**Unsettling Images: Cinematic Theatricality in Ritwik Ghatak’s Films**

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Celebrated for its blend of formal innovation and political commitment, the cinema of Ritwik Ghatak (1925—1976) still looms large over the landscape of India’s alternative film culture. Critical appraisals of Ghatak’s film style have mostly focused on his modernist experiments with epic form and melodramatic devices, geared toward creating a cinematic idiom capable of registering the devastating emotional impact and continuing socio-economic aftershocks of the Partition of Bengal (1947).[[1]](#footnote-1) This essay moves away from discussions of the epic and the melodramatic to locate the affective force and intellectual impact of Ghatak’s films partly in their “cinematic theatricality.” I use this term to refer to a theatricality – or an ensemble of effects evoking the artifice and the drama of theatrical performance, and reminding viewers that they are watching a representation of reality rather than reality itself – that is also intensely cinematic, contrary to conventional understandings of the theatrical as anti-cinematic. It is “a mode of address and display”[[2]](#footnote-2) that emerged out of a creative collision between the stage and the screen, between Ghatak’s ideas about film form (partly shaped by Calcutta’s incipient film society movement of the 1940s) and his experience as an activist in the leftist theatre movement of the late 1940s-early 1950s. While retracing the precise terms of this encounter is beyond the scope of this essay, it highlights the need to do so (if we are to move beyond a purely auteurist approach to Ghatak’s cinema) by pointing to some instances of cinematic theatricality in Ghatak’s films and connecting these to his prior engagement with the theatre.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Ghatak, who was born in 1925 into an upper-middle-class Bengali family in Dhaka in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), came of age in Calcutta in the 1940s. There he witnessed millions of refugees from the countryside and especially from East Bengal – uprooted by the manmade famine of 1943, the ravages of World War II, the communal violence preceding the Partition of Bengal (1947) and the Partition itself – pour into the city, irrevocably changing the fabric of Bengali society. The political turmoil of these years radicalized Ghatak, who became a Marxist activist by 1946, gravitating toward the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. The IPTA, which emerged out of the cultural activism prompted by the Bengal Famine of 1942 (e.g., Bijon Bhattacharya’s groundbreaking play, *Nabanna/Harvest* and the dance-drama *Bhookha Hai Bangal/Hungry Bengal*), attracted progressive writers, artists, and theatre workers who recognized the potential of popular theatre as an effective weapon in the battles against British imperialism and fascism, and in the struggles of peasants and workers against colonial and internal structures of oppression. Ghatak worked within the IPTA as an actor, playwright, and director, staging, and performing in, plays both on stage and in the streets, till ideological conflicts and his discomfiture with hardening Party orthodoxies led him to leave the organization in 1954. While he continued to direct plays afterwards, his focus shifted to filmmaking by the mid-1950s.

Ghatak’s interest in film dates back to the late 1940s, when he started frequenting the now mythic Paradise Café in south Calcutta, where young, left-leaning Bengali cineastes and aspiring filmmakers, equally impatient with the conventions of mainstream Indian cinemas and oppressive socio-economic structures, would gather to discuss world cinema and books on filmmaking that pointed towards alternative, socially engaged modes of film practice.[[4]](#footnote-4) Ghatak always claimed that he had been drawn to the medium merely as a means of reaching and “viscerally” affecting a much wider audience than he could through the theatre.[[5]](#footnote-5) Despite his oft-repeated protestations about his immunity from cinephilia, his films and writings on film are animated by a heightened awareness of film form and a passionate interest in experimenting with it, in “trying to find the limit, the end, the border, up to which the expression of film can go.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

His experimental urge to push cinematic representation to its limits was also a political one, stemming as it did from what he described as his “commitment to contemporary reality” and his desire to ““to present to the public eye the crumbling appearance of a divided Bengal, to awaken the Bengalis to an awareness of their state and a concern for their past and the future.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This commitment to reality did not, however, translate into a strict adherence to the protocols of cinematic realism. He drew on a creative vocabulary forged in live performance, the writings of Brecht, Stanislavski, and Eisenstein, the allusiveness of Indian music and mythology, conventions of Bengali and Hindi melodramatic fiction, theater, and film, and the work of his two cinematic heroes, Eisenstein and Buñuel, to create a hybrid cinematic idiom that moved fluidly between the representational logic of screen realism and the expressive potential of stage performance. What I am calling cinematic theatricality emerges out of this dynamic oscillation; it is a political intervention, a deliberately disruptive move designed to provoke a critical engagement with both cinematic image and contemporary reality.

