

Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism in Indian cinema: the double take of modernism in the work of Satyajit Ray¹

Ravi Vasudevan

Sarai, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi

This paper will look at one dimension of the institution of the cinema in post-independence India, that of the work of Satyajit Ray, a key figure in the self-conscious development of an Indian art cinema ostensibly separated out from other film traditions and practices, especially those of the commercial mainstream. Issues of authenticity in the constitution of a post-colonial politics and culture take on different resonances as we move through different domains within the cinematic institution, and across art institutions. Central here are several different constructions of what composed an authentic art practice and what functions such authentication performed in relation to the requirements of state formation, in response to wider processes of modernization and, quite crucially, in terms of the imagining of the publics that art works and commercial cultural products would seek to bring into being.

Popular commercial forms, however denigrated in governmental practices and hierarchies of taste, also demonstrated certain affiliations with earlier traditions of representation, narration and musical address in their bid to articulate a contemporary Indian identity in the wake of independence.² This is not the occasion to reflect on the complexities of this domain, except to highlight the particular criticisms that an artistic intelligentsia made of the mainstream. Central here was the argument that popular commercial films had failed to develop realist protocols that would adequately capture social reality, indeed the truth of Indian reality. Arguably, this was the dominant discourse of the 1950s, and practitioners in different strands

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² See, for example, introduction, in Ravi Vasudevan edited, **Making Meaning in Indian Cinema**, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000

of the cinema believed it to be critical to any purposive engagement with nation-state building projects.³

The differences appear to emerge from evaluating the status of the narrative form through which the real would be articulated, through what means of representation, styles of acting, aesthetic strategies the real would be invoked. Here the popular compendium - studio shooting, melodramatic, externalized forms for the representation of character psychology, non- or intermittently continuous forms of cutting, diversionary story lines, performance sequences - was not acceptable within the emergent artistic canon, for they undermined plausibility and a desirable regime of verisimilitude.⁴

However, the question of realism was only one of the issues at stake. As historians and theorists of modern Indian art have argued, what was always at issue was the drive to uncover differences from western canons of aesthetics which, in the modern period, were heavily determined by arguments for realism. Earlier debates from the colonial period sought to argue that Indian art traditions were differently constituted, oriented to a certain iconographic and decorative character. Kapur suggests that the three lynchpins of this anti-colonial discourse were an aristocratic folk paradigm emerging from the romanticism of Tagore and the Santiniketan artists, the canonical, craft oriented aesthetic of Coomaraswamy and the artisanal base of Gandhian ideology. It is Kapur's argument that Ray combined the influence of the Santiniketan tradition with other modern traditions in the novel and cinema, and qualified it and shifted it to a middle class sense of conscience and destiny that was intimately tied to the project of modern nationhood. In contrast to the long and problematic history of colonial modernity, in which modernity was seen as an imposition and dissembling strategies had to be evolved which would contest the modern even while deploying modern apparatuses and procedures, Ray worked out a strategy which would authenticate the modern, and its middle class vehicle, by showing it as emerging from out of previous aesthetic traditions.⁵ To do this his films bridged the chasm between civilizational identity and modernity, but in ways which his critics have

³ Ravi Vasudevan, 'Shifting codes, dissolving identities: the Hindi social film of the 1950s as popular culture', in R. Vasudevan, **Making Meaning**

⁴ Satyajit Ray, **Our Films, Their Films**, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1976, 'Introduction'

⁵ Geeta Kapur, 'Sovereign subject: Ray's Apu' in Geeta Kapur, **When was modernism**, Delhi, Tulika, 2000

faulted for glossing over the traumatic and concrete history defined by peasant immiseration, and the horrendous social and political bloodletting of Partition. ⁶

Rather than see Ray playing out a 'destinal' narrative that provides for a redemptive and authenticating identification with modernity for the protagonist, I want to suggest that he was involved in a rather more complicated dialogue with the modern, showing it to be necessarily and irreducibly split in the forms of subjectivity it gave rise to. In a sense this is the condition of modernity, and authentication lies in the articulation of a split position which constantly gestures to some antecedent self that has been displaced and is in danger of entirely disappearing from consciousness. The force of this particular modernist move lies in the bid not only to find a form that can articulate this splitting and hold on to both parts, but in determinedly seeking out the repressed dimensions of that former self, and laying claim, on behalf of modernity, to the ability to bring it into view.

Some of the following argument analyses this modernist double-take through discussions of realist strategies, as these were the dominant terms on which post-independence discourses of the cinema developed. I will pay attention here to both the potentially repressive and expressive dimensions of Ray's realist strategies. Locating these discourses within a problematic of authentication, I want to see how realist form achieved a surfacing of the present in ways which could speak to the double-take of modernity, persuading the spectator of the connections, however disrupted, submerged and phantom-like, of present being with past selves; and, beyond this, how these often unrealized pasts could re-frame and re-animate the present.

Ray's grappling with the emergence of the present can be seen as engagement with a Bengali public's massive investments in the history of literary form, but also as an intervention in the category of genre. Often, art cinema is not subject to categorizations along these lines, as if the field inhabits a transcendent location vis a vis the mundane play of similarity and difference through which popular industrial products are fabricated and publicized to an audience. However, my suggestion here is that there is an active working over of the category of genre in Ray's practice, one perhaps quite distinct from popular film genres but, like them, often immersed in

⁶ Ashish Rajadhyaksa, 'Satyajit Ray, Ray-movie and Ray's films', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, nos.23-24,

the difficulties of finding a route, of finding the images and sounds and narratives to articulate the present into perception. In a word, the difficulties are those of imagining the present as a distinct moment separated from previous times and generically coded imaginaries. And with this difficulty there comes a distinct politics, one of defining how the present is to be negotiated into existence, which traditions need to be drawn upon and how these should be reframed and new questions asked of them. This particular intervention suggests connections with the development of a wider genre formation within the cinematic institution of the time, the move towards the present through the constitution of the social as a genre of contemporary experience.

Finally, I will surmise that we cannot fully attend to Ray's oeuvre without at the same time seeing it as having to deal with the formal energies arraigned at its boundaries. In particular, I will call upon the register of the popular as specifically worked out within Bengali culture, that body of caricatural representation available through bazaar productions in which respectable society is cast in bizarre and irreverent light. Of course, high art forms can draw upon such energies through quotation, framing them within a larger narrative discourse; at issue here is what these energies are aligned to within the dominant perspectives of the narrative world. There is also the possibility that such a dominant narrative frame does not successfully contain these energies. In the last section of this essay, I will look at *Jana Aranya* to suggest how there is a waning of conviction in Ray's work, an incapacity to generate a plausible protagonist and provide a perspective. In the process the other - the immoral world of seedy deals, sharp practice and pimping - riotously overruns the diegetic world. I should stress that this is not a criticism but rather an acknowledgement of skills of observation and powers of capturing that which is alien and anecdotal to you, only to find that these powers exceed those of narrative integration and moral calibration. This 'failure' of the film may be read as the failure of a form whose historical moment has passed, and is therefore suggestive, simply as caesura, as an insurmountable chasm in narrative cognition that allows other knowledges to surface into view and command our attention. The result is a shift in the terms of authentication away from the privileged middle-class recipient of Ray's imagination.

