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Alternative Be/longing: Modernity and Material Culture in Bengali Cinema, 1947-1975

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English
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by

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Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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The thesis by

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Abstract

My Ph.D. thesis, which engages in a dialogue with the recent body of scholarship on alternative/multiple modernities, postcolonial studies, Marxism and thing theory, has two main objectives: first, I examine how the transition of post-colonial India from a primarily feudal to a capitalist form of economy facilitated a historical-materialist relationship with things, objects and commodities; and second, I argue films belonging to the Bengali parallel cinema genre enable an examination of how this relationship challenges and ruptures the singularly hegemonic narrative of modern capital. Covering critical historical junctures like the decline of feudalism in late-colonial Bengal, post-Independence Nehruvian India and the political upheaval during the Naxalite movement, I analyze Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958) and *Pratidwandi* (1971), Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik* (1958), Tapan Sinha's *Harmonium* (1963), Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1971), and Rajen Tarafder's *Palanka* (1975) to argue that these films represent an audacious retort against the paradigm of Eurocentric, commodity-laden modernity by conceiving of a material imagination that operates outside the purview of capitalism. Avoiding the temporal binary between modern/colonial and pre-modern/pre-colonial, this thesis further contends that in order to understand modernity in its historicized and spatialized diverseness, it is important to conceptualize the multiplicity of material cultures in post-colonial contexts. Although colonialism has been perceived as the reason for the import of capitalist modernity in India, I show that these films, in conjunction with the emergent leftist politics in India from 1950s to 1970s, deploy an aesthetic of modernism and a visual economy, which enable the imagining of a postcolonial material agency that appropriates and subverts concepts like fetishism, labour, and commodity that are associated with the traditional market economy.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Material Culture, Indian Cinema, Modernity, Commodity Fetishism, Thing Theory, Nationalism

For Prakash Mitra (1953-1971), who gave his life for dreaming …

Acknowledgements

Mejomama, Pradip Mitra, replied, "You will only write." I want to thank you for showing my own bourgeois limitations, for your exemplary passion for political activism and for initiating me into the idea of a different world.

Nida, no mere words, no meager thanks, no paltry gratitude. To our impermanent and imperfect transgressions.

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Introduction

Material Culture, Postcoloniality, and Modernity

> From the collections made from fines over the last fifteen months, all the
>
> *Panch* of the *Mahto toli* purchased a panchlight at this year's Ramnavami
>
> fair. The village has eight *Panchayat*s in all, each caste has its own
>
> assembly and each *Panchayat* owns a common rug, a sheet, a carpet and a
>
> Petromax, which is also known as panchlait in the rural idiom.
>
> Immediately after buying the panchlight, the headmen decided,
>
> while still at the fair, that the surplus ten rupees should be invested in
>
> articles for devotional offerings, as it was inauspicious to inaugurate a
>
> mechanical object without religious rituals. Even in the times of the
>
> *Angrez Bahadur* (the mighty British) they always made sacrificial
>
> offerings before initiating the construction of a bridge. (Renu 70;
>
> emphases in the original)[1]

This paragraph from "Panchlait," a short story by the famous Hindi writer

Phanishwar Nath Renu (1921-1977), first published in his volume of short fiction

Thumri (1959), shows, apart from the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity/

technology and rituals, the sudden formation of a collective desire around an

---

[1] This quote is from Ravikant's translation ("Panchlight') of Renu's story, published in the collection of papers presented at Sarai's 3rd annual conference in 2003 on the theme of "Shaping Technologies." Another translation of "Panchlait," by Kathryn Hansen, is also available.

inanimate object. The story goes like this: the lower-caste Mahtos decide to buy a

kerosene-lit lantern, Petromax, for their neighborhood. On the arrival of the

Petromax, a kerosene-lit lantern, the lower-caste village community in India, who

bought the lantern in order to be materially at par with other upper-caste

communities of the village, remains unsure about how to light it. All the elaborate

religious rituals the Mahtos perform around the piece of machinery do not help.

As daylight gives way to evening darkness,

> A thick layer of melancholia hung over the *toli*[2] as darkness started
>
> spreading its wings. Nobody had even cared to light a wick in their houses
>
> today... Why should they think of doing that when there was the panchlait!
>
> (71)

Mahtos cannot even think of asking for help from an outsider, as "this involved

inviting a lifetime of jibe from other" (71). Finally, the whole community turns to

Godhan, who has been ostracized for his frivolous and distasteful demeanors, but

who possesses the technical knowledge to light the lamp. As he comes and lights

up the panchlait, the entire community breaks into celebration. On the pretext of

his role in saving the honor of the community in front of other upper-caste

communities of the village, Godhan is excused and absolved.

The melancholia that hangs over the Mahto toli before the panchlight is lit

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[2] "Toli" connotes group, conglomeration, and neighbourhood in Hindi.

is not a simple expression of physical darkness; rather, it is symptomatic of a collective fetishistic projection. As the members of the community gather around the Petromax, Renu's story shows how the use value of the Petromax as a generator of light is pushed into virtual oblivion. Although the use value of the lantern is ultimately actualized, it acquires a symbolic value by emerging as a site of the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity expressed through a collectively desired material object. The simple lantern, transformed from a product of technological progress into a communal fetish,[3] enable the Mahtos to reinvent their communitarian boundaries, in terms of identity, prestige, needs, rituals and, even, law, for the purpose of accommodating a material consciousness.

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[3] I need to qualify my use of the concept of fetishism at this point and throughout the thesis. Not unexpectedly, a large part of my theoretical engagement revolves around the concept of fetishism—specifically commodity fetishism which is perceived as an effort on the part of Marx and a number of scholars working in the field of material culture to provide a theoretical rationale for explaining an irrational attachment with objects. Considered an aberration within an otherwise rationalized narrative modernity, commodity fetishism, as pointed out in William Pietz's canonized series of essays on the ethno-historical study of "fetish," refers to the magical materiality that could not be understood by the logocentric paradigm of the European traders in Africa. Marx too, in his critique of political economy, considers commodity fetishism as the phantasmagoric abstraction of material things: the singular reason for the emergence of exchange value at the expense of labor and use value in the capitalist system. Influenced by Auguste Comte's discussion of fetishism, Marx argues that commodities, unlike physical things, emerge as "mist enveloped…beings endowed with life" to enter into a "relation both with one another and the human race" (*Capital* vol. 1. 165). While my analysis of the human-object relation in this thesis is not always limited by the Marxist suspicion about commodity relations, one of the main aspirations of this thesis is to analyze how these cinematic narratives try to conceive of an attachment between the postcolonial subjects and the inanimate objects to show the ways in which these "territorialized historical" objects evoke "an intensely personal response from individuals" (Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I" 12).

I begin the thesis with this story of the Petromax, beacuse it depicts how the seemingly simple desires for buying and consuming an object of necessity acquires a symbolic significance that is reflective of the mediation. By engaging in a dialogue with the recent body of scholarship on alternative/multiple modernities, postcolonial studies, Marxism and "thing theory," my dissertation has two main objectives: first, I examine how the transition of postcolonial India from a primarily feudal to a capitalist form of economy facilitated a historical-materialist relationship with things, objects and commodities; and second, I argue films belonging to the Bengali parallel cinema genre enable an examination of how this relationship challenges and ruptures the singularly hegemonic narrative of modern capital. Covering critical historical junctures like the decline of feudalism in late-colonial Bengal, post-Independence Nehruvian India and the political upheaval during the Naxalite movement, I analyze Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958) and *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1971), Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik* (*The Pathetic Fallacy*, 1958), Tapan Sinha's *Harmonium* (1963), Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1971), and Rajen Tarafder's *Palanka* (*The Bed*, 1975) to argue that these films represent an audacious retort against the paradigm of Eurocentric, commodity-laden modernity by conceiving of a material imagination that operates outside the purview of capitalism. Avoiding the temporal binary between modern/colonial and pre-modern/pre-colonial, this thesis further contends that in order to understand modernity in its historicized and

spatialized diverseness, it is important to conceptualize the multiplicity of material cultures in postcolonial contexts. Although colonialism has been perceived as the reason for the import of capitalist modernity in India, I show that these films, in conjunction with the emergent leftist politics in India from the 1950s to the 1970s, deploy an aesthetic of modernism and a visual economy, which enable the imagining of a postcolonial material agency that appropriates and subverts concepts like fetishism, labor, and commodity that are associated with the traditional market economy.

A number of scholars have studied how India, like many other colonies, was consumed as a source of various commodities for the profiteering enterprise of colonialism. The rise of trade, modern commerce, and mercantile economy in the colonies has been trademark developments of colonial modernity. I aim to address a different and interrelated set of questions here. How does the postcolonial subject participate in this modernity through her consumption? How are modernity and consumption connected in the context of India? If there is already a scholarly accepted need to re-spatialize and re-historicize modernity, how do we re-conceptualize the relation between modernity and material culture in a space like postcolonial Bengal? There are no linear and formulaic answers to these questions. And this thesis will not attempt to come up with one. However, by looking at these Bengali films, which were made during the three decades after India's independence from colonialism, I examine how they can be understood as

multiple narratives that engage with the partnership of the un/holy couple—

modernity and capitalism—to emerge as aesthetic and political attempts at re-

claiming the postcolonial subject's relationship with her material environment – a

relationship that often disappears in a world in which the value is displaced by the

regime of "unreserved surrender to things."[4]

     Although a few of the above-mentioned films were commercially

successful, none of these filmmakers, with the exception of Tapan Sinha, are

considered "popular." Often considered "more serious" than its "frivolous,"

"popular" counterpart, Indian parallel cinema,[5] which is aesthetically influenced

primarily by the French *nouvelle vague* and Italian neorealist cinema, reinvented

the use of realism on the Indian screen.[6] Claiming to be more authentic

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[4] This is how Georges Bataille characterizes capitalism in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* (1988). He confers that capitalism transforms the relationships from an interaction between human beings into interactivity among people and things. Departing from Mauss's analysis of the phenomenon of *potlatch* in his work on archaic society, Bataille develops his theory of general economy and his critique of political economy by arguing that the act of expenditure is a non-recuperable, excessive part of economy. This excess, however profitless, makes the process of consumption entirely unproductive. See, also, his essay "Notion of Expenditure" (1985).

[5] Terms like Indian parallel cinema, Indian New Wave did not actually come into use until the late 1960s. First used by filmmakers and critics, these terms were later adopted by government agencies like the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC).

[6] Indian New Wave cinema, an offshoot of Indian parallel cinema, emerged in the 1960s and flourished in the 1970s. Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) and Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* (*A Day's Bread*, 1970) are considered as the beginning of the movement. Although Ghatak's *Ajantrik* and Ray's *Jalsaghar* were made before the Indian New Wave formally began, they are largely considered pioneering practitioners of similar aesthetic strategies. The role of parallel cinema remains significant in the context of aesthetic modernism in India. A number of these filmmakers were immensely influenced by the stylistics of

representations of "true" Indian life and aesthetic agents of social change, these

films, much like their European predecessors, depict the social and economic

problems of Indian life.[7] All the filmmakers I discuss in this thesis, apart from

Satyajit Ray, had a direct connection with leftist politics.[8] Their cinematic effort

at representing a material culture that disrupts the narrative of modern capital can

be attributed, at least partially, to their political orientation.

Although all of the films under discussion are essentially about individuals

who are caught in material relationships, their narratives are allegorical rejoinders

to capital's appropriation of the colonial and neo-colonial reality. The end of

feudalism—the transition of the Indian economic system from primarily an

agrarian operative to a capitalist, entrepreneurial one—marks an epistemic

rupture. My investigation begins with showing how ideas associated with money,

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European filmmakers like Jean Renoir, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, Federico
Fellini, and Vittorio De Sica. Although many of these films rarely received commercial
success, the global intellectual circle recognized the brilliance of Indian cinema by
appreciating films that by and large belonged to the Indian New Wave.

[7] Renowned film critic Chidananda Dasgupta delineates the difference between Indian
parallel/art cinema and the commercial genre:

> The difference between 'art cinema' and 'commercial cinema' in India is simply
> the difference between good cinema and bad—between serious films and
> degenerate 'entertainment.' The New Cinema in India is the creation of an
> intellectual elite that is keenly aware of the human condition in India. ("The
> 'New' Cinema" 41)

Ironically, the political efficacy of this genre is undermined by the fact that it could never
be at par with its popular counterpart in terms of reaching the "popular" audience it was
supposed to represent.

[8] I will present detailed descriptions of the connection these directors individually had
with the Marxist movement and its parties in respective chapters.

possession, and consumption were violently transformed by the arrival of colonial modernity that had it closest accomplice in the capitalist bourgeoisie, and how the characters in *Jalsaghar*, *Harmonium* and *Palanka* express their desire for resisting that process of transformation.

The nation-state of postcolonial India, during the tenure of its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, embarked upon a journey to manufacture its identity as a modernizing nation to salvage itself from the state of being a "needy nation."[9] This project depended on a fetishistic relationship between persons and technological things – a relationship that is inscribed within the subject-object binary. This statist agenda not only undertook the project of displaying symbols of mammoth technological advancement, military empowerment, and national integrity as markers of a nationalist modernity, but also endeavored to hide the material contingencies behind these projects—following the modalities Marx identified in the operatives of commodity fetishism—as an enactment of "state fetish." Bimal of Ghatak's *Ajantrik* expresses his affective agency—albeit in a futile way—to create an eccentric object-relation in which his obsessive

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[9] Srirupa Roy in *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (2007) argues that post-Independence India, during Nehru's tenure as prime minister, was discursively constructed as a "needy nation" in the imagination of both domestic and international public. This construction of the recently decolonized nation-state determined by its essential lacks, Roy argues, legitimized the developmentalist agenda of Nehru (106-08). Such strategy could arguably play a significant role in Nehru's personal interest in the success and global dissemination of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Little Road*, 1956), which depicted the "real," poor India. It was because of Nehru's personal intervention that *Pather Panchali* managed to reach the Cannes Film Festival in 1956.

attachment with his run-down automobile is a subversion of both commodity fetishism and statist-fetishism. Additionally, the Naxalite movement which was the most significant and violent uprising against the neocolonial bourgeoisie, and a watershed moment in the history of postcolonial India, left an indelible impact on the urban youth. The quest and the loss of several pieces of clothing, the inoccuous presence of domestic things, and the undoing of cinema's commodity status in Sen's *Interview* are moments that demonstrate the urgency of understanding the implications of revolution by connecting the urban unrest with a young man's quest for a better job. Ray's *Pratidwandi*, somewhat ambivalent in its political message, engages with the experience of turbulent modernity in Calcutta by depicting the quandary of another job-seeking young man who remains disenfranchised in his beloved city.

Modernity: Singular, Plural

Dipesh Chakrabarty evocatively opens one of his important works on postcolonial modernity as follows: "Modernity is easy to inhabit but difficult to define" (*Habitations* xix). Susan Friedman in her remarkable article, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of *Modern/Modernity/Modernism*," puts forward an exhaustive set of incessant difficulties in defining the term "modernity." The difficulty in defining the term in general can find its traces in the conceptualization of "modernity" as an absolute rupture from whatever has come

before it. As a conceptual category modernity has a complex relationship with history. "Modernity … not only entails," as David Harvey begins his estimate, "a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions, but is characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself" (12).[10] This is certainly reminiscent of what Paul de Man meant by characterizing modernity, borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche, as "ruthless forgetting" (147). De Man goes ahead to claim that "modernity and history are diametrically opposed to one another" (148).[11] The ruthlessness, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the contingent, and the fragmentary that are so essential to Eurocentric modernity are the results of societal modernization, rapid urbanization and the proliferation of

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[10] By referring to Charles Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life," David Harvey (2003) characterizes modernity as a ceaseless conflict between the ephemeral and the immutable. Several other scholars have tried to diagnose similar symptoms within the conception of modernity. Of note are David Frisby (1986) and Marshall Berman (1982) both of whom read the transience of modernity in various contexts. Frisby, by reading the works of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin, and Berman in his study of Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire and Dostoevsky explore the rupture of historical continuity caused by the advent of modernity.

[11] Reading Nietzsche's *The Use and Abuse of History* (1873), Paul de Man proclaims that the "full power of the idea of modernity … exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier" (147-48). Exposing the paradox inherent within the relationship between modernity and history—"a self-destroying union which threatens the survival of both" (151)—de Man argues that history essentially depends on modernity for its survival, whereas modernity's existence, ironically, makes itself present by being "reintegrated into a regressive historical process" (151). Although de Man's formulations explore the conceptual connections between literary modernity and history in particular, the literary desire to start afresh finds its ideological and philosophical counterpart—what Foucault terms as "counter-memory" (Foucault 160)—in the modernizing impulse of modernity. The rapid urban reorganization and industrial upheaval, Haussmannization in nineteenth century Paris, for example, emerged out of the same instinctive effort at absolute forgetting.

commodity maelstrom. The industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries and the subsequent expansion of the culture of consumption was

certainly the prelude to Europe's modernity. The literary registers in the writings

of people like Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Paul Valery often

function as narratorial expression of this material consciousness within the project

of modernity; whereas the ideas of Marx, Simmel and Benjamin, among many

others, respond to the same set of developments in the wake of capitalist

production. The ideological overtures of Western modernity are decisively

contemporaneous with the emergence of capitalism and "the great

transformation"[12]—emergence of consumer revolution. The question here,

however, is: do we understand the experience of modernity in non-Western

context through the same explanatory prism of a-historicized maelstrom of

consumption?

      Exposing the spatial bias within the project of modernity, Timothy

Mitchell observes, "Modernity has always been associated with a certain place"

(1). The project of modernity, always unfinished, as Habermas observes[13], is to

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[12] I borrow this phrase from the groundbreaking work of Karl Polanyi on the modern age of market economy, *The Great Transformation: the Political and Economic Origin of Our Time* (1957 [1944]). Of many books written on the troubles and travails of the human race during the turbulent period of capitalist modernity, Polanyi's is probably the most relevant. Some of his observations become even more relevant for the increasingly amorphous flow of capital in the age of globalized economy.

[13] Jurgen Habermas first developed his analysis of modernity as "an unfinished project"

singularize "the multiplicity of global events into a single narrative" (8-9).

Anthony Giddens asks, "How far is modernity distinctively Western" (Giddens

174)? The journey towards these spatial questions, as Mitchell himself points out,

starts with a temporal appropriation of history itself. And, Marx could be

considered the first one responsible for rearranging the dispersed events of global

contexts into what Benjamin calls "homogeneous empty time"[14] or "the time of

capital" (Chatterjee "Ambedkar" 73).[15] By looking at various aspects of industrial

capitalism, Marx constructs a singular narrative of bourgeois modernity that

originates out of organized material forces of production. Marx, as a philosopher

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in *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity* (1985). Speaking strongly against postmodernist critics, Habermas argues that the incompleteness within modernity can only be overcome by a stronger engagement with an "everyday sphere of praxis that is dependent on a living heritage," not by regressing into a misplaced nostalgia for a pre-modern past or by embracing technocratic postmodernity. Habermas's position, somewhat valid and politically imperative, runs not only the risk of imposing a singular paradigm for interpreting events across a spatio-temporal expanse, but also establishing modernity as a destination unto itself.

[14] This phrase has become singularly relevant in the understanding of the propagation of nationalism in modern times. Benedict Anderson (1991) in his groundbreaking work on nationalism, points out that the nation, which is a "sociological organism," and an "imagined community" moves calendrically through "homogeneous, empty time." This establishment of synthetic simultaneity among the members of the national community, especially in a postcolonial context, is accomplished, according to Anderson, through modern developments like print capitalism.

[15] Giorgio Agamben points this problematic within Marx's conception of history in his essay "Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum" (2007 [1993]) by arguing that "[t]he vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogeneous continuum has thus diluted the Marxist concept of history" (99). Elaborating on the differences he finds between Marxist concept of time and that of Aristotle and Hegel, Agamben vigorously contends that man, for Marx, as a historical being is bound within a "nullified experience of time" (109) and an obstinate determinant of praxis only to remain unable to take "possession of his own historical nature" (109).

of modernity and "perhaps the first and greatest of modernists" (Berman 129),

reads the new age ushered in by the reign of capital as an epoch that experienced

absolute transformation of social relations into impersonal abstractions. About

society after the nineteenth century European industrialization, Marx writes,

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all
>
> social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the
>
> bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with
>
> their train of ancient venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away,
>
> all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is
>
> solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last
>
> compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his
>
> relations with his kind. (*Communist Manifesto* 38)

The philosophical underpinnings of Marx's evocative observation about the

modern age are decisively addressed to the profound nostalgia about the

retroactive excision of "all" that is graspable. The temporal preoccupation of

Marx's voice is the quintessential expression of the inextricable crux of

modernity. Fraught with the idea of the conflict between past and present, his

ruminations over the nineteenth century developments bear a sense of an end of

"chivalrous enthusiasm" and "philistine sentimentalism" of an idyllic, feudal past.

In *Grundrisse* Marx writes that the "civilizing influence of capital" makes "all

earlier [stages] appear as mere *local developments* of humanity and as *nature*

idolatry" (409-10).

      Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar in the introduction to *Alternative Modernities* (2001) studies modernity in a non-Western context to acknowledge "the need to revise the distinction between societal modernization and cultural modernity" (1). The social, political and cultural transformations associated with the idea of modernity are often paradigmatically conflated with each other. Gaonkar argues for a culture-specific and site-based cognitive modification to extend the dilemmas and dialectics of Western modernity (15-16). We have encountered the application of a similar scholarly effort in some studies of Western modernity too, as in Marshall Berman's (1982) concept of "modernism of underdevelopment" in the context of Russia. Harry Harootunian (*History's Disquiet*) elaborates on how using everyday life as a category of analysis can cause a rupture within the monolithic conceptualization of comparability between the East and the West. Skeptical of the "spectre of comparisons" proposed by Benedict Anderson (1998), Harootunian conceives of a new mode of comparison imbued by "larger spectrality of societies deeply involved in fashioning a modernity coeval with Euro-America yet whose difference is dramatized by the revenant, the past and the premodern culture of reference, which appear as ghosts that have not yet died but have become repressed excess … ready to return … to haunt and disturb the historical present" (Harootunian, "Ghostly Comparisons" 189). In the same tone, Friedman suggests that to understand the complexities within various modernisms

we need to supplement Fredric Jameson's imperative "Always historicize!" with "Always spatialize!" ("Periodizing Modernism" 426). The often uncontested spatial and temporal boundaries of the canonized Western modernism need to be pushed to re-conceptualize some of the basic premises of modernity as a condition. Exploring the "spatial politics of periodizing modernism" (426), Friedman persuasively argues that it is not always possible to comprehend the dialectics and praxis of modernity in various geo-political contexts without challenging the center/periphery model propagated by the post-Enlightenment period of modernity and the Eurocentric ideology of diffusionism.[16]

In the context of a space like India, modernity arrived within the cultural, political and cognitive fold of colonialism. The scope of studies in the field of post/colonial modernity, as it has been in the Western context, has expanded along various trajectories—in disciplines like political philosophy, cultural histories, gender relations, education and technology, among others.[17] Such

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[16] One of the most significant volumes of contribution to this aspect of the study of modernity is the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective in India. Prominent subaltern scholars like Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among others, have relentlessly worked towards pointing out what Foucault calls "epistemic violence" that was precipitated by the Enlightenment.

[17] A large body of scholarship is available on this issue. Some remarkable and relevant works in the context of colonial and postcolonial South Asia are Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) and *Habitations of Modernity* (2002); Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986); Sudipta Kaviraj's "Modernity and Politics in India" (2000); Debjani Ganguly's *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity* (2005); Gyan Prakash's *Another Reason* (1999), and others. These and several other

investigations are often methodically fraught with conceptual dichotomies between tradition and modernity. In his effort to go beyond this polarization often associated with the topic of modernity, Dipesh Chakrabarty questions the rather unchallenged and assumed autonomy of Indian people over their "traditional" pasts (*Habitations* 47) and exposes the moral and political expediency often thrown up by the project of capitalist modernity.

In an astute reading of Marx's *Capital*, Chakrabarty makes a distinction between two kinds of histories: "histories 'posited by capital' [what Chakrabarty calls History 1] and histories that do not belong to capital's 'life process' [History 2]" ("Two Histories of Capital" 50). He argues that the latter form of history, even in a capitalist society, without being subsumed by the former, is predicated upon the idea of difference inherent within Marxian concepts of labor and commodity. Translating the "diverse life-worlds and conceptual horizons about being human" (71) into the categories of "Enlightenment thought that inhere in the logic of capital" in order to study what historians call "transition to capitalism," Chakrabarty suggests, is tantamount to emergence of a universal language of the

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works enquire into political and cultural aspects of this problematic. Besides these, several scholars have studied the impact of post/colonial modernity on other institutions such as domesticity, gender relations, matrimony, education, etc.

For studies of modernity in other spatial locations of the postcolonial world see, Anthony L. Geist and José Manleoné's *Modernism and Its Margins* (1999); Tani Barlow's *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (1997); Gi-wook Shin's *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (1999); Tamara Lynn Loos' *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (2006); Rey Chow's *Woman and Chinese Modernity* (1991).

social sciences. This results in the loss of more *affective* narratives of History 2.

For Chakrabarty, the boundaries between these two Histories are porous,

exchangeable and fluid.[18] Our scholarly interest—in its determinacy and

approximation—cannot deny the validity of these arguments. Chakrabarty's

formulation deals with a discursive conflict between capital and its other in the

context of postcolonial modernity, yet it attempts to resolve the problematic not

through any ideological revolution, but by claiming that the narrative of capitalist

modernity is always accompanied by its ghostly other. My contention is to

explore a historically determined escape from the burden of capitalist history: the

historical materialists in the films analyzed here, I argue, are agents who attempt

to declare their sovereignty against the regime of capital and modernity. By

reading their whimsical materialism, my argument is that there is a

methodological necessity of conceiving a spatial understanding of materiality,

consumption, and possession in order to arrive at a proper understanding of

spatialized modernities.

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[18] Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai in their essay on public modernity in India point out the intricate and inherent relationship between modernity and consumption, particularly in late-twentieth century India (*Consuming Modernity* 5-6; see also Appadurai 1990, 1996). Their argument about the mode and nature of public modernity in India in the age of global capitalism, though astute, cannot avoid some obvious pitfalls. Appadurai furthered the argument by proposing that the pleasure engendered by consumption, often considered a form of drudgery of global civilizing processes, contains the possibility of agency that disrupts the hegemonic and totalizing impulse of capitalism.

The Hermeneutic of Consumption: Material Culture

The idea of consumption as a socially symbolic act has been explored by many

scholars. Most notably, work of Douglas and Isherwood (1980) has put forward

an insightful analysis of the consumption as a mediating act to unravel the

multiplicity of social relations. The symbolic significance of consumption

emerges as a historical artifact in itself (McCracken 3). Within the cyclical

process of production, exchange and consumption, the last phase is the process

through which seemingly neutral goods, argues Alfred Gell, "become attached to

personal referents" (115). This attachment is predicated upon the consumer's

hopes and ideals and, eventually, produces "displaced meaning" (McCracken

104). This displaced meaning not only enables the emplacement of the consumer

and the consumed within the domain of cultural activity, it also exposes elements

of historical expediency. The study of consumption is important for various

reasons: First, consumption can be considered a bedrock of ideologies and

political beliefs – a veritable "vanguard of history" (Miller 1). Second, following

the trajectory of consumption can reveal the biographical possibilities of an object

(Kopytoff). The specific modes and objects of consumption can be considered

useful vantage points for understanding not only an individual's or a collective's

historical location, but also the complexity of an object's materiality. The work of

Susan Stewart (1984) and James Clifford (1988), among others, has eloquently

unraveled this idea. Stewart's remarkably audacious work on literary and cultural

criticism, and Clifford's provocatively anthropological analysis investigate the

world of souvenirs, collectibles, miniatures and artefacts to reveal the semiotic

relevance of the material world. [19]

The field of material culture studies has paid attention to this cultural and

historical reciprocity of the worlds of the human and the material.[20] The origin of

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[19] James Clifford, in his *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), presents a remarkable analysis of how the encounter of consumerism and modernity, of ethnography and its objects give rise to the most profound understanding of identity. In the section titled *Collections*, Clifford presents a perceptive look into the ideological assumptions and biases that often inform and appropriate collection. In the chapter titled "On Collecting Art and Culture," Clifford writes,

> Some sort of "gathering" around the self and the group—the assemblage of material "world," the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not "other"—is probably universal. All such collections embody hierarchies of value, exclusions, rule-governed territories of the self. But the notion that this gathering involves the accumulation of possessions, the idea that identity is a kind of wealth (of objects, knowledge, memories, experience), is surely not universal [....] In the West, however, collecting has long been strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture, and authenticity. (218)

In her *On Longing* (1984), Susan Stewart, more literary in her approach, unearths the myriad peculiarities in the act of longing, collecting and consuming. She argues,

> [...] acquisition is repeated over and over through the serial arrangement of objects in display space. Thus, collected objects are not the result of the serial operation of labor upon the material environment, rather, they present the seriality of an animate world; their production appears to be self-motivated and self-realized. If they are "made," it is by a process that seems to invent itself for the pleasure of the acquirer. Once again, an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation. (165)

For a lucid analysis of the interrelations between collection, fetishism, material culture and identity formation, see Kevin Hetherington's *Capitalism's Eye* (2007). See also Johannes Fabian (1983) and Jean Baudrillard (1968). Studying deeply emotional attachment to family heirlooms to perplexingly political drives for imperial collections to the fetishistic impulse to study things ethnographically, these works argue for the importance of a hermeneutics of consumption.

[20] For accounts of the emergence of material culture studies, see Daniel Miller's *Material*

modern consumption in the West has been variously located by different scholars. The methodological approaches and the subsequent conclusions have been diverse. For example, Neil McKendrick and others (1982) argue that the process of the "great transformation" began in eighteenth-century England; Chandra Mukerji (1983) traces this transformation in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, while Rosalind Williams (1982) claims this to have happened in nineteenth-century France.[21] In spite of the differences in the outcomes of these remarkable studies, the trajectories of such investigations use both historical and ethnographic approaches to identify the emergence of material consciousness in the modern era. These works were followed by the collection of essays, edited by Arjun Appadurai, titled *The Social Life of Things* (1986). Articles in this volume,

Cultures: Why Some Things Matter (1998) and *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987); Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery's *History of Things* (1993), Ian Hodder's *The Meaning of Things: Material Culture and Symbolic Expression* (1989); Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1979); Susan Pearce's *Objects of Knowledge* (1990). Ian Woodward provides a very lucid and crucial overview of the discipline in *Understanding Material Culture* (2007).

There have been several works on the material emergence and consumption of individual objects and commodities. See Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller's *The Sari* (2003), Henry Petroski's *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (1989), Galen Cranz's *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (2000), among others, for cultural, historical and anthropological studies that pay close attention to the cumbersome journeys of various objects. Another important collection of essays on this topic is Sherry Turkle's *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (2007). Daniel Miller, in his recent work, *The Comfort of Things* (2009), has put together his anthropological fieldwork among thirty households from a single street in South London to explore how people express themselves through their possessions.

[21] In the introductory chapter of his book, *Culture and Consumption* (1990), David McCracken considers these three works the pioneers in the field of material culture studies. In addition to presenting detailed summaries of their works, McCracken also points out the limitations within their works.

especially the introduction by Arjun Appadurai and "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" by Igor Kopytoff initiated a new turn in this corpus.[22] Appadurai argues for the significance of studying the "diversionary paths" (26) taken by artefacts as commodities in order to acquire a new perspective on their "circulation ... in social life" (3). Critiquing the overtly deterministic interpretation of commodities under the regime of capitalism, his essay reinstitutes the need for examining the cultural context within which they operate (12-13). The value of a commodity, for Appadurai, contrary to the Marxist idea, originates in actual and imagined exchange. In an effort at understanding the shortcomings of the works of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists on the "evolution of things," Appadurai argues that these works have ignored the idea that "even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (5).[23]

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[22] *The Social Life of Things* contains several other essays that are important scholarly interventions in the discipline of material culture. Alfred Gell's "Newcomers to the World of Goods: Consumption among Muria Gonds," Patrick Geary's "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," and C.A. Bayly's "The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700-1930," among others, study various transformations the culture and politics of consumption has been undergoing over a widely diverse spatial and temporal expanse.

[23] For a critique of Appadurai's formulation, especially his ideas about "methodological fetishism," see Pels ("Spirit of Matter"). By looking into the "genealogy of the fetish" (93), via William Pietz (1985; 1987; 1988), Pels argues that Appadurai's "methodological fetishism" is more of a "methodological animism," which, in its effort at

Appadurai's intervention is important for several reasons: First, he conceptualizes

an alternative understanding of objects and commodities outside the deterministic

frame of capitalistic interpretation. Second, he overturns the singular focus of

earlier interpretations on the animate to the inanimate. Kopytoff's essay in the

same volume unravels the complex trajectory a commodity follows in its lifetime.

Arguing for recurring transitions between commoditization and singularization,

Kopytoff points out that the cultural biography of the commodity, which is fluidly

contextualized and recontextualized as it enters and exits the economy of

exchange, needs to be studied in order to invalidate the historically deterministic

distinction between 'things' and humans. Furthering the argument of the historian

Fernand Braudel, Kopytoff contends that "the extensive commoditization we

associate with capitalism is thus not a feature of capitalism per se...." (72). Both

Appadurai and Kopytoff are interested in exploring how "commodities represent

very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge" (Appadurai 41) and

both of them try to restore the subjective sovereignty of the thing; and, both the

essays, in spite of their recurring references to various historical developments in

the field of material culture, try to come up with theories that are too general in

their reach. This runs the risk of obscuring the role of materialist factors that often

determine the value of a commodity in an inorganic manner. I refer to these

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excavating the agency of things, downplays fetishism's ability to singularize
commodities and concentrates (94-98).

essays and borrow ideas from them; however, I maintain my disagreement, which is somewhat concurrent with parts of Pels' and Thomas' disagreement with the sweeping nature of Appadurai's argument.[24] I do think the material independence that Appadurai attributes to things is, in a way, similar to the dehistoricization that capitalist commodity fetishism engenders.

"Historical ontology congealed within objects…": Thing Theory

In his essay Rom Harré asserts that "An object is transformed from a piece of stuff definable independently of any story-line into a social object by its embedment in a narrative" (25). The effort at analyzing this semantic re-codification of material things has taken diverse approaches. The literary-historical narratives studied by several anthropologists have tried to understand the emergence of material culture in various parts of the world in an ethnological manner. Whereas these studies explore the journey and transformation of commodities and objects in conjunction with the emergence of consumer culture, "thing theory"—a recent disciplinary offshoot of material culture study in the fields of literary and cultural studies—explores the semantic and aesthetic effect

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[24] Nicholas Thomas points out, quite pertinently, that Appadurai's effort at blurring the distinction between the two phases of material culture, pre-modern and modern, "seems to obscure precisely the factors which mark the biographies of objects and sometimes break them apart through recontextualization and transgression" (29).

things have on human narratives.

Departing from the hermeneutically stabilized quests of material culture, "thing theory" has provided a refreshing autonomy to things as they appear in literature and film. Bill Brown's work (1997; 1998; 2001; 2003; 2006) in this area is singularly pioneering. The special volume of the journal *Critical Inquiry* entirely dedicated to "thing theory," published in 2001, was an important beginning. In his introduction to this volume, Brown claims that the semantic reducibility of things into objects and their perverse arrest within the subject-object relationship can be undone by exploring the "audacious ambiguity" ("Thing Theory" 4) hidden within them. The (ap)perceptive fixation on things within a limited diachronic possibility of their object-use can only delimit the semantic possibilities. This is an important departure from what has been a steady trajectory in material culture studies. In his own words, the works discussed earlier had—in spite of their impulse to "denaturalize consumer practices and trace ... the *work* of exchange and consumption" (*Sense of Things* 4)—"left things behind, never quite asking how they become recognizable, representable, and exchangeable to begin with" (4). Developments in the field of "thing theory" have tried to overcome the aesthetic inadequacy that has often characterized material culture studies. Along with filling that void, "thing theory" has tried to institute an ontological sovereignty of things. The essays anthologized in the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* study a plethora of topics in literature and films to further the

project started by Susan Stewart.[25] Although "thing theory" runs the risk of

obscuring the legitimate importance of materialist history behind the journeys of

both objects and commodities, it creates a space of negotiation between

anthropological material culture studies and the philosophical ideas of Heidegger,

Gadamer, and Benjamin among others. Although the theoretical orientation of

"thing theory" remains interested mainly in the representational and aesthetic

value of objects, the foundational thrust is to question the seemingly irreversible

"semantic reducibility of things to objects" (Brown "Thing Theory" 3).

Material Culture and the Postcolonial Agency

A series of anthropological examinations has identified the origin of modern

consumption with the spread of colonization.[26] McCracken points out, "One of

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[25] Apart from the seminal introduction by Bill Brown, some of the remarkable works included in this volume are Rey Chow's study of a little-known Chinese collector ("Fateful Attachments"), John Frow's evocative attempt at exploring the relationship between humans and things in an Australian short story and a Polish poem ("A Pebble, a Camera, a Man"), Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones's study of the fetishized glove in Renaissance Europe ("Fetishizing the Glove"), Peter Schwenger's lyrical exploration of the poetic possibilities hidden in things ("Words and the Murder of the Thing"), and Lesley Stern's study of the diegetic arrangement of things in films like *Maltese Falcon*, *Umberto D* ("Paths that Wind").