In Ghatak’s view, alienating the audience or jolting them out of what he saw as a facile involvement in the narrative or with the lives, loves, and losses of specific characters – an involvement easily forgotten once the film was over -- was crucial to achieving such an engagement:

“I am going to constantly jostle you [the spectator] around so that you understand that it is not an imaginary story and that I am not here to deliver cheap pleasures to you. I am going to hammer it into your head that you are watching an imagined incident on the screen but do try to understand what I am trying to convey through this – my thesis, which is entirely true. I am going to keep on alienating you in order to draw your gaze to that truth. I would succeed as an artist only if you become aware and get involved in the task of challenging that social obstacle or injustice in the world outside after seeing the film, if I can transmit my protest to you.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Ghatak’s agenda of alienating the spectator was partly shaped by the Brechtian theory of alienation or *verfremdungseffekt* (with its reliance on anti-realist staging, narrative non-linearity, and rational rather than emotional appeals) that he first encountered as an IPTA activist, through Brecht’s plays (some of which Ghatak translated into Bengali), writings on epic theatre, and the creative appropriation of Brechtian ideas in IPTA’s agitprop practice.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is important to keep in mind, however, that this was a hybrid practice, incorporating elements from “several models ranging from the realist to the Brechtian to Bengal’s living folk and popular forms.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, the Brechtian emphasis on disrupting the verisimilitude of realist performance resonated with Ghatak’s keen interest in the “epic form” of the indigenous folk traditions of performance (e.g., the *jatra*, a traditional form of Bengali theatre particularly popular in rural areas) – a form that he described as “kaleidoscopic, pageant-like, relaxed, discursive”[[11]](#footnote-11) – to which IPTA activists continually turned for inspiration.

Ghatak’s arsenal of alienating strategies was thus assembled from an eclectic array of sources and elective affinities. His use of the word “hammer” in the interview quoted above indicates the forcefulness with which he wielded these techniques, leading some critics to accuse him of hyper-theatricality (*oti-natokiyota* in Bengali), and others to celebrate him as one of India’s most original and politically committed filmmakers. Such criticisms and celebrations often focus on moments in which the continuum of realist time and space is torn apart by an aesthetic of excess and fragmentation. Techniques contributing to that aesthetic include modes of direct address in his films (e.g., the dancers who point accusing fingers at the audience at the beginning and end of *Jukti Takko Gappo/Reason, Debate, and a Story*, or the indignant father in *Meghe Dhaka Tara/The Cloud-Capped Star* shouting “I accuse” in English in a patently melodramatic manner, his arm outstretched, finger pointing towards the audience); a disorienting juxtaposition of naturalistic and expressionistic performance styles (e.g., the contrast between the understated quality of Supriya Chaudhuri’s performance as Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and what Bhaskar Sarkar calls “the studied melodeclamation”[[12]](#footnote-12) of Bijon Bhattacharya in his role as her father and in his roles in other Ghatak films); a self-reflexive use of melodramatic clichés like coincidences, the suffering of the virtuous, and acoustic underscoring (*Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* being the most frequently cited in this context); the frequent use of extreme camera angles and shifting frames, rack focus, unexpected close-ups, wide-angle lenses, and exaggerated chiaroscuro effects; the use of song, both diegetic and non-diegetic, at critical moments; and an intricate layering of images with songs (including choral chants), dialogue, and sound effects.