Realism: definitions and practices

A particularly influential way of talking about realism has been in terms of the classical realist text; in which a superior or meta-narrative level uses quotation marks to render different levels of object language within the diegetic world, and then hierarchizes these to produce an understanding of what is true. 'Unlike the other languages placed between inverted commas, regarded as certain material expressions which express certain meanings, the metalanguage is not regarded as material; it is dematerialised to achieve perfect representation - to let the identity of things shine through the window of words...' ⁷ This form of narration has been called an excessively obvious one, as the meta-narrative level does not reveal itself to the reader-spectator, as if the story were telling itself rather than being recounted. In terms of film form, classical realism is associated with that apparently seamless mode of filmic story-telling practices described by Noel Burch:

... The reader's relationship with the traditional novelistic discourse is based on non-perception, on the "invisibility" of the material articulations sustaining this discourse: in other words, syntax, grammar, and the perceptual form of words and symbols. In the cinema, this non-perception corresponds to a reading which "sees" neither the edges of the frame nor the changes of shot - the two materialities which in fact tend to challenge the illusion of continuity that... underlies the credibility both of the traditional novel and of the cinema which had adopted the same specifications. ⁸

In the context of Indian film studies, the classical realist text has been given a particular inflection, where it has been aligned with the development of a culture of modernity with certain political ramifications. These comprise the understanding that realist cinema addresses, indeed seeks to constitute a modern spectator invested in the cognitive practice of individualised perception central to the development of a civil society of freely associating individuals. A realist art cinema is then part of a culture of civil society which in practice is the preserve of a small segment of society quite at a remove from the wider weave of social and political subjectivity. Its form and its thematics invite the spectator to assume modern perceptual practices that can objectify and distance her from the 'traditional' and the 'feudal'. Insofar as social subjectivity is much more complex in terms of the meshing of the social forms that it

⁷ Colin MacCabe, 'The classical realist text', *Screen*, vol 15, no. 2, 1974

⁸ Noel Burch, 'Fritz Lang', in Richard Roud edited, *Cinema: a critical Dictionary*, volume II, Martin Secker and Warburg, 1980, p.584

institutes, then this too functions as a repressive frame within which the citizen spectator is situated.⁹

Ray's films: perception, genre and a history of the present

On the surface, much of this seems to resonate with Ray's work, especially the trilogy: the focus on individual perception, the carefully calibrated, invisible style of narration which does not draw attention to itself, the emphasis on modern destinies that finally transcend previous states. It would also conform to the argument that Ray's camera seeks to conquer or subordinate reality for the requirements of ideological stability, in this case a tale of the seamless emergence of a nationalist modernity from the weave of civilisational particularity. However, I will argue that the modernist dimensions of Ray's work disturb any such straightforward organisation of narrative material and spectatorial perspective. In particular, the foregrounding of stylistic elements signal a process of irruption that drives a wedge between the contemporary and the force of unresolved pasts.

The modernism of the trilogy

In addressing these issues, I would first like to consider the way in which the trilogy undertakes some of the work of symbolization and historical distanciation which I take to be important to Ray's intervention in the cinema. I want to identify a certain dynamic in the way this distance emerges within a naturalistically calibrated representation. I use the term advisedly, in that the way this mode of representation is developed in *Pather Panchali*, for instance, acquires a level of formal equipoise, a concern with balance and pace that is very different from that concrete duration of time extolled by Bazin for the neo-realists.¹⁰ What is suggestive to me is not only that this naturalism is subjected to disruption within Ray's work, but that its very form undergoes different articulations through the trilogy.

The train sequence: economies of representation

⁹ Madhava Prasad, **Ideology of the Hindi film**, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998; Prasad makes this argument in relationship to the parallel cinema of the 1970s, supported by state institutions such as the National Film Development Corporation. It would be interesting to see whether Prasad would apply this argument to Ray as well. For a critical appraisal of Prasad's argument, see my review of his book in *Journal of the Moving Image* No. 1, Autumn 1999, Calcutta, Department of Film Studies Jadavpur University.

¹⁰ See especially in Andre Bazin, **What is Cinema**, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, Berkeley, University of California Press, volume II

I have argued elsewhere that **Pather Panchali** (1955) undertakes a transformation of symbolic economy, charting changes in the forms of attachment and temporality represented by the different characters in the story. Central here is the opposition between Durga and Apu, where Durga is framed as continuous with nature, governed by the instincts, and associated with an immersion in resources (an orchard formerly owned by the declining Brahmin family) and desires that are foreclosed to her. Durga's fascination with a past plenitude is the attribute of a doomed entity, while Apu is symbolically placed to escape the desires that snare his sister.¹¹

If this past/future temporality provides one axis of the film's narrative, then another is that of the gruelling present, caught in the disposition of the mother Sarbajaya. In the history of Sarbajaya and her struggle for familial survival we are certainly not presented with anything like the histories of conflict which characterised the Bengal countryside. Neither does the film seek to capture the politically induced scarcity that erupted in the catastrophe of the Bengal famine of 1943. However, what we witness is likely to evoke this traumatic moment for a Bengali audience of the 1950s, even if the film uses a narrative structure with very different emphases, one aiming to communicate a sense of the relentless cycle imposed by the rigours of scarcity on recently impoverished lives.

The sequence relating to Apu's sighting of the train is in fact inaugurated by this multiple sense of time, with a view of Sarbajaya, inanimate, inward and conflicted in her relationship to the grandaunt, Indir, whom she has had to expel from the household for reasons of family survival. Indir leaves the Ray house, into an encompassing, dwarfing nature where she will find her final resting place. The movement of the children is woven out of these different logics, of present time and the cyclical one of death, into a completely different register, and an entirely new one for the film. The naturalism that has governed it so far has been a carefully calibrated one, and highly formal in terms of its attention to framing, perspective and the simulation of a naturalist continuity, day unravelling into evening and night and into the next morning. Its formalism is at a remove from the contingencies of neo-realist time, and there is a strong sense of images corresponding to the descriptive procedures of a literary naturalist mode. However, this is a dissembling naturalism, whose high investment in formal equipoise is displaced by the concentration of

¹¹ Ravi Vasudevan, 'Dislocations: the cinematic imagining of a new society in 1950s India', **Oxford**

viewer attention on character perspectives and emotions rather than on what frames them. Here we may discern the significance of classical narration for the form of the film.

Kapur has noted of the train sequence that it provides for a seamless sense of the emergence of time within the landscape of Shantiniketan painterly modes, a spatial strategy presenting new figure-ground relations to induct the movement of the train, and of history, into the frame.¹² In contrast, I would suggest that there is an emphatic disjointment exercised at the level of representation, drawing the viewer into a new economy of perception, one that works through the thematics of history not as a seamless emergence but as a rupturing and a positing of a new and distancing perspective.

Interestingly, it is through the realm of the instincts and senses, one contrasted to the realm of verbalized language, that Ray draws us into this new field of perception. For it is through Durga that the spectator is routed into new sense perceptions, as, moving ahead of Apu, she registers strange vibrations and sounds, capturing the tremor of modernity as it is relayed in the tactile form of a quivering telegraph pole. As if needing to work disruptive effects of the sensation into filmic structures, Ray resorts to a rare discontinuity, a temporal gap intruding in the abrupt cut that shows Apu entering the space around the telegraph pole after Durga has left it. The compulsion to repeat, to go through again, highlights the moment and the space as symbolically charged, as marked off from the seamless flow of previous time. And then, almost mystically, the frame itself is shot through with a de-naturalizing impulse, high key effects rendering the kash fields in which the children move as a graphical field defined by the textures of light. This instinctual, sensate space is one that cannot admit of verbal enunciation. When Apu asks Durga for an explanation of the mysterious sense impressions which course around, she merely gestures him to silence, to listen. The billowing cloud of smoke that emerges on the horizon releases the children into movement, Durga slipping awkwardly to fatally fall behind. If the spectator has already been invited to enter a different, graphic realm of perception, there is now a foregrounding of our looking, as a swish pan, entirely going against the tonality of anything in the film, swings to catch Apu moving towards the railway line. Our look here is precipitately dislocated from the smooth flow of character

focalized narration, where the choice of frame is justified by the presence of character. For we briefly lose our object, and in the process are alerted to the phenomenology of the moving camera at the very moment the character becomes aware of the moving train. This double articulation of the perceptual registering of modern machinic energies for character and spectator is not, however, merely a clever and ironic reflection on the impinging of two different forms and moments in the history of modernity, although it is that as well. The moment of dislocation is developed into a full jettisoning of the spectator's view from the framed character. We are denied the function of virtual looking that tracks the characters, and come to be entirely split from the character, as the camera captures the moment of the train's impinging on little Apu not from his perspective, but from the other side of the tracks. The character is abstracted and made graphic along with the thing he watches, and the whole is offered up for a view from outside.