[26] One remarkable study of this is the collection of essays, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (1998). Drawing on historical and anthropological studies, the essays in this volume examine how the material lives of the colonizers and colonized peoples were altered in various parts of the world. Examining museums, art collections, art exhibitions and temporary displays, this collection reveals "them as potent mechanisms in the construction and visualisation of power relationships between coloniser and colonised" (5). For the relationship between colonialism and material culture in New Guinea, see *Collecting Colonialism: Material Culture and*

the opening events of [consumer] revolution was the wild enthusiasm with which

the English consumer greeted the cheap calico and muslins imported from India in

the 1690s" (5). The West became a consumer of the huge varieties and amounts

of "imperially expropriated commodities" (Slater 18) discovered out of ever-

expanding colonies.[27] The proliferation of commodity culture and consumption

was closely linked with the colonial machinery of material oppression and the

civilizing mission of colonial enterprise (Ashcroft 77). However, the corpus of

material culture studies has conspicuously overlooked the historical agency of

colonized subjects in determining their own material practice. Even when they

have not, these studies tend to attempt an analysis of indigenous consumption

only in terms that were introduced by and imposed on by the colonizer in the

colonies. More often than not, such studies tend to investigate how materialism in

the colonies has been altered and re-shaped by the hegemonic presence of a

colonialist apparatus. Some notable works in this area, among others, include

Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* (1991), Anne McClintock's *Imperial

Leather* (1995), and two essays in Bernard Cohn's *Colonialism and Its Forms of*

Colonial Change (2001) by Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles. Several other works in
the field of museum studies investigate into the historical understanding of material
culture in the West with respect to the colonial expansion. See, for example, Bankes
(1990),

[27] See in this context Chandra Mukerji (1983) and, in the context of imperial Germany,
Andrew Zimmerman (2001).

Knowledge (1996).[28] All these works more or less subscribe to the European

colonizer and its subjugated, colonized other structure. While on occasions they

identify the possibility of ambivalence and cultural hybridity, mainly through the

theoretical framework provided by Homi Bhabha in his collection of essays,

Location of Culture (1994), within the material dialectic, their main focus is to

conduct a historical enquiry into how the unequal power structure between the

colonizer and the colonized ultimately hegemonized the global proliferation and

circulation of commodities. Another group of work looks into the emergence of

an oppositional material culture that consciously functions against colonial

supremacy in order to re-invent an authentically nationalist sentiment through the

act of consumption.[29]

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[28] Analyzing the synchronized and concurrent progression of imperialism and consumer culture, McClintock formulates,

> Commodity racism – in the specifically Victorian forms of advertising and commodity spectacle, the imperial Expositions and the museum movement – converted the imperial progress narrative into mass-produced consumer spectacles. Commodity racism ... came to produce, market and distribute evolutionary racism and imperial power on a hitherto unimagined scale. In the process, the Victorian middle-class home became a space for the display of imperial spectacle and the reinvention of race, while the colonies – in particular Africa – became a theatre for exhibiting the Victorian cult of domesticity and the reinvention of gender. (133)

While McClintock's historical understanding is irrefutable, the scope of her study is limited to the specimens that leave no possibility for the agency of the colonized subject.

[29] See, for instance, Rosinka Chaudhuri's "Modernity at Home: The Nationalization of the Indian Drawing Room, 1830-1930" (2007). While Chaudhuri's study explores the ambivalent, hybrid nature of everyday life among Bengali elites in the colonial period, a large part of her essay looks into how the Bengali bourgeois class tried to rejuvenate a national fervor through their consumption within the domestic sphere.

A large body of work dedicates itself to studying the material culture of non-western societies in pre-colonial and early colonial times. Marcel Mauss' work, originally published in the journal *Année Sociologique* in 1924, is certainly a pioneer in understanding the distinctive modes of exchange in pre-capitalist society. A large number of works that engage with the conflict between the capitalist and pre-capitalist systems of economy take Mauss' *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Society* (1990) as their theoretical premise. Among these two blocs one can perceive a rigorous temporal and paradigmatic binary between the colonial and the pre-colonial. The scholarly polarity not only essentializes a strict boundary between two historical periods; it also pre-empts any possibility of the agency of the postcolonial subject in the wake of colonial modernity. Some anthropological studies like Nicholas Thomas's (1991) analysis of the economy of exchange in the pre-colonial and early-colonial places around the Pacific (mainly Fiji and eastern Polynesia) attempt to address this lack. Problematizing the academically monolithic enquiries into how indigenous societies have unilaterally been perturbed by imperial expansion, Thomas, who refers to and uses Appadurai as one of his theoretical points of departure, proclaims, "As socially and culturally salient entities, objects change in defiance of their material stability. The category to which a thing belongs, the emotion and judgment it prompts, and narrative it recalls, are all historically refigured" (125). In the chapter titled "The Indigenous Appropriation of European Things,"

Thomas argues that while the coercive nature of the global trade of commodities under the aegis of colonialism cannot be ignored, the mutability of things and commodities along the routes of this trade can indeed be a two-way process.

Another remarkable exception in this case would be Michael Taussig's study of the culture of consumption in the villages of South America. In *The Devil and the Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), Taussig's formulation of fetishism in a "pre-capitalist society," further elaborated in his *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), reinstitutes the apparently non-modern community's subjective independence over their artefacts in the face of modernity. In the former work, Taussig analyzes the collision between the two worlds, the pre-capitalist and the capitalist ones, in the peasant communities of South America to argue that the liminal character of material culture in that society is essentially different from the one dominant in a purely capitalist system.[30] Taussig's formulation is important not only for the particular locale it deals with, but also for its pertinence in conceiving a theoretical framework for understanding the difference among the status of objects in two forms of existence. Both Thomas and Taussig, however,

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[30] Furthering Mauss's observation about exchange in Maori society, Taussig argues,
> […] the fetishism that is found in the economics of precapitalist societies arises from the sense of organic unity between persons and their products, and this stands in stark contrast to the fetishism of commodities in capitalist societies, which results from the split between persons and the things that they produce and exchange. The result of this split is the subordination of men to the things they produce, which appear to be independent and self-empowered. (37)

Similar works on the various non-western, pre-capitalist societies are Lynn Meskell's *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present* (2004),

attempt to identify these ruptures, subversions and appropriations of Western material culture during the period of early contact between Europe and its Other. The paradigmatic premise of their works is of an epistemic rupture that lies between the primitive and the modern.

These works, however, remain subsumed by two types of binaries: the first one is the spatial binary between the colonizing West and the colonized periphery, and the second one, a temporal binary between pre-capitalist/pre-colonial and capitalist/colonial. It is not my intention to argue against the epistemic disruption and re-evaluation of institutions and ideologies enforced by the hegemonic nature of colonialism; however, one aim of this thesis is to transcend the spatial and temporal dualism by which these works are circumscribed. I intend to study cinematic narratives that occasion possibilities of an alternative materialism even in the wake of capitalist modernity. Here I must mention that Appadurai, too, undertakes a similar project in the aforementioned essay. He attempts to resolve the problem of temporal polarity between tradition and modernity, primitive and capitalist by arguing for the need to look at the iconographies of things through a seamless, continuous trajectory beyond the controls of the maneuvers of capitalism and colonialism. My interest lies in diagnosing a material rebellion in the advanced stages of colonialism and modernity. A partial project of this thesis is to look for possible agency of postcolonial subjects through the representation of their material consciousness. It

is not an anthropological enquiry into the structure of consumption and exchange; rather, I intend to identify various modes of possession, consumption and exchange to argue that there is a need to understand the uniqueness of these acts in the context of postcolonial India, specifically Bengal, in order to comprehend the architectonics of modernity in its specific spatio-temporal locale. The characters in these films, as I shall argue, declare their sovereign independence from the imposing nature of commodity system and the universalist impetus of modernity.

Things in Films

In an interview sequence in the British film *Ghost Dance* (1983) by Ken McMullen, Jacque Derrida poignantly comments, "[Cinema] is the art of allowing the ghosts to come back." Are these ghosts necessarily remnants of living beings? Or, can they be of spirits of inanimate objects too? The haunting presence of things, objects, and commodities has long been adding to the ephemera of cinema screen [think 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane*]. As it is in literary narratives, cinematic narratives, too, are often entwined with the presence of inanimate objects – "things charged with effects" (Stern 320). Bresson once demanded, "Make the objects look as if they want to be there" (101). And, Siegfried Kracauer proposes, "[F]ilms in which the inanimate merely serves as a background to self-contained dialogue and the closed circuit of human relationships are essentially

uncinematic" (46). Discussing cinema's ability to instill life into inanimate things, filmmaker Jean Epstein says,

> I would even go so far as to say that the cinema is polytheuristic and theogonic. Those lives it creates, by summoning objects out of the shadows of indifference into the light of dramatic concern, have little in common with human life. These lives are like the life in charms and amulets, the ominous, tabooed objects of certain primitive religions. If we wish to understand how an animal, a plant or a stone can inspire respect, fear and horror, those three most sacred sentiments, I think we must watch them on screen, living their mysterious silent lives, alien to the human sensibility. (Epstein 317 [quoted in Moore 73])

How does the camera infuse the objects—"constellations of meaning" (Moore 73)—with their own will? What does this organized sovereignty do to their historical possibility? Furthermore, how does their audacious presence on screen affect our understanding of their human counterparts? These questions will keep haunting us throughout this thesis. Now Bresson's direction relates directly to the organization of *mise-en-scene* and cinematography. The narrative possibility invested in the objects can certainly go beyond this. Think of how Vertov deployed the object on screen in his commercial for Soviet Toys (1924) to conceptualize a Marxist critique of capitalist consumption, or in *Kinoglaz* (1924) to show the backward revealing of the production history of a commodity like

meat. The intellectual engagement with things on screen, in spite of its limited volume, has remained diverse in its approach. These works have drawn upon psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, and, in some cases, theories of everyday life, to explain the ontological, historical and referential significance of objects on screen. In this section I present a brief overview of some of the major works in this area.

Laura Mulvey's collection of essays, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996),[31] brings back the ghosts of objects, artefacts and curiosities to not only point out their semiotic significance, but also to position them within the discursive field of specific political and social developments. For example, the preface argues—in quite an impassionate manner—that the fetishistic investments in objects rejuvenate them "with belief and suspension of disbelief" (7), an outcome that immediately relates to cinema as a commodity. Using the Freudian theory of fetishism, Marxian commodity fetishism, and feminism as her theoretical apparatus, Mulvey looks at the commodity (this broad category, in Mulvey's work, includes objects, commodities, curiosities and female bodies) on screen as the condensation of topographies of desire. The essays of this collection reveal not only the aesthetic implication of objects on screen, but also elucidate various discursive structures within which those objects are deployed. Mulvey contends

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[31] It is interesting to note that in Mulvey, to connect with Derrida's comment in the beginning of this section, the figure of the ghosts come recurrently.

that the genre of mainstream Hollywood film, as an extension of Marxist theory of fetishism, erases the mechanics and production behind its creation to maintain its commodity-status. Mulvey's argument is singularly important for the spatially, temporally and contextually diverse nature of her work. Ranging from American cinema of Douglas Sirk to photographs of Cindy Sherman to *Citizen Kane* to postcolonial African cinema—the essays open up a political possibility within the conspiratorial agenda of things on screen. Particularly the essay on *Xala* (1975), a Senegalese film by novelist-director Ousmane Sembene, "The Carapace That Failed: Ousmane Sembene's *Xala*" is of importance for my thesis, especially for the chapter on *Interview*, as she explores how the appropriation of value, exchange, and commodity in Africa, as represented in Sembene's film, is essentially controlled by neo-colonial conditions.

Lesley Stern in her essay on things in films, published in the *Critical Inquiry* issue on "thing theory," intervenes within this disciplinary fold in a significant manner. Trifling through "the thicket of things"—a phrase Stern borrows from Siegfried Kracauer—she examines films like *Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Umberto D* (1952), *L'Argent* (1983), and *Centre Stage* (1992), among others, to explore the interrelation between objects and gestures, the accidental and the quotidian in films. Stern's analysis explores, instead of proposing a singular theory, the various ways in which things and objects are filmed to show the "mutability of things that matter" (354), which might draw the spectator's

attention to the "reconfiguration of relations between words and things and people" (351). Although this thesis does not fall entirely in the fold of "thing theory," various chapters pay attention to objects—objects like the ubiquitous chandelier in *Jalsaghar* (1958), the car horn in *Ajantrik* (1958), and the everyday things in *Interview* (1971)—on screen not only to excavate a materialist history of postcolonial India, but to understand the cinematographic significance they render, the affect they generate, and the ephemeral they concretize.

Concatenating Longing, Belonging, and History: A Synopsis

This thesis engages with various ideas discussed above. Drawing on studies in the discipline of material culture (and its various subsets), film studies, and postcolonial studies, I examine a number of Bengali films made between 1958 and 1976 in order to analyze how the cinematic language translates the things on screen and their relations with human characters into political and visual agency. Indian cinema has received little scholarly attention when it comes to reading things and objects on screen. There have been occasional commentaries on Indian cinematography. But how Indian cinema can be viewed as an index of a postcolonial material culture remains to be sufficiently analyzed.

Popular cinema's own emergence and proliferation, in the Euro-American context, is ontologically linked with the rise of modern consumer capitalism. The

transformation of merchandise into spectacle was the rationalizing contingency

behind the success of cinema as an object of looking (Bowlby 6; see also

Doane).[32] Miriam Hansen (1991) notes that early cinema and advertising both

aimed to stimulate desires through "visual fascination" and by blurring the

boundaries of 'looking' and 'having.' Without trying to arrive at a conclusion

about the universal nature of cinema as a medium, I am trying to suggest that the

cinematic modernism in the Indian context too could not escape the pervasive

nature of commodity culture.[33] Adding to Andreas Huyssen's formulation that

"modernism is a response to the long march of the commodity through culture,"

Priya Jaikumar argues that "colonial modernism was constituted partially as a

response to the fear that national commodities would march to the tune of

imperial technologies of production, vision, and power" (218). Though

Jaikumar's observation is about mainly cultural commodities such as cinema,

which was caught between the two opposing impulses of Western

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[32] Tom Gunning (1986) in his groundbreaking work characterized early American cinema as a "cinema of attraction" that was particularly exhibitionist in foregrounding the act of display rather than any narrative integration. Almost working as an amusement park, Gunning suggests, "cinema of attraction" enchants the audience through shock, chance and surprises. Gunning's formulation can be extended to conclude that the cinema of attraction stylistically deployed the symptoms of consumerist modernity in order to encourage the audience to develop a fetishistic relationship with the medium.

[33] Priya Jaikumar (2006), in her remarkable work on the cinema of late imperial period, makes a somewhat similar connection between commodity modernity and early Indian cinema. She argues that Indian cinema of the late colonial period tried to negotiate the material space between tradition and modernity in order to resolve the oppositional pulls between western commercialization and nationalist authenticity.

commercialization and an indigenous thrust towards autonomy, the same tension

can be seen in the context of other commodities too. The films I discuss in this

thesis do contain commodities that are products of commercialized production;

yet the semantic codification of objects in these films puts forward a pattern of

consumption and ownership that defies the hegemonic imposition of the logic of

modern capital.

The emergence of realism as a representational strategy, Sumita

Chakravarty points out in her remarkable study of post-Independence Hindi

cinema, assumes an aesthetic force that is fraught with questions of national and

individual identity (85). She sees realism as a "stabilizing discourse" that tries to

work against the maelstrom caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization.

Realism, for Chakravarty, became a "metaphoric site of displaced intellectual

anxiety" that attempts to "offset the greed, selfishness, and individualism

associated with Western-style progress" (117). Talking about the connection

between realism in Indian cinema and the politics of postcoloniality, Ashish

Rajadhyaksha too argues that the construction of the new economy in the

emerging nation-state found its aesthetic ally in realism (415). Through the realist

mode of representation in cinema the agenda of nationalism found a ratifying

vantage point. The films in this thesis belong to the realist school. A number of

them are considered to be part of the neo-realist canon of Indian cinema.

Although it is sometimes difficult to see them as narratives of "stabilizing

discourse" trying to iron out the discrepancies inherent within Indian modernity,

they too present methodological protest against a monolithic project of modernity.

All of the films in this thesis find their location within the domain of

human-object relationships. Although the chapters are somewhat chronological in

their contents, my idea is not to present a historicized evolution of material culture

in the context of either Bengal or India. Rather the aim of the following pages is

to study these films to understand certain patterns of materialism in colonial and

postcolonial Bengal to delineate a space of uneasy negotiation between tradition

and modernity, between immutable and transitory. The protagonists of these

films—somewhat reminiscent of canonical figures of Western modernity, figures

like Marx's "revolutionary," Benjamin's "flaneur," and Simmel's "stranger"—

emerge as the representative embodiments of "double consciousness" (Gaonkar 3)

that is so essential to the experience of modernity.[34] Biswambhar of *Jalsaghar*,

Rajmohan of *Palanka*, Bimal of *Ajantrik*, Ranjit of *Interview*, and Siddhartha of

Pratidwandi are all caught in the same double consciousness. Their ennui, their

helplessness, their frustration are similar to the canonical figures of Western

modernity.

In chapter 1, I study three films, *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958) by

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[34] Dilip Gaonkar terms this experience of double consciousness as "the poisoned gift" of modernity. This deeply divided consciousness comes out of the realization of difference between scientific modernization and cultural modernity. The first one acts as the pretext of bourgeois orderliness and discipline in nineteenth century, while the second experience of cultural modernity arises out of a deep-rooted anxiousness to create and maintain an authentic self in the face of rapid modernization (1-4).

Satyajit Ray, *Harmonium* (1963) by Tapan Sinha and *Palanka* (*The Bed*, 1975) by

Rajen Tarafder as material narratives, located against Indian society's painful

transition from feudal to bourgeois modernity, to show how the commodity

character of manufactured objects is appropriated and challenged by a group of

stubborn individuals who declare their historical resistance against the logic of

capital. All three films in this chapter depict the demise of the feudal world in

India. Not mourning this demise, these narratives show the way in which the

continually shifting and entangled relationship between human subjects and their

inanimate possessions reflect the modalities of their historical belonging.

Jalsaghar, the tale of a feeble and defeated landlord, Biswambhar, works as a

preamble to the other two films by showing the fundamental conflict between the

native, agrarian economy and colonialism-aided capitalism. *Harmonium*

represents the biographical journey of a harmonium through diverse social and

cultural classes in order to allegorize the transformation of the material

consciousness of the Bengali community. The last film in this chapter, *Palanka*,

located in the context of the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, uses an old

patriarch's obstinate obsession over an ornate bed to signify the specters of an old

order that holds its last revolution against the hegemonic order of bourgeois

capital.

  Looking at Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik* (*Pathetic Fallacy*, 1958)—a tale of

merciless conflict of ethereal nature and mechanized civilization—the second

chapter argues that the obsessive relationship between the protagonist Bimal, a lonely taxi driver, and his ramshackle car, Jagaddal, ruptures the totalizing impulse of commodity and technological fetishism. By engaging Bimal's humanist attachment with a mechanical object in dialogue with the technological determinism of Gandhi, who saw technology as a source of the evils of modern times, and Nehru, who visualized technological modernity as a means for ushering in the nationalist progress in India, I argue that the fallacious relationship conjures up the possibility of what Michael Taussig terms as "pre-capitalist fetishism." Ghatak's narrative takes recourse to figments of primitivism, I argue, to re-invent an affective relationship between the man and the machine, the owning subject and the owned object, to look for the possibility of not only re-conceptualizing the traditionally demonic stature of machines for humanity, but also breaking the subject-object dualism that became prevalent in the wake of technological modernization in decolonized India.

The last two chapters are set against the most politically turbulent phase of postcolonial Bengal: the Naxalite movement, which was an armed insurgence against the state organized by peasants and leftist leaders. Chapter 3 works as the revolution's prelude. As a materialist critique of statist and neo-colonial fetishism, Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1971) shows a middle-class, bourgeois, young man, Ranjit's desperate search for a suit that he absolutely needs to get a job in a mercantile corporation. This film operates on two three levels: first, it attempts to

establish that the carefully orchestrated public iconoclasm—just another form of statist fetishism—is ideologically less effective as opposed to seemingly innocuous and domestic material practices. The act of destroying statues of colonial figures remains a symbolic gesture; by delineating a detailed space of everyday life in the domestic sphere, this film argues that Ranjit's mother succeeds in practicing a stronger historical agency in denying the overpowering control of neo-colonialism in public life. Second, by depicting how Ranjit's desperate and frustrating search for a better material life and a secure job transforms him into a human mannequin, the filmmaker, in keeping with his strong allegiance with the leftist movement, uses this narrative to express his politically charged opposition to the prevalence of neo-colonialism. Third, this film, inspired by a set cinematic technique of neo-realist cinema, undoes its own status as a fetishized commodity in order to create a dialogic space between the visible and the audience. This de-fetishization of cinema and the actor makes Ranjit's—and the film's—final acknowledgement of the expediency of the revolution more feasible by establishing an intimacy between the medium and the spectator.

The last chapter on Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* (1971) comes on the coat tails of chapter 3. Much more ideologically ambivalent, Ray's film shows a jobless Siddhartha's inner dilemmas in front of a deeply divided city. Caught between the desperate hunt for a job to fulfill some of his bourgeois dreams and

an indecisive yet ideological sympathy for the leftist movement, Siddhartha tries to reclaim his right to the city. Ray cinematically builds up an urban world for his protagonist – an urban world that is not subsumed by the "society of spectacle." I pay close attention to the use of vision as a political and aesthetic register, as it is deployed in the film, to argue that *Pratidwandi*, in spite of its ambivalent political stance, invents a postcolonial subjectivity that enacts its volition by creating an alternate, to borrow a term from anthropologist Johannes Fabian, visualism. This chapter will identify modal similarities between the *flaneur*, the canonized protagonist of Western modernity, and the postcolonial city-dweller only to suggest that Siddhartha's flanerie does not become possible by consuming the visual stimuli on the commodity-laden city streets. Instead of being absorbed into the visual consumption of the spectacles of capitalism, Siddhartha practices his visual agency by transforming various persons—his siblings, his acquaintances, strangers on the street—into objects of observation. Although, unlike Ranjit of *Interview*, he does not reach the goal of realizing revolution's expedient relevance, Siddhartha declares his resilience against the brutalities of the capitalist city by hopelessly hunting for a bird—the only commodity he craves for—in a cacophonous pet market.

These are narratives of what Dipesh Chakrabarty terms as History 2, which "allows … for the politics of human belonging and diversity" ("Two Histories of Capital" 67) and cannot be subsumed to the logic of capital.

According to Chakrabarty, the history of capital is always already constitutive of its historical difference with the affective narratives of human belonging. This difference, for him, much like the Derridean trace, does not await counteractive intervention to interrupt the narrative of capital. The characters who appear in these films, however, practice their historical agency in a more dialectical manner to challenge the topological dominance of capitalism. Their narratives of belonging and longing, their affective relation with the objects, and their fanciful rebellion delineates an alternative connection between the postcolonial subject and the experience of capitalist modernity.

This work was written during the aftermath of the recent global recession, a period when the capitalist world watched and practiced an exorbitant emphasis on production, consumption and possession, when almost every perceivable sphere, including academics, in the economic north was impacted by the indices of abstract exchange, and when we watched a universal urgency to increase the flow of capital. While the world scrambled to keep the narrative of modern capital intact, the characters of these films, I hope, show that there is a necessity for, and perhaps a possibility of, imagining a different exchange.

Chapter 1

Consumption, Ownership and the Experience of Modernity: *Jalsaghar*, *Harmonium* and *Palanka*

Commodities are repositioned and re-contextualized within the regimes of exchange often determined by the unequal power relations (Appadurai "Commodities and the Politics of Value"). The ways human beings respond, react and relate to objects are constituted by the larger socio-historical context that is materially embedded in those power relations. In his essay "The Transformation of Objects into Artifacts, Antiquities, and Art in Nineteenth-Century India," Bernard Cohn writes, "It was the British who, in the nineteenth century, defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined" (77). In the colony, Cohn attributes the act of establishing a "system of classification" that would determine values of objects as artifacts, souvenirs, collectibles and mementos to the colonial, European patrons. In India then, the rise of material culture in its modern form came about through the colonial desire and fetish for native objects, which, as a result of such desire and fetish, started to bear the mark of the power relations that were not constituted within the immediately available native frames of exchange.

The system Cohn talks about is essentially and peculiarly entangled within the history of colonialism and modern capital. And, the ubiquity of the

relationship between colonialism and capitalism cannot be ignored while deciphering the history of an object in India. As Cohn suggests, the native economy—both real and cultural—experienced capitalist modernity through its encounter with colonialism. Talking about the transformation of native things into objects of value in the nineteenth century, Cohn argues:

> It was the British who … defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined. It was patrons who created a system of classification which determined what was valuable, that which would be preserved as monuments of the past, that which was collected and placed in museums, that which could be bought and sold, that which would be taken from India as mementoes and souvenirs of their own relationship to India and Indians. The foreigners increasingly established markets which set the price of objects. By and large, until the early twentieth century, Indians were bystanders to discussions and polemics which established meaning and value for the Europeans. Even when increasing numbers of Indians entered into discussion, the terms of the discourse and the agenda were set by European purposes and intentions. (77)

Cohn's observation, as exemplified by words like "museums," "monuments," "souvenirs," and "price," is accurate and pertinent if we look at such transformations with reference to the rise of essentially modern disciplines and

institutions like anthropology, museology and market capitalism.[35] His

perspective specifically arises out of the capitalist assumption about

commodities—"objects, persons, or elements of persons, which are placed in a

context in which they have exchange value" (Thomas 39)—that can be entirely

alienated from the producer/laborer. Along with identifying the role of colonial

hegemony in determining the shape and form of material culture in the colonized

countries, Cohn's formulation sweepingly preempts any possibility of a

consciousness or any agency on the part of the native populace *vis a vis* its

relationship with objects and commodities.

The aim of this chapter is to look at three Bengali films—Satyajit Ray's

Jalsaghar (*The Music Room*, 1958), Tapan Sinha's *Harmonium* (1963) and Rajen

Tarafder's *Palanka* (The Bed, 1975)—in order to explore how they reveal a

politics of possession that operates not within the system Cohn identifies but

within a more multi-centric value-system. This suggestion is inspired by the work

of Igor Kopytoff on the system of valuation in pre-modern African society.

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[35] In 1800, the Carmelite missionary Paolino writes,
> Though the Indians see daily before them the furniture and cooking utensils of the Europeans, they have never yet thought proper to make use of them. The customs prevalent among them above three thousand years ago still remain unchanged. (Quoted in Thomas 1)

Apart from the Orientalism of labelling Indians as stuck to primitive customs (Thomas 1), this statement explicitly locates the native population outside the system of modern consumption. The disjoint between the European things and the disinterested Indians, as pointed out by Paolino, is not only a commentary on native material culture, it is also a biased, de-historicized reading of the colonized people's relationship with modernity.

Discussing the system of economy in a pre-colonial, pre-capitalist world,

Kopytoff, summarizing Bohannan's work on pre-colonial Tiv in Nigeria, points

out that the native economy had three spheres of exchange: (a) "the sphere of

subsistence"; (b) "the sphere of prestige items"; and (c) "the sphere of rights-in-

people" (71). It is not possible to transport a system of exchange across a geo-

political expanse, yet the spheres proposed by Kopytoff could be identified in the

context of India, albeit with its local variations. I would like to argue that, in

addition to the spheres identified by Bohannan, there could be another: the sphere

of taste, which is closely linked with what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital."[36]

Predetermined by one's class position, Bourdieu argues, access to and mastery

over certain cultural practices form a class relation that might not be following the

trajectory of the same within the economy of money. The conceptual connection

between culture and taste in the extra-capitalist, feudal world plays a critical role

in the films of this chapter. Although in all the three films there is a haunting

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[36] I use the category of "taste" here specifically in the sense the term has been analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu in his reading of the culture of consumption in the French society of the 1960s. Refuting Immanuel Kant's idea that the "pure" aesthetic appreciation is an expression of "disinterestedness," Bourdieu connects the origin of taste with class. By arguing that "taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others" (Bourdieu 56). He reads taste as an expression of "symbolic power" that originates out of economic inequality. This intricate relationship between taste and class cannot preclude the possibility of "cultural capital." Dividing the concept of capital in various categories like economic capital, social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital, Bourdieu argues that these various spheres of capital do not necessarily preempt or presume the existence of one another. Though these categories can often be translated into one another, the operative strategies and systems of different capitals can remain distinct.

presence of extra-mercantile exchange, the transformation of objects into commodities and the resultant conflict can be attributed to a class-determined idea of taste. In all three films there are obvious references to the realm of taste that is cultivated and inherited along the genealogical line and often is beyond the reach of a cultural outsider. There is a perceptible co-existence of these spheres of exchange in the films of this chapter: the particular status acquired by objects is determined by the conflict of this multi-centric economy of the feudal world and the monolithic narrative of capital.

However diminutive and futile impact the characters of these three films might have on the larger narrative of history, they challenge and transgress, at times with audacious obstinacy, the operative hegemony of colonial modernity in the wake of bourgeois capitalism. Through these films I identify a material agency that is expressed through a series of fetishized spaces and objects that reflect a variety of fantasies, anxieties and desires in order to undermine the logic of capitalist production, consumption and accumulation. Subsequently, the objects of possession and consumption in these films metaphorically embody a historical resistance to the logic of capitalist modernity. *Jalsaghar* is about the feeble, sinking figure of a landlord who is obsessed with the space of his music room. The room, as a site of performance with its material *mise-en-scene*, stands for a time that is fast disappearing. The second film, *Harmonium*, builds a narrative around a traveling object that inadvertently tells the tale of a changing time.

Through its journey from being a feudal possession to a bourgeois token of cultural status for an urban middle-class family to a source of simple entertainment in a prostitute's quarter, the musical instrument allegorizes social mores that are rhapsodically determined by a material consciousness. *Palanka*, the most overtly political of these three films, represents an old patriarch's and his handyman's obsession with an old bed that stands for—initially for them and then for the entire local community—a symbolic plenitude and prestige. Through their ineluctable engagement with inanimate possessions and their shared engagement with the transition of Indian society from an agrarian/feudal to an urban, capitalist/entrepreneurial existence, all these three films enable a critique of a bourgeois material consciousness that was emerging through the contact of Indian society and colonial apparatus. In spite of the similarity among the modalities, the three films depict various sides of appropriation of value in the wake of such transformation. *Jalsaghar*, set in 1920s' Bengal, depicts a stubborn disavowal of all values attached to material objects by the capitalist regime; although it is difficult to estimate the actual time-frame of its story, *Harmonium* captures how the narrative of the aforementioned transition can potentially be excavated by following an object on its biographical routes; and, set against the turbulent backdrop of India's partition in 1947, *Palanka*, in stark contrast with *Jalsaghar*, revolves around an obsession for holding onto a material possession. Ironically, much like what Marx identified with respect to capitalism, the possessors in these

films are producers of value; they are the producers of meaning—"a fantastic

labor which operates through the manipulation of abstraction rather than through

concrete or material means" (Stewart 164). Yet, I shall argue, these narratives

throw open a material rejoinder to the impending hegemony of bourgeois

capitalism by re-contextualizing the possessor and the possessed objects beyond

the milieu of capitalist accumulation.

Of these three filmmakers under discussion, Tapan Sinha (*Harmonium*)

and Rajen Tarafder (*Palanka*) both were connected with leftist political

movement in Bengal. Sinha was associated with the Indian People's Theatre

Association (IPTA).[37] In fact, Sinha started his first rendezvous with filmmaking

along with famous Bengali directors Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak, both strong

and overt supporters of leftist political movements.[38] As a filmmaker, Sinha,

unlike his friends, was never considered a part of the parallel, New Wave cinema

of India. He has always been considered a more mainstream, commercial, popular

filmmaker, although a number of his films attempt to remain engaged with social

and political issues. Tarafder was a much less prolific as a filmmaker; he became

famous as a filmmaker due to the commercial and critical success of his film,

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[37] A detailed discussion of the cultural and political significance of the IPTA will be presented in the next chapter, as Ritwik Ghatak, the director of *Ajantrik*, had a much more significant relationship with the organization.

[38] Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and Tapan Sinha started making their first film in a rather amateurish manner. The three got together to make film on a shoestring budget. The unnamed film was not an organized project and it was never completed.

Ganga (1959), which depicts the hardships and struggles of the fisherman community of Bengal. Tarafder is equally well-known for his roles as an actor in a number of films like Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of a Famine, 1980) and *Khandahar* (The Ruins, 1984).[39]Although Satyajit Ray, unlike Sinha and Tarafder, was not part of any political movement, he is the most internationally well-known director from India. Before *Jalsaghar*, Ray, who is considered the first filmmaker to introduce realism in Indian cinema, had already become renowned for the first two films of his Apu trilogy—*Pather Panchali* (The Song of the Little Road, 1955) and *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished, 1956). I will discuss Ray's political position in greater detail in the chapter on his *Pratidwandi* (Siddhartha and the City, 1971).

Theoretical Preamble

The films I discuss in this chapter demonstrate a cumbersome perambulation of objects across the spheres of subsistence, prestige and taste. Objects travel through structure of exchange and representation in these films to transform from mere objects into prestige items, icons of taste and possessed heirlooms. In his

[39] Rajen Tarafder plays a particularly interesting role in Sen's *Akaler Sandhane*. As the film crew from Calcutta comes to a village to shoot a film on the Bengal famine, Haren (Tarafder) plays a local drama enthusiast who works as an interface between the crew and the local community. Intrigued by the activities of the group, Haren reveals his love for and past involvement with theatre. While talking about his passion for theatre, he tells that he wanted to stage *Das Capital* (most probably an oblique reference to Eisenstein's wish of making a film on the same text) and that people used to think that he looked like Karl Marx.

brilliant genealogical investigation into the term "fetish"—a term deeply

embedded in the historical contestation between pre-colonial and colonial system

of understanding and knowledge[40]—William Pietz notes, "The fetish is always a

meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a 'historical' object, the

enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event" ("Fetish I" 12).

"Territorialized in material space," Pietz suggests, "[t]his reified … historical

object is also 'personalized' in the sense that beyond its status as a collective

object it evokes an intensely personal response from individuals" (12). This

intensely personal, and often whimsical, response introduces aberration within the

socially accepted status of the fetish object as a material signifier. And, it is in this

space of aberration where the object of fetish emerges as "the site of both the

formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness" (12-13). The

materiality of the "reified, territorialized historical object" often evokes similar

response from a collective or an individual-representing-a-collective that is

incommensurable with the logic of social codes. In this dialectic, an object works

like a relic that not only marks the irrationality of its fetishization but also the

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[40] William Pietz's genealogical investigation into the evolution of the term and concept of fetish is significantly embedded in the history of colonial expansion. In a series of meticulously researched essays, Pietz points out that the term "fetish"—derived from *fetisso*—emerged through the trading relations between Portuguese merchants in West Africa in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He argues that the concept of fetish has always been associated with the mysterious power of material objects that evoked an incredulous sense of proximity from the West Africans, which was incomprehensible to the rational European subjects ("Fetish I" 14).

sentimental overtures of a social transformation. Often the sentimental response could be interpreted as an individual whimsy, but at the same time could be received as a synecdochic preoccupation of a larger community. In such cases, the objects of obsession are injected with values beyond their materiality to emerge out of their commodity state. By virtue of their journey through specific social situations, these objects, violating the rule of money, follow a peculiar trajectory to acquire the status of a relic, a talisman, a fetish, and to attain a singularity among an otherwise homogeneous commodity world.

Culture can function in opposing ways to attribute objects with this singular status within the dialectic of society. The anthropologist Igor Kopytoff argues that culture establishes a homogenous order among the world of diverse singular things. "Culture achieves," Kopytoff argues, "order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within overall heterogeneity" (70). At the same time, culture creates a situation where objects can be singularized even when the society is saturated with commodity forms (Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny" 177). "[T]he process of singularization," Brown contends, "returns the object-world to its heterogeneity where the lives of things are variously differentiated" (177). Brown's idea of identifying the possibility of commodities acquiring a specific uniqueness within a material and cultural milieu defies the logic of the production system of capitalism. It draws attention to two features: first, culture manages to

salvage an object out of the homogeneity of modern commerce, and, second, the process of cultural singularization establishes a material culture that is outside the purview of capitalism even in the presence of it. This singularization, which supplements "the life of things as conceptualized in Marx's account of the fetish character of the commodity" (177), does not let objects remain strictly defined and determined by the production-dominated view of commodity. Rather, the symbolic importance that these objects accrue arises from a sentimental value that stands for a social symptom. In these cases commodities are often diverted from their normal course to traverse through more personalized circuits of exchange. This not only attributes them with something more than use- and exchange-values, but also makes them an inherent part of ritualized practices. These films, cultural products themselves, depict the process of singularization of objects by salvaging them from the process of commodification and by defying the logic of pecuniary exchange.

The ritualized practices that lie hidden behind such abrupt estimation of value often take objects on circuitous journeys. To follow the convoluted path a commodity takes, as Kopytoff suggests, one needs to treat that commodity as a person with a legible biography. This is not a simple reiteration of the Marxian approach of treating a thing as a person and vice versa; this calls for a meticulous investigations into an object's travel through various social, historical and cultural contact zones to excavate its social identity. Resonating Marcel Mauss' argument

about pre-capitalist exchange as a process of treating objects as "personified things that talk and take part in the contract" (55), Kopytoff calls for the epistemic necessity for doing the biography of a thing. To do so, Kopytoff writes,

> […] one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life," and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (66-67)

If one finds answers to all these questions, there could be revelations about the people, individual and collective, who own, exchange, gift, fetishize these things. In a way, the route of a thing could very well be retraced, if not supplanted, by the route of history of a people.

