout the trilogy, Apu moves from rural poverty (pictured early on as coeval with pre-modern pastoralism) to establishing, and securing, a domicile under industrialized modernity in the metropolis of Calcutta. This politics (and poetics) of uplift is crystallized in one of the most rapturous scenes in the history of cinema: a near-fantastical vision Apu experiences as a child when, playing in a field of *kaash* flowers with his elder sister Durga, he sees a train thunder past. Ray films this scene in a way that makes clear the momentous impact this romanticized vision of radical modernity would have on Apu, changing forever the course of his life.

Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the first of three films to confront the shocks of Partition, brutally undoes Ray’s romantic visions of modernity just five years later. Portraying an impoverished, displaced East Bengali family as they negotiate life in a refugee settlement just outside Calcutta in the 1950s, Ghatak sees trains as exemplifying modernity as a force of personal and cultural alienation. In the film, Neeta, the eldest daughter, shoulders the impossible burden of providing for her entire family: her older brother, who dreams of success as a classical singer; her mother who has grown bitter over their reduced circumstances; her father, an absentminded schoolmaster who seems to embody the *bhadralok* [3] humanism that sustains Ray’s Apu trilogy; as well as her younger sister and brother. In one memorable scene, Neeta and her suitor, Sanat, sit under a tree by the river as they discuss their current circumstances and hopes for the future. Abruptly, a train cuts across the frame, its clamor completely obliterating their conversation. The noise caused by the train seems inordinately loud given its distance within the frame, in what is a typically unsettling instance of Ghatak’s audacious play with sound against image, refuting Ray’s seamlessly realist aesthetic and use of synchronous sound. It echoes, with amplified violence, a striking shot in the first moments of the film when Neeta is framed in a tight

close-up along the same riverbank, listening to her brother practice his singing while a train passes by in the distance. Elsewhere in the film, Neeta's father has a fateful accident when he breaks his leg in a fall on the train tracks, precipitating a course of events that will see Neeta give up on her education — and indeed gradually give up on living for her own self — as she must attend ever more to her family's demands.

Another startling sequence in *Komal Gandhar/E-Flat* (1961), the second in the loose "Partition trilogy," showcases Ghatak's most uncompromisingly Brechtian commitments, which draw on Ghatak's own experiences with the Indian People's Theatre Association. The film weaves together a romance with an investigation of the possibilities for artistic and secular collectivity against the backdrop of a nationalist crisis. It is also the most forthrightly theatrical of Ghatak's films — it is worth recalling that Ghatak had extensive experience with the theater, and wrote at length on the relations between theater and cinema. *Komal Gandhar* is deeply informed by the *jatra*, a rural Bengali theatrical form that Ghatak once described as "kaleidoscopic, pageant-like, relaxed, discursive." In *Komal Gandhar*, the protagonist Anusuya is a refugee in Calcutta; she has lost her family in the Partition violence. She pursues her passion for the theater by joining a local performing group, and develops a romantic and creative partnership with its leader, Bhrigu, who like her is also a refugee. Through his use of dialect and folk music, histories of Hinduism and Islam, East and West Bengal, Ghatak reconstructs forms of collectivity and kinship, even as the singular catastrophe of a Partition born of centuries of colonial rule looms in the background.

In the sequence in question, Bhrigu and Anasuya converse by the banks of the river Padma. Bhrigu muses of a time before Partition, recalling the train tracks that used to bring him back from visits to Calcutta to the riverbank, where he would board a steamer to cross over: "I thought of something looking at that track now. It used to be a meeting point, a place of union, and now it has become a point of division. The nation is torn in two there." As Bhrigu mourns his displaced status, the film's formal unity begins to disintegrate. In the background, the sound of women chanting "Dohai Ali" (a traditional East Bengali boatmen's prayer to nature for safe passage) rises sharply in volume. Cutting away from their conversation, the film transforms into one of those "phantom rides" so popular in cinema's earliest years. The camera takes off down an empty rail track that is cut off in the distance — the India-East Bengal border — and accelerates until, astonishingly, it seems to shatter itself against the wooden barrier. The sound of the chants, by now loud and frantic, is overwhelmed by what seems like the sound of a whiplash, and the scene cuts to black. If one were to translate into cinematic terms Walter Benjamin's exegesis of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), in which he describes the angel of history fleeing, blown toward the future by a storm called "progress," from "one single catastrophe" with "his face […] turned toward the past," one could do no better.