In terms of a psychoanalytical register, we could say that the imaginary domain which offers a play of recognition and identification to the spectator within classical realist strategies has here given way to revealing the symbolic register through which the imaginary is constructed. Our position, now radically other from that of Apu and Durga, is only fleetingly registered, before the film goes back to the cadences of its naturalist mode. But in this moment, our dislocation is not only that of spatial disjointment, but a temporal one. The deployment of a modernist cinematic stylistics itself marks the passage from the literary naturalist mode Ray invokes, and in the process enforces a temporal distance. The stylistics points to the articulation of the here and now. And, in doing this, it also alerts us to the fact that what we are bearing witness to is not a seamless, organic narration of origins, as if the nation can aesthetically inscribe an uninterrupted narrative of itself. This, I believe, also puts a question mark over the formulation that the modernist art of this period functioned in uncomplicated ways to fulfil the images required of the state in its tale of origins. Not only does the art cinema emerge independently of the state in this initial phase - although in the case of *Pather Panchali* the West Bengal government comes in at a later stage - it also appears to set its face against a position of organic identity for its spectator. Ruptured from the flow of narrative, invited to look at the fictive world and its literary origins from a distance induced by a self-conscious cinematic stylistics, the spectator occupies the emergent terrain of the present.

¹² Kapur, 'Sovereign subject'

The significance of a position of externality and distance is highlighted by the progressive induction of distanced spectatorial attributes in the character of Apu. Let us return to the train, this time as it carries Sarbajaya and Apu back to the countryside in *Aparajito* (1957). The journey has been precipitated by two developments. During the initial sojourn of the family in Benaras, we have been provided intimations of the vulnerable status of Sarbajaya in the tenement, as she wards off the intrusiveness of a male neighbour. With Harihar's death these presentiments are reprised, and there looms up Sarabajaya's status as widow in a city which ritually incarnates the renunciatory status of the woman who has lost her husband. The return, however, is precipitated very abruptly, at the point that Sarbajaya and Apu are offered a position of service within a well to do Bengali household. Presentiments of this subordinate and marginalised position leads to a moment of introspection and a jolting cut to the train crossing the Ganga and back to countryside. It is as if the mother has forsaken the subordinated security offered her to start the story again, from its original location, in a move to neutralise the losses that have arisen in between.

The journey back has something of the status, however, of a visit rather than a return. For the time that has elapsed in between, carrying with it the heavy burden of loss, can never be recovered (neither can the space; Sarbajaya and Apu come to Mansapota, rather than Nischindipur, although Sarbojaya hopes that they can ultimately return to their home village). In a remarkable passage, Apu enters the house of an aged relative of the family, and runs to the doorway on hearing the sound of the train in the distance. He calls excitedly to his mother, in anticipation of the sight he is about to see. But at the moment of the sighting, his face drains of animation. Of course, Apu has just been on the train, it is no longer a mysterious and wondrous object heralding new experiences. But what is remarkable is not only the deflating function of this moment of dis-enchantment, where a structure of mundane spectatorship has entered into the experience of the character, but also the production of a moment of pathos. For what is built into the moment is a secret sharing and exchange of spectatorial positions; if Apu has in a sense assumed the symbolic position we were fleetingly offered in *Pather Panchali*, then we are provided the one he had occupied, a situation of impending lack. Durga's fatal fall, her inability to achieve the vision Apu attained, is here reiterated with deadening effect, as if her absence is inscribed into the space of vision now, dragging it down, making

it go quiet and look inwards. Ray's achievement here, without taking recourse to flashback, spelling things out for us, honours our capacity to read the image, layer it over previous images in order to register the internalized lineaments of loss built into the transformation of horizons.

This is in no way a terminal moment of disenchantment, but part of a spiral that feeds back into cycles of re-enchantment and loss. So *Aparajito* follows on from the first film in its opening out of vision and experience for its protagonist. This is charted by the leitmotif of the observational camera in *Aparajito*. Attractively, the camera is employed with a less rigorous attention to frame and duration than marked *Pather Panchali*, gaining a less cadenced, more rambling effect.¹³ In contrast to the somewhat flexibly structured sequences concerning Apu's expanding world, it is perhaps significant that Ray adopts a quite different mode of framing to evoke the position of the mother and the space of the countryside. This space, of a bank curving around a large pond, adorned by a overarching tree, is the space Apu comes into and leaves, and which his mother looks to for signs of her son's arrival. The frame functions in the fashion of a *mise en abyme*, a structurally precise and recurrently deployed unit of aesthetic composition. Ray's usage of this space as counterpoint to Apu's evolving, expanding world, functions not so much as a counterpoint of stasis/movement, but as governed by an asymmetry of desire, where the mother's desire, to recover her son, can never be fulfilled. The son of course knows this desire, but he is helpless to respond to it, carried as he is by a different momentum and temporality. Here, as with the case of Durga, the film evokes a moment, finally, through its absence, as Apu returns to this space to find that its occupant can never be regained. The distinct stylistics of this evocation, the returning of the protagonist to the moment of earlier being from which he is now forever severed, conjures up a certain irreducibility of time. Here, in a very distinctive way, Ray conveys not only a passage within the protagonist, but a nurturing and cultivation of memory against the depredations of modern processes and subjectivities.

The full logic of the modernist method Ray uses, signalling at once distance and separation along with the imperative of remembering, is something to be drawn out

¹³ The influence of Renoir is often noted for Ray, but it is only in *Aparajito* that he evokes that director's more open, searching relationship to bodies in space, especially in such films as *Toni* (1934) and *Rules of The Game* (1939).

over a number of films. What is striking about the last film in the trilogy is the way it appears to change track, abandoning this particular double movement of enchantment and loss, and confronting the protagonist with a terminal scenario of renunciation. In *Apur Sensar* (1959), we have a recurrence of several motifs, especially of alienated viewing, but now modelled on a separation from the here and now rather than the past. In an extended sequence the adult Apu looks for a job, to find that he is considered too qualified for teaching jobs or unable to cast himself in the role of routinized and deadening work. The last is a superbly realized segment, Apu looking into the type-setter's room, a scene wonderfully dense in its evocation of humdrum labour. It should be stressed that this has nothing to do with arrogance. The narrative cannily draws upon the fact that Apu has been engaged in the very same labour in the past, to facilitate his education. Driven by the desire to write, he appears perfectly indifferent, at the level of material wants, to his penurious condition. And, indicating a social commitment that is also a mark of the work's context, it is significant that Apu has refused to take a job that would have infringed the norms of a strike.