Jalsaghar: Material Consciousness and a Painful Transition

Based on a short story by Bengali writer Tarashankar Banerjee, *Jalsaghar* is set in Bengal of the 1920s. Though the initial idea of the film came from Banerjee's

story, the ultimate filmed character was immensely influenced, according to Ray, by a real-life Bengali zamindar, Upendra Narayan Choudhury, who, like Biswambhar of the film, had been a patron of music.[41] The story, as Nicholas Dirks points out, is a common and simple one ("Sovereignty of History" 149). Biswambhar's excessive obsession with music and his uncontrolled expenditure to support his addiction for music cause the predictable and gradual downfall of his estate. His addiction not only brings financial doom for him; it also indirectly causes the death of his wife and son. The decadence of his zamindari is contemporaneous with the rise of a local money-lender and businessman, Mahim Ganguly. In his desperate attempt to keep up with his luxurious lifestyle and to maintain cultural superiority over the *nouveau riche* money-lender, he arranges another concert. His wife and son, who are away, are immediately called back. On a stormy night, on their way back, they die as their boat sinks. This pushes Biswambhar into pensive solitude. In the final segment of the film, we see Biswambhar going back to his beloved music room to arrange for one final concert. This is the denouement: as the concert winds down, the feudal lord reaches his absolute downfall. In the final scene, the decrepit man rides on his horse towards the horizon to meet his final destiny.

[41] This brings up a coincidence. When Ray got in touch with the author, Tarashankar Banerjee, to tell him that the film would be borrowing from Choudhury's life, Banerjee told him that even the character in the story is influenced by the same zamindar. Like Biswambhar in the film, Choudhury's estate too had been encroached upon by the hungry river. See, Ray's *Our Films, Their Films*, 44-47.

I begin my discussion of *Jalsaghar* with the mention of a strikingly haunting scene that comes at the end of the film. The defeated figure of the protagonist, Biswambhar Roy (Chhabi Biswas) stands in front of a mirror, looking pensively at his own reflection, to witness the impending end of the long-standing feudal legacy of his family. The burning out chandeliers, the darkening music room, the material markers of once-vibrant opulence remain silent witnesses to the downfall. Dirks sums up the narrative of *Jalsaghar* as follows,

> A prominent Bengali landlord, beneficiary of Lord Cornwallis's preposterous idea that a permanent settlement with the feudal remnants of old India would introduce a new managerial landed elite to the Indian countryside, an entrepreneurial gentry that would both replicate the best of English history and combine stable property rights, a secure tax base, and a sedentary lifestyle with the entrepreneurial spirit of world capitalism, undergoes a tragic fall due to the relentless hold of the feudal past. (149)

The corpus of "feudal past" consists of holding musical and dancing soirees, bestowing expensive gifts upon musicians and dancers, and giving feasts for local villagers. Like any other landlord, Biswambhar too indulges in similar activities. The huge expansive palace, the festivities during his son's threading ceremony and throwing feasts for local poor people are all figments of that feudal glory.

It is pertinent here to give a brief outline of Permanent Settlement and its impact on the material culture and value system of colonial India. In the context

of India, one cannot overlook the presence of hegemonic colonial power that

always remains hidden behind enquiries into the evolution of modern materialism.

The fall of feudalism (both as an institution and as a way of life) is prevalent in all

the three films in this chapter; the fanatical addiction to music in *Jalsaghar*, the

biographical journey of a musical instrument in *Harmonium* and the unusual

reification of a bed in *Palanka*—the devastated individuals and disintegrating

communities precipitously entangled within a material and ideological dialectic—

are ubiquitously linked with the fall of feudal society. This historical rupture in

the context of India is directly resulted by colonial manipulation—namely,

Permanent Settlement. Permanent Settlement, "the result of British inability to get

a handle on the actual levels of production in agrarian tracts" (Dirks, *Castes of*

Mind 111), brought into effect in 1793 by the administration of Governor-General

Cornwallis declared the native zamindars as "proprietors of the soil" and put them

within binding agreement over a fixed amount of revenue to be paid out to the

East India Company. Thereby, this plan tried to reform the landlord by "depriving

him of his traditional feudal privileges and ... converting him through education

and the gift of private property into an improving landlord, after the contemporary

English model" (Guha 182-83). This virtually transformed the zamindars of India

into revenue-generating instruments. This astonishingly simple legislation, which

was meant to erase the scope of corruption that existed when officials could alter

assessment of revenue at their will,[42] replaced the traditional agrarian forms of

transaction with a revenue system that was prevalent in England. But this

legislation, however, initiated the downfall of the zamindars, and, at the same

time, facilitated the construction of the figure of Bengali zamindars as reckless,

lethargic figures. Apart from playing the role of contrivance of the colonial

regime, this legislation was a part of a larger paradigmatic shift in the perception

of ideas like value, exchange and ownership in colonial India. Translation of land

as a means of generating a fixed amount of revenue not only aided the economic

exploitation meted out by the colonizer and contributed to the process of colonial

underdevelopment, it also acted its part in giving legislative and administrative

support—by deciding the proper value of agricultural land—to the transition of

the native Indian economy from "gift economy" to "exchange economy."[43] More

than the representational changes, Permanent Settlement changed the perception

of value and, subsequently, resulted in the rise of a new material consciousness in

colonial Bengal.

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[42] For understanding the historic evolution of this legislation, see, Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (1982). For more location specific case studies, see, Subhajyoti Ray's (2002) *Transformation on the Bengal Frontier: Jalpaiguri, 1765-1948*; Bindeshwar Ram's (1997) *Land and Society in India: Agrarian Relations in Colonial North Bihar*.

[43] Here I am particularly alluding to the works of Marcel Mauss on the system of exchange in pre-capitalist societies. As I discussed briefly in the introduction, Mauss, while charting the differences between the archaic form of exchange and the capitalist form, argues that there is an inherent connection between person and things in the former one. Whereas capitalism, as Mauss suggests, essentially binds the human and inanimate in a dualistic subject-object relationship.

The feudal figures in *Jalsaghar* and *Harmonium* are ambivalent variations of their colonialist constructs. Although they are represented as typical gallivanting, music-loving, carefree souls, the films' narratives try to question the colonial construct of these figures as worthless, lazy beings. *Palanka*—located after the independence of India and Pakistan from British rule—departs from the stereotype further: the waning landowner in this film actually tries to find work at a local government office, albeit mostly unsuccessfully. All of them fall victim to the ways of the new economy and the rising influence of the *nouveaux riches*; yet, their hopeless audacity posts a retort to the project of colonial capitalism.

Ray was often considered a part of Bengali bourgeois humanism, which was a continuation of the remnants of the nineteenth-century Bengali renaissance. He was not known for his overt political commitment. By his own admission, Ray had decided to make a film on the story because his last film, *Aparajito*, the second one of the Apu trilogy, was a disaster on the box office. He chose this particular story as it had sufficient scope for including song and dance sequences that could possibly catch the Indian audience's fancy and lure a producer to finance the project.[44] If we take this initial reason for making *Jalsaghar* into

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[44] Ray writes this about his decision of making *Jalsaghar*,

> My standing with the distributors was not particularly high at this point, and maybe this was one of the factors which subconsciously influenced my choice of *The Music Room*.
>
> Here was a dramatic story which could be laced legitimately with music and dancing, and distributors loved music and dancing. But here, too, was scope

account, the reading of the social and political message in the film somehow

seems inconsequential from the perspectives of the filmmaker.[45] Only in the

process of making the film, *Jalsaghar* gradually emerged as a penetrating tale of

the fall of a social order. The representational structure, which is at play in Ray's

films dealing with this conflict between feudal tradition and colonial modernity,

films like *Devi* (*The Goddess*, 1959) and *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (*The Chess Players*,

1977), bears that element of sympathy with the old order. Earlier critics like Ben

Nyce and Marie Seton find Ray more sympathetic—culturally more than

materially—with the high-culture-admiring, music-loving Biswambhar. Dirks,

too, interprets Ray's sympathetic treatment of Biswambhar as an expression of his

own distaste for modern, popular music – as a product of, as Adorno termed, the

"culture industry" ("Sovereignty of History" 164). They find support for their

argument in the visibly apparent caricature-like portrayal of Mahim. Nyce writes,

"Though both Biswambhar and Ganguly are fools in their own way, it is obvious

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for mood, for atmosphere, for psychological exploration. (45)
I shall talk about Satyajit Ray's political position in greater detail in the chapter on his
film *Pratidwandi*.

[45] To his utter surprise, *Jalsaghar* became one of his most commercially and critically
successful films in international film circles. American film critic Bosley Crowther wrote
in his review:

> I wish I had space to be more voluble about the special felicities of this film—
> about the delicacy of the direction, about the performance that Chhabi Biswas
> gives as the decaying landowner, about the pathos of Padma Devi as his wife,
> about the eloquence of the Indian music and the aura of the *mise en scene*.
> (quoted in Robinson 113)

All the reviews were not equally generous; a number of Indian and international critics
derided the film.

that Ray has more sympathy for Biswambhar's aesthetic passion than for Ganguly's crudity" (49). On the other hand, Dirks unequivocally points out that Ray has no nostalgia for the lost order. He writes, "[…] Ray indulges in the ambivalence of nostalgia only ambivalently; he has no wish to return, and he condemns the past quite passionately" (155). Reena Dube in her short analysis of *Jalsaghar* points out,

> Often critics like Seton and Nyce have tended to interpret Bishwambhar in an individualistic manner, as a feudal landlord obsessed with music. To take this view is to overlook the fact that Bishwambhar … is a cultural leader…. Therefore Biswambhar is positioned historically and culturally as the representative of culture, and as the self-image of a culture. (24)

By positioning the film squarely within a larger materialistic understanding, Dube's analysis argues that Ray alienates the audience from the music or culture depicted in the film, and thereby manages to maintain the status of both Biswambhar and the film as culturally superior, by foregrounding a chronological arrangement of music. Additionally, the use of music as a narrative element, Dube suggests, disrupts the flow of linear time and enables an aesthetic rebellion against the singular temporality of modernity.

As critics remain divided over Ray's sympatheic allegiance with the feudal system, my intention here is simply neither to add to and expand on the reading of the history of Bengali feudalism and its downfall in the film nor to

reach a conclusion about Ray's cultural allegiance with the feudal lord. Rather, I concentrate on the mode of representation through which the cultural materialism and materialism as culture comes forth in the visual narrative of the film to explain how this enables a historical understanding of the narrative. Marie Seton, writing about the three zamindari films made by Ray, *Jalsaghar*, *Devi* and *Monihara*, says,

> The action in all three films is concentrated within a magnificent zamindari house. Studio sets were almost exclusively used. Western influence by way of clothes and furnishings are powerfully evidenced, for it was the zamindar class that adopted the outward embellishments of European life to enhance the comfort of an excess of elegant repose. Objects, possessions people these films almost to the degree of becoming characters…. Isolation surrounded by inanimate objects is shown in Ray's zamindar films to be the setting for ruinous obsessions. (144)

As evident in the writing of Seton, who was closely associated with the production of a number of Ray films, minute attention was given to accentuate the material scene of *Jalsaghar*, whose object world is significantly different from that of Ray's Apu trilogy.[46] The world of the trilogy is marked by a minimal

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[46] Apu trilogy consists of Ray's *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955), *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished, 1956), and *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959). A bildungsroman based on a famous Bengali novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, these three films follow the life of Apu through his journey from his native village to the city of Calcutta to his marital life.

commodity circulation, perilously meager property,[47] whereas the realism of

Jalsaghar acquires a precipitous force by the somewhat ambivalent appearance of

objects—mostly superfluous—of value and consumption. These inanimate objects

not only form an elaborate and impartial *mise-en-scene* for the sake of realism,

they conjure up a material consciousness and historical imaginary that transpires

to articulate a physical and metaphysical conflict between the worlds of the feudal

landlord and the entrepreneurial capitalist. In this effort, music, as represented in

the film, becomes a commodity, a sort of cultural capital, for consumption; not

only music, other animate and inanimate objects—the useless elephant, the

unridden horse, various paraphernalia of the music room—shown on the screen

seem to form the locus of the conflict. Dube makes a similar conjecture by

looking at music as an aural device and the mirror as a visual device in *Jalsaghar*

to contend that the material world of the film causes a "re-routing of value" (19).

She argues, "In the absence of value-anchored land, Ray re-routes value as value-

laden music in the music room" (26).[48] I look at the visual arrangement of these

objects to argue that Biswambhar and his world become materially legible as a

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[47] Moinak Biswas makes this point about the early films of Ray and argues that the director makes a subliminal investment in trivial, timeworn things like Aunt Indir's utensils and Durga's trinket box to make the absence of valuable objects even more conspicuous (Biswas "Early Films" 45).

[48] Dube also interprets the use of music and the mirror forming the twofold—aural and visual—approach of the film's political critique of the colonialist/nationalist construct of the lazy landlord figure.

figural representation of an alternate materiality and consumption.

Jalsaghar was the first Ray movie that used an elaborate set.[49] Critical

attention to the minute details of the diegetic arrangement is a hallmark of this

film. Marie Seton recapitulates,

> Of the furniture for Chandragupta's very large set—it had been difficult to
>
> find the suitable objects, particularly when there had not been the money
>
> to buy what was required—an enormous mirror, a magnificent chandelier,
>
> and a huge carpet … were introduced as active elements in the creation of
>
> atmosphere which would subsequently be intensified with the help of
>
> these objects. (146)

Such observation reveals the narrative importance attributed to objects that fill the

screen of this film.

The film is divided into three sections: an opening into the present, a

substantially long flashback sequence, and a return to the present. As the credits

appear, a forlorn chandelier hangs in the background; gradually the camera closes

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[49] Eminent film scholar Chidananda Das Gupta writes,

> In *Jalsaghar*, Ray made his first important film in a studio, with a professional
> actor and more complex resources. And *Jalsaghar* is the outstanding example of
> his technique until *Charulata*—in his handling of a vast set, mixing the real and
> the artificial. Significantly, it came out of the oldest and most primitive of
> Calcutta's studios. (31)

In his previous two films, *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, Ray had cast mainly lesser-
known character actors and newcomers; whereas, Chhabi Biswas, who played the role of
Biswambhar Roy, was a stalwart of the Bengali film industry. Moreover, the first two
films were mainly shot outdoor with minimal usage of sets and props – something that
was essential for Ray's realist representation of the impoverished rural life of Bengal.

in to finally give way to a listless face of Biswambhar. We encounter an old and

dilapidated figure of Biswambhar sitting on a terrace. As the feeble and somewhat

pensive man look away into distance, the sound of *shehnai* comes floating from

the house of Mahim Ganguly. The mood of the scene is pensive; the loneliness of

the aging landlord is accentuated by the open expanse of the terrace and the

dilapidated walls. As the landlord immerses himself in reminiscing, the flashback

begins with a premonitory moment: a letter from the bank declining the landlord's

application for a loan against the already-pledged securities. This forces him to

meet with Mahim, son of a money-lender, who has made a lot of money and

wants to take a sand bed on lease to start a quarrying business. As the pride of

feudalism is faced with the rise of modern capitalism, the increasing authority and

influence of banks and profiteering businessmen work in tandem to subvert the

cycle of land-based traditional economy. The initial encounter between the two

systems is not a simple event in the film; rather, it sets the backdrop for the

material conflict that pervades the whole narrative.

Metaphorically, and spatially, the music room remains the bearer of and

witness to the conflict in the film. It is not difficult to read the film as a tale of a

disintegrating feudal lord paving the way for his own disaster. The first time the

two worlds—the decaying world of feudalism and the emerging world of

entrepreneurial capitalism—meet, they do it in the extravagantly decorated music

room. The landlord enters, looking around and examining attentively various

articles carefully arranged all over the room, before he sits in front of an enormous mirror looking, rather narcissistically, at his own reflected grandeur. The agent of the new order, Mahim, comes looking for an approval; his sheepish effort at legitimizing his taste for music does not make any difference. The landlord's rather impervious indifference to Mahim's presence and his condescending advice only emphasize the schism; and, the landlord, in a rather abrupt manner, exits declaring he cannot even imagine depending on a money-lender to fund his son's forthcoming threading ceremony. The material and aesthetic topicality of the room is instituted as a categorical necessity within the corpus of consumption and exchange. The artifacts—the mirror, the portraits of Biswambhar's ancestors and the chandelier—all carefully adorning the music room—elaborately manifest a world of taste that forms the main area of contention in the film. Mahim's visibly small stature and comically simple demeanor in the middle of the overt opulence of the music room only reveal the deep conflict between the two worlds: the audacious feudal world and the calculative world of the bourgeois entrepreneur. The room does not remain a mere locale for holding musical soirees; the three major nodal points of the film—the first encounter between Biswambhar and Mahim, the second concert during which the zamindar receives the news of the death of his wife and son, and the final concert—take place in the room. It not only provides a location for the exhibition of consumption that ultimately plays the driving role for the narrative;

it also becomes an instinctual and sensate metaphor for the social and political conflict between the agrarian world of feudalism and the capitalist economy.

In the same scene, with his back to the camera, the landlord sits in front of the large mirror, transforming himself into "a self-constructed portrait" (Dube 26). Reflected in the mirror, the interior of the ornate parlor-like room is infinitely expanded. The mirror is an optical device to reduplicate the elaborate interior of the music room; the aesthetic organization of the *mise en scène* of the room is underscored through the *mise en abyme* effect.[50] Discussing the aesthetic effect of mirrors in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Tom Gunning ("The Exterior as *Intérieur*") points out that the interior, especially a window mirror, creates an illusion of including the exterior within the spatial expanse of interior.[51] In Biswambhar's case too, the music room, along with the mirror, represents an all-encompassing space. His palace is not a bourgeois household in any sense; nonetheless, the diegetic emplacement of the mirror magnifies the music room in

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[50] Lucien Dallenbach defines *mise en abyme* as "*any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repealed or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication*" (italics in the original; 36). Linda Hutcheon considers this as a literary device to produce and re-produce a "narcissistic narrative." First used by Gide in 1893 and common in a number of self-reflective modernist writers, *mise en abyme* has been considered as a literary technique that accentuates the internal reflexivity of literary and art form. *Jalsaghar*, however, uses this effect more on a structural level.

[51] In Benjamin's analysis the nineteenth century Parisian bourgeois household becomes the site of ambiguous spatial interpenetration. "Through a defensive posture,"Tom Gunning analyzes, "the intérieur constitutes itself as a space cut off from the world, but this process of private appropriation relies not only on separation and insulation but also on disguise and illusion, as the optics of interior space take on the complexity of the phantasmagoria" (Gunning "The Exterior as *Intérieur*" 106-07).

an almost never-ending space that includes everything—chandeliers, enormous

family portraits, furniture, useless-yet-expensive bric-a-bracs, etc.—that is there

in the feudal world. There are precisely two brief scenes where we see him step

out of the palace: first, he goes out briefly to embrace the lifeless body of his son;

second, the very last scene when he comes out of his palace to pet his horse. The

old, feeble landlord rides the horse into the horizon before meeting a tragic end,

though it remains rather ambiguous in the film. Apart from these two marked

moments of absence the mirror in the music room occupies the centre stage;

returning the gaze of the camera (Dube 26), the mirror optically transforms the

material world of *Jalsaghar* into a "cocoon of consumption" (Gunning, "The

Exterior as *Intérieur*" 106). Instead of functioning as a kitsch-like assemblage of

objects and commodities in a middle-class apartment, the mirrored interior of the

music room adds to the memory of the obstinately unending glory of feudalism.

The unresolved conflict between Biswambhar's futile obstinacy and

Mahim's crass capitalism can be conceptually connected with the difference

between "productive" and "unproductive labor" in a capitalist system. The

categories of "productive labor," which produces value, and "unproductive labor,"

which consumes value, appeared first in Adam Smith, who writes in *The Wealth

of Nations* (2007 [1776])[52] that "the labor of most respectable orders in the

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[52] In the canonical section entitled "Of the Accumulation of Capital, or of Productive and Unproductive Labour," Smith writes,

society is … unproductive of any value…. In the same class must be ranked …

churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds; players, buffoons,

musicians, opera-singers, opera-dancers, etc." (271). It would be interesting to

notice how Marx, extrapolating from Smith, considered a musical instrument

(exemplified by a piano) as a part of what he thought to be "unproductive labor:"

> What is *productive labour* and what is *not*, a point very much disputed
>
> back and forth since Adam Smith made this distinction, has to emerge
>
> from the direction of the various aspects of capital itself. *Productive*
>
> *labour* is only that which produces *capital*. Is it not crazy, asks e.g. … Mr
>
> Senior, that the piano maker is a *productive worker*, but not the piano
>
> player, although obviously the piano would be absurd without the piano
>
> player? But this is exactly the case. The piano maker reproduces *capital*;
>
> the pianist only exchanges his labour for revenue. But doesn't the pianist
>
> produce music and satisfy our musical ear, does he not even to a certain
>
> extent produce the latter? He does indeed: his labour produces something;
>
> but that does not make it *productive labour* in the *economic sense*; no

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> There is one sort of labour which adds to the value of the subject upon which it is
> bestowed: there is another which has no such effect. The former, as it produces a
> value, may be called productive; the latter, unproductive labour. Thus the labour
> of a manufacturer adds, generally, to the value of the materials which he works
> upon, that of his own maintenance, and of his master's profit. (270).

Marx re-theorized the difference between productive and unproductive labor by arguing
that the former produces surplus value for capital, while the latter does not. Unproductive
labor, for both Smith and Marx, represents everything parasitical, wasteful, and
adventitious to capitalism – a perversion of labor. See, in this context, Hannah Arendt's
analysis of these two forms of labor in *Human Condition* (1998).

more than the labour of the mad man who produces delusions is productive. (*Grundrisse* 305; emphases in the original)

Marx's interpretation of the music producer could easily be extended to encompass the corpus of music appreciation, patronage, and so forth. From the position of political economy the acts of producing music and listening to it are essentially out of the jurisdiction of production. In this sense, the musicians and dancers Biswambhar patronizes are unproductive laborers; Biswambhar's fanatic love for and patronage of music is unproductive *per se*. Although the narrative of *Jalsaghar* is definitely tied to money (the landlord's depleting coffer and the local businessman's growing financial dominance), the topography of exchange/conflict is deeply extra-capitalist. Biswambhar's uncontrolled spending pushes him towards an inevitable penury; but this journey from a life of ebullience to the final insolvency is more than a monetized one. The narrative in the quixotic world of Biswambhar operates outside of what Marx categorizes as "productive labor" and "economic sense" by denying capital/money the status of transcendental signifier.

Dirks, through Bataille's essay "Notion of Expenditure," which was originally published in 1933, interprets Biswambhar's uncalculated (mis)demeanors as an anarchist rebellion against the order of modern capitalism. Bataille helps Dirks to see "the self-destructiveness of the … zamindar neither as mere signs of feudal decay nor as vestigial remnants of postcolonial glory but

rather as transgressive rebellion against the colonial/capitalist regime" ("The Sovereignty of History" 162). Biswambhar asks his manager to mortgage some jewelry to get money for the upcoming concert; when the manager tells him that the jewelries are all finished, Biswambhar retorts back: "How could you use the word 'finish' so easily? There is no finish." This retort does not refer to the actual wealth; it does not mean that there cannot actually be an end of it. Rather, this audacious declaration expresses an unflinching desire to tear down the perceptible and empirical figures of the exchange economy.

The circulation of capital in *Jalsaghar*, right from the beginning, is determined by class relations. Considering all the direct encounters between feudal grandeur and crass capitalism, one realizes that, on most occasions, Biswambhar's dismissal of Mahim as an inconsequential entity stands for a conflict between tradition and modernity, old and new, excess and calculation. Biswambhar's assumption, and the film's inconspicuous validation, of him as the legitimate connoisseur and custodian of the currency of culture is conspicuously determined by the class hierarchy in a feudal milieu. Ironically the hierarchy is not necessarily sustained by the quantum of money, but by the symbolic value of cultural capital. Although Biswambhar's financial status is lagging behind that of Mahim's right from the beginning of the film, the assumed class-difference between them, sustained by the overshadowing of the sphere of capital by the sphere of taste, reminds one of the remnant of the old world order. If

Biswambhar's shrinking land, gradually washed away by the river, is the

embodiment of a struggling material culture, Mahim, the practitioner of industrial

and entrepreneurial capitalism, who has made money from his business of money

lending and has subsequently branched out into other businesses like quarrying

sand, is the representative of the entrepreneurial economy benefiting from the

aftereffect of Permanent Settlement. From the ramshackle music room of

Biswambhar we will reach, in the next section, to the parlor of another bankrupt

feudal household. The downfall of these landed aristocrats is not simply the defeat

of tradition in the face of hegemonic modernity; the sympathetic treatment that

Biswambhar receives from the filmmaker is a quest for an aesthetic and political

economy that challenges, albeit unsuccessfully, the teleology of capital.

Harmonium: The Biographical Possibilities of a Musical Instrument

In Volume 1 of *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record: A Monthly

Journal of Missionary Information* in 1876, a report published under the title of

"Visit of Sir W. Muir" describes the following in a paragraph:

> After tiffin the bells chimed for Divine Service in the church of the
>
> Epiphany. The service was in Santali. The Rev. A. Stark read the evening
>
> prayers. Bhim, catechist, read the lessons. The singing and chanting were
>
> rendered in a very hearty manner, accompanied by the *harmonium*. The

church was filled in every part. (166; my emphasis)

The report ends with a rather long list of achievements of that particular chapter

of the missionary in converting the natives into Christianity. *Harmonium* the film

starts with an evocative effort at placing the musical instrument within the socio-

cultural milieu of the Bengali community. Before the film begins, there appear

epigrammatic lines:

It's said that paddy, rice, coal and cow-dung cake are

Truer than laughter, flute and song,

Yet one can see in the secluded corner of a Bengali home,

One harmonium!

The mention of harmonium, on one hand, in the missionary report that is squarely

positioned within the civilizing mission of colonialism and the aphoristic

declaration in the beginning of the film, which projects the harmonium as an

integral part of the cultural identity of the native Bengali community on the other,

expose the paradoxical status of the simple musical instrument within the

complex narrative of cultural materialism. And, almost immediately, the

harmonium is located in a process of material circulation that instills the pulse of,

what Arjun Appadurai calls "social life" in an inert object. In his analysis of the

social life of things Appadurai contends,

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view

that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions,

attributions and motivations endow them with, the anthropological

problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical

circulation of things. For that we have to follow things themselves….

Even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things

with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-

motion that illuminate their human and social context. ("Politics of Value"

5; emphases in original)

Although Appadurai's formulation, in its effort at giving independence to the

"things-in-motion," runs the legitimate risk of de-historicizing the circulation

itself (see Pels "The Spirit of Matter"), following a thing through its journey and

circulation can certainly reveal hidden nodal points of human history. Following

the circuitous journey of a musical instrument in the film *Harmonium*, I argue that

the thing-in-motion—in this case, the harmonium traveling from its feudal abode

to an urban middle-class location to a brothel—is invested with both narrative and

signifying impetus to reveal the particular "human and social context" it is

dwelling in. By acquiring different statuses in various locations, the harmonium

reveals the material ideology of people belonging to different classes in Bengal

that experience the transition from primarily rural, feudal existence to urban,

bourgeois sensibility. Constituted of three separate narrative segments, this film

becomes a whole by only being materially sutured by the traveling harmonium.

The harmonium, the main object of attention, interestingly, goes through various

circuits of valuation—use-, exchange-, and sign-value—to shift from one

destination to another. The narrative centrality of the harmonium is not essentially

dependent on that circuit. Rather, the journey, the network of destinations—both

spatial and cultural—is what emerges as the stage of performance for the

inanimate possession. The film complicates the material journey of the

harmonium from a family heirloom in the feudal world, to a bourgeois possession

in the middle-class household to a pure source of pleasure in the brothel, by

juxtaposing the journey of a thing with the complex dynamics of class and gender.

Before engaging in an analysis of the film, I think it should be worthwhile

to recapitulate the journey of the harmonium as a musical instrument in India.

Invented in Paris in 1842 by Alexandre Debain, the first version of the modern

harmonium reached India in the 19th century through the Christian missionaries.

In fact, this could purportedly be considered a return of the instrument to the land

of its origin.[53] In tandem with the existence of devotional music as an inherent

part of everyday life in India, the harmonium soon caught the fancy of the native

population. But the over-sized and typically large European pedal-harmoniums

were not suitable for the Indian lifestyle for a variety of reasons.[54] The invention

of the current form of the hand-held harmonium is credited to a Bengali

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[53] Charting the history of the evolution of the harmonium as a musical instrument, Kraig Brockschmidt (2003) points out that the instrument is believed to originate in the East, most probably China. The modern harmonium evolved from the primitive harmonica of ancient China (9-11).

[54] See, Brockschmidt, 18-19.

gentleman Dwarkanath Ghose, who was an employee of the British musical instrument merchant Harold and Co. in Calcutta. Realizing the limitations of the pedal-harmonium in the Indian context, the ingenious Dwarka, as he was better known, improvised on the existing model to come up with a hand-held version. Eventually, encouraged by his British employers, Dwarkanath opened his own shop in Bowbazar area in Calcutta and founded his company, Dwarkin and Sons in 1875 (this is the make of the harmonium shown in the film). Dwarkin remains till date the most well-known and sought-after brand of harmonium in India.

This story certainly bears traces of the material impact of colonialism: the harmonium as an object emerges as an ambivalent space, a space where colonialist hegemony is accepted, appropriated, and, implicitly contested. Historicizing the material emergence of the harmonium might help us fathom and, possibly, underscore the ambiguity that I attempted to point out at the beginning of this section. This narrative traces the journey of a harmonium through the roads and by-lanes of history to reconstruct the cultural and material biography of Bengali social milieu. Socio-politically, the crucial transformation shown in this film is similar to that of *Jalsaghar*: although it does not engage with the colonial predicament, it depicts the transformation of the social fabric of Bengal from predominantly feudal to urban, modern, and bourgeois in the aftermath of colonialism.

The opening scene shows an unusual setting of exchange. The location is a

visibly plush feudal household; the setting is an auction. As an auctioneer shouts, "Item No. 5: one mahogany bed. Double bed. One hundred years old. Think, for hundred years there has been so much love, affection, arguments on this bed."[55] And then the prospective buyers start bidding. Then comes, "Item No. 6: a harmonium. It's there in that corner. Dwarkin make. It's thing of taste. You won't get this thing anywhere else. It starts with two-hundred rupees." As the lonely lady of the house, almost a replication of the zamindar figure in *Jalsaghar*, watches, "love," "affection," and "taste" get abruptly translated into figures according to the erratic mood of the auction. The musical instrument is just another item on a list of things to be auctioned. The human emotions and memories invested in these objects are blatantly used to embellish the exchange-value of these objects; the personal belongings are transformed into collectibles in the marketplace of the bourgeoisie. It is the scene of the fall – the fall of a family, of a value-system and a social topography.

Gradually the narrative reveals the harmonium, albeit obliquely, as a traveler through various material impersonations to render a historical, cultural and contextual continuity to the social transformation. The auction scene is followed by a flashback revealing how the musical instrument was brought to instill a taste for music in a little girl—the older lady of the opening scene—of a

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[55] All the dialogues from *Harmonium* and the other films are in my translation, unless mentioned otherwise.

zamindar family. The opening auction scene serves as a pretext for the feudal house being sold off and the landlady, the young girl of the flashback sequence, leaving the ancestral home. The manager (Gangapada Basu)[56] of the estate has gradually usurped the entire property through deceits and scams. After the auction, the harmonium reaches an urban, middle-class household from its feudal abode. From the feudal household, the narrative cuts to a city scene where the harmonium travels through the signboard-laden streets of the city to reach a cramped quarter of a middle-class family. In one sense, the tortuous journey of the harmonium, shown in a carefully calibrated scene, through the visible expanse of commodity-laden streets of the city is a sequel to the ending of *Jalsaghar*. Maybe the leftover artifacts and curios of Biswambhar Roy's palace and music room in *Jalsaghar* have undergone the same journey as the harmonium. From its tasteful, reified status in the zamindar household, the harmonium in its urban dwelling becomes some sort of a symbolic and utilitarian acquisition.

While the materiality of the harmonium as a musical instrument and as a source of aesthetic pleasure is conspicuously fulfilled in the zamindar household, in the household of the middle-class family in the city, the harmonium becomes a device for preparing the girl of the family as a prospective match in the marriage market. Her parents hope to make their daughter more valuable a possible match

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[56] Gangapada Basu is the actor who played the role of the crass business man, Mahim Ganguly, in *Jalsaghar*.

by giving her some music lessons; thus, the harmonium arrives. The unwitting instrument rather inadvertently performs its ultimate duty. The family appoints a young man from the neighborhood, with whom the girl is already in love, as the girl's music teacher. This only works as a facilitator for their romance of which the families are unaware. After the girl elopes with her music teacher, the families break into an ugly squabble. Intriguingly, the girl's parents unequivocally hold the harmonium responsible for the disaster. As soon as the eloping couple is apprehended and brought back by the police, the girl's father decides to sell the harmonium. And, the harmonium goes back to the system of exchange. Along with the discernible presence of class dialectic, this segment is further complicated by the introduction of gender relations. The use of the harmonium to make the unmarried girl more marriageable is indicative of the gendered appropriation of value: the bourgeois family crassly strips the harmonium of its materiality as a source of aesthetic pleasure to deploy it to fulfill the motives of a patriarchal society.

Now moving towards an even inferior class position, the harmonium is bought and brought to a city brothel. As the harmonium winds down to find its final abode among the *impromptu* musical soirees of the women of the brothel, the biography of an object gets persistently intertwined with the movement of human beings across various class and cultural layers. The plot showing the prostitutes' quarter is certainly the most dramatic one. Depicting the story of one

particular girl (Shyama) who has landed in the brothel through sheer misfortune, this part of the story presents the harmonium in its most inconsequential incarnation. The events of this part are not in any way facilitated or threatened by the harmonium, for it simply remains a source of aesthetic pleasure here. A fugitive criminal who is Shyama's husband, an elderly woman who is also the guardian of the house, an impassioned singer (Ratan) who is especially close to and sympathetic with Shyama, and several other women form the human world. The harmonium comes to the brothel as an impulse buy. As soon as it arrives, the whole group breaks into a spontaneous singing session. It remains a participant in the regular musical soirees. Apart from this, the harmonium has no more narrative role to play here. As Shyama's husband kills Ratan, this segment comes to an end.

The final part of the film returns to the woman who had been the original owner of the harmonium. This particular part of the film forms a kind of parallel text in the film. It runs simultaneously with the journey of the harmonium. The feudal landlord's daughter, ousted from her estate, has ended up in the city. Living in absolute penury, she takes up a job of a housekeeper-cum-governess for a family. She keeps her family identity a secret. Eventually her employer, a widower, finds out about her musical acumen and requests her to train his daughter. The narrative reaches its denouement with the harmonium ultimately brought to the same household. The erstwhile owner unexpectedly finds the prized possession of her childhood returning to her; and the film ends with her

singing a song she had learnt from her father, with scenes showing glimpses from her childhood.

The transportation of the musical instrument from its feudal habitus into its bourgeois milieu embodies a passage of an object between the zones of "want" to "utility." From within the logic of production, to recall Marx from the previous section, this musical instrument has no "productive purpose" after it is once bought. The exchange value of the harmonium, properly monetized, is evocatively overlooked in the allegorical message of the film. Sinha tries to capture its symbolic and ideogramatic value with reference to the cultural life of the Bengali community.

Unlike the other two films I discuss in this chapter, the representation of historical change in *Harmonium* is significantly less painful and, consequently, more subtle. Apart from the initial uprooting of the lonely woman from her ancestral home and the auctioning of her belongings, there is a narrative smoothness in the film that is designed to make the audience oblivious to the allegorical aspect of the story. The biographical sojourn of the harmonium represents the end of a feudal era and the beginning of an urbanized, bourgeois existence in Bengal; even though, this apparently linear movement is not without slippages. One of the slippages would be the segment dealing with the brothel. This brothel sequence adds a unique dimension to the narrative. Insofar the social subjectivity and class hierarchy are intricately linked, the harmonium's position as

a source of pure pleasure in the feudal household and the brothel unravels an

extremely intriguing disposition. The harmonium unwittingly blurs the class

distinction between the two extremes of social hierarchy: Shyama is the daughter

of a traveling performer whom we come across in the beginning of the film. By

the end, the daughter has become a prostitute. The journey of the performing

woman, synchronized with the journey of the harmonium, shows how the rise of

the bourgeois middle-class turned both the musical instrument and the performer

into commodities in the modern, monetized society. This parallel between the

harmonium and the performer once again underlines the gendered appropriation

of the value system. The bourgeois re-evaluation of the harmonium reflects the

fate of the female performer in modern India. This sequence can be seen in

conjunction with the decline of the courtesan culture in colonial and postcolonial

India. In the pre-capitalist economy the female performer, maybe somebody like

Shyama's mother, was patronized by feudal lords and nawabs like Biswambhar of

Jalsaghar.[57] The financial downfall of these feudal lords, aided by the emergence

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[57] Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1984) in her study of courtesan culture in Lucknow charts
the decline of the tradition after the annexation of Awadh and exile of Wajid Ali Shah,
the last Muslim emperor of Awadh, in 1856. Lalita du Perron (2007) in her work on
Hindi poetry and Hindustani music describes the close connection between the feudal
patronage culture in India and the flourishing of a musical genre like Thumri. Both these
scholars have convincingly shown that the decline of the high music culture in north
India is historically linked with the rise of colonial power.