All of these techniques are profoundly theatrical – in the dual sense of being emphatically dramatic and dramatically emphasizing the artifice at the heart of cinematic storytelling, and in terms of recalling the space and conventions of theatrical performance. Yet the theatricality of these techniques relies not so much on a direct borrowing from the theatre as on a theatrical manipulation (masterly at times, less smooth at others, but almost always inspired) of film form: cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, and the sound-image relationship. Take, for instance, the sequence from *Komal Gandhar/E-Flat* in which the narrative is unhinged from the exigencies of dramatic action and the camera doubles as a performer as it hurtles down an abandoned railroad track abruptly truncated at the India-East Pakistan border, accompanied by a chorus of women’s voices chanting “Dohai Ali” (a ritualized entreaty to gods or to nature, used by boatmen in East Bengal as a prayer for mercy) on the soundtrack. Picking up momentum as the chants grow increasingly desperate, the camera finally flings itself against the buffer at the end of the track in a supremely theatrical gesture, the chant is drowned out by the sound of something being torn apart, and the scene goes black. This sequence seems to perform the very limits of cinematic representation itself, simultaneously acknowledging the difficulty of representing the historical trauma of the Partition and defiantly asserting the need to keep trying to do so. The theatricality of this sequence is largely created through the cinematic means of camerawork, editing, and sound-montage; it is, in fact, a kind of theatricality only achievable on the screen.

Reminiscences about Ghatak’s work in the theatre (which remains largely undocumented) indicate that his approach to the theatrical, especially as a director, was marked by a desire to move beyond the constraints of the stage and toward a kind of visuality and mobility associated with the cinema. According to Hemanga Biswas, the prize-winning performance of Ghatak’s play *Dalil* (*Document*) at the national conference of the IPTA in Bombay in 1954 was extolled not only for its moving depiction of the plight of refugees from East Bengal in Calcutta but also for the way in which stage design and lighting “broke the dimension of the stage” to present a panoramic view of the fields and rivers of East Bengal.[[13]](#footnote-13) Sajal Raychaudhuri, another IPTA veteran, remembered the loud applause that greeted the very first scene, which was lit in such a way as to “really make it appear that a man was sitting on the banks of the river Padma and singing a song.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Interestingly enough, Tapas Sen, who was in charge of the lighting of *Dalil* and would go on to become an acclaimed light-designer, claimed that “Ritwik was never a man of the theatre” as his vision of the theatrical was often too “exaggerated” and “poetic” to be credibly implemented on the stage. The dramatist and actor Bijan Bhattacharya and actor-director Utpal Dutt, both of whom had worked closely with Ghatak in the IPTA, agreed that Ghatak’s imagination found its most effective expression on film, suggesting that his aesthetic of exaggeration was perhaps better suited to the cinema than to the theatre.[[15]](#footnote-15) We do not have sufficient information about Ghatak’s actual practice as a theatre director to assess the comparative strengths of his cinematic and theatrical practice. However, the evidence of his films implies an organic connection between the two. The unsettling power of his films emerged out of the fusion of theatrical and cinematic forms – more specifically, out of a productive friction between an aesthetic of distance traditionally associated with the stage and an aesthetic of intimacy predicated on the cinema’s “appeal of a presence and proximity.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

An essay that Ghatak wrote on the disparate demands of stage and screen acting indicates that he saw distance (or lack thereof) as being a crucial determinant of the formal specificities of the theatre and the cinema. His perception of the distinction between the cinematic and the theatrical revolves around a contrast between the distance separating the stage performer from her audience and the film viewer’s illusion of proximity to the images on the screen:

The biggest challenge in stage acting is that the distance between the spectator and the performer is not changeable but constant… the actor’s gestures and words have to reach the last viewer in the last row. The actor is thus compelled to depart from naturalism and take recourse to artifice. He has to declaim at the top of his voice even when he is supposed to be whispering into another actor’s ears, or exaggerate the act of raising an eyebrow in order to convey surprise… Theatrical conventions are born out of the need to capitalize on the distance and the artifice…