While the earlier films always sought to capture different temporalities, *Apur Sensar* constitutes a bid to be of the present, but on terms distinctive to the hero's desires. Involved here is, pre-eminently, the desire of the subject to write himself into significance. His novel, whose themes he relates to childhood friend Pulu in their walk over the rail tracks that lead to his rooms, is clearly autobiographical in content. It deals with a character who is ordinary, whose everyday life is a struggle, but who nevertheless lives life to the full. Encapsulated here, against the background of the preceding observation of dulling work routines and the setting of the criss-cross of rail tracks, is what Geeta Kapur refers to as the trilogy's transcendence of the realm of necessity. But, as Pulu points out, the writing is incomplete, lacks adequate experience, for it lacks the experience of romantic engagement in the writer's life.

I would suggest that this is the realm of the present, as opposed to the realm of necessity or of freedom, for it has to be invented in the here and now. For, in a sense, Apu lacks a social frame. He lies at the margins of the reality which surrounds him, even if this is a self-willed distance. To make the present real to him, he has to carve it out, and the enterprise is conducted within the discretion of a space, that of the conjugal dwelling. It is here that the film undertakes a substantial task, a working with and containment of iconographic resources. Kapur has pointed out that in Ray's

bid to develop a secular aesthetic, he took characters whose names carried mythic resonances, such as Durga in *Pather Panchali*, and 'decoded' them, rendering them into ordinary characters. Here he adorns Apu with a flute to draw on the mythic figure of Krishna, specifically his erotic resonance. In a set of remarkable sequences, Ray works through iconographic elements to constitute an intimate space for modernity.

The first of these follows on from Apu's return from the job hunt. He enters his room, takes out his flute and lies down on the bed. As he starts playing, the shadowed figure of a woman emerges at the window across the tenement. Apu, suddenly aware of the woman's look, stops playing, recedes from view, and carefully uses his flute to push the window shut. As he does so, we see the woman withdrawing, as if accepting the prohibition on her look. This is the first time a distinct erotic play has emerged in the trilogy - excepting, of course, the sensuality of Durga in the first film - and Apu's location as object of desire is associated with a Krishna symbolism which is then disavowed. The use of the iconographic instrument not to solicit desire but indeed to ward it off suggest the issues at stake; Ray here transforms iconic functions to displace attention onto the space itself, as the place for a different order of desire - the symbolic, privatized space of the conjugal couple rather than a more diffuse order of desire. In a sense, the space is being prepared for the arrival of the beloved; and, almost immediately there arrives Pulu, who will prove to be the narrative agent who so fortuitously leads Apu to his future bride, his cousin Aparna.

Pulu invites Apu to take a holiday, and enjoy a visit to his family home in the country where Aparna is to be wed. We have here the imagination leading back to the idyllic space outside the city, though one very different from the impoverished hamlets of Nischindipur and Mansopotar of the first two films. For this is the estate of a well to do landed family. The romanticism of the countryside, with Apu reciting poetry as he gracefully lounges on the boat that carries them across the lake to the house, stems from the rapturous invocation of another world which only the urban imaginary can invoke with such pleasure. Later, as Apu lolls on a hillock above the bustling activities of marriage preparation, he again draws out his flute; and indeed, when Aparna's mother first meets Apu, she likens him to Krishna. But these references are developed only to be refigured. When it is discovered that Aparna's betrothed is mentally impaired, the mother refuses for the marriage to take place,

which would leave Aparna unmarriageable if the ceremonies are not completed within the specified time. Pulu appeals to Apu to step into the breach and save his cousin; Apu cannot at first believe what is being asked of him, but after reflection accepts his friend's plea.

What is ironic about this entire chain of events is the implausibility of what takes place. A man from poor background would normally never be acceptable for the daughter of a well to do family, and it is only a catastrophe that could explain the match. This the narrative offers, but the stretching of the plausibility function, normally so important for a realist narration, suggests that something symbolically charged is at work. There has been a build up, through the previous scenes and the iconographic evocation and containment of mythic functions for Apu, whose ultimate goal is the constitution of a companionate, conjugal marriage. The symbolic structures here seem to posit an imperative, that of not only generating an adequate semiotics of secularized, privatized romance, but also a social transformation, where the space generated for Apu can posit the possibility of dissolving other social ties of a hierarchical order. Apu's acceptance of Aparna withdraws her from an order whose (extreme and contingent) sign is the compulsion to marry within appropriate social rank even at the cost of personal ruin. Equally important is the fact that Aparna can actually fit into Apu's newly constituted space despite its penury, and can provide the companionship of Apu's romantic idyll. The narrative clearly transcends any plausibility criteria here, although the entire relationship between Apu and Aparna – from its arrangement, through the romance after marriage to the death of Aparna in childbirth - has been explained by certain critics as a sociologically observable phenomenon, and Ray is extolled here for identifying with and capturing 'traditional Indian realities'. The point is missed by pondering whether such things happen, don't happen, or should happen.¹⁴ Evidently, these events could have happened, but the question is, why have these been chosen over others, and what symbolic purpose do they serve? I would argue that what is at stake is a weaning of the central

¹⁴ 'Fate had brought together a perfect idyll of happiness; then reality ended it (death in childbirth was a common fate of women in those days) and grief had to give way before duty... *Apur Sensar* ... is informed by a deeply, freshly felt Indianness going back to the archetypes of tradition in a kind of personal discovery. It is suffused with warmth and compassion without any awareness of the old worldly values it is internalising. The director is at one with his characters, reaching out into the heart of the traditional realities through them, seeing them as part of the great, timeless process of life'. Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, Delhi, 1983, p45

characters away from the symbolism of earlier mythic forms and contemporary 'traditional realities', into an image for a new society.

This making present of an ideal form is transient, and is abruptly brought to a close with Aparna's death in childbirth. Yet another defining loss found on the death of a woman. Is the narrative form Ray explores taking an obsessive shape, something to be explored in rather different terms in *Devi*(1960) and *Charulata* (1964)? I will suggest that it is, and clarify its ultimate symbolic trajectory, a direction that may help us place the ramifications of the trilogy more clearly. For the moment, in the context of *Apur Sensar*, the function can be clearly and specifically delimited. If in the earlier films the death finally severed the protagonist from the past, here it provides a decisive way of rendering his agency in the present, his will to generate new forms within the contemporary, suggesting that there is something fatalistically conceived about the possibilities of a plenitude in the present. The modernity enterprise is, to draw upon Sudipta Kaviraj's evocative phrase, doomed to inhabit an unhappy consciousness, an unhappy present.¹⁵ Apu renounces his son, Kajal and the world, and retreats into nature to dissolve himself into labour, here a mining enterprise. The renunciation is symbolically sealed with Apu's casting to the winds of the pages of his manuscript, his inscription of ideal form into the present.

The present, doomed to provide only an unhappy habitation, nevertheless has to be returned to. Pulu seeks Apu out, and urges him to accept responsibility for his son. The space Apu returns to, the landed estate where Apu married Aparna, once a teeming, animated space, now emerges as a hollow form, depleted of human presence. Everyone seems to have died or left. All that is left is the taciturn grandfather - he who had been prepared to sacrifice his daughter into a disastrous marriage to uphold traditional norms - a paterfamilias increasingly unwilling to shoulder the burden of looking after his daughter's unruly son. The space is suggestive of expressionistic tonalities that will surface with a rather different symbolic weight in the following year in *Devi*. Before our eyes, a space that had provided a romanticized retreat for the city-dweller now acquires the aura of a haunted house, a bhuth bangla, a ghostly form now enveloped in the past. The little boy Kajol suggests the dissonances at work, with his startlingly contemporary look, clothed in shorts and a t-shirt, and flaunting a brash and irreverent disposition.