  Rimli Bhattacharya in her introduction to the English translation of famous
theatre actor Binodini Dasi, *Amar Jiban* (*My Story and My Life as an Actress*), provides a
critical analysis of the changing life of an actress in colonial Bengal. Deepti Priya
Mehrotra's (2006) biography of the first nautanki theatre actress, Gulab Bai, records the

of colonial, modern institutions, eventually pushed these performers to abject

desperation. Apart from the economic factors, the collapse of the courtesan

culture was due to the rise of the Western-educated, middle-class morality within

the fold of mainstream nationalism. Through the intervention of a colonialist

edifice based on "an idealized Victorian domesticity," the culture of the native

courtesans became "threatening to the male agents of empire" (Singh 110). As a

result of institutionalized control, these performing artists resorted to prostitution.

There is a perceptive connection between the arrival of the harmonium to

the middle-class family as the device for making the girl more marriageable and

the decline of Shyama in prostitution in the city. The juxtaposition of the body of

the actress-prostitute and the commoditized status of the harmonium is reflective

of the melancholy of monetized modernity[58]: an approximate replication of the

philosophical connection Simmel makes between money and prostitution.[59] But

amidst the bourgeois world of the city, it is the spontaneous gatherings of

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decline of the nautanki theatre as an institution and of the female performer in modern India. See, also, Kathryn Hansen's *Grounds for Play* (1992).

[58] In this context, see Dorothy Rowe's (2005) "Money, Modernity and Melancholia in the Writings of Georg Simmel."

[59] Georg Simmel makes an interesting comparison between the monetized society and the trade of prostitution,

> Money serves most matter-of-factly and completely for venal pleasure, which rejects any continuation of the relationship beyond sensual satisfaction: money is completely detached from the person and puts an end to any further ramifications. When one pays moneys one is completely quits, just as one through with the prostitute after satisfaction is attained. (Simmel, *Individuality and Social Forms* 121)

commoditized women over songs and dance around the harmonium that rejuvenates its materiality.

   Harmonium, even more than *Jalsaghar*, contains no overt reference to the larger historical and social context. There is a conspicuous absence of any historicized referents. However, the audience is driven to decode the otherwise illegible social history inscribed through the harmonium's journey. Through its circuitous journey it becomes a palimpsest of a community's cultural and material biography. Purposively, the harmonium's navigations through different layers of the society represent not only its own destiny, but also stand for the transformation of the cultural milieu in Bengali society. Even if it remains a simple object, the harmonium becomes "different things in different scenes" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 9). The anthropomorphized harmonium, becoming a juxtaposition of what Latour terms as "quasi-subject" and "quasi-object" (*We Have Never Been Modern* 51), perfunctorily assumes the role of a character that controls the trajectory of the narrative. The audience only gets to know the characters belonging to such variegated backgrounds because it follows the harmonium. And on the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that the narrative only follows the harmonium because it is possessed by the human subjects. If the return of the harmonium to its original owner is allegiant to what Annette Weiner, in her re-interpretation of Mauss' reading of Maori exchange, terms as

"inalienable wealth,"[60] its consumption in the middle-class household reveals the filmmaker's ideological criticism of the bourgeois appropriation of an object's materiality. The harmonium, although it changes its ownership, never really becomes a commodity for exchange. Instead, its biographical journey, one may argue along the lines of Kopytoff, reveals the transition of Bengali material consciousness from the pre-capitalist, feudal system to bourgeois modernity.

Palanka: Nation, Possession and Rupture

In this urban life humming with the sound of work, a message of greeting from a friend reached me one evening…. He had just returned from [having spent some time in] the lap of the village in which we were both born. The question he asked as soon as we met was: "I have brought this ultimate treasure for you back from desh; can you guess what it might be?" … Eventually, he surprised all by handing over to me a clod of clay. This was from the soil of my bhite, the "Basu-house," sacred from the blessing of my father and grandfather. This soil is my mother. The sacred

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[60] By the phrase "inalienable wealth" Weiner alludes to things and objects, such as heirlooms, that sustain and reproduce the identity of a particular ethnic group. These may be temporarily alienated by being located in a commodity phase, but eventually are returned, reclaimed and kept out of capitalist exchange. Weiner suggests that women, more than men, play a significant role in safeguarding the sacred status of these cherished possessions. By proposing that "[t]he authority and esteem embedded in inalienable wealth [is] far greater than its exchange value" (36), Weiner proclaims that the ownership of inalienable possessions establishes differences between human subjects.

memory of my forefathers is mixed with this soil. To me this was not just

of high value – it was invaluable. I touched this clod to my forehead. This

is no ordinary dust. This clay is moist today with the blood that has been

wrung out of Bengal's heart. (*Bajrojogini* 1; quoted in Chakrabarty,

Habitations 122)

This passage contains various layers of signification. As Dipesh Chakrabarty's

essay rightly suggests, this is an expression of an entanglement within the web of

memory of a land lost. The trauma of the Partition of 1947, the longing for the

remembered village for those forced to migrate away from it, the craving to get

reunited with the lost home even in a metaphysical way – all these are re-

inscribed through the vocabulary of spiritualism that invents an alternate

discourse of value. And on a deeper semantic level, it is to be noted, a simple clod

manages to carry and transport the elusive touch of that village. As the village is

elevated to exemplify the generic image of the ideal homeland for the uprooted,

the clod loses its actual materiality to stand for a spiritual reconnection with a lost

spatial and temporal habitation.

Released in 1975, *Palanka*,[61] made by an Indian filmmaker, Rajen

Tarafder, in Bangladesh, bears witness to a different historical churning than the

previous two films I discussed in this chapter. Set in rural East Pakistan, the

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[61] Palanka generically means bed. Specifically it refers to a particularly large, ornate variety of bed.

eastern part of Pakistan after the Partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 and before the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, this film depicts a story of an aging patriarch whose individual whimsicality gets gradually transmitted to become a communitarian symptom. It is the story of a desperate attempt at clinging onto a material reminder of a sociological and historical present that is fast slipping by. It is the story that not only bears witness to the changing social fabric of Bengal in the aftermath of the Partition, but also positions itself to expose a capricious dialectic between communal and class relations in rural Bengal. The indication is set right in the beginning: as the credits roll in, we, along with the protagonist, witness another bed, disassembled, and taken out of the village. Maqbool, the boatman, says: "See, the Ghoshes have sold their belongings, and are migrating to India." As Rajmohan looks at the bed pensively, he continues, "Maulavi Saheb says if Hindus leave better times will return to us. He is right." This other bed, taken apart into pieces, gives a material metaphor for the larger condition of the local community.

The plot is much simpler than the temporal overlapping. Though the film is made five years after the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, the narrative is set in immediately after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 when Bangladesh was still a part of undivided Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan. Even though Hindus are fleeing to the Hindu-majority India, Rajmohan (Utpal Dutt), who is a Hindu patriarch, has stayed back in East

Pakistan, which is now a Muslim-majority nation.[62] His son has already moved to

Calcutta with his family. Struggling economically, Rajmohan's daughter-in-law

writes to him to sell her nuptial bed and send the money to them so that they can

buy a new bed for their children in the city. In a fit of rage and anger at his son's

and daughter-in-law's request, Rajmohan decides to sell the bed immediately. His

Muslim handyman, Maqbool, who has long been yearning for the ornate bed,

does not let this opportunity go and decides to buy it with the money he has saved

for buying a cow and repairing his dilapidated hut. Very soon the word spreads all

over the village, and others come offering to buy other furniture, as they assume

that Rajmohan must be preparing to leave Pakistan to go to India. Though

Maqbool manages to buy the bed for a paltry sum of fifty rupees, soon the

repentant Rajmohan wants to buy it back. In spite of his offer of a five-rupee

dividend, Maqbool refuses to sell the bed back. Though the leaders of the

community order him to return the bed, Maqbool remains adamant. Soon the bed

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[62] Utpal Dutt (1929-1993) has been an illustrious figure in Indian theatre and cinema. After starting his stage career with Geoffrey Kendall's touring Shakespeare theatre company in India, he joined the IPTA. A large number of his political plays speak against the atrocious treatment of the Communist Party of India workers during 1950s. Later on he ventured into plays that drew their subject from internal issues like fascism in Germany (*Barricade*), racism in America (*Manusher Adhikarey* [By the Rights of the People]) and the Vietnam war (*Ajeya Vietnam* [Invincible Vietnam]), etc. Almost all his plays, as Dutt himself elaborates in his writings and interviews, are conceived of as political weapons instead of a simple source of entertainment. He entered into films much later. A large number of his films represented him as a stereotyped actor and character, and he primarily looked at this as a way of earning money for his stage enterprises. See, Bharucha, 1983; Dutt, 1982.

becomes the center of all the activities in the village, as other people too try to

acquire the bed from Maqbool. Gradually both the communities, Hindu and

Muslim, of the village stop all kinds of business from him trying to put him in

economic trouble. As Maqbool's destitution becomes unbearable, the entire

village thinks of newer ploys to break him, but to no avail. Finally Rajmohan gets

the news that Maqbool has decided to sell the bed to a different person. The film

reaches its climax on a stormy night when Rajmohan arrives at Maqbool's house

to get a last glimpse of the bed. To his utter surprise he finds that Maqbool has yet

again turned down the offer. Maqbool's family, now starving for two days,

evokes a parental sympathy in Rajmohan; looking at Maqbool's children sleeping

peacefully on the bed, Rajmohan realizes the emptiness of his obsession with an

inert bed. He murmurs to himself: "My bed is not empty anymore." And the film

ends in reconciliation between not only Rajmohan and Maqbool, but also between

Rajmohan's humanism and his material obsession.

During this peculiar tale of an obsession with an inert thing, the story

touches upon various issues. The haunting impact of the Partition, the complexity

of the class-religion dialectic, the tussle between tradition and modernity – all

these get reflected through the narrational centrality of the bed. As a commodity,

the bed undergoes an extra-mercantile value-determination that not only creates

an alternate economy, but makes possible the formation of a community that was

getting increasingly fractured during the period of heightened communal tension

in the post-Partition period. Apart from the tale of a family and an individual, this film bears the mark of the historical and communal rupture caused by the Partition. The local community is gradually disintegrating; Hindu people are leaving for India to be with their own people; a paranoia is caused by the hushed hearsay that the power center in West Pakistan would replace Bengali as the local language with Urdu[63]; the religious leaders are gaining more power over the village community.

The film captures, along with a geo-political change in the region, a more quotidian aftermath of Partition. As the film shows in the beginning, through the comparative juxtaposition of the open, rural setting of East Bengal and the congested, dingy localities of Calcutta, the migration from rural habitat to the urban centers caused a deeply unsettling experience among the people who moved to the western side of the province. Between August and December 1947, several millions Hindus migrated across India's eastern border to the provinces of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. All of a sudden, labeled as minority, these people faced an uncomfortable choice between being persecuted by the new masters and leaving everything behind to face a new set of challenges in an

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[63] The language divide between the East and West Pakistan would eventually become the main issue of contention between the rulers located in the western part and the people of the eastern side. Between 1947 and 1971, the religious nationalism that Pakistan was founded upon gradually gave way to linguistic nationalism in the eastern part. In his recent book, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (2006), Sufia M. Uddin presents a historicist evolution of various forms of nationalisms—from religious to linguistic to ethnic—in colonial and postcolonial Bangladesh.

unfamiliar country. The Hindu community that was forced to move was profoundly stratified in terms of its class identity. The working-class and lower-caste Hindus, the larger group, mostly illiterate and deeply indebted, found the process of migration extremely difficult. Not only the pain of leaving home, familiar locality and immovable, however small, possession, the uncertainty of finding jobs and refuge in the new space made them extremely insecure. They were the ones who faced the brunt of the Partition. Though the material repercussions were much easier to adapt to for upper-class Hindus, the abrupt uprooting was deeply traumatic even for them. They had to leave "behind beloved friends and treasured landscapes, as well as large estates, palatial homes and the trappings of aristocratic life, and say goodbye to familiar localities where they had long been the people who mattered" (Chatterji 114).[64]

The particular Hindu family shown in the film is an upper-class one; yet, like many others of similar social status, Rajmohan's son had to leave a life of reasonable comfort to take up a low-paying, white-collar job in Calcutta. As the film shows, the family tries to survive in their new home. The crammed apartment, the dark lanes, the dingy walls of their Calcutta life contrast sharply with the idyllic East Bengal. Although their condition is starkly better than the

[64] For an incisive recording and analysis of the migration of Hindus from East Pakistan to Calcutta and its surrounding, see, Joya Chatterji's *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*. In the chapter titled, "Partition and Migration: Refugees in West Bengal, 1947-1967," Chatterji presents a detailed empirical record of the refugee influx into West Bengal after Partition.

refugees in temporary camps and squatter colonies, the family's condition is a representative of the "irrational aberration" (Chakrabarty, *Habitations* 119) a large number of middle-class Bengalis from East Bengal had to undergo.[65]

A number of literary and cinematic texts have been produced to represent the plight of uprooted people. The material, physical and emotional turmoil of refugees has been given critical and scholarly attention in recent times.[66] Of all films that deal with the impact of Partition, *Palanka* is closest to Ritwik Ghatak's films in its treatment. Much like Ghatak's classic films like *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*, Tarafder tries to capture the after-effect of the event at the level of everyday life. Ghatak's films show the life of displaced families who have crossed the border from East Bengal to the western side. Instead of dwelling on the representation of gory violence that is often associated with the memory of Partition, these films depict the ruptured subjectivity of

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[65] Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the act of memory often ignores the historical explanation of an event like Partition and tries to look at it as a "monstrously irrational aberration" (119).

[66] In the context of migration of refugees along the eastern border between India and East Pakistan, Joya Chatterji's *Spoils of Partition* (2007) and Bidyut Chakrabarty's *The Partition of Bengal and Assam* (2004) are detailed historical research into the political causes and demographic repercussions of the Partition. Besides these, see, Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* (2001), Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (2000), Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh's *The Partition of India* (2009), Sukeshi Kamra's *Bearing Witness* (2002) and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998). There have been significant works on the cultural representations of Partition and its impact on refugees, e.g. Kavita Daiya's *Violent Belongings* (2008), Jill Didur's *Unsettling Partition* (2006), Bhaskar Sarkar's *Mourning the Nation* (2009), Anjali Gera Roy and Nandi Bhatia's *Partitioned Lives* (2008), etc.

Bengali society by depicting the disintegrating familial and communal structures. *Palanka* too, instead of showing the bloodshed and the violence, captures the brutalities at a more sublime level. Though Rajmohan is not displaced *per se*, the violent outcome of partition is captured by his destitute loneliness, which is the result of uprooting of his family and the disintegration of the local community.

There is a synthetic attempt on the part of few people in the village to establish homogeneity in the community. The local Muslim religious leader unscrupulously tries to persuade others to succumb to the idea of Urdu as a national language; and, at the same time, common people remain visibly suspicious of the changes that are going to be brought in by the new government. The schism between a nationalist fantasy and a communitarian ideal remains prominent. On the one hand, there is a sense of respite for the ousting of colonialism, and on the other, there is persistently uneasy negotiation with the trauma of Partition. The trauma is not a simple symptom of a pain caused by the division of geo-political space; it is the consequence of sudden dissolution of a way of life. At the same time, the film remains a conscious testimony to the unflinching syncretism in the community. It is evidenced by Rajmohan's decision to stay back. The reluctant Hindu remains a lonely figure in a predominantly Muslim nation, without his family.

This is a story, apart from the context of Partition, of a battle between two obstinate individuals—Rajmohan and Maqbool—over an object. Rajmohan is

truly an obsessive owner. Even before the bed appears on screen, he emerges as a bickering old man who always obsesses over material possessions. He screams at a servant when he drops a utensil; he rebukes Maqbool when he says that he would cut down a tree; he repetitively refers to his ancestral belongings in a pensive manner. His world is literally and figuratively filled with his inanimate possessions. As he tries to negotiate with the changing atmosphere around him, he receives a letter from his daughter-in-law saying, "You have seen that we have no bed here. So I am asking you to sell the bed my grandfather gave at my wedding and to send me the money. With that money I will buy whatever type of bed I can for your grandchildren. It is hard to watch them sleep in discomfort." Maqbool's eyes bulging as he listens—Rajmohan continues to read out, "In any case what will you do with the bed? It is of no use to you. And after all, it does not belong to your family. It will not harm your prestige to sell it." At this exasperated Rajmohan instantaneously decides to sell the bed. The letter adds an interesting dimension to the whole dialectic. The veritable connection between owning and associating with an object is put under erasure here. The fact that the bed does not *really* belong to Rajmohan makes his attachment to it even more perplexing and more sublime. If the capitalist right to ownership is usually situated within the monetized act of selling and buying, the metaphysical connection Rajmohan feels towards the bed is beyond the mercantile scope of such exchange.

On the other hand, we encounter Maqbool who immerses himself in

desirous reverie the moment he hears that his master wants to sell the bed. Unable

to believe that the bed is actually up for sale, he repetitively asks Rajmohan, "Are

you really going to sell it?" He pounces at the opportunity and decides to buy it.

In an intoxicated trance, he tries to convince his wife to give him the money that

she has saved for buying a cow, repairing their dilapidated house and buying

some jewelry for her. "It is jewelry I am bringing into the house – but not for you

alone, for me too. We will wear it together." As the couple drifts into imagining

themselves cuddling on their imminent possession, the story suddenly moves

beyond the context of partition and becomes a tale of a material thing. The poor

couple's desperate effort to scrounge for the needed money underscores the

anxiety that permeates the whole narrative.

For Rajmohan, losing the bed is a symbolic gesture of losing a part of the

inherent control over his homeland; for Maqbool, acquiring the bed is in the same

way a step towards gaining a possible plenitude. In both their cases the

plenitude—lost and gained—is intricately linked and metaphysically de-bonded

from the question of money. The class relation does play a significant role in the

film. As the Hindus leave the country, poor Muslims see no change in their lives.

"Times are good for wealthy Muslims," Maqbool says at one point. They become

even wealthier through black-marketeering in such a time of crisis. The tension

that follows after Maqbool buys the bed is largely the result of that class tension.

The acquisition of the bed by Maqbool becomes both unfathomable and

unacceptable for the wealthy Muslims of the village. As the news spreads all the over the village, several of them become active to snatch the bed out of Maqbool's hands, but to no avail. Soon Rajmohan realizes his mistake and tries to get the bed back himself. An obstinate Maqbool refuses to sell the bed back. It is sheer class alliance that makes richer Muslim leaders of the community stand by Rajmohan against Maqbool. Behind the decision of the local elites to support Rajmohan is their putative allegiance with a person from an upper class than their belief in the necessity of communal accord.

In spite of their obsession with a commodity, neither Rajmohan nor Maqbool is a capitalist. Rajmohan's pointless commute to the courthouse without any work is a testament to that; Maqbool's obdurate resolve to die of starvation rather than give up the bed too is a disruption of the *telos* of capital. This is precisely why it can be said that the bed, in spite of being a manufactured object that can be sold and bought, emerges as a singularized object that defies the logic of capitalist accumulation. In the final scene, Rajmohan sees Maqbool's starving children sleeping on the bed and realizes his own mistake; this is finally the arrival of the use-value. Even this scene is made more ambivalent as Rajmohan visualizes Maqbool's children as god-like figures. Again, the determinants of need-based economy are juxtaposed with an abstracted economy of desire. This desire is the expression of the repressed self of an emasculated subject who has given in to the addiction of possession to counter the advent of modernity.

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the sphere of subsistence, prestige and taste often commingle in this context to establish the unique circulation of objects. The bed, for Rajmohan, is not simply an ornate commodity; in an almost mnemotechnic mechanism, the bed gets persistently intertwined with his memories of a glorious past. The sporadic interjections of flashback depicting a happier time in his household along with his entire family act as an anachronistic tool to elevate the bed from its utilitarian value to make it stand for a lost time and to emblematize a specific type of fetishism. For Maqbool, the bed stands for longed-for future: a future he was promised, but has been denied. The narrative around the bed is the dystopic present that is haunted with metaphysical nostalgia for a harmonious past on the one hand, and yearning for a future, on the other. The axis of past/future temporality of the narrative around a material possession becomes allegorical of the national narrative of Bangladesh. Although the film is putatively about the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the specific timing of its making, that is five years after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan, transforms the narrative into a reflection of the "nationalist modernity"[67] of the newly born nation.

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[67] Discussing modernism in Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy, Ravi Vasudevan argues that the stylistics of Ray's Trilogy could be putatively perceived as an effort at subordinating the reality in order to achieve an ideological stability: in this case "nationalist modernity." Vasudevan, however, argues against such a simplistic and seamless reading of Ray's films. I borrow this phrase in the context of *Palanka* to point out that conceptualization of any such modernity has to be done to underscore the schism between "the contemporary and the force of unresolved pasts" ("Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism" 85).

Conclusion

The material negotiation between tradition and modernity in these films brings forth the issue of cognitive fetishization of objects. In spite of being mechanically produced commodities, these objects prefigure the cycle of commodification. Though the circulation, exchange, destruction and reincarnation of objects here are repetitively linked with the transaction of money, ultimately, they are de-capitalized to become sacralized entities. The possibility of transforming these individually definable objects into deeply symbolic social objects is engendered by their positioning within an even deeper social transformation. The painful transition of a society accustomed to traditional forms of existence into the schismatic phase of modernity is conveyed through the representation of "commodity aesthetic."[68] The protagonists of these films are fractured selves; the subjective torment they go through is perfunctorily incarnated through their relationships with material things. The defeated Biswambhar, the duped and uprooted lady, the destitute and lonely Rajmohan—all these figures try to hang onto the disappearing past through their ownership of these things. The logic of their world refutes the strategic logic of bourgeois capitalism that positions an object within an ever-mutating flow of time and valuation. In their desperate

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[68] In his essay "A House of Fiction: Domestic Interiors and the Commodity Aesthetic," Jean-Christophe Agnew proposes that "commodity aesthetic" is "a way of seeing the world in general, and the self and society in particular, as so much raw space to be furnished with mobile, detachable, and transactionable goods" (135).

attempt they try to maintain the singularized status of objects and stop their

recommodification.[69]

In these films, the consumers—*ipso facto* possessors—delight "in evoking

a world that is not just distant and long gone but also better—a world in which, to

be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the real

world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful"

(Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 19). If the biographical possibilities of the objects we

encounter in these films signify a painful transition from demonetized, seigniorial

world to a society of monetization,[70] the human possessors conceive of a better-

than-real world through the relation with their possessions. Through their fantastic

labor at maintaining the interiority of their possessions, these possessors exhibit

their urge to become historically exteriorized. The objects, on the other hand,

instead of bearing the burden of use value through their instrumentality or

becoming impartial sites of consumers' fetishism, emerge as souvenirs that

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[69] Here I allude to the chain of "commodification-decommodification-recommodification." Kopytoff ("Cultural Biography of Things") elaborates on the exit and return of an object into the chain of monetized exchange. Going in and out of commodity status through its biographical journey, an object, he asserts, gets valued depending on its state in the space of ownership.

[70] Georg Simmel considers the hegemonic emergence of money as the generalized medium of exchange and the dissolution of other forms of exchange and barter as the main development that modernity encountered. Considering the emergence of urban modernity in Germany, in *Philosophy of Money* Simmel argues that "money measures all objects with merciless objectivity" (64) and replaces the web of energy in the natural order.

become acts of historical-materialist agency. A country like India was often seen as a source of commodities that were extracted and consumed by the Western consumer (Cohn 77). Then, how do we read the trajectories of consumption and possession in these films? Without trying to resolve the interpretative challenges through a simple tradition against modernity axis, it would be appropriate to fathom the presentiments through a conception of an alternate value system. The aesthetic and ideological calibrations of these three films are certainly framed and situated within chasm between two different forms of existence. If the modernity of consumption arising out of Western capitalism is reinscribed within the logic of what Marx terms as "productive labor" and "economic sense" and the process that turns "products more and more into commodities" (Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 327) and, thereby, "dissolves the old relationships" (Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 330), the native consumers of these films declare their rebellion against the teleological course of capitalism by rejuvenating their material possessions with libidinal cathexis.

Chapter 2

Anomalous Overlaps: Modernity, Machine and Primitive

Fetishism in Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik*

In his 1916 book *The Romance of the Automobile Industry*, American author

James Rood Doolittle writes:

> The mission of the automobile is to increase personal efficiency; to make
>
> happier the lot of people who have isolated lives in the country and
>
> congested lives in the city; to serve as an equalizer and a balance.
>
> Elegant in lines, powerful in action, wide in service, the modern
>
> automobile represents the incarnation of the transportation art – the silent,
>
> always-ready servant that has more strength than Aladdin's genii, and that
>
> already has accomplished vaster works for mankind's betterment than
>
> anything that has gone before. (441-42)

Like a number of writers, philosophers and artists of modern times, Doolittle

reveals the modern era's obsession with the automobile in an interesting way. He

visualizes the car as the execution/embodiment of a certain *techne* which

facilitates the process of some ulterior and practical fulfillment. Doolittle's

effusive glorification of the automobile as "the silent, always-ready servant" is

exemplary of not only the capitalist, fetishistic attitude towards the technological

commodity, but also of the essentialization of the binary between the human

subject and the inanimate object.

    Ajantrik (*The Pathetic Fallacy*, 1958)[71], the second full-length feature film made by renowned Indian filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976), is also about a human being's obsession with an automobile. Through the depiction of a peculiarly passionate relationship between a man and his car, this film not only brought a new theme to Indian cinema; it also marked an important moment within the scope of Indian modernism by emblematizing a sutured space within the understanding of modernity in postcolonial India. As it engages with concepts like technological/mechanical modernization, man-machine relationship and primitivism, the film also questions the postcolonial nation-state's fetishistic investment in technology. Through the figure of Bimal (Kali Banerjee), the film-text invents a subjective possibility that remains conscious of its unique designation in the context of its ideological milieu. If the three films in the previous chapter show how the act of possessing and consuming becomes an act of historical retort to the project of capitalist, bourgeois modernity, *Ajantrik* attempts to undo the project of modernity from within. This chapter examines

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[71] The English title of the film is most likely borrowed from the term, "pathetic fallacy," coined by John Ruskin in his 1856 work *Modern Painters*. In an essay titled "Of Pathetic Fallacy," which has often been read as his Realist critique of Romanticism, Ruskin claims that the fallacy of treating inanimate objects and abstract ideas as living beings is a perception distorted by emotion. He writes, "All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the 'pathetic fallacy'" (61). Although Ruskin's treatment of such "false impression" is rather derogatory, Ghatak re-invents the affective aspect of this fallacy in order to underscore his critique of modernity's dualistic vision of the world.

Ghatak's *Ajantrik* to argue that the film challenges the dominant response to technology in postcolonial India by conceiving of a relationship of "pre-capitalist fetishism" for one of the most prominent products of capitalist modernity – the automobile. By locating Ghatak's narrative in dialogue with M. K. Gandhi's and Jawaharlal Nehru's attitude towards technological modernization, I will argue that Ghatak produces an ontologically organic relationship between the owner and the owned, the human and the technological to not only challenge the rampant projection of the technological as either monstrous or instrumental, but also to delineate and re-invent pre-capitalist fetishism between a man and his mechanical possession.

Based on a Bengali short story written by the famous writer Subodh Ghosh (1909-1980), the film presents a distinctly nervous narrative of the relationship between a taxi-driver and his car. It is a story of an obsessive relationship between a lonely man, Bimal, with his old, run-down car, Jagaddal. He treats his old companion as a living being. Although he is laughed at by local village-folks for his apparently insane behavior, Bimal does not falter. He does not care even if he cannot earn money from the car any more. In spite of the advice of his friends and acquaintances, he does not want to replace his car with a new one. As the health of Jagaddal deteriorates, he incessantly tries to resuscitate it. As the narrative approaches its inevitable end, Bimal comes to terms with the reality and sells the car as a scrap metal to a junk-trader. The film comes to an

epiphanic end as Bimal looks at a child playing with the left-behind horn of

Jagaddal.

Ritwik Ghatak started his career as a writer. He joined the theatre in 1948.

Politically he became involved with the Communist Party of India and

subsequently came in close association with the cultural wing of the Party, the

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).[72] He started writing plays and

helping in their productions. His involvement with cinema began in 1948, when

he assisted Manoj Bhattacharya in both direction and screenplay-writing of his

film *Tathapi*. Ghatak attained some public attention when he collaborated with

stalwarts of the Bengali stage like Bijan Bhattacharya and Sudhi Pradhan for the

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[72] IPTA as a cultural and political movement galvanized itself around the event of Bengal famine of 1943, often considered the result of administrative and regulatory failure to control hoarding, black-marketing and profiteering during the turbulent time of the Second World War. By 1945 it had expanded to a nation-wide movement that brought the peasant – the subaltern in a wider sense – on the Indian stage for first time as a substantive figure. Groups of performing artists would go to major urban centers and villages to perform their acts, using various aspects and varieties of dramaturgy like agitprop theatre, songs, pantomime, puppetry, to covey their political message of anti-colonialism and anti-fascism. Nandi Bhatia writes about the political efficacy of IPTA:

> Keeping a theory of social realism as its central concern while forging an interpretative relationship with the audience, IPTA organizers constantly experimented with an amalgamation of theatre forms, both indigenous and Western…. By mobilizing plays that were constructed according to the sociopolitical environment, the IPTA altered the use of theatre from merely a means of entertainment to a forum for people's struggles. By performing for the rural and nonliterate public instead of a limited elite audience, the IPTA made political theatre available to those who previously had little or no access to it. (Bhatia 93)

This long note about IPTA is important as it reveals Ghatak's own aesthetic digression from the "social realism" of IPTA in his films. For a socio-political description and importance of IPTA, see also, Bharucha, 1983.

IPTA production of a new version of the famous nineteenth-century Bengali play

Neeldurpan (1860). Ghatak's political involvement and his ideological adherence

to Communism played a pivotal role in all of his artistic endeavors.[73] In almost all

of his stage and screen projects, Ghatak tried to point out the socio-economic

anomalies in contemporary society. He made his directorial debut with *Nagarik*

(*The Citizen*, 1952), a film that tells the tale of a displaced urban middle-class

family. Set in the backdrop of post-World War II Calcutta, *Nagarik* poignantly

reveals the deepening schism between the aspirations of the middle-class and the

deteriorating milieu of urban squalor. Unfortunately, this film could never be

released as it could not find commercial distribution. After this, a dejected Ghatak

left Calcutta to go to Bombay for a brief stint with the Hindi film industry. He

wrote the screenplay for the very successful Hindi film, *Madhumati* (1958). In the

late fifties he directed two films – *Ajantrik* (1957) and *Bari Theke Paliye* (*The

Runaway*, 1958). After this Ghatak produced three films that deal with the theme

that remained the most painful for him. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped

Star*, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (*E-Flat*, 1961) and *Subarnarekha* (*The Golden

Thread*, 1962, released in 1965), generally considered as a trilogy, expose the

irreversible degeneration and decadence in the Bengali middle-class in the

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[73] Ghatak mentions in one of the interviews,

> The ideological base is fundamental Marxism. Marxism not in the sense of this
> party or that party. Marxism as can be seen philosophically, psychologically.
> Marx, Engels, Lenin – many clashes and conflicts [in my films] have touches of
> their writings. ("[To use] Melodrama is [one's] Birthright, It's a Form." 77)

aftermath of the partition of the province in 1947. Ghatak made two more full-

length feature films – *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (*A River Called Titas*, 1973) and

Jukti, Takko ar Gappo (*Reason, Debate and a Story*, 1974). It should be noted

that *Ajantrik* is the only film by Ghatak that does not discernibly deal with any

broader political issue.

The automobile, the "ur-commodity," the most desired commodity in the

modern era of mass consumerism (Duffy *Speed Handbook* 114), and a product of

technological modernity that reaffirms, as Herbert Marcuse points out, the

instrumental view of the world as object, not only offered the pleasure of

ownership, which is a tangible enactment of commodity fetishism; it also offered,

as Duffy suggests, the sensual pleasure of speed.[74] The results produced by this

mechanical object—both mechanical and sensory—the speed, the freedom, the

rush—have found their place in literary and cultural representations.[75] Several

major modernist writers—for example Marcel Proust,[76] Thomas Mann, Virginia

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[74] Enda Duffy points out the emergence of mass consumerism in market economy in the West and the arrival of the automobile as the source of "*new* physical sensation" and a sense of ownership of a "glamorous commodity" were contemporaneous (*Speed Handbook* 7-8).

[75] One remarkable study of the impact of the automobile on the modern psyche is Enda Duffy's recent book *The Speed Handbook* (2009). Duffy claims that "speed is the single new pleasure invented by modernity" and "the experience of speed is political" (3). While making these observations, Duffy points out that the emergence of speed and the culture of consumption were simultaneous and paradigmatically interconnected.

[76] For a detailed discussion of the aesthetic impact of speed on Proust's writing see, William C Carter. *The Proustian Quest*. New York, N.Y.: New York University Press,

Woolf, and James Joyce—have explored the cognitive changes brought about by

the motor-car. In most of these, the car is portrayed not only as a symbol of

technological modernization, but also as a means for producing sensual and

aesthetic impact.[77] In cinema, especially American cinema, the automobile is

purportedly projected as "the expressive face of the peripatetic self" of both the

actor and the spectator (Orr 103).[78] The automobile as the face of the wandering

self of the actor and the spectator, as Orr suggests, works in tandem with the

mobile nature of the movie camera (130); however, the strategies of aesthetics are

not dialectically addressed with respect to the use of the automobile as the filmed

object. In most cases, the aesthetic maneuverings, all too often facile and

simplified, re-dramatize and typify the simplistic subject-object dualism between

the human and the automobile by using a representational structure of depicting

the owner alienated not by possessing the commodity, but by being temporarily

1992. For an insightful investigation into the impact of automobile and technology in general on Proust's aesthetic imagination see, Sara Danius's. *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002, 91-146; and *Proust's Motor* (2000).

[77] Nicholas Zurbrugg (1998) provides a rather telling survey of these two approaches in modern literature, showing that while the Futurist school envisioned the car as a harbinger of a possibly new aesthetic era, writers like E.M. Forster and Wyndham Lewis to some extent loathed the changes brought about by the car. Nicholas Zurbrugg. "'Oh what a feeling!' – The Literatures of the Car." *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century*. Eds. David Thoms, Len Holden and Tim Claydon. Aldershot; Brookfield, USA: Ashgate, 1998.

[78] For a further detailed discussion of representations of car in American films, see Kenneth Hey. "Cars and Films in American Culture, 1929-1959"; Julian Smith. "A Runaway Match: The Automobile in the American Film, 1900-1920"; Len Holden. "More than a Marque. The Car as symbol: Aspects of Culture and Ideology."

dominated by a world that is 'other' even though he himself gave birth to it.

Ajantrik does not belong to the groups that either condemn or celebrate the advent of technological modernity in India. Temporally situated in an India that had recently come out of colonial rule and a nation that was negotiating its path between an agrarian past and a technological modernity, the film's engagement with the idea of mechanical modernity is not unexpected. As the nation was coming out of two centuries of colonial rule, the foundations of the postcolonial nation-state were taking a more concrete shape. It could particularly be mapped onto the shifting ground of a nation that craved to tread the path of modernization. A detailed discussion of the Indian state's approach towards technological modernity will come in a later section, though some historical facts here might help the reader to locate the narrative within the matrices of socio-economic historicism. India got its first personal car in 1897 and its first taxi in 1911. In 1901, Jamshedji Tata, a famous industrialist, became the first Indian to own a car. India started its first indigenous automobile company, Hindustan Motors, in 1942. Consequently, a car was still considered a token of modernization in 1958. Amidst this, Ghatak's protagonist stands on an aporetic space between the pre-modern and mechanical modernity. Ghatak reveals that the uniqueness of the story, at least as far as the broader oeuvre of Indian literature is concerned, attracted him to it. He had come across no narrative in the Indian context that had tried to deal with "the very significant and inevitable relationship between man

and machine." Keeping Ghatak's own fascination with the dialectic of such a relationship, it would be interesting to analyze the significance of the ontological investment the film makes in the relationship between Bimal and his car. In terms of its storyline, this film was the first of its kind in India. Satyajit Ray made *Abhijan* (*The Expedition*, 1962) four years later on a somewhat similar concept, but his film never humanizes the car like Ghatak's. Moreover, the narrative of *Abhijan* gradually departs from the topicality of the car. Towards the second half of the movie, the protagonist, Narsingh (Saumitra Chatterjee), loses his feelings for his car. It is only Narsingh's helper, Rama (Rabi Ghosh), who maintains an attachment with the car. Because of its engagement with the moral degeneration in a small town, Ray's film could never predicate itself upon the relationship between the man and machine. Bimal too is a strange and lonely taxi-driver in a provincial small town. The film traces the arrhythmic movement of Bimal's relation with his taxi, Jagaddal (literally meaning 'immovable'). The story is puzzlingly simple. It is devoid of overtly dramatic elements or moments. It is a tale of nothing but a lonely man and his mechanical companion. Tracing the man's emotional upheaval along the trajectory of the car's precarious health, the story reaches its climax with the demise of the machine. On its way, the story includes a number of characters who are rather inconsequential to the narrative progression, yet important for the aesthetic and ideological message of the plot. It is a story at the same time of loneliness, determination, stubbornness, fetishism

and fidelity. Moreover, it is a tale of relationships: the relationship between Bimal and his car, between Bimal and the townspeople, between an individual idiosyncrasy and the norm. Ashish Rajadhyaksa situates *Ajantrik* within the framework of the mythological 'archetype.' "The specific tradition of the narrative in *Ajantrik*," for Rajadhyaksa, "comes from the Soviets." He observes, "Eisenstein's description of narrative not 'unrolling' in the naturalist principle but a 'colliding of attractions,' and its relation to pathos … finds direct use in *Ajantrik*" (48).[79]

Human and Machine: The National Question

Geeta Kapur, in her study of Indian modernism, argues,

> Even as the ideology of Indian nationalism is worked out there is a
> continual self-definitional discourse on the subject, a partisan discourse. It
> is precisely at this existential point, on the question of self-determination
> that the national and the modern converge. Here, nationhood and selfhood
> are almost deliberately, for grand metaphorical purposes, conflated; or, on
> the other hand, conflicted through a critical debonding. This can be seen in
> film after film of Ritwik Ghatak, from *Ajantrik* … to the 1960s' post-

[79] Ghatak has, on more than one occasion, acknowledged the influence the Soviet filmmakers have had on him. He was particularly impacted by Sergei Eisenstein. In an interview, he says, "Anywhere there is film, the filmmaker is only the child of Eisenstein, for he is the guardian, the father, he is Adam, the primeval Adam of the cinema, the first man." From an interview originally published in *Film Miscellany*. Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, 1976, reproduced in *Rows and Rows of Fences: Ritwik Ghatak*.

partition Calcutta trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*, to *Jukti Takko Gappo*. Ghatak counterposes an exile's journey with a communitarian ideal and dream of plenitude within reach in his milieu. (294)

Kapur further suggests that the foundational narrative of Ghatak's films employs what Adorno formulated as "negative commitment" to operate within the ideological topography in opposition to the prevalent rhetoric of the postcolonial nation-state. Although the element of "critical debonding" is more readily identifiable in films that directly engage in a dialogue with the historical narrative of the nation—for example, Partition and nation-state in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar* and the leftist movement in *Jukti Takko Gappo*—this section examines *Ajantrik* in dialogue with M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to argue that Ghatak delineates an alternative space for imagining the dialectic between man and machine. While both Gandhi, in his abomination of technology, and Nehru, through his statist fetish for technological modernity, articulate the conception of machines in terms of their instrumental utility, Ghatak rescues the relationship between man and machine from such ontological reducibility.