There is no such distance in the cinema. The camera will amplify even a slight raising of the eyebrow. A whisper can be uttered as a whisper… There is no need to exaggerate speech or gestures. The cinema demands a return to naturalism… Theatrical conventions become a burden here.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Theatrical conventions, however, become a creative resource rather than a burden in Ghatak’s films, which derive some of their emotional and intellectual impact from repeated collisions between the theatre’s aesthetic of distance and the cinema’s aesthetic of intimacy. A striking example of this can be seen in a harrowing sequence from *Subarnarekha* /*The Golden Line* (1965). The film narrates the story of two siblings – Ishwar and his much younger sister Seeta -- whose lives are disrupted by the Partition and warped by a haunting sense of loss, irrational prejudices, and tragic coincidences. Seeta falls in love with Abhiram, an orphan whom Ishwar takes under his wings, but the discovery of Abhiram’s low-caste origins makes Ishwar, who has brought both of them up, implacably opposed to their marriage. Seeta and Abhiram run away to Calcutta and get married, while Ishwar sinks into despondence. After Abhiram’s death in an accident, Seeta is forced to consider prostitution to support herself and her young son. A strange twist of fate brings a drunk Ishwar to her door as her first customer; traumatized, Seeta kills herself with a kitchen knife in front of her brother. As Ghatak made it clear, his deployment of melodramatic coincidence in this sequence – decried by some critics as forced and excessively theatrical -- was a formal choice, intended to rend the fabric of realist representation and to compel the viewers to confront the metaphorical implications of the situation: “Take, for instance, the brother turning up at his prostitute sister’s. If we keep in mind the thesis of the film, we realize that any prostitute the man visited would still turn out to be his sister. Here that point has been expounded mechanically, with the aim of alluding to the general through the particular.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

This sequence lays bare not only the mechanisms of allusion in Ghatak’s cinema but also a process that is crucial to the production of cinematic theatricality in it: a fluid yet deliberate movement between the simulation of proximity that we associate with the cinema and the creation of distance through theatrical staging. As Ishwar drunkenly staggers into Seeta’s darkened room, we see him first in a long shot from behind Seeta’s shoulders, framed in a patch of light against a half-opened door. A quick cut to a startled Seeta seen in a low-angle medium-shot, a slight and fragile figure surrounded by darkness, is followed by a medium-close-up of Ishwar’s face, which reveals his struggle to see in the dark without his glasses, and then by an out-of-focus shot mimicking his blurred vision. As he slowly progresses across the room, almost in the manner of an actor moving across a stage, medium shots of him alternate with extreme close-ups of Seeta (e.g., Fig. 1), her face and then one of her dilated eyes filling up the screen as we hear the sound of her labored breathing on the soundtrack. The camera glides back and forth across the room, an invisible third person caught up in the unfolding situation. A cut to a kitchen knife almost seems to direct Seeta’s gaze to it as her eye shifts in its direction and we see her picking up the knife. Then we see Ishwar in a medium-shot, the shadow of an uncertain smile fleeting across his face and changing into bafflement as Seeta kills herself off-screen and he looks down at the blood spattered on his clothes and the musical instruments on the floor reverberating from the impact of Seeta’s fall. As Seeta dies, the camera pans across the walls of the room, as if in a daze, passes over an immobilized Ishwar, finally stopping to stare at a mirror in which we see Ishwar and then at Seeta’s lifeless hand clutching a tablecloth. We then see Ishwar looking down on the woman lying dead in front of him and Seeta’s face floats in and out of focus, as if within his field of vision. The camera follows him as he bends down and then straightens himself, looking at the blood-spattered knife that he has picked up. A close-up of his face, revealing his sense of shock and horror, is followed by a more distant shot of his silhouette lurching across the room, and another tilted close-up of Seeta’s face, half shrouded in darkness. A male voice utters “Hey Ram” (what Gandhi was supposed to have said when the assassin’s bullets hit him) in a curiously dispassionate tone, breaking the oppressive silence in the room and linking Seeta’s death to a national tragedy and the aftermath of the Partition.



Fig. 1 Fig. 2

The next shot moves outside to the courtyard where Seeta’s landlady (also her procuress) and one of her associates are waiting for Ishwar. The camera joins them as we see the distant figure of Ishwar stumbling out of Seeta’s room, clutching the knife (Fig. 2)[[19]](#footnote-19). Frontal medium-shots of Ishwar, conveying his sense of inarticulate horror, alternate with distanciating long shots of his leaden and lurching movements from the back. Finally opening his mouth in a wordless wail, he turns away from the camera and throws himself down on the ground. The camera observes him writhing on the ground – as if pinned down by a ray of light on a dark and empty stage -- from a distance, assuming the position of a spectator watching a play. It then turns its gaze to the horrified expressions of the onlookers, slowly panning up and down as Ishwar keeps sobbing, till it focuses on the shell-shocked face of Seeta’s young son, Binu, in a gesture that resembles a tender and tentative caress.