Iconically, he has no place in the dying space, and the father, vanquished in his bid to manufacture his own time, carries him away into an unspecified future.

In contrast to the earlier films, with their emphasis on traditional spaces and beckoning futures, *Apur Sensar* suggests a bid for telos, an unravelling of past desires within the armature of the present. With its tramways, coffee houses, contiguous railway lines and everyday bustle, it produces an image of the contemporary, but as a time which can never be settled, and must give way before unspecifiable futures. It is as if this is the symbolic register, the place of narrative authorization, through which all previous representations can be made sense of, where they were destined to arrive. But, at the point of arrival, the present slips, lacks a sense of possibility, and can only project itself forward in time.

The unfinished agenda of history

This present is then the place of historical perspective, that symbolic register of temporal distance outlined across the railtracks in *Pather Panchali*, fleetingly registered by Apu in *Aparajito*, and then sought to be made over into an embodied form in *Apur Sensar*. It is foundationally governed by a sense of unresolved pasts and a lack of present certitudes. Having deferred its realization, Ray turns back once again into formal history, in two significant films of 1960 and 1964, reiterating the caesura of the present by seeking to understand the logic of irresolution, to understand why the present cannot emerge into view and through the conviction of embodied being.

I only want to refer to *Devi* to draw attention to a significant continuity with the formal structures and symbolic hurdles deployed by *Apur Sensar*. This is the scenario of the father-daughter relationship, and the enveloping, shrouded entity of the feudal household. It is remarkable that what we see as a cantankerous, unwilling repository of authority at the conclusion of the Apu trilogy should emerge, full blown, as overwhelming power just a year later in *Devi*. Chhabi Biswas's envisioning of his daughter-in-law, played once again by Sharmila Tagore, in the role of the goddess, is of course framed as a critique of superstition, and therefore revisits the terrain of the 19th century reform movement. Significant here is not only the opposition of rationalism to dark and irrational imaginings, but also the delineation of a field of

¹⁵ Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chatterjee and the formation of nationalist discourse in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995

persistent power. Here, in Ray's first directly political film, the failure of the present to come into view derives from the way the power of unresolved pasts has crystallized as the unconscious of the contemporary. There is a strange and asymmetric mirroring of past forms of power in the two films. In *Apur Sansar* past forms are bereft of authority, while in *Devi*, they exercise an encompassing and erotic regime. It is as if, registering that the moment of arrival has fatally slipped, there is a turning back, a bringing of the past back into perspective to capture the insidious logic of its hold.

One trajectory we have tracked lies in the fashioning of a narrative form which, through the death of women characters re-iterates the significance of the past, and, in *Apur Sansar*, the slipping away of the present from the grasp of subjectivity. With *Devi* there is a return to the past as inescapable locus of the present, not as something to be remembered, nurtured and cultivated, but as a place of nightmares and cloistered space. Here the loss of the woman comes across as the product of specific relations of domination and subordination, in which the woman is rendered a figure who does not know herself, who has submitted to the desires of the other. In all these films the city and modern experience is constituted through a male protagonist, but in this case it is not so much an issue of the necessity of remembering that which you no longer are, but of confrontation with a past which will not allow you escape, which is not memory but insidious presence. As opposed to the succession of enchantments that have defined the narrative trajectory of Apu's opening world, *Devi* essays a dark mesmerism to immerse the contemporary spectator.

One should point to the ambiguity that surrounds the source of this anxiety. For the opening images of the film conjure up not only the obsessions of feudal authority, but of popular fascination with the Kali image. In its opening passage the image is rendered in the manner of iconic form whose increasingly shorter distance from the camera suggests a hypnotic interiorising of the image for the spectator. In this sense the film draws on a widely influential cultural artefact to interrogate a deeper anxiety about popular perceptions, not only their authoritative embodiment in the figure of power. This critique of not only older forms but of the way popular perception has been subservient to them is, of course, quite foundational to an art cinema involved in cultivating a rationalist sensibility in the spectator. This project leaves a somewhat constrained imprint on this work, as if the particular method it employs to negotiate

the thickets of history to understand the impasse of the contemporary has limited the possibilities of perception.

Something of the nature of the impasse is suggested in the way one form of the popular, that subject to the sway of feudal authority and superstitious belief, is pitted against another, older form, harking to a pre-modern phase of devotional culture. Kapur's insightful analysis turns on the way the plebeian recipient of the fateful miracle, the poor man whose ailing child has been healed by Dayamoyi, returns to invoke Ramprasad's keertan and turns a pitiful gaze on the entrapped girl-goddess.¹⁶

If *Devi* writes the unfinished agenda of history as the unconscious of the contemporary, and is therefore an overtly political statement in Ray's early work, it may do so in such a way as to foreclose on a certain dynamic way of thinking through the power of myths, images and the popular energies they channel. As a result, the film fails to develop a more complex and generous account of the legacies to which the contemporary is heir, particularly the transposition of these legacies into the domain of modern popular visual culture. This is surely one of the fields Ray gestures to in the opening passage of the film, in which the image of Kali is presented with mesmerizing, hallucinatory effect. The narration then goes on to enframe this seductive, non-rational form and its audience, puts quotation marks around it, and constructs a critical distance to the compendium of power and popular superstition that support its influence.

In contrast, *Charulata*, the extraordinary film which marks the end of a certain phase of Ray's engagement with the past, reinscribes the popular in such a way as to forge not a distance but an alliance with it for modernism. In this film the director's obsessive return to the subordinated place of women in discourses of history and modernity in the early work lays bare a certain logic of aesthetic inquiry, finding resources to articulate a voice for a hitherto inarticulate subjectivity.

The **zoom** is a remarkable invention - not just as a time-saving substitute for tracking, but in its own right for its power of varying the emphasis.

¹⁶ Geeta Kapur, 'Revelation and doubt: Sant Tukaram and Devi' in Kapur, *When was modernism*

Charulata

Partha Chatterjee has argued how the emerging nationalist discourse of the late nineteenth century fashioned an inner world secured against the inroads of colonial modernity. Whatever the travails encountered by men in the outer world of colonial disempowerment, this inner domain would shore up nationalist identity against the inevitable adjustments to modernity of social, political and intellectual attitudes.¹⁷ Feminist scholarship has argued that the home in fact functioned in the 1870s and 1880s as the place where the difficulties faced by the middle-class male in an unequal and racist public life were compensated. This space of tradition was the realm over which he could reign supreme, even if, as in many other domains of colonial experience, concepts of the traditional had been reshaped in terms of modern codes, in this case those of house management and child rearing. But this home was a space subject to repression, and women had to shoulder the burden of representing a traditional identity protected from the inroads of a hierarchical colonial culture.¹⁸

In the character of Charu's husband Bhupati, *Charulata* focuses on a character who precedes this understanding of nationalist politics, one who embraces western ideas and is focused on England as the birthplace of progressive values and drives to liberty. The film subjects this view to a critique, suggesting that Bhupati's liberalism depends on his wealth, and there is something ironic about the way a celebration of political victory for the English liberals is presented within the format of a musical evening modelled on the patronal traditions of the landed elite and urban gentry. Bhupati's indifference to cultural practices, especially here poetry and novels, deprives him of an understanding of the sources of energy in his wife. In the film's portraiture of Charu, this energy is centred on memory, on the interior, and on the creative possibilities of speaking to the cultural resources of the village past. The film also appears to develop a somewhat affectionate critique of the rather timeless ruminations and metaphorical relationship to life embodied in the brother-in-law Amal's poetry. Nevertheless, while distancing itself from these male characters, *Charulata* draws on the reformist tradition to critique it from within, as it were. This

¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, **The nation and its fragments: colonial and post-colonial histories**, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994

¹⁸ Tanika Sarkar, 'Hindu wife and Hindu nation: gender, religion and the pre-history of Indian nationalism' Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001; also Partha Chatterjee, 'Nationalism and the woman's question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid edited, **Recasting women: essays in colonial history**, Delhi, Kali For Women, 1989

does not so much generate new perspectives on it, but recalls and reiterates perspectives, such as those represented in Tagore's story, which existed at the time.