Subarnarekha/The Golden Line (1965) concludes Ghatak's Partition series, in which, once more, he is concerned with questions of caste and refugee crises, displacement, and the impossible absurdities caused by the artificial carving up of territories. At the film's center are the siblings Ishwar and Sita. Ishwar adopts Abhiram, an orphan of lower caste, who eventually develops a romance with Sita. Unable to see past caste lines, Ishwar wants none of it; the couple elope to Calcutta. They marry, but soon afterward Abhiram is killed in an accident. Struggling to support her young child, Sita turns to prostitution. In a twist of the knife, her first customer is none other than Ishwar, who has come to the big city for a wild night out (rendered in a spectacular sequence that riffs as much on Edwin Porter's 1905 *Coney Island at Night* as on *Battleship Potemkin*). Ishwar fumbles his way into Sita's room, which is submerged in darkness. He doesn't have his glasses on (they shattered during the drunken revelries earlier in the night), but Sita, shocked, recognizes him. The lens drifts out of focus. Ambient sound drops out on the soundtrack, and all we hear is her quickened breathing. Before one can regain one's bearings within this nightmarish space of darkness and blur, Sita seizes a nearby *bonti* — a kitchen knife found in most Bengali households — and slashes her own throat. The focus continues to drift in and out, as though embodying Ishwar's struggles to make some sense of what has befallen. He leans over to pick up the *bonti*, moving with a curious slowness, and then suddenly we are at a distance, watching him move — still with that eerie slowness — across to Sita's body. The soundtrack is deathly still, until a small, still, male voice speaks: "Hey Ram." The film scholar Manishita Dass puts it best when she reads this as a citation of Mahatma Gandhi's reaction to being shot by his Hindu nationalist assassin, Nathuram Godse, thereby "linking Seeta's death to a national tragedy and the aftermath of Partition." [4]

At the crux of Ritwik Ghatak's work, discerned most clearly in the Partition films, is a full-throated protest against the rhetoric of triumphalist Indian nationalism exemplified in Jawaharlal Nehru's 1947 "Tryst with Destiny" speech, delivered as independent India's first prime minister after three centuries of British rule over the Indian subcontinent. Nehruvian nationalism insisted that "the past [is] over and it is the future that beckons to us [now]." [5] It embraced uncritically the European notion of the nation-state construct and viewed nationalist self-determination by the exact standards of European nationalism. Partition, in all its shocking violence, was little more than "the pains of labour," to be endured, but ultimately left in the past.

But for Ghatak, it was the loss of subjecthood experienced by a nation's people, newly divided along arbitrary lines — a condition imposed as the very criterion of claiming a newly conceived citizenship — that became a recurring obsession. Rather than try to dramatize all the physical brutality of Partition, Ghatak sought to understand the violence done to human subjecthood and relations by the machinations of the nation-state as it draws, and redraws, lines on a map. The specificities that ground Ghatak's films — from matters of Bengal's history (and the larger history of British colonialism in India), to subtleties of Bengali social hierarchies; from India's vast cultural trove of mythology,

folklore, and music, to their brilliant, if erratic, allusions to Buñuel, Eisenstein, Brecht, and any number of European figures of the avant-garde — are what make them resistant to easy assimilation into Euro-American canons of global art cinema founded upon historicist ideologies.

And this is also where the history of Ghatak's reception in the West tells a larger story. When notions of world cinema or global art cinema take as their premise the principle that "local" texts must first make themselves legible to an international (read: Euro-American) community, they rehearse the logic of European historicism. They consign such texts to what Dipesh Chakrabarty, in a lovely turn of phrase, calls the "waiting room of history." So long as the terms of what comprises "the global" are inscribed by, within, and for Western institutions, the center remains unshaken and all else is reduced to subalternity. Yet this is not to point an accusatory finger at well-intentioned efforts to globalize canons of cinema. Rather, I mean to suggest that the work of Ritwik Ghatak — at once historically precise yet calling out to our contemporary moment of resurgent nationalisms and their attendant crises — as well as its reception in Euro-American cultural contexts, urges us to think carefully about how we negotiate difference as we reconstruct histories of art that were always global anyway.

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[1] Jacob Levich, "Subcontinental Divide: The Undiscovered Art of Ritwik Ghatak," *Film Comment* 33:2 (March–April 1997), 30-35.

[2] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

[3] A term that can variously be translated as the middle class or the *petit bourgeoisie*, it literally translates as "gentlefolk." However, in contrast to the Western origins of the middle class, the foundations of the *bhadralok* were not in industry but in land ownership. This is why Partition, which dramatically reconfigured land ownership, also reconfigured class tensions. Ghatak is ever critical of the fact that even under conditions of displacement, the Bengali *bhadralok* largely clung to nationalism and industrialization in hopes of regaining class hierarchies.

[4] Manishita Dass, "Unsettling Images: Cinematic Theatricality in Ritwik Ghatak's Films," *Screen* 58:1 (Spring 2017), 88.

[5] Jawaharlal Nehru, “Tryst with Destiny,” *Mirrorwork: Fifty Years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, eds. Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 3–4.