This sequence derives its power, in part, from the fusion of theatrical ways of staging with cinematic modes of mobility and emotional access. Moreover, it illustrates that the cinematic theatricality of Ghatak’s films cannot be understood only in terms of rational appeals and a rupture of verisimilitude and emotional identification. It also involves the use of theatrical flourishes – through performance, camerawork, editing, lighting, and the soundtrack -- to create an affective charge that combines with the force of disruption to compel a close reading of the image on the screen and of the soundtrack. The audience is simultaneously wrenched out of a state of illusionistic absorption and thrust into a space of heightened emotions, with a view to unsettling their habitual images of reality and confronting them with – or implicating them in -- the post-independence plight of a “divided, debilitated Bengal.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Theatricality in Ghatak’s cinema is thus not just a matter of Brechtian alienation but also a powerful mode of affective engagement. More importantly, this engagement is brought about partly through Ghatak’s use of film form as an element of expressive performance, and not just through the deployment of blatantly theatrical forms of direct address and declamation, or through melodrama’s dramaturgy of excess. As I have shown, the framework of cinematic theatricality includes, but is not limited to, the dramaturgical modes of melodrama, and allows us to explore other aspects of Ghatak’s presentational mode, especially the ways in which it draws on the ontological fictions and ways of seeing associated with the cinema and the theatre.

(3804 words, including footnotes)

1. See, for instance, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* (Bombay: Screen Unit, 1982), Geeta Kapur, “Articulating the Self into History: Ritwik Ghatak’s *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*,” in *When Was Modernism: Essays in Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), and Shahani’s articles on Ghatak collected in *Ghatak: Arguments/Stories*, eds. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar (Bombay: Screen Unit, 1987), and Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andre Loiselle and Jeremy Maron (ed.), *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I explore this in more detail in a chapter of my book-in-progress, *Left Luggage: Cinematic Legacies of the IPTA*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See “Paradise Café” in Mrinal Sen, *Montage: Life, Politics, Cinema* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), 105-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ritwik Ghatak, “Interview,” *Chitrabikshan* August-Sept. 1973, reprinted in *Sakhhat Riwtik*, ed. Siladitya Dasgupta and Sandeepan Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Deepayan, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ritwik Ghatak, “Experimental Cinema,” *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ritwik Ghatak on Cinema* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005), 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ritwik Ghatak, “My Films,” *Rows and Rows of Fences*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Interview in *Movie Montage*, 1:2, 1967. Reprinted in *Sakkhat Ritwik*. All translations from Bengali sources are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See his essay “Brecht o Amra” (Brecht and Us) in Ritwikkumar Ghatak, *Chalachhitra Manush ebang aaro Kichhu* (Calcutta: Dey’s, 2005), 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kapur 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ghatak, “Music in Indian Cinema and the Epic Approach,” in *Rows and Rows*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sarkar 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hemanga Biswas, “Smritir Chhinnopatre Ritwik,” in Subrata Rudra (ed.), *Shei Riwtik* (Calcutta: Pratibhash, 2011), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sajal Raychaudhuri, *Gananatya Katha* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 1990), 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Samik Bandopadhyay, “Ritwik Ghatak: Theater-e, Cinema-ai,” in Rajat Ray (ed.), *Ritwik Ghatak* (Calcutta: Pratibhash, 2011), 135-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Christian Metz, “On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,” *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ghatak, “Abhinoye Nabo Adhyay,” *Chalachhitra Manush ebang aaro Kichhu*, 59-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ghatak, “Subarnarekha Prasangey,” *Chalachhitra Manush ebang aaro Kichhu*, 153-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The stills have been obtained from the National Film Archives of India, Pune. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ghatak, “My Films,” 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)