Ray's intervention is not simply one of transposition and reiteration, but, as in the case of the transformation of Santiniketan practices, is one of constructing a modernist perspective on earlier practices and representations by carving out a distinctive niche for the spectator through the cinematic frame. And it is here, I think, that a new articulation of modernist and popular practices comes together. Over the previous films, we observe the way in which the popular emerges in distinct comic fashion in films such as *Parash Pathar*, and subsequently in *Mahapurush*, and *Monihara* exhibits Ray's engagement with popular genres such as the ghost story. Ray himself draws on the lineage of the caricaturalist Sukumar, his father, for this work, but in *Charulata* it would appear that in the crucial opening sequence of the film, he mobilizes the popular in alliance with the distancing, scrutinizing intent of a modernist style.

In the justly famous opening sequence, we are alert to a highly self-conscious deployment of the camera, with Ray taking recourse to elaborate travelling shots, zooms and an assertion of the symbolic functions of the frame and the scene as spatial orders. The veranda running along the house's first floor is recurrently used to define relations between people, and to provide the spectator with a perspective, across the landing, other than that of the characters.

The film's opening sequence describes Charu's exploration of Bhupathi's space. The space is divided between Bhupathi's workspace, and that of the library and recreation, a division between politics and culture. Looking through the books on Bhupathi's library shelf, Charu chants the name of her hero Bankim (displacing the embroidering of a B on the husband's hanky in the opening shot onto an intimately felt cultural register). This invocation invites the spectator to share with the character a common interiority shaped by the literary domain. This is about reaching into oneself, into a register of the interior that the film elevates into a domain of substantive meaning, where subjectivities which are deeper, more valid, than the world of the political public are reawakened. The opera glasses then playfully taken by Charu to look at the street below, ironically emphasise her separation from the world outside. Her spectatorship of the street scene, relayed across a series of window frames, whimsically renders the world of everyday street life as a spectacle remote

from the subject's experience. The spectacles here function not so much as a vehicle for enhancing visual powers, as for providing a visual distraction from the isolation and monotony of the cloistered space of the household. The development of a thematics of externality/interiority comes full circle when Charu subjects her husband to the ironic, exteriorizing gaze of the opera glasses.

At one level, what Ray provides here is a modernist framing of a history through devices of spatial staging and distantiation, as something being enacted for a spectator at a remove from the events being narrated. Ray himself spoke rather allusively about the possibilities of the zoom for varying the emphasis, but the rhythms of his usage of this device come to be distinctly jolting rather than functional, highlighting the spectator's perspective by jettisoning us into a closer view or into sudden distance. What is remarkable too is the way the female protagonist comes to participate in this distantiation, as she too is privy to the systems of knowledgeable distance provided by Ray's framing for the spectator of the film. Of course, our gaze is different from hers. Where ours is akin to the distance visited on the world of Apu in the first two films of the trilogy, as emerging from outside the diegesis, Charu's distance is to dominant ways of thinking about the world within the narrative.

Equally significant, I would argue, is the mobilization of the popular into the perspective. The particular figure who draws Charu's attention, a pot bellied man who is rolling along on the street, is the type of figure favoured by the comic imagination of bazaar art and satirical humour, of which latter tradition Ray is of course an inheritor.¹⁹ Charu's playful tracking of his perambulation also allows her to look at other items of street life, such as an organ grinder with a monkey, and to catch the aural rhythms of the vendor. We may recall earlier scenes, in *Pather Panchali*, which conjure with the fascination of children for the world heralded by the itinerant bioscope peddler. Indeed, there is a childlike quality to Charu's mimicking of this vision, this invocation of mechanisms of vision for 'distant' views which are actually physically proximate but socially estranged. But this is not merely

¹⁹ Tapati Guha Thakurta and Moinak Biswas have suggested to me that this invocation of the popular is closer to Sukumar's satirical form, as in *Abal Tabol*, than to the bazaar realism of Kalighat *patachitra*. While this distinction is probably accurate, the form Ray employs is clearly at a remove from the pre-modern popular culture of the type Kapur has identified for *Devi*. In this sense Ray here moves into the domain of modern print culture and its representations, a moment within modernity where the distinctions between high and low were not so marked. See also Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, for an account of Sukumar Ray's work.

ironic reflection on the conditions of a particular alienated situation. In form, this vision is very much aligned to a different order of representation.

Normally, one could say that a dominant, realist form of representation embeds another within it, by quoting it. However, there seems to be something a little more happening here. For we cannot but recall that the bazaar form especially cultivated a sending up of bhadrakok pretensions to status, though often from a strictly chauvinist perspective which mocked the man who would allow his westernized wife to dominate him.²⁰ Here, there is an adaptation, where Charu's opera glasses, charged with the energy of bazaar vision, aligns with this vision to turn it on her husband, Bhupathi, caught in the pose of serious contemplation. The cut to the viewing subject registers a glittering, amused look, as if animated now by a caricatural energy.

The marginality of the protagonist is thus converted into a position of articulate perspective on the world through the energies both of a literary imagination and a street culture. Ray subsequently deploys other mechanisms of the popular, such as those of melodramatic contrivance in the representation of Charu's cunning brother who embezzles from Bhupathi, and also in the melodramatic effects of storms to signal emotional peripeteia. As I will point out later, the specifically popular genre of visual representation is returned to, and in a rather suggestive way.

Ray builds an echoing weave around a significant swinging motion: from a focus on the opera glasses swinging at Charu's side, through the rise and fall of Charu on the swing during her dalliance with Amal in the garden, to the literary magazine that dangles at Charu's side as she rushes to meet Amal. There seems to me to be a complex set of exchanges in this visually condensed, elaborated and re-condensed echoing chamber. The devices of visualization and publicization which bookend this series, respectively through the opera glass and the literary publication, define different forms for an interfacing of self with the outside, These are mediated by the crucial reverie of the garden, where we are invited to physically register the lineaments of Charu's erotic being as it opens out through her relationship to Amal. This elaboration of the earlier motif into a fully fledged phenomenology is abruptly subject to a rending when it is revealed that Amal's companionship derives not from any independent desire or interest in Charu, but from Bhupati's request that his brother look after and cultivate his lonely wife. Charu gets Amal to promise that

what he has been inspired to write will remain private. When he transgresses this injunction, she is determined to teach him a lesson, and to upstage him in his writerly aspirations. For her struggle to write about her most intimate memories of village life in the essay 'My Village', Ray generates a suggestive montage. Some of this recuperates the lost world of his early village films, conjuring up an uncontaminated, pre-modern experience. There are also elements of folk performance, jatra, in the medley of images Charu conjures up. One way of thinking about this montage is to see it as the interior pitted against the modern and the urban; but there is an intriguing discrepancy where, breaking the logic of the images which inhabit Charu's interior life, there emerges the shadowed, profiled figure of a young boy with top hat and whisky bottle tipsily weaving around. We have here the surfacing of a performative figure that again smacks of the bazaar, doesn't quite belong with the pristine images of village life, and recalls Charu's earlier encounter with popular forms. This articulation of a fragment, a trace, of mediations that have come to reside within the character's subjectivity is strangely liberating. For it refuses to describe the character as entirely alienated from modern urban experience. The secret and productive compact of the first sequence thus resurfaces, charging Charu's face-off with her opponents with a sense of complicated resources and alliances.