Ajantrik is a representation of wonderment and alienation. The wonderment, and ensuing bewilderment, occurs mainly among participants other than Bimal—the townspeople and the audience. The lonely register of alienation

is Bimal. As the film opens, we encounter two comical characters who are going to be the first passengers for Jagaddal in the film. The duo—one of them a bridegroom going for his wedding—initiates the film for the audience with a comical opening. Caught in a particularly desperate situation, they manage to convince Bimal to take them to their destination. Jagaddal comes to rescue. The first journey of Jagaddal shown in the film is a significantly clumsy one. With its door falling off and rainwater pouring in through its tattered canopy, the car sets on its trip in a jittery way. When it gets stuck in mud, the passengers themselves have to help re-start it. Bimal remains disturbingly unaffected by the plight of his passengers. The opening sequence establishes an over-arching element of detachment on the part of both Bimal and Jagaddal. The human and the mechanical—the possessor and the possession—come together not by an owner-owned relationship, but by the commonality of their emotional response. The audience gets hit by the first strike of the unreal only in the second scene when Bimal starts talking to his car and the car responds through body-movements. The turning headlights, the auditory responses, the corporeal overtures anthropomorphize the car. The machine, yet the unmechanical (literally meaning 'Ajantrik'), transcends its status as an object by being literally animated. One could justifiably question: why such a peculiar gesture?

Whether *Ajantrik* tries to comment on the general necessity for blurring the line of ontological division between the human and the machine is debatable.

What it certainly does is to represent at least one aesthetic exemplification of what
Bruno Latour on an occasion takes up as the departing point for questioning our
anti-technological modernity.[80] Ghatak himself elaborates on his affinity to the
story, with which he had been in love for twelve long years,

> What struck me most was its philosophical implication. Here was a story
> which sought to establish a new relationship in our literature – the very
> significant and inevitable relationship between man and machine.
>
> Our literature, in fact our culture itself (i.e. the culture of middle-
> class city dwellers) has never cared very much for the machine age. The
> idea of the machine has always held an association of monstrosity for us.
> It devours all that is good, all that is contemplative and spiritual. It is
> something that is alien to the spirit of our culture – the spirit of ancient,
> venerable India. It stands for clash and clangour, for swift, destructive
> change, for fermenting discontent. (*Rows and Rows* 38)

This perceptive explanation lays out the singular point of deviation from the
conventional response towards the machines of modernity.[81] Analyzing the role

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[80] Latour suggests that the essentialist and deterministic separation between the human
and non-human is specifically an invention of modernity. In a concise manner Latour
argues that the concept of 'modernity' is particularly inscribed within the assumed purity
and separability of spheres of human and non-human. See Bruno Latour. *We Have Never
Been Modern* (1993).

[81] Though Ghatak only talks about the limitations within the Indian psyche, one cannot
but remember the demoniacal representation of the machine in films like Fritz Lang's

of machinery and automation in the modern society, Marx argues that machines, in spite of their productive force, are employed only to produce more and more surplus value for the capitalist. He writes in *Capital*,

> Like every other instrument for increasing the productivity of labour, machinery is intended to cheapen commodities and, by shortening the part of the working day in which the worker works for himself, to lengthen the other part, the part he gives to the capitalist for nothing. The machine is a means for producing surplus-value. (492)

The anti-technological sentiment that can be perceived in Marx's formulation— similar to a number of thinkers about modernity—is premised upon the perception of machines as instrumental to sustaining the profiteering system of capitalism and modernity's inscription of man/machine dualism.[82] The most prominent critique of this human/non-human model of understanding is found in Latour. The dominant perception that the machine, originating out of an abstract idea, gets disseminated and distributed through the verification of its use-value is fundamentally challenged by what Latour designates as his "translation model." In his *Science in Action* (1987), Latour sums up his idea in a concise sentence: "No one has observed a fact, a theory or a machine that could survive outside of

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Metropolis (1927) – perhaps the most prominent cinematic portrayal of machine as a monster.

[82] Marx's position is ideologically allegiant to a number of modernist thinkers. However, within the canon of Western modernism, groups like the Futurists and Dadaists have created a more hospitable space for technology as part of their aesthetic strategy.

the networks that gave birth to them" (248). To deny such inter-relation between

the social, economical, ideological and technological—in other words between

the human and the mechanical—would be to rely on a determinism that looks at

machines only in terms of instrumental conception of technology, in terms of the

modern being's will to know and control the world, namely "instrumental

rationality."[83] As a conceptual extension of this, machines are considered only to

be indices of progress and of societal modernization. The other side of this

argument is the imagining of machines as monstrous and allegorical

representations of deteriorating humanism in the modern era.

Mahatma Gandhi elaborates his ideas about the impact of modernity and

machinery on Indian civilization in *Hind Swaraj*: "It is machinery that has

impoverished India…. Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now

knocking at English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization;

it represents great sin" (107). Gandhi identified an evil nexus between industrial

modernity and colonialism, exemplified by the railways, to argue that the

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[83] The idea of "instrumental rationality" originates from theorists of modernity like August Comte and Max Weber. Determined by the idea of end, this form of rationality considers technology only as a means reaching that end. Weber, in his analysis of the rise of instrumental reason in Western modernity, identifies this as a source of and reason for the gradual erasure of pre-modern unreason and mythology. This structured view of historical progress is conceptually connected with the order modern capitalism tries to impose upon the otherwise diverse world. For an analysis of the relation between "instrumental rationality" and the evolution of the concept of *techne* in the era of high technology, see R.L. Rutsky. *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic and the Posthuman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

essentially agrarian sentiment of India has no organic space for mechanical modernity. Ashis Nandy, in his analysis of Gandhi's views on science and technology, argues that Gandhi rejected "technicism, not technology" ("From Outside of the Imperium" 137).[84] Gyan Prakash in his excellent study of science and technology in modern India points out that Gandhi did not have "a blind opposition to machinery" (214). "Rather for him," Prakash continues,

> […] machinery had assembled a different kind of India, a new space
>
> constructed by a network of social practices, ideas, values, and a dark
>
> desire for a civilization that was at odds with what he believed to be the
>
> life and traditions of the authentic nation. (214)

Although Gandhi's repugnance for machinery rises in the context of the coercive and devastating impact of industrialized Manchester on the Indian textile industry, his dismissal of machinery as the unambiguous source of evils of modern life is unequivocal. Machinations and automations as emblems of modernization, for Gandhi, worked as agents of disruption for what he perceived as the organic fabric of the India as a community. However, his opposition to machinery was not without exception. To the question, "Are you against all machinery, Bapuji?", he

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[84] Nandy essentially argues that Gandhi's views on science and technology, in spite of his ardent criticism of technological modernity, needs to be understood in a more nuanced manner. Gandhi, as Nandy argues, rejected the utilitarian, teleological understanding of technology as instrumental for advancing personal benefits. Within such understanding, Gandhi spoke for an Indian existence that could survive outside the logic of the modernity of imperium.

answers, "How can I be when I know that even the body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning-wheel itself is a machine. What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labor-saving machinery" (Homer 176).[85] If Gandhi tries to invent a pure, agrarian, and pre-industrial national identity in opposition to the mechanical, automated West, his argument resonates with what Marx has to say about surplus-value-producing machinery.

Although Gandhi's ideas played a crucial role in shaping the political psyche of India, from the moment of independence, with the arrival of the sovereign nation-state, his ideas increasingly became marginalized in the operative ideology of nation-state. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru departed decisively from the Gandhian tenets to determine India's negotiation with mechanical modernity in the post-Independence period with his developmentalist vision. Though himself not an unequivocal supporter of

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[85] In the same piece, Gandhi expresses his support for technological innovation that arises out of human need, out of the necessary reduction of human labor. For example, he points out, the Singer Sewing Machine was invented by a man who could not bear his wife's incessant work with sewing needles. Gandhi maintains that the next step of industrialization, e.g. manufacturing of sewing machines on a large scale, should exclusively remain nationalized. No profit-making, capitalist venture should be allowed to grow around these endeavors:

> The sewing machine had love at its back. The individual is the one supreme consideration. The saving of labor of the individual should be the object, and honest humanitarian considerations and not greed the motive-power. Thus, for instance, I would welcome any day a machine to straighten crooked spindles …. Therefore replace greed by love and everything will come right. (177)

modernization, Nehru saw industrial and technological advancement as a driving force behind successful nation building. Even before the independence of India, Nehru was in close association with Indian scientists and engineers. If Gandhi discerned the specter of the same evil in both colonialism and modernity, Nehru perceived colonialism as an aberration within the project of modernity. While the Gandhian vision was that the Indian economy should have been built upon self-sustainable, small-scale, cottage industries, Nehru failed to identify any essential conflict between large-scale industrialization and micro industries. In spite of his own set of problems with modernity (Prakash 203), Nehru had no intention of taking the nation to a state of pre-modern purity. He writes in *The Discovery of India*,

> It can hardly be challenged that, in the context of the modern world, no country can be politically and economically independent, even within the framework of international interdependence, unless it is highly industrialized and has developed its power resources to the utmost. Nor can it achieve or maintain high standards of living and liquidate poverty without aid of modern technology in almost every sphere of life. An industrially backward country will continually upset the world equilibrium and encourage the aggressive tendencies of more developed countries. Even if it retains its political independence, this will be nominal only and economic control will tend to pass to others. (403)

It was during his tenure and under his supervision that the postcolonial nation-state undertook its first journey on the path of rapid industrialization. Following the Soviet economic model, the Indian state introduced the second five-year plan of rampant industrialization. The plan allocated funding for developing infrastructural projects like electricity plants, shipyards, and locomotive, cement and fertilizer factories. Departing decisively from Gandhi's vision of agrarian syncretism, Nehru followed on his belief in the teleology of industrial modernity. For him, the *telos* of industrialization was not a pervasive ideological re-orientation; rather, it was always governed by the motive of strong nation building. Ironically, Nehru also maintained, as did Gandhi, a strong and consistent opposition to capitalist control over such endeavors. He always maintained that it is the state's prerogative to maintain its control over industries in order to use them only to strengthen the nation.[86]

In order to look for national questions and the element of "critical debonding" with the narrative of nation in *Ajantrik* one needs to compare it with some of the popular depictions of the human-car relationship on the Indian screen during the same period. Most of the depictions approach the issue from an essential position of political economy. In films like *Naya Daur* (The New Race

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[86] Gyan Prakash argues that Nehru, contrary to common perception, was not an avid believer in Western modernity. His vision was neither to make India imitate a Western model of industrial progress blindly nor to take it back to a mythic, pure past. Rather he envisioned a possibility of instituting a communitarian ethos through comprehensive development brought in by industrialization (234).

1957), the polar opponents—human and mechanical—are positioned against each other only to establish the human being's looming defeat in the hand of manufactured modernity. Set in a post-Independence Indian village, *Naya Daur* depicts the fight of a village tangawallah, horse-cart driver, played by the legendary actor Dilip Kumar, against a mushrooming bus service that becomes an increasing threat to the livelihood of all horse-cart-drivers. The film essentially sympathizes with the view that cars are evil by-products of the process of technological modernization that makes traditional forms of labor-structures irrelevant. Almost emulating the Luddite and Ruskinian hostility towards mechanization and industrialization, the film purportedly supports the perception of machines as the source of social misery and aesthetic ignominy. The film reaches its dramatic climax with a race between the mechanically driven bus and manually driven tanga. Remaining faithful to the overarching ideological tenor of the film, the race ends with the underdog tanga's win over the bus. Though B.R. Chopra, the director of the film, uses a Marxist-Humanist framework, *Naya Daur* belongs to the genre of films that often apparently and putatively merged with the nationalist agenda[87] and the vision of Nehru.[88] The same theme remains prevalent

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[87] Significantly there is a song in *Naya Daur* ("Saathi haat badhana, saathi re" [Friend, extend your hands]) where the village folks, at the end of the song, join hands to form a map of India. For a more detailed discussion of this film and its correlation with the ideology of Nehruvian nation-state see, Meghnad Desai. *Nehru's Hero: Dilip Kumar in the Life of India*. New Delhi: Roli, 2004. A rather detailed study of roles played by Dilip Kumar and their metaphorical representation of Indian society and politics can be found

in several other social-realist films and literatures of that period. For example, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), mainly through its opening and ending, puts across an unflinching faith in the role of infrastructural industrialization (building of an irrigation canal in this case) in alleviating the state of the nation's poor and building an unflinching sense of communitarian belonging.

Referring back to the historical facts I presented earlier, the car in India was still suspected of, at least in the popular cultural depictions, being an agent of heartless automation. It was received as something that would take the jobs away from the people who were still oriented towards a particularly agrarian form of economy. *Ajantrik* does not indulge in this kind of rhetoric; and yet, it does not subscribe to an unrestricted subservience to the Western model of modernity and commodity culture. Although the film, unlike a number of other films by Ghatak, does not critique the dominant ideology of nation-state in a polemical manner, the narrative of Ghatak is deeply embedded against the backdrop of Nehruvian India.

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in Akbar S Ahmed. "Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics."

[88] Towards the latter half of 1950s, some scholars argue, Nehru's vision underwent a marked shift. Bhikhu Parekh describes how Nehru shifted from the program of industrial modernization, controlled by a strong and centralized government, led by the Westernized neo-colonial elite, to a more local government (the panchayati raj) and indigenous models of development. This could be read as Nehru's return to a Gandhian pre-modern syncretism. See Bhikhu Parekh. "Jawaharlal Nehru and the Crisis of Modernization." *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*. Eds. Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh. New Delhi: Sage, 1995. But in her recent study of Nehruvian policies during long 1950s, Srirupa Roy (2007) argues that Nehruvian postcolonial India experienced a strategic formulation of an idea of "traditionalist development" that effectively appropriated Gandhian tenets for statist purposes.

In spite of their differences, both Gandhi and Nehru envisioned the technologies of modernization from absolutist and deterministic positions. In Gandhi, the technological determinism is constituted of its evil effects; for Nehru, the telos of technological progression is legitimized by the need of the nation and producing that nation through technology (Abraham 29). Both of them look at the mechanical, one negatively and the other positively, by encoding technology as an instrument, through the essential prism of what I discussed as instrumental rationality. Ghatak's vision inscribes the relationship between human and machine beyond the logic of technological determinism. Without engaging with the question of human/technology dichotomy, he makes the relationship one that is ontological, that is of spiritual oneness.

As Bimal immerses himself in his private conversations with his car, the duo becomes increasingly distant from the rest of the world. Rajadhyaksa comments about Bimal's relationship with others thus:

> Bimal is clearly splintered into different contradictory revelations in his relationships. The romantic extension of human emotion into nature is here reversed as an ensemble of perspective, evoked through the unification of various fragmented relationships—the car, the children, the townspeople, the tribals, the countryside—come together to define the individual sensibility. Thus the false unity of bourgeois characterization, the unidimensional relationship with nature, breaks down as various

elements, passive in analytic-dramatic cinema here suddenly come alive

with their own narrative forms. (43)

Bimal's fragmented relationships with the rest of the world are presented through occasional one-liners and inchoate reactions. Throughout the movie there are only two people, apart from his passengers, who are seen engaging in any comprehensive dialogue with Bimal. There are only two people, who can empathize with Bimal's attachment with Jagaddal: the little boy, Sultan, and a person who is addressed by the generic noun 'Mistry' (mechanic; Gyanesh Mukherjee). Apart from these two, only one of the peripheral characters manages to establish an emotional oneness with Bimal. The frivolous runaway bride opens up Bimal's emotional world as she, like Bimal, manages to appreciate Jagaddal's beauty. Eloping with her husband, she breaks into laughter in a carefree manner when Bimal compares noises made by Jagaddal with that of a human being defecating. She derives immense, childish pleasure from the glimpse of the sky through the tear in the hood, especially the scene where she breaks into a wild laughter as the car moves around in the courtyard in a frenzied manner. She remains absolutely oblivious of the disaster that could have happened. The series of joyous, rapid shots comes to a violently abrupt end as Bimal brings the car to a halt just before it manages to run over the woman. After some time, the runaway bride returns. Now, deserted by her husband, she is rescued by Bimal. He takes her to the railway station and puts her on the train. As the train leaves the station,

the woman, now outside the visible frame, grabs the ticket from Bimal's hand. She says something to him. Neither Bimal nor the audience can hear what she tries to say. For a fleeting moment, a possibility of another relationship is created, though it is hardly of any romantic possibility. Rather, Bimal and this woman almost came close through their shared appreciation of Jagaddal whose mechanical body becomes the site where two human beings suddenly form their inoperative community.

It is only the boy Sultan to whom Bimal can express the intimate details of his emotional attachment with his car. Bimal confides in him, "The men of Bengali Gentlemen's Club have said it correctly. They say, 'The man is a machine.' Yes, I find the smell of burnt petrol intoxicating. But they don't understand that Jagaddal too is a human being." "In these bad times," Bimal continues, "he daily earns two rupees for me. Consumes so little oil. Runs twenty-two miles per gallon. He understands that I am poor." To answer the little boy's query, Bimal reveals that Jagaddal has been with him for almost fifteen years. Jagaddal came the year Bimal's mother died. The boy curiously asks, "Master, where is your home? Don't you have anybody?" In another sequence, when Bimal attends to repairing the needs of his car, two unwelcome characters make some comments. Bimal retorts, "I don't understand why others poke their noses in somebody's private matters." The clueless stranger comments, "Private? Is a car anybody's wife?" This chronological aligning of the car's arrival in his life with

that of his mother's death and the stranger's unsolicited comparison of the car

with a woman frees Bimal and Jagaddal from the limits of owner/owned and

subject/object dualism by creating a space for libidinal investment into an inert

being.

The film is strewn with scenes of Bimal driving Jagaddal in the backdrop

of natural scenery. The rugged landscape, the expansive field, the flowing

streams, the hills in the backdrop all remain a constant in the entire film. Jagaddal

is seen running amidst all of these; yet, it does not strike the audience as

disrupting the natural tranquility of the location. The temporal and locational

juxtaposition of natural and mechanical is far more jarring when we come across

the wagons moving along the overhead wires, the lonely tribal woman positioned

in front of the factory, the railway gates, and the train running over the dry

riverbed. They appear in successive shots, and are immediately accompanied by a

race between the car and the train. Rajadhyaksa argues that the car is completely

different from other machines that enter the frame. These scattered and disjointed

interjections—all arguably visible reminders of the industrial progress of

Nehruvian India—form a counter-topology. They have been tamed in the hands of

human civilization. It has to be admitted that Jagaddal is positioned alongside

these other machines to underscore its subjective independence; but, at the same

time, the montage like visual overlapping of the natural and the mechanical

highlights the dialectical relationship between these two categories. The dialectic,

much in the line of Eisenstein, comes out of the attraction of opposites. There is

certainly a production of meaning that manages to survive the conventional

conflict of eternal and temporal, natural and mechanical. This meaning directs us

to reformulate our perception of the relationship between them without denying

the technicity (or, mechanical-ness), which would be a denial of modernity

itself.[89]

Without rejecting technicity itself, Ghatak's film tries to reformulate the

human response to the idea of the mechanical. In *Ajantrik,* the car and its owner

are bound together through a relationship that manages to act beyond the etiologic

limits of Western modernity and market capitalism. Though the perception of

modernity is at times grossly overdetermined by the postulates and characteristics

of market capitalism that always desires to bind the human and the inert in a

subject-object dualism, Ghatak's film decides to use the automobile as a character

to unsettle the binary. If Bimal's attachment to Jagaddal is an endorsement of the

essential technicity of the modern era, the same attachment works to undo the way

the modern era perceives technicity. There is an effort to establish continuity

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[89] For an explanation of this suggestion, read what Lefebvre says: "Technicity is an essential characteristic of 'modernity.'" See, Henri Lefebvre. *Introduction to Modernity.* Tr. John Moore. London; New York: Verso, 1995. Lefebvre follows up with a poignant and rhetorical question, "How can we refuse it [technicity] without implying that the crisis of modernity can be resolved only by a return to the past, which would both be impossible and inconceivable?" (279).

[90] W.J. Mitchell points out this shortcoming in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1987).

between the worlds of the human and the mechanical. Jagaddal's loneliness as a car is juxtaposed with Bimal's own secluded existence; the dilapidated car is not very different from Bimal's ramshackle habitat, as if both the car and the owner are subsumed under Bimal's narcissistic self-absorption. This becomes even more evident when Bimal, all dressed-up, takes Jagaddal to take a photograph. While getting prepared for posing for the photograph, Bimal tries to go behind the camera to see how they would look. Bimal's disposition almost reminds one of the arrangements made to take a married couple's photograph.

Though it can be argued that Ghatak too utilizes the automobile as a symbol of technological modernity in order to constitute a space of pre-modern syncretism, the filmmaker envisages an ideological and aesthetic structure—neither Gandhian nor Nehruvian—not by accepting the idea of technological determinism, but by establishing an affective narrative of reciprocity. This is his way of working through the dichotomy within the Janus-faced project of modernity: the dichotomization between societal modernity and cultural modernity. If the former is topologically determined by the linear logic of historical progress, the latter is way of negotiating self-realization and self-exploration (Gaonkar 2-3). Unlike most of his other films—films that are deeply and overtly engaging with grand historical events like Partition, Independence, the Naxalite movement—*Ajantrik* might come across as difficult to be interpreted as a coherent effort at "critical debonding" with the narrative and ideology of nation-

state. Ghatak's narrative re-institutes sovereignty to the subject who has been historically marginalized by the narrative of modernity. Dissolving the binaries between the human and the machine, the living and the inert to expose the limitations of the singular critique of modernity, Ghatak, the next section will argue, conceives of a relation of primitive fetishism for "the ultimate fetish of the commodity age" (Duffy *Speed Handbook* 8).

The Affect, the Pain, the Secret: Primitive Fetishism

Jean Luc Nancy writes evocatively,

> The fetish is the *being-there* of a desire, an expectation, an imminence, a
> power and its presentiment, a force interred in the form and exhumed by
> it. Whether one considers it in the context of magic, of psychoanalysis, or
> the jubilant and almost incantatory use of the word in Marx, the fetish
> possesses a double secret: the one that critical analysis shows to be the
> paltry monetary secret, and the other that which remains in the intensity of
> a presence, which precisely *as presence* retains its secret, and its presence
> is in this keeping of the secret. (6)

What Nancy implies by exposing the non-monetary secret of fetish is the semiological excess beyond political economy—the zone of sign, "priceless," "without equivalence and without divine prevalence." The monetary secret of fetish functions within the purview of capitalism and exchange economy, while

the secret of intense presence operates within an ontogenetic connection between the human and the commodity. The insanely "abnormal" obsession Bimal has for his car—obsession that can be interpreted as fetishism—belongs to this zone. But how do we separate this fetish from the commodity fetish of exchange economy? How do we unravel the secret of it? How do we assess Bimal's fanatic attachment with capitalist technology's signature invention, and yet not falter into reading this as simple technological and commodity fetishism? In the previous section I argued that Ghatak's delineation of man-and-machine relationship is perceptibly different from that of Gandhi and Nehru, both of whom consider mechanical modernity through the discursive prism of instrumental rationality. By transcending the limits of the human-mechanical and subject-object binaries, Ghatak establishes, this section argues, a relation of primitive fetishism between Bimal and Jagaddal.

The relationship between the human owner and the inanimate object has undergone a severe and stern criticism since Marx's *Capital*. For Marx, objects, invested into by misleadingly mysterious depiction of unclear social relations, become commodities in exchange economy. By claiming that our connection with the commodity is undeniably superficial, Marx proposes that the manually manufactured object could maintain its magical spell over the owner only if the reality of production remains unknown. Talking about the 'secret' of 'commodity fetishism' in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx contends that the 'magical,'

'mystical,' and 'enigmatic character' of commodities originates not in their use value but their 'exchange value.' This fetishism, which attaches itself with the product as soon as it is produced, as Marx suggests, generates a thrust towards a de-historicized disavowal of human labor. As Marx says in the most frequently quoted section of *Capital*:

> In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relations both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (72)

Fundamentally, commodity fetishism not only erases the history of labor that goes behind the production of a product, it also produces a system of abstract valuation—a mistaken sense of relationship between things—that "subjugate persons, who become dominated by a world of things—things that they themselves created" (Taussig *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* 28). In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács extends the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism through his model of "commodity-structure" and argues that the abstraction of an object through fetishization, culminates in a rationalization and

calculability that "conceals above all the immediate – qualitative and material – character of things as things" (92). For Lukács the commodity relation is not restricted to the dimension of human needs, but "stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man" (100). "His qualities and abilities," Lukács argues, "are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world" (100).

Benjamin, however, appropriated Marx's conception to argue that fetishism is enacted only through visual consumption. As the modern streetwalker passes by the ornate display-windows of shops, Benjamin conjectures, the fetish gives birth to a kind of scopophilic drive in the onlooker as it "whispers to a poor wretch who passes a shop-window containing beautiful and expensive things" (*Charles Baudelaire* 55). In his essay, "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin makes a shift from a Marxist position to explore a more positive side to commodity fetishism by understanding collecting as an act of historical materialism – a Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character. The collector, working through the "dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order," Benjamin points out, is in a "relationship to objects which do not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate" ("Unpacking My Library" 62).

Benjamin's ideas are intriguing for two reasons. First, as Rey Chow ("Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and Lao She" 288-90) points out,

he rescues commodities from being superficial, ambiguous, mystical things.

Second, Benjamin for the first time emphasizes, albeit in a passing manner, the

importance of attachment to a commodity. The collector of things, according to

Benjamin, unlike the bourgeois consumer of Marx's world, possesses an object

within its entirety. This recognition—call it a recognition of an existence in the

physical world of commodity-on-display—lies in an alternative conception of

commodity fetishism that seems to be confusing and conflating commodity

fetishism with a scene of seeing and, thereby, situates Marx within the framework

of visual economy (Brown *Sense of Things* 30-31). For Brown, Benjamin's

invoking of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism from the *Capital* only

compensates for the strategic abstraction and abandonment of the same theory. It

is undeniable that Benjamin's ideas about commodity fetishism are markedly

grounded within the ocularcentric system of understanding; nonetheless,

Benjamin manages, most probably for the first time, an entrance into the

possibility of historicizing commodity fetishism. Not only that, Benjamin's

concept adds a trajectory of aesthetic appreciation, which is entirely missing in

Marx,[90] within the spectrum of commodity fetishism. Though Benjamin's

appropriation of Marx's theory could be seen as misleading and as an effort at

denying the history that has been invested to transform a thing into a commodity,

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[90] W.J. Mitchell points out this shortcoming in Marx's theory of commodity fetishism in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1987).

his theory too, as Brown (31) argues, as that of Marx, subscribes to "commodity-*structure*" that "is an eroticization of the lifeless artifact, a necrophilial desire to possess dead things" (Gilloch 127). Both Marx and Benjamin in their own ways fail to see the human attachment to objects as anything more than a perverse and misplaced fascination with commodities enacted by the cultural condition in consumer capitalism. Marx in his critique of commodity fetishism attacks exchange value only to suggest that the historical relationship between men and things can only become sufficiently understood if use value of those commodities are appropriately realized. This, as Amariglio and Callari (1993) point out, re-institutes Marx's overtly deterministic dependence upon "economism."[91] Marx in his blanket criticism of commodity fetishism pays very little attention—both ideological and aesthetic—to the possibility of a relationship between people and things that are not controlled by either use or exchange value.[92]

Ghatak's narrative contains various symptoms delineated by both Marx

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[91] Marx depends too heavily on the idea of exchange as an activity universally independent oh human subjectivity. Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari (1993) in their reading of commodity fetishism of Marx argue that the economic determinism of *Capital* considers all trades as capitalist exchanges – a presumption that objectifies all human relationships.

[92] Here I am somewhat influenced by the ideas of Simmel, who was also, by the way, critically attentive to the nexus between fetishism and visual appeal. Simmel in his *Philosophy of Money* remains explicitly suspicious of Marx's concept of use value. While Marx uses use value as an ideological terra firma, Simmel argues that centralization of use value only naturalizes the value system in money economy. Substitution of exchange value for use value, for Simmel, "seems unable to reach its consummation" (130).

and Benjamin. But Bimal's fetishistic obsession with his car is not simply a

penchant for exchangeable commodities that can speak with each other

irrespective of any human intervention. Given Ghatak's turbulent relationship

with the Marxist movement in India, it could be interesting to analyze how he

tries to rupture the unilinearity of the project of interpreting *Ajantrik* as a narrative

of fetishism.[93] From an ideological position, his film departs significantly from

the tenets of social realism which was used to form the foundation of the cultural

ideology of Indian communist parties. His portrayal of Bimal's obsession with his

car too, both aesthetically and thematically, strives to transgress the strict

boundaries of realism.

    If we try to read Bimal's attachment to his car within the framework of

fetishism, we need to maneuver the indices of such a theoretical position. In the

Marxian model, the historiography of human labor behind the production of a

commodity gets abstracted through its incessant positioning within a syntagmatic

chain of several other commodities. Jagaddal, a visibly dilapidated and old

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[93] It should be noted here that Ghatak lost his membership of the Communist Party of India following a letter he wrote criticizing the cultural approach of the party. He was suspended from the Communist Party for criticizing the stringent social-realist "cultural line" of the party. The full draft of this letter can be read in *On the Cultural 'Front': A Thesis Submitted by Ritwik Ghatak to the Communist Party of India in 1954*. Kolkata: Ritwik Memorial Trust, 2006. 100-19. Though Ghatak remained a firm believer in the philosophy and politics of Leftism, he grew increasingly unsure of its aesthetic pertinence. This made him even more skeptical about the validity of any collective politics in practice. In films like *Nagarik*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*, there are moments where organized politics becomes the target of his criticism.

nineteen-twenty model Chevrolet, remains the singular object of Bimal's

obsession. The car is the only being, apart from the little boy, that exists in his

life. There is another haunting possession in the film: the aluminum-pan

belonging to the madman Bulaki. The parallels between the relationship between

Bimal and his car, and that between the madman and his pan are not coincidental.

Neither of these possessions functions within the bourgeois economic structure

that has been conceptualized by Marx and Benjamin. Bimal's car has a depleting

use-value; the worn out aluminum pan has none. Though the car gets occasional

passengers and earns a little sum of money for Bimal, as its health deteriorates

Jagaddal demands much more expenditure, particularly towards the end, than it

can earn for its owner. It is equally impossible to evaluate the car according to the

gauge of exchange-value too. The townspeople, other taxi drivers like Piara

Singh, and finally, Bimal's friend Mistry prod him to get a new taxi; but, Bimal

remains steadfast in his fidelity towards Jagaddal. The cinematographer's eye

follows the car through its intimate body parts. The close-up shots reveal every

nook and corner of the car's body—every curve, every tear in its tattered canopy,

the door falling apart.[94] The soundscape relays every single daunting sound

produced by it—the screeches, the jarring halts and the deafening brakes. By the

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[94] It needs to be noted here that there is almost an emulation of this mode of
representation in Satyajit Ray's *Abhijan*. It is not officially known whether Ray was
consciously/ intentionally influenced by Ghatak's treatment of the car in *Ajantrik* but, the
parallels, especially in the first half of Ray's film, are too prominent to ignore.

time the film moves to its second sequence, the audience is familiarized with the immediacy of its presence and existence not only in Bimal's life, but also the visual narrative of the film, which leaves no possibility of making the car visually appealing, nor does it leave a chance of projecting it as either a mechanical marvel or a valuable possession. Rather the audience is made to wonder how it still works. This is what makes Bimal's attachment and obsession with Jagaddal so much more peculiar and tender at the same time. The visual and auditory details give an experiential three-dimensionality to the car; Bimal's self-involved comment reveals the car's intertwining with his life. If one compares this with the madman's obsession with his ragged aluminum-pan, which too does not have any practical purpose, then one can perceive the pan as an indicator, much like Bimal's Jagaddal, of its owner's eccentricity. The fetishization of the car and the pan ruptures—both at the symbolic and real levels—the assumptions of "commodity-structure" of capitalist market. They transcend the limits of their objecthood to work against their own reducibility as simple material possession.

To go back to the previous section, the technological modernity as perceived by Gandhi and Nehru is deeply embedded within the subject/object binary that considers technology as an outcome of "instrumental rationality." There is, however, a conceptual similarity between this idea of "instrumental rationality" and that of the use value in Marx. Attributing an ideological primacy to the utilitarian importance of an object to rescue it from the evil grasp of

exchange economy, as it is the case in Marx, and rationalizing it through the discourse of progress, in Nehru, are two faces of the same coin. The Nehruvian approach to industrial and mechanical modernity in the context of the postcolonial nation-state is fetishistic in another way. Itty Abraham, in his study of the making of the atomic bomb in 1970s' India, argues that there has always been a statist agenda of public consumption of mammoth technological modernity—the dams, the railways, the factories—the artifacts that recur within the visual narrative of Ghatak's film—which would project these technological achievements as modern fetishes for the citizens of the postcolonial nation (20). This fetish, Abraham argues through Michael Taussig, to reproduce the ideological apparatus of the state, works towards inscribing the technological artifacts with "all the accoutrements of the postcolonial state's desire" (156). The statist fetish of the developmentalist project of postcolonial nation-state, much like that of a capitalist consumer, abstracts the condition of the production of the technological artifacts. Bimal's story, which too is a story of fetish, is different from the fetishism of commodities and the statist fetish for technology of Nehruvian India. This fetish neither leads to accumulation, nor does it lead to any phantasmagoric fluidity. As the film moves towards the final fall-down (metaphorically, death) of the car, Bimal is repeatedly advised not to spend money and time for repairing Jagaddal, and to sell it off. Other taxi drivers in the town bring in the shinier and more stylish automobiles; yet, Bimal remains steadfast in his effort at retaining

Jagaddal and curing it. Although the townspeople and other taxi-drivers make fun of him, Bimal is not deterred. He works tirelessly to bring Jagaddal back to health.

This obsessive attachment is comparable to the table we find in the first chapter of *Capital*. Unlike other commodities discussed by Marx, the table even after the onslaught of the first chapter manages to maintain its material specificity. While in the Marxian theorization, all the commodities appear made only of facades and all of them are mutually replaceable because of the price-tag of use- and exchange-value, the table emerges as the only object that could lure us into knowing it separately. "[O]nly the unruly table," Bill Brown points out, "can be said to captivate our pictorial imagination, and indeed to frustrate that imagination as we try to picture a table not upside down but, rather, standing on its head" (*Sense of Things* 29). Unlike any other commodity in the first chapter of *Capital*, the table emerges as worthy of having and imagining. This moment of attachment is the moment "where Marx intimates not the fetishism he theorizes but the more pedestrian, not to say less powerful, fetishism through which objects captivate us, fascinate us, compel us to have a relation with them, which seems to have little to do with their relation to other commodities" (29). A pure "social relation between human subject and inanimate object" is counterpoised against modernity's "ontological distinction between human beings and nonhumans," and, effectively, transcends the capitalist "context of use or exchange" (30). Unlike any other

relation between human possessor and the nonhuman commodity, the table, very

much like Jagaddal in the film, is bonded within a relationship that is

"overwhelmingly aesthetic, deeply affective:" it involves "desire, pleasure,

frustration, a kind of pain" (30). Brown goes on to attribute this peculiarity in the

first chapter to both the residual humanism, which might have played a role in

Gandhi's approval of the sewing machine invented by the man to alleviate the

pain of his wife, in the Marx of *Capital*, and his recognition that the human

fascination with a particular object can sometimes be cognized beyond the

principles of the value system. Brown's observation about Marx's table is

particularly pertinent to our understanding of the variety of fetishism in *Ajantrik*.

The relationship between Bimal and Jagaddal creates a topography of "desire,"

"pleasure," "frustration," and "a kind of pain."

