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CELLULOID HISTORIES AND FUTURES: ART CINEMA IN INDIA

by RANU ROYCHOUDHURI

Review of Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021)

'Don't mind my saying this, Sir, but we never learnt to care about quality. Our motto seems to be, produce more and produce rubbish.' In these lines from Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (Hero, 1966), a passenger travelling and interacting with the famous Bengali actor Arindam Chatterjee (played by real-life superstar Uttam Kumar) on a train journey from Calcutta to Delhi reflects on what he views as a key problem in commercial Indian cinema. The film sequence highlights how the quality of Chatterjee's brand of films bothers the co-passenger who prefers American films and claims to have first-hand knowledge of the Japanese and American commercial film industries. The scene simultaneously encodes Ray's appreciation for Hollywood and his disdain for the mainstream Indian cinema of that period which prioritized quantity over quality. In a poignant twist, we note how *Nayak* is about the commercial film star Chatterjee, but is not in itself a commercial film. Reading between the lines, this comment speaks to the commercial/non-commercial binary that has overshadowed any discussion of Indian art house cinema from the 1950s till today. Is it possible to go beyond this long-cherished binary to think about art cinema as something more than a genre? Certainly, *Nayak* and other art films at large are products of historically specific moments and bear traces of their time. But can we think of these films as modes of historical thinking? Film historian Rochona Majumdar's recently released pioneering book on global art cinema's layered lives in postcolonial India provides an answer to some of these questions in its critical reflection on cinematic ways of 'doing history'.

While art cinema as a genre in India heralded by early auteurs like Ray has attracted isolated but sustained debates, discussions and hagiographies, Majumdar's book is the first ever systematic analysis of this phenomenon as it existed from the 1950s through the 1970s. Indeed, Majumdar's insights alert us to why art cinema was not simply a stylistic genre involving filmmakers and production processes but also an ecosystem of cinematic knowledge production sustained by individuals and institutions, which included film societies, cine magazines, film society activists, cinephiles, critics, educators, funding agencies and publics. Her project is to think with and about this ecosystem without succumbing to value judgements and oppositional structures. Looking at interconnected global networks of people, ideas and image-objects, she argues that Indian art cinema in the 1960s and '70s was a historical exercise that anticipated 'various critiques of the nation that postcolonial, feminist, and other radical historiographies developed in the 1980s and the 1990s' (p. 1). It emerged as a mode of negotiating pasts in a postcolonial present that simultaneously opened and foreclosed possibilities of imagining India's future/s. Majumdar's analytical structure for understanding temporality bears shadows of historian Reinhart Koselleck's argument of how promises of modernity reconfigured the relationships between futures and their pasts. For Majumdar, the promises of political independence in 1947 and its subsequent losses and failures allowed art cinema to rethink the past, the present, and the futures that nevertheless remained elusive when the future arrived.

Divided in two parts, each comprising three chapters, with an introduction and an epilogue, the book is rigorous in archival engagement and innovative in analytical method. For example, Majumdar extensively uses film society documents and periodicals in three languages-English, Bangla and Malayalam-published from metros like Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi, non-metro film hubs like Trivandrum and Vijaywada, as well as small towns like Naihati (West Bengal). This archival base and other narrative details highlight the wide reach of the film society as a movement. Further, these rare and understudied sources, together with writings of crucial but underdiscussed individuals like British film society activist, critic and biographer Marie Seton, make it possible for Majumdar to foreground art cinema's lack of fixity as a category and delineate the shifting terrain of discursive practices within which this movement operated. The book is empirically rich and theoretically insightful, but it is not a comprehensive survey, which is rather impossible anyway. Instead, the book focuses on select moments, themes and practices to inquire into art cinema's response to India's postcolonial condition where 'belatedness' in practice enabled creative possibilities.

The first part of the book charts the history of art cinema in India by focusing on three issues: first, how art cinema in India was specific to its immediate historical context while also reminding a constituent part of global discussions on the category; second, the 'newness' of a form that acquired the moniker New Indian Cinema; third, why the film society movement of the 1950s-1970s is foundational for understanding what counted as new or radical in art cinema or what was perceived and propagated as good cinema or political cinema. Majumdar traces the journey of this category of cinema from being a site of making good citizen-subjects in the 1950s, in conjunction with the ideology of the newly independent nation, to becoming non-teleological formal experimentations and ethnographies of their temporality in the 1960s and '70s, by which time the promises of independence had withered away.