The triumph of Charu's publication in a better known magazine than Amal has managed is an emphatically bitter one. For the interiority within which Amal has come to acquire an affective presence was not something to be publicized, to be brought out into the open, but to be secretly nurtured. There is a strange violence to the way Charu has been driven to reveal herself, as if she has been drawn into the hitherto distanced public world of her male adversaries' desires. At one level the politics of figuring Charu's subjectivity as inhabiting a different world from that of the men would seem to resonate with that opposition between inside and outside that has been theorized in the constitution of nationalist consciousness. As we know, this laying claim to a more authentic consciousness is processed through modern forms. Aside from this issue of modern fabrication of the traditional, there is also a question of why Charu's expression of self comes across as such a bitter subjection. The interior is revealed as something not only different but as something personal that speaks of desires which cannot be acknowledged. It is here, through the thickets of Charu's desire, that Ray puts a particular critical slant on the subordinated

²⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a 'New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal,*

modernity of his forebears without succumbing to an essentialist cultural formulation. For the village of Charu's interiority is connected with desires that would not be admissible within 'traditional' formulations about womanhood. The unfinished agenda of history that Ray plots here has a distinctly interventionist quality quite at a remove from the dark ruminations of his *Devi*.

It is with *Charulata* that some of the structure of the double take, the spirals of enchantment and loss, of romance and alienated viewing that have recurrently centred on woman characters now assumes a clearer frame, urging a retrospective view. It is as if the sacrifices and sacrificing of Durga and Sarbajaya, while obviously in a different and 'traditional' cultural register from the character of Charu, are opened to scrutiny from a new, elaborated perspective. In the process, so too are the 'destinal' narratives against which these lives are located. The question becomes then not only one of an inevitable movement away from these figures and the traditional forms of being they embody, but an introspection about the very route the spectator has, willy-nilly, been taken along. It is when a particular form of the modern has crystallized into a determinate hierarchy, into the world of politics and letters, of inside and outside, of the home and the world, within an elaborated urban configuration, that a definite pause is given to the movement of modernity. At this point its male vehicle appears contrived and self-indulgent, fundamentally lacking in the inner life and imaginative resources. What is suggestive is that this de-authentication is not founded on a counter-identification with a fiction of organic being. Rather, there emerges a contrary image of a heroine defined by an involuntary and conflicted psychology, and an interiority pictured as a modern montage of forms rather than one of sacred and pristine essence. The figure of Apu's little wife stands outside this retrospective configuration, because, in terms of character focalization, she is a subset, a product, of Apu's desires. Here, the wife's image derives from the bid to authenticate, constitute and embody the modern within the privacy of personal relations. Her tragedy is not her own, but that of Apu's failed tryst with the present. Sharmila Tagore's Dayamoyi is similarly a plaything of superior authorities, though replayed to capture this subjection as a form of tragedy.

The contemporary

Through the actress Madhabi Mukherjee Ray was to carry his reflections on the discontents of modern womanhood forward into the contemporary with works such as *Kapurush* and *Mahanagar*. For my purposes here, I want to track the complex negotiations of his formal response to the contemporary through two instances which capture the difficulty of his project, *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Jana Aranya*, the latter probably his last substantial film. The reason I choose these films is that they appear to engage the contemporary as a problem for representation, as something which cannot be accessed coherently because the sources of authentication cannot be firmly figured. Deprived of the double take of modernist method which had provided such rich ambiguity to the earlier work culminating in *Charulata*, the work from now on provides, at its most productive, the trope of irony, a kind of remote, comic view on an increasingly dystopian perspective on the middle class. The bid to develop a countervailing moral economy to contain this irony, and to locate a moral voice, invariably in the figure of a female character, underlines a steady thinning of politically purposeful engagement.

Aranyer Din Ratri

Ray's 1969 film provides the prelude to what is often referred to as his city trilogy, *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seema Badha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya* (1975). It is also very much a city film. Although it takes place in the forests of Palamau, it arguably captures the interactive dynamics, unthinking behaviour and arrogance, and hierarchies of an urban middle class in an inventive and playful way. The group, composed of two business executives, a sportsman and a hanger on, carry ties from the days of school and college, and reproduce within their social ensemble a microcosm of a certain type of city relationship. The story functions as a moral tale, where the men are meant to be shown the petty inwardness of their ways, and urged to reflect and reform - at least this is intended for those who are capable of such self-analysis which, admittedly, is only pertinent to two of the group. The moral frame that Ray's narrative presents is routed through the character played by Sharmila Tagore as Aparna, part of a family who periodically visits the area. But, for our purpose, it is the combination of this moral register with two other registers that is of significance, that of the tribal environment within which the story takes place, and the presence of Aparna's sister-in-law, Jaya, the widow played by Kaveri Bose.

The wonderful ensemble of the Calcuttans, played for a comedy of comeuppance, their dignity undone, lack of values exposed, veers towards a darker, serious denouement. Issues of repression and desire surface in the latter part of the film, and in such a way that signifiers of identity become detached and mobile. Strangely, the most glaring instance of contrivance, of blatantly inadequate representation in Ray's realist trajectory, the performance of Simi Garewal, in blackface, as a sensual, childlike tribal woman, may provide a somewhat off-colour clue.

In the final section of the film, Ray interweaves three different spaces and relationships: a sexual encounter between the sportsman Hari and the tribal woman in the forest, followed by a payment of money and an assault on Hari by the servant whom he had unjustly charged with theft and had beaten; Asim (Soumitra Chatterjee) and Aparna, as they wander towards the resthouse; and Jaya and Sanjay, as they retire to her bungalow for a cup of coffee. The last is one of the most extraordinary passages in Ray's work. In the expressionistically lit interiors of the widow's bungalow, Jaya emerges, heavily adorned in tribal jewellery, an overwhelming image of desire that the man is completely bewildered by. If Asim and Aparna provide a normative centre to the film, in which the woman provides a moral education for the man and the possibilities of carefully calibrated romance in the future, the figures on either side do not abide by any such normative frame. Forest and sexually charged interior provide the *mise-en-scene* for the grasping, petulant sportsman from the city and the widow whose desires have been repressed for so long. The mobility of tribal signs in this interwoven tapestry is suggestive. Part of Asim and Aparna's exchange takes place against the stylized backdrop of the plains along which tribal peoples move, a backdrop that frames a moral discourse with which it has no intersection.²¹ Quite contrary are the developments on either side of this rather anaemic centre, in which the *mise en scene* of nature and primitivist signification course through expressively and through displacement. Whatever the intention of the director, Ray's use of Simi Garewal, a figure of urban chic to masquerade as a tribal serves to loosen the sign and relay it to the figure of the widow, releasing turbulent energies that cannot be articulated through the normative discourse of the civilized centre.

²¹ One may recall that these were the years in which Miklos Jancso's work was being showcased in international festivals. In the stylization of this scene there is something of the choreographed forms of the Hungarian's work, but in a way which does not resonate within some larger organic movement, but as drained signification, an abstracted form against which the moral discourse of the middle class can play itself out.