This affective relationship between "human beings and nonhumans" can

be best described as "pre-capitalist fetishism" (Taussig 124).[95] Delineating the

differences between capitalist and pre-capitalist fetishism, Taussig goes on to

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[95] Discussing Walter Benjamin's effort at reading things as "sacred texts," Taussig
comments,

> To read things in this way, as though they were sacred texts, is also to indulge in
> a sort of magic, which we can call "pre-capitalist fetishism." It is to strive for a
> unification of experience otherwise unobtainable. It is the stubborn compulsion
> to see things and persons as reciprocally interwoven to the point at which things
> are meaningful because they embody interpersonal relationships even when (in
> an age without magic) those relationships lie behind a reified exterior. (124)

This particular type of fetishism, which is both an acceptance and transgression of
capitalist fetishism, has been used in similar ethnographic texts by few other scholars.
See, for example, Friedman (1974 and 1979) and Godelier (1977).

argue that the modern market system works to replace pre-capitalist fetishism with the capitalist commodity fetishism by erasing the trace of 'reciprocity'[96] between the possessor and the possession that can be found in this particularly antiquated form of fetishism. Elaborating on an epistemological connection between fetishism and the pre-modern psyche, Taussig observes in the opening chapter of his *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*,[97]

> Time, space, matter, cause, relations, human nature, and society itself are
> social products created by man just as are the different types of tools,
> farming systems, clothes, houses, monuments, languages, myths, and so
> on, that mankind has produced since the dawn of human life. But to their
> participants, all cultures tend to present these categories as if they were not
> social products but elemental and immutable things. As soon as such
> categories are defined as natural, rather than social products, epistemology
> itself acts to conceal understanding of the social order. (4)

Discussing the comparison between fetishism in capitalist and pre-capitalist orders, Taussig argues that both of these systems can create animated, autonomous objects out of mere things. But, at the same time, Taussig points out,

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[96] At this point I would like to remind the reader of Bimal's comment to Sultan about how Jagaddal understands his financial limitations.

[97] See also, Francoise Lionnet. "The Mirror and the Tomb: Africa, Museums, and Memory." *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*. Ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub./Wiley, 2004.

this process takes place in the two systems differently. In the industrialized,

capitalist, commodity-oriented system mere things are transformed into

autonomous, animated objects that are increasingly distant from the network of

social relationships. Therefore and thereby, the commodities themselves "appear

as the source of value and profit" (27). Consequently, categories like time, space

and labor too, become separated from social relations to result in what Taussig

terms as "phantom objectivity." This involves, as W.J.T. Mitchell argues,

juxtaposition of two forms of amnesia, "a kind of double forgetting" (193) [98] –

forgetting that people themselves project life and value into commodities, and

forgetting that the "commodity veils itself in familiarity and triviality, in the

rationality of purely quantitative relations" (193). While in the pre-capitalist

social structure too, simple things, along with other ethereal categories like time

and space, turn into magical, animate objects, but not in abstraction from "the

tissue of life activities." Talking about the practices in South American

communities that were waiting on the margins of the modern, capitalist system,

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[98] Following Georg Lukacs, Michael Taussig coins the term "phantom objectivity":
> A commodity-based society produces such phantom objectivity, and in so doing it obscures its roots – the relations between people. This amounts to a socially instituted paradox with bewildering manifestations, the chief of which is the denial by the society's members of the social construction of reality. (5)

The way Marxian fetishism gives a mistaken independence—in other words, "phantom objectivity"—to things moves Slavoj Zizek (1994) to diagnose the subject-constructing power of objects. In his effort at bringing Marx and Lacan, Zizek argues that the lived social reality that forces Marxian subject to fetishize an object is always already "guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion" (32-33).

Taussig observes that the people belonging to these communities also attributed

certain magical, almost supernatural, powers to inane, innocuous objects. But this

does not result in the retreat of the most intimate relationship between people and

their surroundings into oblivion. The relationship between Bimal and his material

possession, which signifies the possibility of a space of excess beyond the value-

based fetishism of commodity and the lure of ownership, carries the potential of

conceptualizing an ontological oneness between humans and non-humans. While

statist fetish brings the postcolonial subject closer to the myth of the nation-state's

desire for a materialist and technological landscape to re-invent its own identity

(Abraham 20), commodity fetishism of the modern man distances him from the

realization of the mythopoeia that is occasioned by the world of commodities.

Ghatak, however, introduces the element of primitivism within the visual

economy of the film to conjure up, as Geeta Kapur points out, the "critical

debonding" with the state.

In *Ajantrik*, the representation of the pre-modern is an important and

strategic phenomenon. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the screen is often

filled by people belonging to the tribal community from the eastern part of India.

Now, representing these people could posit a serious aesthetic challenge for

Ghatak. Rajadhyaksa comments,

Ghatak appears to have been acutely conscious of the gulf that separated

him from his subject by this cultural barrier. The investing of a false

character to tribal culture, even by their sympathizers, has been a major

factor in perpetuating their exploitation. Even the liberal or 'humanist'

sections, not devoid of the romantic influence, have inevitably taken a

non-materialist stand while attacking such exploitation; the sympathetic

view has usually been to control the rapaciousness to preserve the tribal

culture as long as possible. The very camera that defined the relationship

between Ghatak and his subject has been a vital technological instrument

in the hands of the ruling class in furthering economic colonization. (40)

The camera has been instrumental in ratifying the technology of exploitation

inherent in the pedagogical structure of ethnography and anthropology.[99] Writing

and filming the primitive has been an issue of contention in recent discussions.[100]

Anthropology and ethnography, often in the garb of 'negrophilia,' produce texts

that are inscribed within the paradigm of exoticism.[101] In most cases, as argued by

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[99] For more on the connection between anthropology and early cinema, see Fatimah
Tobing Rony's *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (1996);
Assenka Oksiloff's *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early
German Cinema* (2001).

[100] For a comprehensive discussion of the putatively colonial politics of anthropology, see
Talal Asad's *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973); Patrick Wolfe's *Settler
Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (1999); Pauline Wakeham's
chapter "Celluloid Salvage" in her *Taxidermic Signs: Reconstructing Aboriginality*
(2009).

[101] See James Clifford and Georges E. Marcus. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics
of Ethnography*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1986; Christopher F.
Miller's *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (1985). Using the context of
Africa's colonial history, both of them offer persuasive critique of the exoticist
stereotypes of Africa, ethnography's colonialist biases, and aesthetic and cultural

scholars like Edward Said (1985 and 1993), these texts project the figure of the primitive as an objectified and exoticized other to the enlightened modern self of the one who produces the texts.

Other than the academic projects of anthropology and ethnology, the primitive has been objectified for the purposes of modernist art too.[102] Ghatak's own endeavor in situating his film in the tribal region of India and his decision to film people belonging to the local tribal community could have faced the challenge of avoiding such aesthetic biases. Not only the people—the entire locational setting, the *mise-en-scene*—was too exotic for the city-dwelling cinema audience. Ghatak himself mentions this particular setting as one of the reasons

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construction of an African alterity. This exoticization, often garbed in the mask of aestheticization results in what Abdul R. JanMohamed has identified as Western "fetishization of the Other":

> The power of the "imaginary" field binding the narcissistic colonialist text is nowhere better illustrated than in its fetishization of the Other. This process operates by substituting natural or generic categories for those that are socially or ideologically determined. All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonialist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultutral difference but as characteristics inherent in the race – in the "blood"- of the native. In its extreme form, this kind of fetishization transmutes all the specificity and difference into a magical essence. (86)

[102] Simon Gikandi recounts what Aubrey Williams, a leading member of Afro-modernism and black abstractionism, wrote about his first meeting with Pablo Picasso:

> […] I never thought I would not like people like that. But the total of the whole thing is that I did not like Picasso. He was just an ordinary past-middle-aged man. I remember the first comment he made when we met. He said that I had a very fine African head and he would like me to pose for him. I felt terrible. In spite of the fact that I was introduced to him as an artist, he did not think of me as another artist. He thought of me only a something he could use for his own work. (quoted in Gikandi 455)

why he got attracted to the story:

> Firstly, the story is laid in a terrain which is one of the least known to
> normal Bengali film-goers. They have no emotional attachment with it.
> Try however I might, I could not peddle in nostalgic sentimentalism,
> which is the curse of many a fine worker in this country. I had to create
> new values, all within the span of the film itself. On the other hand I could
> cash in on the novelty of the landscape. The different planes and levels are
> refreshingly unusual to the plainsmen of the Gangetic delta. (39)

"Secondly," says Ghatak,

> [t]he tribal people … are the people who own the land where the story is
> laid. Without them the landscape would lose its charm and meaning. I
> cannot marshal my camera on any spot without integrating them into my
> composition. (39)

In these excerpts, one can easily identify the traces of the exoticist fetish for the primitive unfamiliar. The attraction for lack of identification with the landscape actually is fraught with the danger of exoticizing the Other. And, perhaps, one cannot deny that such objectifying cinematic tendencies can be found in the film. It is to be noted that not a single tribal person has any dialogue relevant to the narrative. Apart from Bimal, no one of the town community is seen interacting with them. Having acknowledged that, it has to be observed that the representation of the pre-modern (or primitive) remains crucial in this film in

order to understand the relationship between Bimal and Jagaddal.

Talking about the fundamental anomaly in the story, at least from a rationalist point of view of modern "city folks," Ghatak observes the correlation between Bimal's crazy obsession with his "God-forsaken" car and the simplistic animism practiced by tribal people. "We could," he says, "imagine ourselves in love with a river or a stone. But a machine – there we draw the line. But these people do not have that difficulty. They are constantly in the process of assimilating anything new that comes their way" ("Some Thoughts on *Ajantrik*" 39-40). Right from the beginning, and in keeping with the director's vision, Bimal is shown in close emotional and sentimental proximity with the tribal people. The visual explication of the landscape and its original inhabitants is reconstituted within an understanding that the space represented is far from the 'modern,' 'rational' civilization.

Although the element of orientalist obfuscation of the actual people cannot be ignored,[103] an exegetic understanding of the film reveals far stronger semantic significance of the tribal people. As evident from Ghatak's own explanation, these people function as the signifying marker of the limit of capitalist and bourgeois

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[103] More often than not, the tribal people appear on the screen without anything to do with the tangible plot of the narrative. At times, the audience almost gets the impression of a chance encounter. They appear in their own festivities, they appear in their own market places, they appear as unanticipated passengers, they appear as a crowd to be lost in. The amorphous nature of the tribal people haunts the camera-eye: as if they are there only to serve the purpose of props, only to add to exotic element of the landscape.

rationalism. The oneness that Bimal and these people share is not coincidental. In

Ghatak's own words, he found "an affinity between their pathetic fallacy and

Bimal's" (40). Apart from achieving the director's agenda of expressing a fallacy

shared by both Bimal and the tribal people, the presence of the tribal people

highlights a deeper biographical significance. It should be noted that before

Ajantrik, Ghatak made a documentary film, *Adivasiyon ke Jeevan Srot*[104] ("Life

of the Adivasis," 1955), on the life of the Oraon community—the same tribal

community that is shown in *Ajantrik*—from the Chhotanagpur region of India. In

a short piece he wrote on the documentary and the community, Ghatak makes his

fascination and attachment with the community quite explicit.[105]

From a structural analysis of the narrative, it is discernible that the tribal

people appear on screen at, crassly put, crucial moments of the plot. The vignettes

of the marginal life of these people, outside the tumult of the town, creep in as a

syncretic reminder of an alternative. They come through the sudden interjection of

a scene showing their festive parade, the shrilling sound of their bugles, their

flying *Bairakhis* (flag).[106] These elements are often shown through disjointed,

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[104] It should be noted that Ghatak made this thirteen-minute long documentary as a publicity film for the provincial government of Bihar. This fact might lead us to address the approach of exoticizing the primitive for the modern (urban) consumer.

[105] Ritwik Ghatak. "About the Oraons of Chhotanagpur." *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2000, 119-129.

[106] The Bairakhi (flag) is a sacred and worshipped symbol among the particular tribal community.

abrupt and unexpected shots. By inserting these visual elements in the recurring

interstices between the narrative nodal points, Ghatak tries to create what James

Clifford terms as "modernist collage" (13). The ritualized practices of the tribal

people strengthen the visual reception of the emerging space of magic, the

uncanny. These iterative rituals generate and sustain the collective and

communitarian faith in the supra-real power of the object. Imagination, which

could be considered a sub-set of magic in its absolutely pre-modern sense, works

to vivify the inert thing that gradually grows bigger and more powerful than its

human counterpart.[107] Thus we notice the extra-narrative interjection of tribal

rituals being synchronically positioned with Bimal's increasingly stubborn belief

in Jagaddal's living status. Strewn all over the film, the tribal people motivate an

escape from the deeply alienating experience of the town. In contrast with the

townspeople, the tribal people do not make fun of Bimal. On one occasion, a

tribal couple takes a ride on Jagaddal. Slowly but gradually, there is an increasing

proximity between the world of Bimal and the world of the tribal people. It is this

unique positioning of an automobile – positioning on the argumentative interstices

between primitivism and modernity – that makes Ghatak's system of signification

so unique in this film. He finds the primitive as the site of the affect. The tribal

people function like an anachronistic imposition of the narrative to engender a

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[107] For a broader and more in-depth analysis of this suggestion, see, Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity*, 281-84.

different trajectory of fetishism.

Fetishism – that is not fetishism for commodities – finds an unusual associate in an individual's longing to return to a pre-modern milieu. The symbolic alignment of Bimal's relationship with Jagaddal and figments of tribal life seem to form the explanatory underpinning of the film. The end result of primal reification is the coalescence of the physical and the communal, the material and the social. The metaphorization of the tribal people, and that of the local landscape, happens to establish the most fundamental narrative thrust of the film.

The End: Towards a Possible Plenitude?

As Bimal works on Jagaddal, the interior of the entire machine is exposed. With its parts taken apart, the object of fetishism is undone to further underscore the limits of capitalist, bourgeois fetishism. Bimal, as well as the audience, confronts the grotesque reality of the car's inner constitution. The precarious façade of the object is gone. The possibility of any phantasmagoric perambulation or scopophilic wonderment over its external beauty is taken away. Of this section of *Ajantrik*, Rajadhyaksa poignantly observes,

> […] in the entire sequence of the car-repairing Ghatak breaks completely from realism. The black-and-white contrasts increase, and the virtually life and death struggle is emphasized with the symbol of crucifixion,

introduced only through the use of camera movement and lensing. The

shots conflict Bimal with his milieu, isolate him in his garage, open out

the interior with a strange backdrop where we see a series of crosses, and

at one point so detached from the bindings of narrative as to have a tribal

woman kneeling in grief before a cross. (45)

The film's objective of producing an alternate understanding of the man-machine

relationship and of trajectories of fetishism approaches diegetic finality. In a feat

of mistaken consummation, Bimal comes to believe that Jagaddal is fully

repaired. He drives the car to show his achievement off to the townspeople. But

he fails. As he tries to take it back for further repairing, Jagaddal breaks down

completely. In desperate exasperation, Bimal inflicts deadly blows on Jagaddal, as

he overloads it with a huge amount of stone, making it impossible for the car to

start: thus literalizing the name, Jagaddal. Even after spending an enormous

amount of time and money, Jagaddal cannot be revived. Suddenly this animate

thing, denuded to expose its inner mechanism, is reduced to mere metal. Finally,

the agent of real economy arrives. The moment is of departure and arrival:

departure of that pre-modern attachment and arrival of capitalist reality. The

moment comes in the form of a scrap-dealer. The well-dressed businessman, an

anomalous presence in the shabby, dilapidated world of Bimal, starts calculating

the amount of metal he can get. The moment of revelation that Bimal has finally

decided to sell Jagaddal is unexpectedly followed by the appearance of the

madman who has replaced his old, crooked aluminum-pan with a new, shiny one.

After the dismissive scrap-trader expresses his disappointment at the car's

ramshackle state, the camera cuts away to show the madman in an interlude. In a

completely unsolicited revelation, the madman shows off his new acquisition to

the townspeople. When Sultan tells him that his old pan was much better, the

madman dismisses him by saying: "I have forgotten that [the old pan] long back.

The edges of that were so flattened; absolutely disgusting. Look at this one. How

rounded! So shiny! So shiny! So shiny!" Even the madman has succumbed to the

shiny lure of a new commodity. This short, yet purposively poignant sequence –

parenthetically inserted – underscores Bimal's transgression of the margins of

rationality. The figment of insanity in Bimal's attachment with his car, his

melancholy over the demise of Jagaddal, his reclusive withdrawal from the

surrounding world, his obstinate dismissal of the normative codification of the

owner-owned relationship – all these transgress the limits of reason far more than

the already-acknowledged insanity of the madman. Immediately after the

depiction of the madman, the camera cuts back to Bimal and Jagaddal. The object

of desire is decimated, as Bimal remains silent as his fetishized *thing* is crushed

into *matter*.

　　　As the crushed body of Jagaddal is taken away, the cross, which has been

used as a motif in the film to represent the cyclical nature of life and death,

returns. With Jagaddal being dragged away in the foreground, the camera

juxtaposes Bimal behind a cross. The symbol of death comes to the foreground. The symbol of the cross, used almost as a motif in the film, occasions the reference to that primeval destiny. The mute bemoaning of Bimal gets disrupted with the sound of Jagaddal's horn, which has been working as a cinematic and narratorial reminder of the car's presence. Whenever Jagaddal moves, the sound of horn creates a sensual registration among the characters in the movie and the audience. Bimal – visibly confused – comes out of his daze to find a little child playing with the horn, which has been left behind. After the capitalist scrap-dealer has taken away the decimated body of Jagaddal, the metonymic remainder of the machine declares its presence through the little child, one of "humanity's little scrap-dealers" (Agamben 79). This epiphanic moment, a theatricalization of primitive fetish, brings the narrative to its end and brings Bimal to the realization of his own pathetic fallacy. The smiling child playing with the horn brings him out of his amnesia to make him realize his animism. Immediately follows the visually haunting appearance of the cross to symbolize the cycle of life. The child and the cross—symbolizing the cycle of life—mark the zone of excess within the universalizing narrative of modernity.

While the mystery of capital initiates "the conversion of things into persons and ... persons into things" (Marx *Capital* vol. 1 209) in order to maintain the illusory appeal of commodity fetishism, "which essentially characterized the substitution of the relationship between things for the relationship between

people"[108] (Jameson *Singular Modernity* 84), the mystery of Bimal's world is an erasure of modernity that makes the difference between persons and things possible. While the backdrop of Ghatak's film is filled with allegorical reminders of mushrooming industrialization of the nation – the train, the wagons, the factories demarcating the advent of industrial, capitalist modernity in post-Independence India – the affective tale creates the possibility of claiming a sovereign selfhood that need not be ratified by the ideology of a fetishist nation-state.

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[108] Marx himself wrote, "There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (*Capital*. Vol. 1. 83).

Chapter 3

Dialectic Belonging and Arrival of a Revolution: Mrinal Sen's *Interview*

In what can be considered the most globally famous song coming out of Indian film industry, the impoverished tramp figure, played by famous Raj Kapoor, sings out in the film *Shri 420*[109] (1955): "Mera joota hai Japani/ Yeh patloon Inglishtani/ Sar pe lal topi Russi/ Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani" (My shoes are Japanese/ These pants are English/ The red hat on my head is Russian/ Yet, the heart is Indian). With the mention of several pieces of clothing, this song instantaneously establishes a semantic, and perhaps biological, binary between the objects and the heart, between the man-made and the man, between the inert and the living. The shoes, the pants and the hat, as products to be consumed, remain enmeshed and determined by the global flow of commodities; while the patriot's heart, remaining beyond the reach of the world of commodities, maintains its indigenous purity. On one hand, this post-Independence drama acknowledges the

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[109] *Shri 420*, released after eight years of India's independence from colonial rule, is one of the most famous films to come out of the Hindi film industry. This film shows the journey of a young man, Raju, from the rural heartland of India, traveling to the big city of Bombay. Soon after arriving at the throbbing metropolis, Raju realizes that the values he had inculcated in his village are of no value in the city. The virtues that he had been holding in high regard are completely useless for being successful in the cutthroat atmosphere of the city. For further analysis of the film with respect to national ideology see, Ashis Nandy. *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 1998.

presence of a possible hybrid space generated and determined by the in-flow of several foreign commodities; on the other hand, the song promotes the necessity of maintaining a nationalist sovereignty as far as human faculties of reason and feeling are concerned. What is more intriguing than the cartographic identification of the shoes, the pants and the hat on the map of global production system is the fact that a simple, impoverished young man from rural India is wearing them. The fact that Raju is wearing these of his own volition suggests the possibility of a perplexing mimetic space. Perhaps his decision is motivated and determined by the need to look westernized on his journey to the city; nonetheless, Raju's body clad in Western attire emerges as a site of an overlapping postcolonial, materialist mimicry and nationalist fantasy. The shoes, the pants and the hat do not remain simple objects. They become emblems of a broader discursive signification. The significance of the act of imitating the West (or, the erstwhile colonizer) at the everyday level reproduces a sort of fetishistic obsession with objects that is a reminder of colonial modernity. The film's engagement with apparently simple objects does not end with just the song. After Raju reaches the city, at one moment of painstaking realization he comes to be comfortable with the fact that the medallion he had received as an appreciation for his honesty and moral demeanor back in his village has no value in the heartless, money-mongering urban society. In situations like these, objects become visual and semantic signifiers that facilitate the process of inscribing and codifying the shifting

trajectory of the Indian national ideology.

This detailed discussion of the song from Raj Kapoor's *Shri 420* is important for understanding the public and private life of things in Mrinal Sen's *Interview*, the subject of my analysis in this chapter. *Interview* is a film that captures a single day's troubles and travails of a young man's life in Calcutta. It is the day the protagonist, Ranjit Mullick, gets ready for an interview for a better job. Within its day-long setting, the film follows the young man trying to get hold of a suit and other pieces of clothing that would play the deciding role for his interview. In spite of the overtly suggestive title, the actual event of interview is not the narrational locus for the film. It is the process of preparation, the anxieties and expectations leading to that moment, the journey towards that point, that form the content of the film. Depicting a series of rather bizarre encounters and coincidences, the narrative of the film literally theatricalizes the pursuit of objects. Much as in the case of the song sequence of *Shri 420*, pieces of clothing come to emerge as the focal point of the narrative structure of *Interview*. It is not the presence but the absence of the object that drives the narrative forward. The suit appears momentarily; it is accidentally found; it is lost before it is worn. On the morning of the day of action, Ranjit wakes up to get ready for his interview. As it turns out, the suit is going to play a crucial role for his interview as the company is a Scottish company that considers looking 'smart' an absolute necessity for working there. The suit is considered an inherent part of that 'looking smart'

project. After this, the film presents the young man's day-long effort at acquiring

the suit. Not surprisingly, the narrative does not reach a happy ending. Both the

search for the suit and the interview culminate in a futile conclusion. Along this

journey, the film renders fragments of the young man's, the family's, and the

city's desires into an aphoristic visual collage. Made in a quasi-documentary

style, the film incorporates disjointed visuals, newsreels, and photographs, to

make the historical backdrop percolate through the main plot. More than the

predictable progression of the story, the unexpected, the bizarre, and the

unforeseen form the narrative engine of the film.[110]

As a filmic narrative, *Interview* renders visible an intricate dialectic

between fetishism and its phobic other materiality. The object, as formulated by

Marx, attains a supra-real stature through its journey under the regime of modern

capitalism to become a fetishized commodity. The inert thing acquires a mystic

power that could hide the materiality of the thing itself. An otherwise

inconsequential object, because of its commoditization and subsequent

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[110] It should be noted here that Sen, like many of his contemporaries in India, was admittedly influenced by the neo-realist school of Italy. References to such influences can be found in a number of interviews given by Sen and many other Indian filmmakers. One also cannot overlook an apparent similarity in terms of the overarching idea between Sen's *Interview* and Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). The classic Italian neo-realist film shows a man and his son's search for his stolen cycle that is absolutely necessary for his job. Sica's film likewise depicts the man's journey through the day as he frantically looks for his stolen bicycle. He too encounters a series of bizarre and unexpected events during his search. Though the similarities between the storylines are quite obvious, and the influence of Sica on Sen is undeniable, the cinematic treatment of the same topic remains quite distinct in *Interview*.

fetishization, emerges to signify an excess beyond its use value. Hidden behind

this misty veil of excess meaning, the commoditized object projects itself to be

the harbinger of a fulfillment that only sees its origin, not culmination, within that

structure. Peter Stallybrass argues that the contradictoriness of Marx's *Capital* is

an attempt to capture the contradictoriness inherent within the abstraction of

capitalist society. The abstraction resides in the commodity itself. As a result of

the abstraction, the thing achieves 'equivalence' as its destiny (Stallybrass 184-

85).[111] Marx himself refers to the abstraction of actual meaning in *Capital* (42-

43). What becomes evident is how Marx tries to compare the ontological

emergence of commodities – "the products of men's hands" – with the way a

belief system works in the world of religion. In the same essay, Peter Stallybrass

argues that to fetishize commodities, according to Marx, is to reverse the history

of fetishism "[for] it is to fetishize the invisible, the immaterial, the supra-

sensible. The fetishism of the commodity inscribes *im*materiality as the defining

feature of capitalism" (184). From what Marx quite evidently puts forward and

what Stallybrass tries to extrapolate out of Marx's theories, it becomes apparent

that on Marx's part, there is no effort at historicizing the process of attachment of

excess meaning produced by fetishism. The binary Marx tries to delineate

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[111] Peter Stallybrass makes a remarkable connection between the events of Marx family's financial imperative and his arguments in the *Capital*. Peter Stallybrass. "Marx's Coat." *Border Fetishism: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*. Ed. Patricia Spyer. New York; London: Routledge, 1998.

between the world of labor and the world of commodities depends almost entirely on metaphysical registers that are not only difficult to define, but also impossible to follow.

If Marx's conceptualization of commodity fetishism is deeply embedded in a historical forgetfulness, I argue that the fetishization of things and objectification of people in *Interview* can be inscribed within the broader historical context of India's neo-colonial economic structure. *Interview*, apart from its overtly polemical ending, is a film about objects. The entire scope, both narrative and optic, of the film is a series of falling, searching, finding, borrowing and losing of different objects. It is not only the suit and pieces of clothing; almost each frame is directly and obliquely constituted of things that have absolute and extended, real and symbolic, actual and allegorical meanings. These objects, some accentuated and some left casual in the film, determine the spatial contours of the narrative in public and private, and by extension, the iconic and the everyday. While the visual arrangement re-affirms the boundary, ideologically the film challenges the binary. Conceived as a conglomeration of salvos of erratic camera and body movements, Sen's film endeavors to make a persuasive comment on contemporary bourgeois mores by juxtaposing the quotidian encounter with meaning extracted from an ordinary object. In the process, Sen brings forth an occasion for re-envisioning the materialist consciousness that is enacted through

an ordinary young man's economic and libidinal investment, *investissement*[112], in an elusive suit and other pieces of clothing.[113]

In this chapter, after laying out the historical backdrop of the film, I show how the dialectics of de/commoditization works towards a political purpose in the film. First I argue that Sen tries to conceive of a world of quotidian objects that challenge the semantic hegemony of public over private and prove to be far more effective in revolting against the systemic hegemony of neo-colonialism. The object world of *Interview* exposes the historical hollowness within the statist fetishism invested in public iconoclasm, and, at the same time, enunciates the need for a revolution against the colonial and neo-colonial prejudices. This necessity for a revolution against the technologies of neo-colonial, capitalist materialism, I further argue, is brought forth through the depiction of the protagonist as a critique of the commoditization of the laborer in postcolonial

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[112] My use of this phrase and its French homonym needs some qualification and explanation. Here, through this particular usage, I try to direct the reader's attention to the possibility of investment both in terms of libidinal and political economy. The French word, *investissement*, manages to contain both the connotations in a much better sense than its English counterpart, investment.

[113] Several scholars have looked at clothes, accessories and other sartorial commodities to explore how clothing can be seen as a locus of commodity exchange, hegemony and, above all, fetishism in different historical contexts. For instance, Patricia Spyer (1998) explores the capacity of cloth to "embrace, shape, and subjugate persons and populations" in colonial Aru; Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones study the "currency of clothing" as material repository of mnemonic circulation during Renaissance. See Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones. *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. In the context of colonial history of India, the significance of clothing as a site for enacting colonial hegemony is explored by Bernard S. Cohn (1996) and C.A. Bayly (1986).

Calcutta. This critique of capitalist and colonial commoditization is furthered by the film's undoing of itself as a fetishized commodity.

Arrival of a Revolution and a Filmmaker

The director of *Interview*, Mrinal Sen, is one of the pioneering figures of the neo-realist school of cinema in India. Sen started his prolific career as a film director with *Raat Bhore* (The Dawn) in 1955. In terms of political ideology, Sen frequently subscribed to political ideas that can be located within the rubric of Marxist thought. As a student, Sen came in close contact with the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, although he was never a member of the party. Subsequently he worked with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), an organization that was the cultural counterpart of the undivided communist party in the 1940s. Given his prolonged association with the communist politics in India, most of his films, directly or otherwise, engaged with the pressing social and economic issues of postcolonial India. "These tendencies," says a commentator, "can result in the production of films that can be purposively made to question the dominant, and generate a discourse in the public sphere which will be forced to confront the underlying problems of the hegemonic system, and thus open the space for change" (Mitra 38). Film scholar Moinak Biswas comments, "Mrinal brought cinema directly into the political debate. By its spirit of pamphleteering, his work freed film-going to some extent of its ritual aura" (310-11). In a long

interview he gave on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Sen elaborates on his

long association with the left-wing politics in India:

> In a city like Calcutta, it is natural that everybody must have some sort of
>
> a political inclination. It is unavoidable. I too was very close to Left
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> radical politics, for obvious reasons. And this resulted in my being
>
> familiar with its presence in the different media … print, etc. And most
>
> importantly, in theatre.[114]

After his first eight moderately successful films, Sen came to attain national and

international recognition with his film *Bhuvan Shome* (*Mr. Shome*, 1969). This

film arguably started the neo-realist movement of New Wave cinema in the Indian

film industry. *Interview* was his next feature film and the first one of what can be

arguably considered his city trilogy. The following two films of this trilogy are

Calcutta '71 (1972) and *Padatik* (*The Guerilla Fighter*, 1973). Although Sen

dealt with the topic of the Bengal famine of 1943 in his third feature film *Baishe*

Sravan (*Wedding Day*, 1960), most of his earlier films remained occupied with

the theme of man-woman relationships in the Bengali middle-class milieu. Films

like *Punascha* (*Over Again*, 1961), *Abosheshe* (*And At Last*, 1963), *Pratinidhi*

(*The Representative*, 1964), and *Akash Kusum* (*Up in the Clouds*, 1965), portray

the social and economic tussles among middle-class Bengali protagonists. Though

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[114] As Sen continues to answer various questions about his involvement with radical
politics, he mentions that his interest in the connection between arts and politics grew out
of his consistent fondness for plays produced by the IPTA. See Mrinal Sen. *Over the
Years: An Interview with Samik Bandopadhyay*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2003, 1-3.

it could be deduced that there are oblique references to a particular political position even in these films, more or less they remain limited within the oeuvre of domestic films. As Sen became more and more engaged with Marxist political ideology, his films too grew more engaged with the larger political issues. *Bhuvan Shome*, for instance, shows the spiritual awakening of an old-fashioned bureaucrat after he comes in contact with the everyday lives of village folk in rural India. The film had its share of critics, the most prominent being the internationally-acclaimed Bengali director, Satyajit Ray who sardonically summarized the plot in seven words: "Big Bad Bureaucrat Reformed by Rustic Belle" (99).[115] Despite such scathing criticism from one the most established filmmakers of the time, *Bhuvan Shome* was well received by the audiences and, possibly for the first time on the Indian screen, introduced an overtly political consciousness in terms of both content and technique. Yet, there were occasions in the film that could leave substantial room for interpretations which ascribed a certain frivolity to Sen's political message. Describing the film as "simple in structure, rich in resonance," Barnouw and Krishnaswamy write, "*Bhuvan Shome* was indeed a happy conjunction of spirited talents. Those in the audience favoring 'committed' films

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[115] Satyajit Ray wrote these words in a scathing review of this film and the New Wave experiments on Indian screen. For him, *Bhuvan Shome* managed to earn modest success not because of, but in spite of its experiments. Ray argued that the film, in spite of its claim of trying to achieve an experimental innovation, became successful because of its adherence to certain traditional and 'essentially old-fashioned' structure. For a rejoinder to Ray's argument, see Mrinal Sen. "His book, my comments." *Views on Cinema*. Calcutta: Ishan, 1977.

could find many meanings in it, but it wore its meanings lightly" (252). Sen

himself explained the reasons behind the film's perceptible apolitical (or, non-

overtly political) take on the contemporary situation:

> True, we could procure only meager funds to make the film. We had,
>
> therefore no choice but to be austere. We made efforts to be inventive, and
>
> almost with 'youthful' defiance, we broke away from the moth-eaten
>
> conventions which, in our country, have been eating into the vitality of
>
> cinema. (*Views on Cinema* 105)

At this point it should be noted that the film was financed by the Film Finance

Corporation, a newly formed Government of India body. One could make the

obvious connection between the government funding and the not-so-subversive

message of *Bhuvan Shome*. And to a great extent, this period in Sen's career could

be considered a fulcral moment in the life of a director struggling for financers for

his brand of filmmaking and, at the same time, maintaining his ideological

leanings towards a politically meaningful cinema. In his own words,

> Overnight I became valuable in the film business. Many top film magnates
>
> asked me to make films. Perhaps at the time I could have made ten more
>
> *Bhuvan Shomes*. And perhaps the effort could have brought a good deal of
>
> money. But just then in Calcutta, and many places in West Bengal and
>
> India, many things started happening, a commotion arose in the social-
>
> economic-political life. At the moment I, the same social being, became

somehow 'engaged.' The desire to seek refuge in a quiet place and make a

sweet picture of sorts, 'disengaging' myself from the surrounding reality,

started waning. The desire to move ahead in the direction of disturbed,

agitated life, became irresistible. I felt the urge to capture and analyse the

same, and in consequence, I made *Interview*." (*Views on Cinema* 63-64)

Subsequently, Sen ventured into a much more blatant political statement with his

next three films – his Calcutta trilogy – *Interview*, *Calcutta 71* and *Padatik*—that

instantaneously promoted him into a cult status. Filmed against the backdrop of

brewing Naxalite movement in India, these three films address the issues related

to contemporary political and social upheavals in a much more direct way than

their predecessors. Apart from sharing their political engagement, these three

films, as suggested by their categorization as Sen's 'Calcutta trilogy,' share

Calcutta as their spatial location. Because the historical backdrop for these films

is the turbulent period of Naxalite uprising in Bengal, the aesthetic strategies and

ideological positions used and explored in the film *Interview*[116] need to be located

and analyzed within the referential context of the Naxalite movement. 1962 was a

pivotal year in the history of post-Independence India. The country faced a

humiliating defeat in its war against China. This defeat most probably catapulted

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[116] For quite a comprehensive study of the connection between Sen's Calcutta trilogy to
the political situation in the city, see Ananda Mitra. "Imaging of the 1970s: Calcutta and
West Bengal." *The Enemy Within: The Films of Mrinal Sen*. Ed. Sumita S. Chakravarty.
Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000.

the common people of India from an elongated state of post-Independence

nationalist euphoria to a disillusioning realization of the limitations of its strength

as a nation-state. It marked, in a sense, the abrupt end of the utopian comfort of

Nehruvian India. Coupled with the humiliation that came with the outcome of the

war of 1962, the random feudalism that pervaded the rural communities, the

abject failure of the government to uplift the condition of the rural poor and

landless peasants, and the unsatisfactory state of the industrialization pushed the

dream of building an egalitarian, welfare state further and further away.[117] A

fading economic welfare agenda for rural India caused a steep rise in poverty and

decline in consumption. Scarcity of food, deaths due to starvation, and farmers

committing suicide became regular news items. At the same time, India

experienced a stupendous rise in urban unemployment and a failure of general

urban infrastructure. As the domestic consumption declined sharply, the country's

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[117] It is important to give some historical data for the events I am describing here. People belonging to the lowest rung of the rural society, the agricultural laborers and landless peasants, could only secure work for around 200 days in a year. The low wage (on an average of Rs. 660 per year) and uncertain employment forced them to borrow money on very high interest from local moneylenders and big farmers. 70% of the rural credit system was owned and run by these people, while government agencies like co-operatives and banks could provide only about 7% of the needed credit. This phenomenon gradually forced the marginalized groups of rural India to be subjected to all sorts of draconian injustice practiced by the richer groups. See *All India Rural Credit Survey*, Volume II, 167. During the same period, the small farmers, people holding no or less than 2.5 acres of land, formed 59% of the entire farming population of the country; ironically, they owned only 7% of entire farming land. One could go on to provide a longer catalogue of factual data describing plight of the rural poor in India of that period.

economy faced a severe industrial recession in 1966-67.[118] The same period saw

an upheaval within the leftist politics in Bengal. In a nation facing acute food

shortage and a famine, the undisputed leader of the post-Independence political

landscape of India, the Indian National Congress, faced its first electoral defeat in

West Bengal. The United Front, comprised of opposition parties, came to power.

More importantly, for the first time the more radical branch of the communist

bloc, Communist Part of India-Marxist, CPI-M, became part of a ruling

government. As a major player in the state government, CPI-M managed to get

two key cabinet positions. One of the party stalwarts, Jyoti Basu[119] got the

position of Home Minister that looked after the internal law and order situation.