The second part of the book is an elaboration on art cinema's encounter with 'life in the present' and how three auteurs-Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray-practiced historical thinking in their cinema to imagine India's extra-filmic future/s or lack thereof. The three Calcutta trilogies made by Ghatak, Sen and Ray in the 1960s and '70s are Majumdar's case in point. Despite this focus on three iconic Bengali filmmakers, she is equally attentive of iconic and cult filmmakers who shaped art cinema in other decades and spaces. However, her choice of the three Calcutta trilogies appears to be guided by their common focus on a specific city and their contemporaneity, allowing her to compare the three different approaches to historically specific realities that unfolded in postcolonial Calcutta. Majumdar's discussions of these trilogies are also the best examples of her analytical creativity. She focuses on aspects that have thus far remained supplementary in the vast existing literature on the three directors: in Ghatak the song sequences, in Sen a history of anger, and in Ray his choice of making city films. Through these three aspects, Majumdar argues that the three directors were bearing witness to their present without any developmental understanding of historical processes and hence without any definite vision for India's future. She underscores this presentism in the following way.

Unlike most commentators who have focused on the storylines of the films to understand Ghatak's disavowal of the Partition, Majumdar demonstrates how his song sequences transcend the 'dystopic aspect of the [post-Partition] present [where film characters are located]' (p. 141) by relocating the narrative to 'the realm of the mythic and the poetic' (p. 130): the 'mythical time...makes the present livable' (p. 142). She argues that the heterotemporality infused by the songs 'stand out as radical instances of antihistoricism' (p. 141), i.e., they defy a developmental and teleological understanding of history and thereby also the imagination of any definite future. Likewise, a non-teleological narrative is prominent in Sen's figure of the 'angry young man' (p. 155), embodying a 'complex and contradictory array of political sentiments' (p. 188), for whom 'youth...is a permanent condition for the possibility of the birth of political anger' (p. 156). However, this political anger doesn't translate into a progressive revolutionary future. In Majumdar's analysis, Sen's film texts are deeply 'ambivalent' (p. 160) where presents and futures are confused spaces, something that contemporary commentators 'misrecognized' (p. 171). Ray's Calcutta trilogy is not only less discussed compared to his Apu trilogy, but it is also structurally distinct. Contrary to the developmental narrative of Apu, Ray 'abandoned any sense of the future' (p.194) in the city trilogy, argues Majumdar. She discusses these films as Ray's moments of 'witnessing' (p. 170) his contemporary.

The epilogue of the book shifts attention to the twenty-first century present and identifies it as a disorienting time akin to the disorientations of the 1960s and '70s. Majumdar uses confusion, disorientation, and the anxiety of being in the present and that of imaging possible future/s as grids that connect her analysis of art cinema with her lived realities. In making this connection, she weaves the present into her historical scholarship and mimics what Ghatak, Sen and Ray did with the film form: engagement with the present as a way of 'doing history'.

Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures will speak to different generations of readers differently, depending on their historically specific encounter with the cinema cultures Majumdar highlights. The debates and discussions she charts survived in pockets long after the general 'decline of art cinema' from the mid-1980s. As a millennial in Calcutta/Kolkata, with specific cultural privileges, I experienced the conflation of one's choice of art cinema with one's real-life political choices, the kind of convergence Majumdar eloquently discusses in the context of 1970s 'political cinema'. Here I wonder if historical thought and/or critique of historicism is specific to art films, or if we can think of other films, even those from the commercial genre, as sites of anti-historicist thinking. Simultaneously, my millennial experience accounts for a predominantly male social space as a site of discussions on radical cinema/radical politics, something that parallels the kind of 1970s' discursive space that Majumdar writes about. A handful of writers and critics like Marie Seton, Vijaya Mule and Geeta Kapur appear as exceptions among numerous male names whose writings Majumdar cites. While she explores in detail the gender question in the films of Ghatak, Sen and Ray, I believe that this male-dominated social space within extra-filmic cinema cultures reinforces Majumdar's sharp analysis of the dystopic present in the book. The book is nuanced and its arguments are complex. Yet, it is lucid and accessible, and makes for a compelling reading. It is a compulsory book for anyone interested in history and/or visual culture.

The author of this review thanks Dr. Arvind Elangovan for his comments and suggestions.