None of this has to do with the adequacy or otherwise of the film's representation of the tribals, or, indeed, to a thematics of authenticity. Like its main characters, Ray had fled a city where political and economic circumstances had become increasingly difficult in the naxalite years, and something of the irony he visits on his characters' tourism, their voyeuristic externality to the places they visit, is surely self-ironic. The environment is used to bounce off the characters, as a stylistic vector against which to articulate different forms of urban subjectivity, rather than a properly narrativized entity in itself. Nevertheless, it becomes a crucial resource within the diegetic world, and brings to visibility what urban middle-class forms do not seem to have the wherewithal to relay.

Clearly, the realist form employed here constantly seeks to address other forms to speak about its interiority, its repressions and its desires. And once again, it does this through the figure of a woman deprived expression of desire within respectable society. The function of the popular employed in the urban environs of *Charulata* gives way to another set of energies within the environment tracked by Sunil Ganguli's story. In the most interesting of Ray's city films of the seventies, *Jana Aranya*, we find that the increasingly strident moral discourse which Ray has used to define his relationship to the contemporary – through the Sharmila Tagore characters of *Nayak*, *Aranyer din ratri* and *Seema Badha* - has now come to a point of crisis, in my view a productive one. For the voice is no longer the articulating centre against which excesses are managed on either side, as in *Aranyer Din Ratri*. Instead it starts to lose a sense of clear conviction signalled by depleted characterization, failing even to generate the enigmatic construction of the type represented in characters played by Sharmila Tagore.

Ray took recourse to the work of Shankar in this film, in order to catch some of the energy of street life and observation, especially the caricatural domain which he himself was so adept at. But a clear mismatch starts developing between the drives of coherent character formation and the multiple diegesis through which the narrative world is put together. Ray here uses the following narrative forms:

- 1 the main story line, centred on the lead character, Somnath and his family, composed of an upright, retired father, a cynical elder brother and a nurturing sister-in-law

2 the simulation of a documentary mode, as in the opening scene in the examination hall, or the ironic tracking of an application through the postal system; this also incorporates the anecdote, in which marginal narrative characters and situations are shown to effect the overall course of the narrative; this is the realm of contingency, putting a face and a name to an anonymous process e.g., the person who examines Somnath's script has misplaced his spectacles, effecting his exam result, which in turn leads to his downfall

3 a performative mode, deployed for the glittering gallery of characters who provide Somnath with an immoral education.

It is the latter which steadily displaces the other types of narrative world, producing a singularly discordant text within the Ray oeuvre. And the very anonymity of Ray's lead character, whose lack of strong personality and screen presence is underlined by the shrouding effects of Ray's lighting strategies, indicates the fulfilment, unwitting or otherwise, of a structural effect. For the thematic of a man without personality, suitable as it might be to Ray's vision of a corrupt and corrupting society, also provides for a peculiar evacuation of character point of view. This is significant, if we consider that the classical deployment of shot-reverse-shot for the induction of Ray's gallery of types into the film may be said to strangely obscure the figure in the reverse field.

Although this may be to stretch a point, it is as if the cinema of narrative integration that Ray had been singularly adept at constructing within the Indian context has been combined with a cinema of attractions. Film studies has generated the opposition of these forms to contrast a cinema which successfully linked shots and sequences within a stylistically consistent logic of narrative causality, and a cinema which functioned in a segmented, intermittent and tonally discordant way.²² The cinema of attractions, originally employed to describe the sheer, unnarrativized pleasure of looking observable in the single take films of early cinema, could be transposed to highlight a form that invites the spectator to enjoy a joke, take pleasure in a song, or immerse oneself not in the real but in its excessively relayed performance, as in caricature, mimicry and masquerade. Such a soliciting of the spectator's engagement does not necessarily require that these segments have to be

subordinated to the narrative logic within which they are placed. In this sense the perverse pleasure these segments conjure up appear irreducible to the moral narrative that frames them. This does not mean that such fragmentation offers the possibility of an alternative reading of the text, or suggest an alternative ethics to the moralism which seeks to compensate the spectator for the de-authenticated subject of Ray's late films. But the distracted rather than focused disposition of the story-telling suspends form precipitously, casting a shadow not over the later work, but over the very possibility of a classicism and integrity of form, and thus the bid to conquer the real ideologically.

It has been the argument of this paper that such a classicism was never a straightforward matter in Ray's oeuvre. The conflictual fields of naturalism and modernism in the trilogy, the subterranean alliance of modernist method with popular representational practices, and the centrifugal formal pressures that decentre the perspective of the later work through displacements and fragmentary irruptions all suggest the tensions at work. If the process of authentication in Ray's work at first glance draws for its resources on painterly modes, literary naturalism and Tagore's novels in the early work, it does so through an enframing of these forms through a foregrounding of the cinematic apparatus, placing the spectator at a self-conscious remove from the original source. Putting the spectator phenomenologically out of phase with this point of representational origin, these films correspondingly displace the locus of authentication onto the double take. This constitutes an awareness of the way perception is split between a knowing that you are watching this here, now, through this medium, and desiring to recover a there, then, and the lineaments of another sensorium, of painterly images and words. Moinak Biswas argues that this does not amount to the successful displacement by the cinema of other media, and other histories, as was increasingly argued for in the drive to create an autonomous cinema sense in 1950s Bengal; rather, it signalled a layering of forms and histories into the cinematic.²³ Nevertheless, one would argue that in Ray's work there is a transposition of literary into audio-visual elements of a very distinct type, and that

²² Tom Gunning, 'A cinema of attractions' in Thomas Elsaesser edited **Early cinema: space, frame, narrative**, London, British Film Institute, 1991

²³ Moinak Biswas, 'Revisiting the literary liaison', **Journal of the Moving Image**, no. 1, Calcutta, Jadavpur University, 1999

there is a stylistic intervention that alerts you, the spectator, that it is you, not a character within the fiction, and not only the camera, looking.²⁴

My suggestion has been that this casts a different light on the politics of authentication, and displaces Ray's films from the bid to authenticate the nation-state by constructing a national narrative that seamlessly traverses a point of origin to the modernity of the present. In highlighting the double take, the dual temporality of Ray's modernist method interrogates and distances us from the passage into modernity by reinvesting that we have lost. *Charulata* elaborates this interrogation of a male modernity, while laying claim, in the name of the modern, to the unravelling of a complicated montage and a transgressive rendering of the interiority repressed in the history of modernity.

Along with the rather differently calibrated destabilization of a moral-classical form that sought to offer a pedagogical tale to the de-authenticated middle class addressee of Ray's later films, where do these observations leave us in terms of a politics of culture? It would appear to me that formulations positing a straightforward relationship between politics and culture, as in the argument that modern classical forms confirm and reproduce the cultural limits of citizenship in a post-colonial context need to ponder whether a classical realism has ever worked in such uncomplicated ways. My own effort in this essay has been to attend to both the formally systematic and the more intermittent and incoherent dimensions of Ray's work to indicate the elements of distance and dissonance that were built into the project of a nationalist modernity in the post-independence period. In my understanding, Ray has been too often criticised for failing to deal with the complex mesh of signs, symbols and narrative forms that would creatively engage with the cultural legacies and debates to which we are heir, as for example in the standard contrast with the work of Ghatak. While the power and complexity of Ghatak is not at issue here, I have tried to point out the imponderable moments and layered strategies that defined Ray's rationalist and realist aesthetic and put a brake on the formulation of a seamless national culture for a modernizing middle class. A close reading of his work opens up the possibilities of attending to subordinated histories and self-reflexive moments in the constitution of an Indian modernity. I believe we

²⁴ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Viewership and democracy', in Vasudevan edited, **Making Meaning in Indian Cinema**, Delhi, OUP, 2000

need to look closely at the complexities of his films in order to pluralize our recovery of filmmaking traditions for a re-animation of contemporary cultural practice.