Another leader, Harekrishna Konar was in charge of the ministry of Land

Revenue, which was responsible for handling the contentious issue of "land

reform." This sudden decision of joining the government on the part of a party

that found its origin in the promise of continuing a proletarian, grassroots'

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[118] In West Bengal alone, 23000 workers were laid off in 95 establishments in the first three months of 1967. In Bombay, 3000 workers lost their jobs by June, 1967. See, Banerjee 36-37. This kind of situation was accompanied by gradual concentration of industrial production and capital in the hands of a group of big corporate houses. The socialist vision that India's first head of state, Jawaharlal Nehru, managed to portray for the newly decolonized nation in 1947 was fast being replaced by corporatization of the entire economy. Not only that, the domestic economy was further characterized by the presence of several multinational companies from USA, UK and other European countries.

[119] Jyoti Basu would eventually become the Chief Minister of West Bengal in 1977 to run the provincial government for almost 25 years.

movement undoubtedly alienated a large number of cadres dedicated to building stronger alliance with the marginalized peasants of rural Bengal.

Though the Naxalite uprising started off as a localized armed insurgence for the empowerment of the peasants in a small village in the northern part of West Bengal, it soon became an ideologically and spatially expanding movement aspiring to transform the fundamental structures of the allegedly bourgeois and hegemonic State. In addition to iconoclastic activities like demolishing statues of bourgeois political leaders and nineteenth-century social reformers, the insurgents got involved in disrupting the state machinery and actively encouraged the burning of school books to bring an end to a bourgeois, reactionary education system. Occupying a particularly ambiguous yet significant position in Bengal's as well as India's postcolonial history, the Naxalite revolution embodies "the reinstatement of man as a moral agent if only because Naxalites so radically challenged the premises of established morality" (Ray 3). The Naxalite movement, in spite of its philosophical and ideological limitations, tried to renew a process of active political protest against what they considered a pervasive semi-feudal and neo-colonial nation-state.

In *Interview*, Ranjit is not a revolutionary; none of the characters are. The narrative of the film is only incidentally connected to the Naxalite revolution. The visual representation of the revolution appears in a quasi-documentary, fragmented, montage manner. Yet the ideological backdrop is deeply affected by

the political reality of its time and a comprehensive interpretation of the film

cannot be achieved without an acknowledgement of the revolutionary impulses

traversing the political landscape of Calcutta. The suit, an object perennially

absent and deferred in the diegetic universe of the film, other pieces of clothing,

the domestic trinkets, and the falling statues emerge as the theatrical props of the

polyvalent nature of individual and collective desires in postcolonial India.

Though the suit remains beyond the reach of the protagonist, the visual surface of

the film is incessantly inhabited by many other objects which, in the narrative

unfolding of unrequited desire, subvert the public spectacle of revolution through

the everyday life of things. By demonstrating how these objects and commodities

in the film are inscribed within the two realms of public and private, the next

section argues that *Interview* distances itself from the public iconoclasm of the

State by contrasting the destruction of monuments in the public sphere with the

preservation of old and useless objects in the private sphere, and suggests that the

latter is more effective as a mode of resistance to neo-colonial capitalism.

The Public and Private Life of Objects

When we start watching *Interview*, we are immediately struck by the obvious

similarity with the opening scene of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960).

Fellini's masterpiece opens with the statue of Christ being flown over the city of

Rome. Before the opening credits roll in, Sen's film shows statues of colonial

figures being taken down.[120] Following the ousting of Christ from Rome, Fellini's

film goes on to show a ceaseless flow of senseless consumerism and ebullient

decadence in the city. The taking away of Christ somehow works to signify the

advent of ephemeral profligacy in contemporary Italian society. Much like its

Italian predecessor, *Interview* too tries to signal a fulcral period through its

opening sequence. The falling statues of British colonizers represent a period in

the history of Calcutta that saw the vanishing, in some cases vandalizing, of the

spectatorial reminders of the city's colonial past. The particular sequence in the

film shows, most likely, the fall of the statue of Sir James Outram. Standing on a

major intersection in the city, the statue continued to remind the people of

Calcutta of not only their colonial past, but also of the failure of the Sepoy

Mutiny. Outram played a pivotal role in defeating the anti-colonial forces during

the rebellion of 1857. It was on the occasion of the centenary celebration of the

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[120] It should be noted that we can find an almost identical scene in Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003). In this German film, the young protagonist, Alexander Kerner (played by Daniel Brühl) tries to save his mother, Christiane Kerner (played by Katrin Saß), from realizing that West and East Germany have merged and her beloved Communist East Germany has opened up to free-market, corporate capitalism. Considered a part of the ostalgie movement, the narrative shows how the young protagonist tries to construct a make-believe world for his mother to maintain the illusion of GDR's continuing existence. He simulates the by-gone communist era of East Germany by procuring fake obsolete objects and running fake shows on television. Thus, he convinces his mother that the communist regime still exists. It is on the day the mother accidentally steps out and encounters the tokens of rapid change her beloved country has gone through. In that scene, the film shows a flabbergasted and clueless Christiane roaming the streets in state of absolute confusion and observing a statue of Lenin being flown away from East Berlin. There have been some recent critical works on the representation/role of things and commodities in the context of the ostalgie movement. See, for instance, Daphne Berdahl. "'(N)Ostalgie' for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things." *Ethnos*. 64: 2, 1999, 192-211.

rebellion in 1957, that Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent

India, decided to replace this statue with that of the Rani of Jhansi, who played a

crucial role in the rebellion. But later on that decision was changed. Instead of the

Rani of Jhansi, who is often considered an overlooked figure in the mainstream,

nationalist historiography of India's freedom movement, Mohandas Karamchand

Gandhi replaced James Outram.[121] Years after the nation's independence, there

was, all of a sudden, an effort at, and to some extent collective support for,

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[121] In the wake of the Naxalbari movement, statues of various national leaders and social reformers too were desecrated by urban insurgents. Statues of various political and social leaders and reformers like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Vidyasagar, and Swami Vivekananda were demolished by the activists of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). Though the demolition of the statues of colonial figures was done by the Government, the desecration of the national leaders was not condoned by the State for obvious reasons. The main reason behind such activities that was put forward – very much under the influence of Mao Tse Tung's call for a new social and political order in China almost twenty years back – was that the statues of such people on the streets of the nation only engender the underlying bourgeois structure of the state. Instead, the party demanded that statues of 'real' heroes, people who are often forgotten by the mainstream bourgeois historiography – namely the figures of peasant and other subaltern movements – replace the existing ones. Though there was some public support for the demolition of the colonial statues, the degree of public support for the demolition of national figures cannot be qualitatively and quantitatively measured. In a rather polemical explanation and defense of such actions, Saroj Dutta, one of the most influential leaders of the Naxalite movement and the party, says,

> This is not a negative action. They are destroying statues to build new statues. They are demolishing Gandhi's statue to put up the statue of Rani of Jhansi; they are destroying Gandhighat to build Mangalghat [after Mangal Pande, the hero of the 1857 uprising]. One might ask, are the youth doing all these fully aware of the political implications? The revolutionary people do not enact revolutionary actions, conscious all the time of all the implications. Have they analyzed the records of the work of those whose statues they are destroying? No, they have not! But still, they are doing the right things. They have been born and brought up in the era of the victory of the revolution. They are not burdened with any revisionist past as is the case with their elders. (Saroj Dutta. "In Defence of Iconoclasm." *Deshabrati*, 1970; quoted in Banerjee 179)

rewriting its public hagiography.[122] Remaining ideologically equivocal to these

particular episodes, the film raises interestingly ironic questions about the real and

symbolic repercussions of such concerted efforts at erasing India's colonial

history.

The pre-credit scenes of falling colonial statues, the colonial canon, and

the pillars on the back corridor of the Queen Victoria Memorial, all visible

reminders of Calcutta's colonial past, form the public realm of things. These

things are already invested with power, hatred, and conflict from various subjects.

The monuments are "deeply contradictory sites" that emerge as a concentration of

the city's historicity and, at times, erase "everyday sites of memory" (Mazumdar

168-69). Paradigmatically both the acts of building and destroying statues belong

to the expression of what Michael Taussig calls "state fetishism"[123]: in a way, the

State's effort at removing the colonial statues finds its ideological counterpart in

the Naxalite desecration of the statues of nationalist figures. Repository of

narratives of grand historical events, these statues form a public world of objects.

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[122] In recent times, in a similar move, a number of Indian cities have been renamed to erase the effect of colonialism. The "anglicized" names have been removed to return to a native purity. Consequently, Bombay changed to Mumbai, Madras changed to Chennai, Calcutta to Kolkata, and Bangalore to Bengaluru, so on and so forth.

[123] Departing from the established body of works on commodity fetishism, Michael Taussig proposes the concept of "state fetishism." The State maneuvers the collective, public sentiment to project "a certain aura of might" ("Maleficium" 218) through fetishistic investment in public display of material objects. The production and dissemination of the ideology of the State remain hidden behind a façade of publicly fetishized artifacts.

The public spaces of the postcolonial city are filled with such objects that often

spring out of their inert state to become animate to form what Marx called "social

hieroglyphic."[124] The way capitalism transforms every product of labor into social

hieroglyphics, state fetishism, too, transforms the statues into invested sites of

historical phantasms. However pervasive it may be, their teleological thrust is

denied by this film as it gestures towards the formation of a private, domestic

space of objects. This public space of statues is strategically followed by the

meticulous depiction of the interior object world of Ranjit's home. Because the

Naxalites could not free themselves from the pattern of repetition which situates

their public iconoclasm in an ideological space already circumscribed by

bourgeois nationalism and state apparatus, Mrinal Sen shifts the gaze of the

audience away from such public displays of revolution and takes it into the

private realm of things which emerge as the unacknowledged and unrecognized

repositories of history.

As the movie begins, after the credits roll in, the camera in a shaky, hand-

held manner takes the spectator inside the home of the protagonist. We enter into

the household and immediately encounter a series of domestic objects – the clay

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[124] This is what Marx writes about commodity in the first volume of *Capital*,
> Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language. (74)

oven, the kitchen utensils, the fan, and the useless, old objects in an old trunk. These objects are shown to serve a double purpose. On the one hand, they establish the spectator's familiarity with the domestic interiority of the household; on the other, they are employed to delineate a space of objects that are distinctly separated from the outside world determined by the grandeur of the statue and elusiveness of the suit. At one point or another each one of these objects, in spite of their unremarkably quotidian arrangement, acquires the focal attention of the camera. Although the larger part of the film takes place on the streets of Calcutta, the beginning of the action is marked by these objects that fix at least a part of the film within the vectors of everyday life. They initiate the process of collision: the collision between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the usual and the exceptional, the regular and the dream. They form the real *mise en scène*, as if to prepare the characters and the spectator for the forthcoming disorder.

The innocuous objects of Ranjit's home are those of which our biological and emotional registers remain, at times, appallingly unaware. They form the material world of everyday life. The things we use, touch, pass on, ose, and find remain obscure even to our own perceptive faculties. In our everyday life, the 'social life of things' (to borrow the phrase from Arjun Appadurai) remains remarkably unnoticed. The things that become commodities in the public arena—the market and the arcade, for example—remain intuitively casual in the domestic space. Yet we need to acknowledge that the spatial and semantic organization and

arrangement of the apparently inconsequential things play a crucial role for our material consciousness. In an ineluctable manner, these *things* tend to fix the cartographic boundaries of the space of everyday life away from the reach of the publicly displayed objects. Unlike the mystical, luminous, appealing commodities on display, the scarcely noticed domestic objects come to presence through their ubiquitous ordinariness. The actions of everyday life—dwelling, sleeping, walking, eating, etc.—through a process of habitualization, de-dramatize the theatre of existence. Those same actions – however inane – could be curiously synchronized within an ideological performance. The everyday, if considered both ideologically and semantically codified, becomes doubly coded when projected on the cinema screen (Chow 641). As the spectators speculate over the importance of everyday objects on screen, they are subsumed by the concretization of the image/ visual itself. The intangible, the unfathomable, the abstract, which remain hidden beneath the ordinary *thing*, often eludes the spectator obsessed with the extraordinary. The interaction—both narrative and visual—between the ordinary and the extraordinary, resuscitates the possibility of realizing the cathectic investment in the facile ordinariness of everyday actions and objects.

In the opening scene of *Interview*, the camera familiarizes the spectator with a usual day in the protagonist's household. Not only the trivial objects, the elementary everyday comes to the surface through the routine, daily chores.

Frustrating as they are, these opening depictions prepare the characters and the

spectator for the extraordinary journey they are about embark upon. The

ordinariness of the everyday—the sister hanging the clothes for drying, the

mother preparing the morning tea, the sister getting ready to go for her work, the

mother wiping the floor—prefaces the quest for the unattainable. If, spatially

speaking, this opening sequence, entirely set within the interiority of the

household, demarcates the domestic in opposition to the public that will come

later, temporally, this early part of the day marks a sort of pre-modern(ity) phase

of innocence. This period of the everyday and the ordinary is the time of habit, of

monotony (Heidegger 340); it is nothing but triviality or an accumulation of

commonplaces (Lefebvre 65); it is the site of "prereflective immediacy" (Frow

632); it "simply *is* the routine act of conducting one's day-to-day existence

without making it an object of conscious attention" (Felski 26). Henri Lefebvre in

Critique of Everyday Life (Volume One) theorizes the everyday as residual. Thus,

in a passage inflected with aphoristic rumination, Lefebvre writes:

> Everyday life, in a sense residual, defined by 'what is left over' after all
>
> distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out
>
> by analysis, must be defined as a totality. Considered in their
>
> specialization and their technicality, superior activities leave a 'technical
>
> vacuum' between one another which is filled up by everyday life.
>
> Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them

with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their

bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of

relations which make the human – and every human being – a whole takes

its shape and its form. (97)

What Lefebvre suggests, in spite of all the problems of his text, is that we cannot

ignore the essence of everyday life as in that space emerges a realization of the

possibility of a wholesome material consciousness. The experience and

registration of everyday life become furthermore arduous when it is set within the

domestic everyday. Temporally cyclical in nature, the simple acts and objects of

domesticity shown in the opening sequence of *Interview* function in the way the

everyday functions within the sphere of modernity: "becomes the setting for a

dynamic process" (Highmore 2). After such an elaborate display of the daily and

the domestic, comes the moment of beginning. The initial hints of the unusual

come even before the appearance of the protagonist. Interestingly, it should be

noted that the actual event is not named for quite some time. The first clue comes

when the sister asks the mother, "How many times have you prayed to your god

since morning? Ranju (Ranjit) has got today…." Mother replies, "Praying is

nothing new. Now, I will be relieved if it gets over well." The dialogue ends in an

elliptical manner, leaving the event unmentioned. The anticipation is furthered as

the sister wakes up Ranjit with a morning cup of tea, "Ranju, wake up. You are

getting late. Here is your tea. Do you know what you have today?" Yet again an

exasperating linguistic strategy is employed to keep the actuality of the event obscure. Thus ends the first sequence. And immediately the camera is ejected out of the household to show the sister at work at a milk-distribution depot. Carefully showcased, this short interjection – the milk depot, the exchange of empty and filled milk bottles, the sister carelessly inserted within a series of unknown and unsuspecting distributors and buyers – takes the spectator back to banality. This is not the end. The building up of anticipation continues; as we come back to the household, we hear Ranjit asking his mother if she knows the amount of salary. In spite of his mother's persistent request, he insists on reminding her and rectifying her earlier estimate: "Even more than double of what I am getting now. Plus something; plus commission. Huge." The high-pitched last word, "Huge," strikes both literally and figuratively. Evocative and suggestive at the same time, this one word marks a rupture from whatever the spectator has been watching till this point. Immediately the suggestive thrust of the narrative projects a light of desire on the stage. Till this point the film has shown nothing 'huge.' Every thing, every action and every person shown to the spectator has come across as very modest. The unenviable condition of Ranjit's home becomes even more conspicuous in opposition to this blatant declaration of his desire for more. The visual comparison drawn between the "plebeian" and the "bourgeois" becomes even more evident. Right from the beginning the domestic space is represented as lower middle-class. The old revolving fan, the rickety furniture, the dilapidated

windows – all these visual details are conjured up to show the significance of

Ranjit's aspiration for this new job.

     Simultaneously, this one word, 'huge,' identifies Ranjit with respect to the

political situation, as he is revealed as somebody who has nothing to do with the

revolution. Unlike many of his counterparts from other contemporary Bengali

films, Ranjit appears to be disconnected from the political turbulence of his time.

If we consider the other two films of Sen's Calcutta trilogy—*Calcutta 71* and

Padatik—we encounter characters who are directly connected with the revolution.

Calcutta 71 starts with the depiction of a young man getting shot by the police.

Following this initial scene, the film virtually follows an eternally twenty-year-old

man through a series of narratives showing the long history of marginalization.

Composed of four individual stories from 1933, 1943, 1953 and 1971 – this film

follows the journey of that young man through the history of poverty, squalor, and

injustice in Calcutta. In *Padatik*, the protagonist, a young Naxalite revolutionary,

takes up refuge in a plush apartment in the city in order to escape from the police.

Hiding in that apartment owned by a rich socialite woman, the young man

undergoes periods of introspection and rumination. The film reaches its

conclusion with a meeting between the young man and his father, who has been

disapproving of his son's mode of violent revolution, after the death of the

mother. Apart from Sen's films, the revolutionary figure appears as the

protagonist in a number of parallel films from Bengal and India in the 1970s and

1980s. Ranjit of *Interview* is not directly or obliquely connected to the movement. At no point in the film does he show or express any ideological position for or against the movement. Rather, his juvenile reveries about a better life, his interaction with his mother, sister and fiancée prove that he is just a regular person with bourgeois aspirations. But the film ends with his arrival at the realization of the need for a revolution: this, in a way, sets the scene for the other more politically assertive films of Sen's city trilogy.

As I argued earlier, *Interview* can primarily be seen as a narrative constituted of a fragmentary assemblage of objects that connect with each other to forge a questioning of the prevalent neo-colonial, hegemonic condition of its time. Bhaskar Sarkar in his essay on a different set of Sen's films argues that those films contain a distinct element of self-reflexivity.[125] Discussing *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*, 1980) and *Khandahar* (*The Ruins*, 1983), along with two other films Sen made around the same time, Sarkar suggests that Sen through a particularly distinct modernist strategy marks a postmodern turn within the oeuvre of Indian cinema. Of these strategies, as Sarkar brings to our attention, jettisoning fragmentary images, self-referentiality, subversion of standardized reception of Western rationalism are prominent ones. Though I am not sure if these can broadly be considered indices of any "postmodern turn," the element of

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[125] Bhaskar Sarkar. "The Inward Look: The Politics and Practice of Cinematic Representation." *The Enemy Within: The Films of Mrinal Sen*. Ed. Sumita S. Chakravarty. Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books, 2000.

experimentation is an inherent part of Sen's filmmaking. *Interview*, too, exhibits some of the same strategies that Sarkar points out. These, to my mind, instead of representing any post-modernity, open up a space of uneasy negotiation within the scope of modernity itself. One of the primary examples of this could be considered the way Sen obliterates the line of distinction between the world of inanimate objects and the world of humans. It is not only the objects that go through the process of fetishization; first and foremost, it is Ranjit who undergoes the process in order to prepare himself as a product that can be sold in the marketplace of capitalism. Determined by the facile determinants, such as a good haircut, a well-fitted suit, well-polished shoes, a nice-looking tie, Ranjit undergoes a process of erasure of his capabilities as a worker. All that matters is how he looks.

In a very pointed fashion, the film exhibits the entire process of Ranjit's gradual transformation into a saleable product. And it is the process that involves a wild chase after a series of objects. The elongated shot showing Ranjit's painstaking effort at wearing a tie is the most prominent exposition of this. Catapulted out of his everyday existence, Ranjit scrambles to gather different pieces of clothing to transform himself into somebody who can fit in the colonial set up of the Scottish company. He gradually tries to become "invisible," "immaterial," and, literally, "enveloped" to become an object of the public world. Throughout the better part of the film, Ranjit shows an ambiguous and peculiar

adherence to this process. The value-based contrast and opposition between

Ranjit's domestic world and the world he wants be a part of become even more

prominent again, when Ranjit frantically looks for his shoes. As it turns out his

mother has kept them in an old trunk along with several necessary and

unnecessary things. The trunk becomes a particularly intriguing and important

site. As it contains a constellation of objects that are clearly categorized as useful

and useless for Ranjit, the trunk embodies a discursive locus of the conflict

between bourgeois capitalism and its domestic other, between the iconic and the

everyday. Frantically looking for his shoes beneath the heap of old jars and bottles

his mother has been saving to sell as junk,[126] he shouts that he would cleanse the

whole house of this garbage, that he would throw away all this junk. The object-

laden trunk, like a chest full of treasures for Ranjit's mother, becomes the

"veritable organ of the secret psychological life" (Bachelard 78).[127] In Ranjit's

exasperated outburst, there seems a peculiar intermingling of two layers of

appropriation. On the one hand, he demonstrates a crude desire for dismissing the

structure of valuation his mother, who emerges as a localized version of the figure

of the collector in Benjamin,[128] believes in; on the other, he definitely embodies a

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[126] It should be noted that selling old jars, bottles, and paper products is a common practice in India. It is not a sign of individual poverty. This sustained a process of recycling long before recycling was encoraged in the West.

[127] Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, argues that chests, caskets, and wardrobes site of invested emotions and meanings (74-89).

bourgeois, modern desire for maintaining the interior, domestic space as the

"phantasmagoric space of total experience" (Hetherington 133). Having been

threatened by the fleeting fragmentary experience (*Erlebnis*) characteristic of

modernity in the public space, Ranjit, the modern subject, as thinkers like Simmel

and Benjamin argue about nineteenth century bourgeois subjects, tries to form a

locus of more holistic, comprehensive experience (*Erfahrung*) within his domestic

world.[129] For Benjamin, the modern subject constructs the domestic as the space

of wholesome experience by transforming it into a kitsch-like conglomeration of

artifacts. Carefully arranged, the constellation of artifacts and other fetishized

commodities provides the alienated modern subject an avenue of escape from the

onslaught of the arbitrariness of the outer world. In a way, this elusive holistic

experience achieved under the jurisdiction of bourgeois capitalism comes only

through a drive for material accumulation. Although Ranjit does not share all the

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[128] Benjamin points out that the collectors, unlike the flaneurs, are with "tactile instincts" (*Arcades Project* 206). By putting the objects in an "expressly devised historical system: the collection" (205), the collector extrapolates an order out of an otherwise disorderly set of things. Ranjit's mother in *Interview* is not essentially a bourgeois collector that Benjamin talks about. Her collection, unlike that of the bourgeois collector, whose collection endows objects with a systemicity that results in the quantification of desire (Stewart 163), does not become a site for projecting an open-ended desire for kitsch.

[129] Kevin Hetherington summarizes and explains formulations about *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in a very lucid manner:

> The moment that one lives through, bombarded by consumer stimuli, the reified urban reserve and blasé attitude cultivated as a defense, leads the modern subject to know experience not as *Erfahrung* but as *Erlebnis* – as the fragmentary set of moments in which the subject becomes detached and isolated from any locatedness within a broader understanding of the continuities and realities of social life. (97)

characteristics of Benjamin's bourgeois accumulator, he too exhibits the

bourgeois desire for establishing order in the domestic world by getting rid of all

the "junk" his mother has been saving. In Ranjit's reaction to his mother's trunk

there is no such momentum towards any bourgeois accumulation,[130] although

there is a strong desire for sanctifying and sanitizing the home by getting rid of

objects that are apparently valuable for his mother, but absolute trash for him.

However, it is the trunk from where his shoes are found.[131] This puts Ranjit one

step closer to his destination. As the shoes are found, the search begins for a dry-

cleaning receipt. As the receipt is found, another search begins for the suit.

Gradually and distinctively, the objects establish their veritable empire on the

screen. As the film and the characters chase one object after another, there

emerges a heightened perception about the presence of these objects in our

See also, Buck-Morss, 1986.

[130] Such a desire for constructing a kitsch domestic space becomes prominent during Ranjit's first conversation with his fiancée. Talking about impending prosperity to be ushered in by his new job, the couple immerse themselves in a trance-like imagination about their new home. When Ranjit says that he would immediately buy a new apartment, his fiancé, Bulbul, suggests that she would decorate the new home with everything 'latest.' In their dream-home there shall not be any place for anything old.

[131] The shoes shown here are used to fulfill certain extra-narrative function. The dirty, unpolished shoes are specifically symbolic reference to Chaplin. Once found, the camera focuses on them as they certainly come to life. For few seconds all we see are the shoes moving on their own in a manner that is reminding of Chaplin's famous shoes. Sen personally is intensely influenced by Chaplin as a film-maker. Chaplin as an inspirational figure appears as an extra-diegetic interjection in a number of his films. To know how a poster of Chaplin is used as visual motif in Sen's *Mahaprithivi* (*World Within, World Without*, 1991), see, Bishnupriya Ghosh. "Melodrama and the Bourgeois Family: Notes on Mrinal Sen's Critical Cinema." *The Enemy Within: The Films of Mrinal Sen*. Ed. Sumita S. Chakravarty. Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books, 2000.

everyday life.

In his essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)" (1997 [1925]), Russian Marxist writer Boris Arvatov writes, "The relation of the individual and the collective to the Thing is the most fundamental and important, the most defining of the social relations" (120). As the things of Ranjit's household come to life, literally and metaphorically, the republic of things revitalizes a material consciousness about the quotidian. The structural inequality and exploitative class relations determine the social relations—both person-to-person and person-to-things—that bear the presence of the ghost of colonialism. The act of public iconoclasm cannot successfully cause a revolt against that neocolonial structure. The visual and symbolic importance given to the everyday objects in the film re-invents a conscious space that defies the logic that is often controlled by the assumed supremacy of public objects over the private ones. However trivial in other circumstances, the domestic objects Sen exhibits in this film acquire the power to interrupt the hegemony of neocolonial materiality. It is not that all of them are fetishized; yet, the visual and aesthetic referents in the film underscore the political significance of these objects without elevating them out of their ordinariness. This manages to perform two functions: first, it exposes the political and social emptiness of the destruction of statues; and second, it emphasizes the importance of that supposedly trivial, domestic world of objects. They perform

what Kracauer terms as one of the three functions of films: "to reveal things

normally unseen" (46).[132] The tea things, the revolving fan, the rickety furniture,

the precariously hanging window-shutter, along with the depiction of numerous

household chores, form a dialectic that works against the pervasive objectification

of the outside world. Away from the street of the city and the towering office-

buildings, the almost perfunctorily unnoticed household becomes the source of

objects that can step outside of domestic territory to subvert the hegemony of

bourgeois capitalism.

The film's locatedness within the context of the Naxalite movement calls

for our minute and critical attention to its evocative call for the emergence of an

alternate value-system beyond the jurisdiction of a variety of neo-colonial,

bourgeois, and capitalist paradigms. What I tried to argue in this section is that

Sen uses the world of everyday to lay down a material context for this conclusion.

As I discuss in the next section, Ranjit, at the end of the film, decides that

revolution is the only option left to rescue himself from the hegemonic

materialism of his time. The emptiness of the public fetishism—or, state

fetishism—fails, as the political message of the film suggests, to subvert the bio-

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[132] Although Kracauer is not necessarily concerned with the political usage of this
function, the aesthetic and material importance of "the small" that "stubbornly escape our
attention in everyday life" (53) he delineates is particularly significant in our
understanding of the small things in Sen's film.

power of neocolonial capitalism.[133] However, the seemingly ineffectual

conglomeration of everyday objects from Ranjit's domestic world becomes

politically more effective in subverting the hegemonic nature of the neocolonial

economy.

Resisting the Commoditization of the Worker

In a letter he wrote to Engels on 27th February, Marx says, "A week ago I reached

the pleasant point where I was unable to go out for want of the coats I have in

pawn."[134] Peter Stallybrass conjectures that Marx's inability to go out was caused

not only by the fact that it was impossible for a sick Marx to go out in the thick of

London winter without a proper coat, but also by the fact that the Reading Room

of the British Library, where Marx would go to do his research for *Capital*, "did

not accept just *anyone* from off the streets, and a man without his overcoat, even

if he had a ticket, *was* just anyone" (187). Narrating this anecdote and many more

from the domestic penury of the Marx household,[135] Stallybrass makes an unusual

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[133] I use the term bio-power specifically in the sense it was conceived of by Michel Foucault (1978; 2004). Talking of the emergence of Enlightenment modernity, nation-state and capitalism, Foucault suggests that the modern era is characterised by "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations." This era of bio-power, Foucault argues, invents technologies of discipline that practices the "anatomo-politics of the human body" (*History of Sexuality* 139).

[134] Quoted in Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat" 187.

connection between Marx's obsession with a coat in the first chapter of *Capital* and the financial condition of his family.

What can perceptively be extrapolated from Marx's personal story is the unusually perverse process of material determination a human being undergoes in the era of commodity capitalism. The implication of the story is manifold. It is as much an example of the de-humanization of the human body as it is of appropriation of the man under the stringent jurisdiction of commodity fixation. Arguing against an ideologically limited, anti-capitalist disavowal of all material things, Stallybrass interprets Marx as working against the erasure of the "material particularity" under capitalism. For Marx, the coat, the series of household things he had to pawn, and his own body acquire a phantom-like, extra-material, extra-terrestrial quality that is always produced outside the system of production. In this system, which falls outside of the history of production, all these become the "cell-form" of capitalism. Much like Marx's overcoat, the pieces of clothing in *Interview* turn Ranjit into an abstracted object alienated from the labor itself.

Through his chase after the elusive suit, Ranjit, almost like the impoverished Marx, acquires an extended and abstracted persona that is constantly re-inscribed within the vocabulary of the neo-colonial marketplace. Literally and visually, *Interview* presents the narrative of Ranjit's gradual

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[135] Stallybrass quotes another story from Marx's recollection, in which the poorly dressed Marx was detained in a police cell when he wanted to pawn some family silver. See Stallybrass, 1998, 189.

transformation into a commodity. As we have seen in the previous section, Ranjit slowly and gradually succumbs to the lure of consumption. But at the same time, he himself is produced to be consumed. Other actions, arguments and interactions in the film are foregrounded as there is a consistent movement towards the ultimate production of another Ranjit: a Ranjit who would be suitable to work in the foreign company.

If the vagrant-like figure from *Shri 420* embodies an inevitable material hybridity – consisting of Japanese shoes, English pants and a Russian hat – in postcolonial India, Sen's film questions the continuation of the colonial practice of imitating the white colonizer in mind and in body. The unquestioned indispensability of the suit, the shoes, the tie, and the proper haircut erases Ranjit's value as a worker. Ranjit the worker, who tries desperately to find a job for himself, becomes the commodified person who actually has to sell himself on the market. The body of Ranjit – from being sometimes half-clad to being fully dressed in a suit – becomes a postcolonial entity that is simultaneously inscribed upon with the logic of post-colonialism and bourgeois capitalism. The scene in the beginning of the film, where Ranjit is wearing a vest and a pajama and trying desperately to learn how to wear a tie, is the initiation of this transformation. His sister, after trying it on her, comes to his rescue. Now, Ranjit – in a vest, a pajama and a tie around his neck, running out to get a pair of good socks his friend comes

to lend – is metamorphosed into a postcolonial mimic space.[136] His mimicry—the figurative expression of desires—expresses the drive to become something more than the self. The sartorial transformation signifies the gradual erasure of Ranjit as a person and as a worker. We come to know almost nothing about his new job. While there is a somewhat long scene with background narration of what his duties are at his current job at a small publishing house, there is no mention of his duties and his work in his new job. The laborer and labor become absolutely abstracted by the semiological over-determination of the dress code. The construction of Ranjit into the appropriate one to be employed marks the commodity stage when he turns into a commodity from a worker (see Appadurai 16).

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[136] My understanding of "mimic," "mimicry," "mimesis" is influenced by the way Frantz Fanon (1967), Homi Bhabha (2004 [1994]) and Michael Taussig (1993) use these terms in the context of cultural practices under colonialism. Bhabha has defined "mimicry" both materially and suggestively. According to him, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite … a desire that, through the repetition of partial presence … articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (126). See Homi Bhabha. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Taussig's formulation of mimicry, somewhat similar, is more attentive to the historical specificity. He carefully historicizes the instrumentality of mimetic practices in colonial times and its discursive subversions in postcolonial times to argue for the interdependence between modernity and primitivism. See, Michael Taussig. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of Senses*. New York; London: Routledge, 1993. The overt political tone of Sen's film bears stronger resemblance with the way Fanon delineated the characteristics of the act of mimesis. Like Bhabha, Fanon, too, reads the psychological implications of the act of mimicry among the colonized subjects. But Fanon, unlike Bhabha, sees this more as a result of a colonial exertion of power than a rather harmless incident of cultural hybridity.

Apart from the evocative and polemical last scene, Ranjit is seen in native attire. He does not accept the codes of the mercantile bourgeois attitudes without protest. As he struggles to wear the tie, he complains that it is not meant for the hot weather of India. The slippages and the ambivalence become even more prominent in the fact that all the pieces of clothing needed turn out to be borrowed. He hopes to borrow a better tie from a friend; a friend comes to lend a pair of socks; he cannot manage to get his suit from the drycleaner because of a strike organized by laundry-workers. His father's old suit does not fit him. After a few frantic phone-calls, he gets in touch with an old classmate who would be willing to lend him one. While returning with that borrowed suit, he leaves it on the bus as a scuffle breaks out between the passengers and a pickpocket. All these seemingly accidental events stand in stark contrast with the programmed desecration of public statues. The erratic object world of Ranjit, in spite of its haphazard nature, introduces possible ambivalence into and causes stronger subversion of the discourse of neo-colonial and bourgeois commoditization.

This juxtaposition of the public desecration of the statues of colonial masters in order to erase the remnants of the city's colonial history and the rigorous change Ranjit has to undergo to secure a better job underscores the material paradox within the reality of India as a postcolonial state/ space. While the public iconoclasm engenders a state-sponsored refurbishing of a somewhat static conception of the cultural milieu, the economic space, embodied by job-

seeking workers like Ranjit, experiences the hegemonic re-writing of an extended

colonial aftermath. To a great extent he becomes the re-incarnation or

continuation of the *bhadralok*[137] *babu*s[138] of nineteenth century colonial Bengal.

Not as a personal agent, but as somebody who can be considered to embody a

system, Ranjit represents the native tendency to mime the everyday life practices

of the white superior. This particular tendency came under severe attack during

the nineteenth century. This is what Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the famous

Bengali novelist, wrote on the Bengali *babu*s:

> We have exchanged the cumbrous forms of Bengali epistolary
>
> correspondence for those of Cook's *Universal Letter-writer*, and the tight-

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[137] *Bhadralok*, a compound Bengali word formed by the union of *bhadra* and *lok*, generally means polite and well-mannered. Constituted of people belonging to the group ranked below the "superior" class (mostly the Englishman) and above the "lower" or "working" class, bhadralok stands for westernized, educated, genteel class. A facile secular outlook, attachment to English education, and an insatiable hunger for white-collar jobs are some of the signature qualities of bhadralok.

Ironically, it has been argued that this Bengali bhadralok class, most probably the only one of all such groups in India, got involved in the violent form of the Naxalite movement. Various scholars have made connections between upper-class Bengali ethos and terrorism. The emergence of the revolution was a marked shift from the genteel, sophisticated mores of the bhadralok class. See, for instance, Biplab Das Gupta. *The Naxalite Movement*. Bombay: Allied Publisher, 1974, 218-19. Rabindra Ray, too, subscribes to this connection, albeit in a more nuanced manner. See, Rabindra Ray. *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988. 52-81.

[138] *Babu*, originally said to be a Persian honorific conferred by the Mughal rulers of Bengal, somewhat similar to bhadralok, refers to a group of upper-class Bengali men of eighteenth and nineteenth century, who showed specific love and admiration of Westernized values. Continued in use in the British colonial period, babu (often spelt as "baboo") became a pejorative target of sarcasm from various Bengali writers like Bhabani Charan Bandyopadhyay (*Nababubilas* [Follies of the Nouveaux Babus], 1825) and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

fitting jackets and loose-flowing *chapkans* of our grandfathers for shirts à

l'anglaise and *chapkans* that are everyday steadily approaching towards

the shape and size of English coats….

    In the houses built by English-educated Bengalis, the *poojah-dalan*

[hall of worship] is conspicuous only by its absence…. Chairs, tables,

punkahs – seldom meant to be pulled, American clocks, glassware of

variegated hues, pictures for which the *Illustrated London News* is

liberally laid under contribution, kerosene lamps, book shelves filled with

Reynolds' *Mysteries*, Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* and the *Complete*

Poetical Works of Lord Byron, English musical-boxes, compose the

fashionable furniture of the Young Bengal.[139]

Apart from the revealing catalogue of objects that reflect the babu's desire for

aping the colonizer, this short passage betrays the hegemonic standardization of

quotidian lifestyle. Christopher Bayly, discussing the sartorial evolution of Indian

societies during the colonial era, makes a broader point about the significance of

clothing in Indian communities: "That cloth could evoke such powerful symbols

of community and right conduct was due to the important role cloth and clothes

played in Indian society – not merely in fixing and symbolizing social and

political statuses, in transmitting holiness, purity, and pollution" (Bayly 285). The

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[139] Quoted in Krishna Dutta. *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History*. Oxford: Signal
Books, 2003, 36.

practice of emulating the colonizer's dress code on the part of the Bengali bhadralok could be considered an extension and illustration of a sentiment that was rampant in the late 19th century. Though ironic, this practice on the part of native upper-class, especially men, was not appreciated by the colonial master that they were trying to imitate. "Writing about the British attitudes toward Indians wearing European clothes, N. C. Chaudhuri trenchantly sums up the situation. 'They, the British, were violently repelled by English in our mouths and even more violently by English clothes on our back'" (Cohn "Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism" 132). Bernard Cohn, in the same essay, points out that in the mid-nineteenth century an increasing number of urban Indians in Calcutta and Bombay started wearing articles of European clothing. The sartorial transformation of Ranjit proves the continuation of the same colonial regimen.

An extension of Marx's conceptualization of the ontological connection and mutual engendering of consumption and production, as he points out in the section on "General Relation of Production to Distribution, Exchange, and Consumption" in *Grundrisse*,[140] could ostensibly be applied for understanding the narrative's movement in *Interview*. Ranjit not only gets subsumed by the biopolitical expediencies of the neo-colonial economy; he is also initially the putative producer of the same system. His desire to get a better salary, a better

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[140] For a rigorous analysis of this aspect and its relation with commodity fetishism in Marx, see Miklitsch 1996.

house, "everything latest," plays a crucial role in continuing the chain of consumption and production that Marx talks about. The irony of the situation becomes evident to Ranjit even as he participates in the process: in the congested fish-market, when Shekharkaka, who has promised to fix the interview for him and referred him to the Scottish sahibs of the company, minutely details how Ranjit could look smarter for his interview. As he advises, "Smartness is the real thing," Ranjit sarcastically asks, "Only looking smart will do. You are saying no other qualification is necessary." Ranjit realizes that nothing else indeed matters. The primary criterion for securing the job is to *look* smart. Looking good is an essential part of producing that perfunctory façade that stands for a world where the human subject, the laborer, is in the process of becoming absolutely alienated, fragmented, separated and constituted within a sign-system that he himself does not always comprehend.

This elusive comprehension on Ranjit's part comes at the end of the film. Unable to get hold of a suit, he reaches for the interview in his native attire, kurta and dhoti, but he does not get the job. And that becomes the point of absolute undoing for him. As he realizes the facile obsession of the entire process, he understands his bourgeois proclivity. He meets someone who claims to be a spectator who has been following him since morning. The camera-eye and the eye of the spectator-in-the-film are equated. On being almost chased and interrogated, looking at the camera, Ranjit, visibly perplexed, acknowledges his blindness and

subsequent insight into the situation. Now alone, in a dark backdrop, Ranjit looks

at the lit shop-window with a suit-clad mannequin. This is a society that treats the

human body as a mannequin, stripping it of its human qualities and transforming

it into an inanimate thing.[141] All of a sudden, in Ranjit's vision, the mannequin

becomes animate and starts moving; and, Ranjit, in a trance, starts imitating its

movement. This metamorphosis of the human into the mannequin and vice versa

is what Marx understood as conversion of things into persons and persons into

things. The deliberate polemics of this scene, added almost as an adventitious

parenthesis, re-psychologizes the entire narrative on both social and personal

levels. The hapless jobseeker, after a day-long process of de-corporealization,

loses his subject position. In a world of shifting subject-effect, the laborer is

muted into a simply well-dressed mannequin. The final moment of decision

comes as Ranjit vocally protests against the neo-colonial paradigm. The

revolution which has been coming onto screen sporadically, and which had been

separate from the narrative of Ranjit's interview, now converges with the rising

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[141] Discussing the sartorial convention of eighteenth-century cosmopolitan centers like London and Paris, Richard Sennett (1992) points out how the human body was often treated as an inanimate mannequin to exhibit costumes: "The body was treated as mannequin; speech was treated as a sign rather than a symbol. By the first principle people visualized clothes as matters of contrivance, decoration, and convention, with the body serving as a mannequin rather than as an expressive, living creature" (64-65). Sennett's observation about the transformation of the streets of European metropolis points out the increasing theatricalization of public life during the emergence of commodity culture which made it necessary to exhibit one's social status in public. Ranjit's transformation into a mannequin conveys a transformation which necessitates a similar one-dimensional display of human beings who are forced be amnesiac about their role as historically determined subjects.

voice of the protagonist. The sudden return of the falling statue of the opening scene indicates that this is the moment: the moment of freedom, the moment of decolonizing the mind. We do not know if Ranjit would join the revolution; but it becomes clear that he has finally come to see beyond the mystical veil that has been covering the time.

De-Commodifying Cinema: The Actor Who Is Not an Actor

While the narrative acts as a protest against the commoditization of a worker, stylistically too, the film tries to de-commoditize its own medium. If we try to locate currents and crosscurrents of commoditization and fetishism in this film, we have to pay critical attention to the scene where Ranjit is going to his present workplace before his interview. This is the first time we see him negotiating the streets of the city. As he boards a tram, the camera focuses on his co-passenger. All of a sudden the spectator is surprised to see a female co-passenger of Ranjit's, for she is reading a film magazine that has Ranjit's photograph in it. She casually flips through the magazine to pass the photograph before she becomes more attentive to the photograph once she notices Ranjit standing next to her. This is the perfect occasion to mention that the character in the film and the actor both share their name, Ranjit Mullick. In an article on *Interview*, Suranjan Ganguly

(2000) reads this "supremely Brechtian moment" as an example of auto-critique (61); through this deconstructive strategy, as Ganguly suggests, Sen creates a moment when performance is "foregrounded through deliberate overacting, exaggeration, inane repetition of dialogue and displays of nervous energy or hyper-activity" (63).[142] Although I do not disagree with Ganguly's reading, I think this move accomplishes more than rupturing the film's reality effect. If looked at from the broader ideological position of the film, this scene can purportedly be seen as an attempt at erasing the commodity status of cinema and the actor.

Cinema, often considered a fetishized product, an avenue of escape from banal, struggle-striven, rigorous quotidian life,[143] is believed to provide its spectators a way of positioning themselves outside the world they live in. Cinema, as a cultural product, manages to gloss over the possibility of search, loss and slippage of meaning, and keep its audience captivated and engrossed with its superficiality by maintaining its own fetish status. The spectacle created by the cinematic media is invested with a mystical power to make its audience forget

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[142] In the same article, Ganguly reads such moments from both *Interview* and *Akaler Sandhane* to argue that their location within the Sen's oeuvre of political films makes the spectator reconstitute their position in relation to the screen (70).

[143] It is in this fetish of the commodity, in this phantasmagorical potential, Benjamin identifies the source of capitalism's undoing. Adorno, taking a stricter anti-commodity position, critiques Benjamin's theory of film in his essay by arguing that Benjamin ignores a series of fetishistic tendencies constituted inherently within the medium of film. See, Adorno. "Transparencies on Film."

that it is not real. Yet this forgetting, as Christian Metz suggests, is a not without

its dubious limits (Metz 72).[144] Laura Mulvey argues that the more popular,

commercial form of cinema, specifically the Hollywood film, thrives on a

strategic erasure of the mechanism of its production process. She clarifies, "The

Hollywood film, as a commodity, also emerged into the market place as a self-

generated object of fascination, erasing, even during the high days of genre, stars

and the studio system, any easily identifiable directorial signature" (Mulvey 13).

As far as commoditization of cinema is concerned, Mulvey makes a distinction

between the popular Hollywood cinema and the realist cinema. Unlike glitzy

Hollywood cinema, she suggests, the realist cinema cannot be characterized by "a

star system, generic forms of entertainment, eroticized spectacle … and the

fragility of illusion" (9), although such a realist mode of representation is not

without its specific set of problems.[145] The most prevalent and primordial

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[144] In a remarkable move Metz points out three levels of fictionalization in cinema. First, the diegetic events (whatever happens on screen) are fiction; second, everyone believe them to be really happening; third, there is a general disavowal of the fact that "somewhere in oneself one believes they are genuinely true" (72). This tripartite structure of fictionalization helps cinema to maintain itself as the commodity-on-display and commodity-to-be-consumed. The third level of fiction is particularly interesting and intriguing in the context of the New Wave cinema of India. Often there is a dismissal of make-believe world of popular cinema in the intellectual circle as opposed to the more 'realistic' New Wave films. This binary, I believe, carries the putative admission that the events shown in these films carry traces of real events.

[145] Mulvey argues that the actual ability of realist cinema to bridge the schism between representation and reality it strives to depict falls victim to a genuine concern over its inability and denial of acknowledging the fact that whatever it shows too is not real (Mulvey 9-10).

technique behind the projection of cinema as an object of fetish is to deny its materiality. This is executed by erasing, much like any other fetishized commodity in the era of capitalism, the history of production hidden behind its two-dimensional screen. In this process, cinema establishes an economy of desire that not only fetishizes the cinema itself but also whatever is projected on the screen: that includes the actor, the material object etc.

To go back to *Interview*, it can be argued in the context of the scene I started describing that Sen purposefully tries to remove the mystifying veil that covers cinema. As the woman recognizes Ranjit from the magazine, the actor starts talking to the camera, and discloses that he is not an actor after all. He is just a regular person.[146] All of a sudden the distance between the spectator and the character, created by the camera, falls apart through a Brechtian "alienation effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*).[147] The regular man continues: he was approached

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[146] This was easier to achieve as *Interview* was Ranjit Mullick's first film. He went on to become one of most prominent actors in the commercial and parallel Bengali film industry. He became a popular romantic hero in the 1970s and featured in memorable box-office successes like *Mouchak*, *Devi Chaudharani*, *Raag Anuraag*, *Sayang Siddha*. Apart from his success in the commercial films, he acted in critically acclaimed roles in a number of films by Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray. It should be mentioned though that in real life Ranjit Mullick, unlike the character in the film, does not come from a middle-class background. He actually belongs to one of the most famous landed, aristocratic families of Calcutta.

[147] Bertolt Brecht in his famous essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" reads the technique of talking to the audience deployed by Chinese theatre as a way of bringing down the invisible "fourth wall" between the actor and the audience. The Chinese traditional actor, Brecht suggests, "expresses his awareness of being watched" (95). This, for Brecht, not only disrupts the illusory effect of the European stage, but also provides

by Mrinal Sen, the film director, as the director wanted to follow him on a day of his regular life. Sen has decided to follow him on this dramatic day, as this would make a more fascinating subject for his film. Ranjit goes on to disclose that the persons we have already seen as his mother and sister are actually actors. At this point the camera moves around to capture the presence of the film camera, the actual cameraman (K.K. Mahajan), and other members of the crew. Such breaking of the spectator-actor dualism does not happen again in the film, apart from the last scene. The cameraman holding onto the inside wall of the tram and trying to capture the scene, the crew members mixed with other actors (or, actual people), the actor's blatant disclosure that Sen wanted to record this particular day to make his film more interesting familiarizes the spectator with all the gestures, motives and deviances hidden behind the movie camera. The spectator becomes conspicuously aware of the presence of labor behind the production of what they behold on screen, and immediately identifies with the young woman who appears overtly curious when she realizes the similarity between the photograph in the magazine and the person standing in front of her. She too is the audience, and vice versa. The same bodily position shared by the person in the magazine photograph and the three-dimensional tram-passenger, who is still two-dimensional for the film spectator, conflates three worlds – the filmic within the filmic within the

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the audience with the opportunity to identify "itself with the actor as being an observer" (95).

film. The representational ingenuity of this sequence lies in its identification of the conspiratorial strategies of film itself. Consciously eschewing the mystical cinematic, this sequence remarkably acknowledges cinema's ultimate identity as a material and produced object.

Simultaneously this scene de-fetishizes the figure of the actor. In cinema, the figure of the actor (whether male or female) is the most fetishized commodity both on- and off-screen. This commoditization occurs through the body of the woman actor being the eroticized object of the male gaze (see Mulvey 2009); this could also occur by transforming the actor into a supra-real figure that is adored, loved, worshipped and, often, stalked. This peculiar investment of desire in the figure of the actor obviously transforms the real-life actor into a prosthetic extension of the reel-life protagonist. This not only obfuscates the identity of the actor, but also initiates a flow of significance, meaning and desirability between the filmic and the real worlds. In the process the actor not only becomes a larger-than-life figure, but, at the same time, another text parallel to what we see on the screen. This process of textualization involves the transfer of collective fantasy that begins, often unaware, to believe in an unproblematic conflation between the two worlds.[148] It should be noted here that this transfer of meaning does not

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[148] I am particularly thinking of the ways big heroes and heroines from both Hollywood and Indian film industries are petrified into hagiographic icons. A lucid study of such a phenomenon in the Indian context can be found in Vijay Mishra's interesting essay on the Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan. Considering Bachchan as the first Indian hero, who managed to coin his individual and indigenous stylistics, devoid of imprints of any

always happen without the introduction of possible slippages. Sen himself plays

around with this in an amazing sequence of his film, *Akaler Sandhane*. In one

scene, a cycle-rickshaw advertises the screening of the film *The Guns of

Navarone* (1961), starring "the world's greatest beauty, Anthony Queen."[149]

Exploring the confusion over the Hollywood superstar's last name, this scene not

only exposes how the film industry seduces the audience by eroticizing women,

but also manages to excavate the possibility of slippages that the linguistic

signifier might acquire while traveling between the real and the reel worlds.[150]

Hollywood counterpart, Mishra discusses how some events in the actor's real life
symbolically and significantly parallel with events from his films. See, Vijay Mishra.
"The Actor as Parallel Text: Amitabh Bachchan." *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*.
New York: Routledge, 2001, 125-56.

[149] I am thankful to Bhaskar Sarkar's essay for bringing this scene to my attention. Sarkar
reads this as a reminder of the presence of imperial remnants in Indian society and as a
symbolic gesture towards local subversion of the same.

[150] Jack C. Ellis points out,

> The star is at once ordinary and extraordinary, available for desire and
> unattainable. This paradox is repeated and intensified in cinema by the
> regime of presence-yet-absence that is the filmic image. Further, the
> star's particular performance in a film is always more than the
> culmination of the star images in subsidiary circulation: it is a balancing
> act between fiction and cultism. (91)

The aura of cultism around the star figure is sustained by the economy of the film
industry; in the process, not only the actor but the character too remains fixed and frozen
in terms of their meanings. For example, names like Clint Eastwood, Marlon Brando,
Anthony Quinn connote certain fixed images associated with ruthlessness, toughness,
threatening sex appeal, etc. So is the case in Indian film industry. Amitabh Bachchan has
become truly memorialized as the angry young man on the Indian screen, although he has
played several other memorable roles. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Bengali film industry
too experienced and produced a hagiographic fixation of Uttam Kumar who still remains
the dreamy-eyed, romantic, melodramatic hero. There is a difference between the star
image (image of the actor off-screen) and the film performance (character on screen): the

The photograph of Ranjit in the film magazine is the star image. The young

woman is instantaneously seduced by it; at the same time, the actual person

immediately subverts the cultism of that image. At this moment, she is looking at

the real person who is not an actor. We are looking at the actor who is playing a

character who is claiming not to be an actor. This de-commoditization of cinema

and de-fetishizing of the actor is in accord with the larger political message of the

film.

I would like to conclude by bringing different threads in the film and in

this chapter in an argumentative conclusion. The seemingly different sections—

one dealing with the public statues and private objects, the one polemically

opposing the neo-colonial commoditization of the laborer, and the last one dealing

with the cinema's self-reflexive gestures—lend legitimacy to the political

message of the film. As I mentioned earlier, the film ends with the bourgeois

subject's arrival at the realization of the need for a revolution – a revolution that

would fulfill the "commitment to the abolition of commodity production" and

"the dream of direct and unmediated access to the 'real'" (Mbembe 20). The

film's active subversion of the commodity system, both in its statist and capitalist

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first one, by being both in real and reel lives, conveys a lack that can only be fulfilled by
the second one. The star-image presents the promise of completion through the medium
of cinema (see Ellis 93). For a study of such phenomena in the Hollywood industry, see,
Richard Dyer. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
Discussing mainly Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland, Dyer suggests,
"star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual" (3).

forms, tries to reinstitute the subjective sovereignty of the postcolonial subject and

to reach historical resolution of a neo-colonial paradox.

Chapter 4

Postcolonial Flanerie, Urban Modernity and the Gaze of Revolution in Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi*

In his "Face Hidden behind the Advertisements," famous Bengali Marxist poet Shankho Ghosh wrote,

> I am standing alone,
>
> For you at the corner
>
> Think I will show my face to you
>
> But, the face gets covered with advertisements.
> One or two easy words
> Think I will say with my eyes
>
> But the eyes glitter in the glare
>
> Of ads and bursting colors
> …
> The intimate glances with you
> Are sold off.
>
> Everything private
>
> Has become neon-lit commodities (Ghosh 49; my translation)

In this poem, which has attained a canonical status within the oeuvre of modern Bengali literature, the intimate intertwining of the emerging culture of consumption and urban existence, the desperate alienation of a lover, the commoditization of human relationships and emotion – all these symptoms of

urban anxiety bear a resemblance to the atmosphere we encounter in canonized

modernist texts. Painstakingly lonely amidst the barrage of spectacles of

consumption—emblems of the modern capitalist city—the poet loses his language

that can convey his love. The postcolonial subject experiences Marxist alienation

with the onslaught of the commodity culture in this "society of spectacle"—a

phrase famously coined by Guy Debord in his 1967 book *Society of Spectacle*.

Debord says aphoristically, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a

social relation among people, mediated by images" (7). The surge of spectacular

strategies of modern consumer culture, according to Debord, hides the human

relationships and human labor behind the facades constituted of images. But how

does one rescue the subject from the ambush of these images?

This chapter on Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* (*Siddhartha and the City*,

1970)[151], which is based on a novel by the same title by the famous Bengali poet

and novelist Sunil Gangopadhyay, presents an effort at understanding the way this

film represents urban modernity in the context of Calcutta. The previous three

chapters were on films that dealt directly with specific possessions and material

objects. Here I shall focus on the absence of commodities to argue that Ray

organizes the vision of a city which, also set against the backdrop of the Naxalite

revolution, represents an active effort at conjuring up an alternate subjectivity that

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[151] It should be noted that the literal translation of the Bengali word "pratidwandi" is adversary. The movie is referred to as "The Adversary" in several places including Ray's own interviews. But the subtitle on the original print of the film diverts from such faithful translation and gives the English title as "Siddhartha and the City."

is deeply modern and provocatively postcolonial.

Pratidwandi emerges as a narrative primarily through Siddhartha's strolling along the streets of Calcutta. The urban cartography of Calcutta is rendered visible through his periodic, and often aimless, perambulations on the streets. The postcolonial city, darkly different from cosmopolitan, modern, neon-lit[152] cities like Paris, Berlin, London, New York—represented the spatial axis of Western modernity—comes to life not through the display of "proffering commodities" but through political and economic uncertainties. The film, in spite of being a text of flanerie, overtly lacks a characteristic inherent within the logic of capitalist modernity: commodity. Instead of succumbing to the allure of commodities, Siddhartha's flanerie becomes an agent of protest against the regimen of capitalism. While Ghosh's poem subscribes to Debord's formulation in its representation of the modern cogito surrendered amidst a reified society where commodity culture exerts its pervasive power over human relations, Ray's film ensconces a radical approach to urban modernity that is not engendered by succumbing to the sensuous appeal of commodities, but by the elucidation of a political insurgence. The Calcutta of *Pratidwandi* is an exposé of the disjuncture between two worlds: the Calcutta that is increasingly under the control of a

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[152] The advent of electric light aided the urban transformation. The sudden appearance of well-lit streets, boulevards, and shop windows transformed the city exterior into comfortable and legible walking field for the flaneur (Buck-Morss "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore"). See, also, Anke Gleber's *The Art of Taking a Walk* (1999).

powerful few and the volatile cityscape that denies a generation what Lefebvre

calls the "right to the city."[153] Lefebvre's idea is important for understanding the

film. Conceptualizing a particular form of post-bourgeois philosophy, Lefebvre

argues that the oeuvre of the heterogeneous city, which should remain a space of

participatory cohabitation of different classes, communities and groups, in

modern times, has been replaced by the capitalist city – "a bureaucratic society of

controlled consumption" [the title of the second chapter of Lefebvre's *Everyday*

Life in the Modern World (2002)]. The flaneurdom of Siddhartha is an effort to

regain that sovereign right to the city. This brings us to the next part of my

argument. The capitalist city, a reified space itself, comes to life through an act of

fetishization. The space itself becomes a commodity through what Lefebvre

identifies as the "double character of the capitalist city: place of consumption and

consumption of place" ("Right to the City" 170). In *Pratidwandi* too, there is a

fetishization of the city, although fetishism, here, needs to be displaced from its

Marxist connection with commodity. The fetishization of Calcutta—unlike that of

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[153] To mark the 100th anniversary of Marx's Capital, Henry Lefebvre wrote his short yet much-celebrated book *Le Droit à la ville* ("The Right to the City"). Later on almost the entire book was incorporated in the English version of Lefebvre's *Writings on Cities* (1996). Although Lefebvre had been planning the book since 1947, the actual publication of this work became even more significant as it was followed by the student and worker uprising of May 1968. Here it should be noted that Lefebvre was working in close connection with Debord: echoing the ideas of Lefebvre, Debord argues that "the proletarian revolution is that critique of human geography whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation not just of their labor, but of their total history" (126).

other grand capitals of modernity—is adduced not through a consumption of the surface appearances of commodity-laden shopping arcades and expansive boulevards, but by declaring a more ontological connection between the city and the citizen.

Modernity of Revolution: the City under Siege

As a spatial location and category the city-scape remains witness to the first footprints of the transformation ushered in by capitalist modernity. Western modernity – in its industrial form – brought in a maelstrom of change in the nineteenth century. This change found its closest and, probably, most dedicated accomplice in the form of commodities. The arrival of a commodity-oriented consciousness transformed the façades of colonial capitals like Paris and London into a conglomerated canvas that would display an endless tableaux of mystical commodities that not only kept the city-dweller enticed without a palpable consummation, but also facilitated the metamorphosis of the city itself—a metamorphosis that contained the Janus-faced promise of modernity for its dwellers—by subjecting it to the capitalist relations of power (Hetherington 28) and by transforming the city into a ceaseless parade of spectacles (Clark 9).[154]

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[154] Timothy J. Clark's ideas as expressed in his *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1984), a remarkable work on the representation of post-Haussmannization Paris, are immensely influenced by Guy Debord's theories about the capitalist society.

Western cities, along with their open spaces, their cafes and clubs, their theatres and cinema-halls, their boulevards and alleys, emerged to emblematize the performing stage of capitalist modernity. At the same time, because of the rapid growth of industrialization, they increasingly became the sole destination for millions who were ready to travel to any length or do anything for securing the dream of a better life for themselves. Such a seemingly endless migration soon overshadowed the promise of the Industrial Revolution and transformed the cities literally into over-congested, precarious nightmares. The beleaguered demographic rupture caused by "[the] colossal centralization, this heaping together of two and a half millions of human beings at one point" (Engels 32) created a sense of "brutal indifference," "unfeeling isolation," even if a large number of individuals "are crowded together within a limited space" (32).[155] This was accompanied by the sudden surge in the visibility of newer and newer commodities in the Western metropolis to produce a puzzlingly paradoxical reaction to urban modernity. The urban space, both utopian and dystopian at the same time, became a cataclysmic container of ceaseless fluctuations.

If modernity in European capitals is characterized by the tableaux of commodities, Calcutta's modernity is historically shaped by three ruptured

[155] Of these changes Paul Valery wrote, "The inhabitant of great urban centers reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation, the feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism" (Quoted in Benjamin *Charles Baudelaire* 131).

moments in the twentieth century. The Naxalite movement, which plays the

backdrop of *Pratidwandi* is the culminating point of a series of urban upheavals.

First, Calcutta saw an unprecedented in-flow of migrants with the outbreak of the

Famine of 1943.[156] The city witnessed the establishment of food kitchens and

recovery camps. In spite of this, many of homeless, hapless people started dying

on the streets of Calcutta.[157] As the streets became filled with destitute people,

around eleven thousand people were dying every week. The fabric of urban life—

the milieu of everyday—was affected by the sudden growth in population, and

subsequent rise in unemployment and poverty.[158] The deteriorating condition of

the urban middle-class as the after-effect of the Famine of 1943 and the Second

World War is poignantly shown through the travails of a job-seeking young man

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[156] For a historical analysis of the Famine of 1943, see, Richard Stevenson. *Bengal Tiger and British Lion: An Account of the Bengal Famine of 1943*. Iuniverse, 2005; Paul Robert Greenough. *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944*. London: Oxford University Press, 1982. For an analysis of the Famine from the point of view of political economy, see also, Amartya K. Sen. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981. Though the official Famine Inquiry Commission put the estimate at 1.5 million, during this disaster, which was allegedly a result of callousness of the colonial administration, three to five million people died of starvation and epidemic in the Bengal countryside (Sen 52).

[157] Some scholars have argued that though the streets of Calcutta became the virtual dying ground for thousands of people fleeing the villages, the middle-class inhabitants of the city did not suffer much. For most of them, the supply of food was secured. For them, the plight of hungry villagers became somewhat of a spectacle.

[158] A classic depiction of this event took place in an IPTA production, *Nabanna*. Written by renowned IPTA member Bijon Bhattacharya, this play shows the miserable condition that the uprooted people from Bengal villages were undergoing in the urban milieu. For a detailed discussion of *Nabanna* and its historical context, see, Malini Bhattacharya,. "The IPTA in Bengal." *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 2 (January-March 1983): 5-22.

in Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik* (*The Citizen*, 1958).[159] The impact of the famine on

the rural populace is narrativized in Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Ashani*

Sanket (*Distant Thunder*), which was made into an award-winning film by Ray in

1973.[160] A similar migration again happened around the Partition of the Indian

subcontinent. The migration of uprooted Hindu refugees from the eastern part of

the Bengali province into Calcutta and its outskirts transformed the structure, both

demographic and psychological, of the city forever. The division of the country,

the unprecedented bloodshed caused by communal violence, and the forced

migration of millions caused havoc for Bengal and Calcutta.[161]

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[159] Following the life of a young man, Ramu, this film captures the shattering of aspirations of the urban middle-class. The film evocatively opens with an ode to the unknown citizen of contemporary Calcutta:
"I know him, I have seen him./ Here stands the metropolis/ Where the river silently wends its way beneath iron fetters/ while alongside flow human tears and laughter/ where the toil of one more day has ended/ The sun sets over millions of toil-tired souls/ Beneath the wire crisscrossed sky/ I saw him/ Midst the teeming millions, the lone citizen."
Following the gradual and imminent fall of a middle-class family from rural Bengal, this film captures its journey from a reasonable affluence to a state of abject poverty. First uprooted from their "big house," they come to a dingy, claustrophobic quarter in the city; and finally, they are forced to move to a slum.

[160] *Ashani Sanket* depicts the disastrous impact of the Second World War on the rural life of Bengal. Representing the plight of the Bengal villagers against the backdrop of the war and the famine, the novel exposes the suffering of helpless villagers in spite of the lack of any kind of historical agency or participation in the actual process. The same theme is dealt with much stronger political overtone in Mrinal Sen's *Matira Manasha* (*Two Brothers* 1966). This same issue has been subject of a number of plays by the Indian People's Theatre Association. The most prominent example is *Nabanna* (New Crop) by Bijan Bhattacharya. Director Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's famous Hindi film *Dharti ke Lal* (Children of the Earth, 1946) too is set against the backdrop of the Famine

[161] Following the Partition, with the influx of millions of refugees from East Bengal, the

Calcutta experienced the next crucial juncture in its modern history around

the end of the 1960s. In the wake of the Naxalite movement, the urban milieu of

Calcutta faced an unprecedented period of unrest. I have briefly discussed the

history and origin of the Naxalite movement in the previous chapter. Here I would

like to recapitulate some facts about the movement's impact on the city.[162] Until

1970 Calcutta remained out of the reach of violence that had broken out between

peasant insurgents and the police. While rural Bengal became the locale of

political upheaval and violent encounters, Calcutta led a peaceful routine life.

Sumanta Banerjee narrates the state of some parts of Calcutta during those days,

> In the fashionable areas of Park Street and Chowringhee, gathered all the
>
> gaiety and frivolity of the city. Swanky business executives and thriving

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city of Calcutta and the state of West Bengal in independent India underwent a massive demographic change. In a span of only three years, i.e. 1947 to 1949, Calcutta had to accommodate an additional population of 1.5 million. Some of them had pre-Partition ties with West Bengal, but a large number were rendered homeless. Many of them sought refuge in refugee colonies mushrooming in and around the city. Officially, 23% of the odd 1.2 million refugees, supposed to have migrated to West Bengal in 1950, went to refugee camps. However, the unofficial figure was much more alarming to fit in the camps and soon many deficiencies like sub-standard sanitary conditions, overcrowding, insufficient rations and water supply, fatal diseases, catapulting death rate and above all, corrupted camp personnel exacerbated the situation. By the end of 1950, approximately 150 squatter colonies housed about 30,000 families on 2400 acres of land.

[162] Both my parents come from families with strong, deep-rooted Naxalite background. Though I was not even born during the first phase of the insurgence and was two years old during the second phase, I grew up with stories, anecdotes and fragmented memories of those days. The stories of young men being killed on the streets of Calcutta, of violent fighting between the police and the revolutionaries, of petrified life in the alleys of the city formed the indelible fiction of my growing up years. As the revolution becomes temporally distant, some of those stories have stopped being told and re-told these days.

journalists, film stars and art critics, smugglers and touts, chic society dames and jet-set teenagers thronged the bars and discotheques. All mention of the rural uprising in these crowds was considered distinctly in bad taste, although the term 'Naxalite' had assumed an aura of the exotic and was being used to dramatize all sorts of sensationalism in these circles – ranging from good-natured Bohemianism to hippy-style pot sessions. (172)

The citizens of Calcutta, at that time, continued to receive information about the uprising through newspaper reports; but the condition did not remain so distant and placid for long. Very soon a large number of urban youth plunged right into the middle of the action. Motivated by the calls of leaders like Charu Mazumdar and Saroj Dutta, students, mainly from elite institutions such as Presidency College, Calcutta University and Calcutta Medical College, joined the movement with unprecedented gusto and enthusiasm. This was confronted with equal rigor by the government. As Calcutta became a regular witness to incessant confrontations between the revolutionaries, the police and the military, supporters and of the Ommunist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) were massacred. Official sources themselves acknowledged that between March 1970 and August 1971, in Calcutta and its suburbs 1783 CPI-ML supporters and members were killed. This figure does not include the number of deaths in police custody. Around this time the nervous scene of Calcutta was filled with military forces,

police, hoodlums, police informers, professional assassins and men "whose hips bulged with hidden revolvers and daggers" (Banerjee 207), and streets of Calcutta "were littered with bodies of men riddled with bullets" (207). This city—under the grip of a raging revolution—forced Satyajit Ray to pay attention to the immediate political scenario.

In contrast to Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and many other filmmakers who worked in close alliance with the leftist movement, Ray never openly and overtly declared any political affinity or affiliation. The same can be said of his films too. Ray's approach to his subject and his protagonist is more ambiguous and subtle. He started dealing with the city from the second film of his Apu trilogy. In *Aparajito* (*The Unvanquished*, 1956), his Apu begins the second phase of his life's journey by leaving the village and reaching the city. Apu's journey ends on a different note in the third film of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar* (*The World of Apu*, 1959). The world of Apu, ironically, comes to a crumbling end with his wife's death, and Apu leaves the city to take up a job in a small town. But Ray's later films are very different portrayals of the city-dweller. The political ideology of his films is more oblique and esoteric. If the Apu trilogy traces the young man's journey from rural Bengal to the city, his latter films narrativize the young citizen's dilemmas and travails within the political contemporaneity of the time. In *Apur Sansar*, Apu leaves the city to take up a job in a non-urban location to escape the locale that contains the memories of his deceased wife. But in films

such as *Mahanagar* (*The Big City/ The Metropolis*, 1963), *Aranyer Dinratri*

(*Days and Nights in Forest*, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*, 1971),

Pratidwandi (*Siddhartha and the City*, 1970) and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*,

1975), the protagonists remain perpetual city-dwellers.

    As Ray is often considered a product of the legacy of the nineteenth-

century Bengali renaissance, critics have tried to find traces of Bengali *bhadralok*

elitism in his artistic approach. One of the early criticisms was levelled by

renowned film-scholar and Ray's close friend Chidananda Dasgupta:

> The world and mind he projects are basically those of the Bengali
>
> renaissance which started up in the 19th century…. The Calcutta of the
>
> burning trams, the communal riots, refugees, unemployment, rising prices
>
> and food shortages does not exist in Ray's films. Although he lives in the
>
> city, there is no correspondence between him and the 'poetry of anguish'
>
> which has dominated Bengali literature for the last ten years. ("Ray and
>
> Tagore" 31)[163]

The accusation that Ray as an artist was detached from his times certainly cannot

be directed against his "Calcutta films." One could argue that Ray had started

showing an increasing interest in the city since his film *Mahanagar* (*The Big City/*

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[163] Pointing out Ray's increasing alienation from the burning days of Naxalite uprising, an eminent leftist critic wrote:

> Thousands like myself who once adored the humanist Ray, today cannot find him the same great creator of *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* … getting alienated day by day from the people and their problems, their struggles for survival—which are becoming harsher and acute. (Chattopadhyay 1975)

The Metropolis, 1963). Based on a novel by a renowned socialist writer,

Narendranath Mitra, this film explores the ruptures in the familial structure in

Calcutta in the wake of a new social order. As her husband Subrata's paltry salary

fails to meet all the needs of the family, Arati, played by Madhabi Mukherjee,

takes up a job as a saleswoman with her husband's whole-hearted support but

much against the wishes of her parents-in-law. Soon Subrata loses his job and

Arati's income becomes indispensable for the family's survival; although Arati's

swift and gradual success in her job makes him increasingly jealous, Subrata

cannot say anything. The film subsequently chronicles Arati's arrival as a

modern, working woman as she negotiates the public spaces of Calcutta. In spite

of her professional success and her new-found economic importance within her

family, Arati does not lose hold of her ideology and stands up against her boss's

unfair behaviour with her Anglo-Indian co-worker. *Mahanagar* captures the

emergence of the postcolonial woman, "who awakens to the possibility of

determining the course of her own life" (Dasgupta, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*

78) amidst the emergence of a new urban modernity in India. The film ends with

her refusal to bow down in front of her boss and her subsequent firing from the

job. The jobless couple comes down to the streets—with large office buildings

towering over them; the young citizens declare their disavowal of the mercantile

hierarchy and convince themselves that at least one of them would certainly find a

job in such a big city before they merge with the amorphous crowd. Although

Mahanagar is the first Ray movie to be entirely set in Calcutta, there is no overt effort at connecting the narrative to any larger social event. However, the Partition (the family shown is an uprooted one from East Bengal), the breaking down of the national economy, and the haunting presence of Bengali nationalist parochialism are issues that find only oblique references in the film. Such oblique engagement with the contemporary political situation, however, changes with *Pratidwandi*, which represents a preoccupation with Calcutta's unforeseen turbulence and violence. When asked if his films had acquired a deeper political awareness, Ray himself was to admit in one of his interviews that it was a concern he could no longer ignore:

> Possibly, but politics has also come increasingly to the surface in the last three or four years. You feel it every moment of the day in Calcutta: not just the bombs and the explosions, but meeting people and walking the streets with posters on the walls. (Cardullo 54)[164]

Pratidwandi and *Interview*, made around the same time,[165] share the city that was going through an unforeseen turbulence and violence, as their backdrop. Besides these two films, there are many others (both from commercial and

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[164] He goes on, in the same answer, to express his disappointment with and disillusionment over the impermanence of ideology in Indian politics. He admits that he has lost faith in left-wing politics. See Christian Brad Thomsen. "Ray's New Trilogy." Ed. Bert Cardullo. *Satyajit Ray Interviews*. University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

[165] Actually the interview scenes, the last scene of *Interview* and the first scene of *Pratidwandi*, were shot in a span of one week in the same boardroom in Calcutta.

parallel Bengali cinema) that represent the city not only as a spatial setting but as almost anthropomorphized entity. Ray's own *Mahanagar*, *Seemabaddha*, *Jana Aranya*, Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik*, *Subarnarekha*,[166] *Bari Theke Paliye* (*The Runaway*, 1959), Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta '71*, Pinaki Bhushan Mukherjee's *Chowringhee* (1968), Nemai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul* (*The Uprooted*, 1950)[167] are a few of the more prominent examples. While a film like *Nagarik* is a futile effort at fleeing the claustrophobic life of the city, *Calcutta '71* and *Subarnarekha* envisage the city as a space of cultural decadence, and *Chowringhee* dwells on the fleeting and uncertain consumerism in a city hotel, *Pratidwandi* is a ceaseless narrative of fetish for the same city, Calcutta.

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[166] In the last scene of *Subarnarekha* inebriated Ishwar and Haraprasad, both Hindu refugees from East Bengal, travel through the nocturnal streets of Calcutta and reflect on the fleeting commercialism of city life. After immersing themselves in enjoying "bibhatsa maja" (grotesque fun) at a cabaret bar, the two renegades move along the blurring streets in a taxi. They rattle on: "Haven't seen the Atom Bomb…. Never, haven't seen the War; haven't seen the Famine; haven't seen the riots; haven't seen the Partition…." This symbolically charged noirish scene represents Calcutta as a phantasmagoric space that remains evasive to the gravity of historical predicament. Through a montage-like juxtaposition of visual and aural elements—the Dionysian atmosphere in the bar, the verse from the *Upanishad*, music from Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, the fluid neon lights of the city—this scene ultimately endorses the idea of the city space as an unsettling mixture of orgiastic fun, moral degeneration and blatant commercialism.

[167] For a reading of *Chhinnamul* as a city film in the context of post-Partition migration of millions to Calcutta, see, Moinak Biswas. "The City and the Real: *Chhinnamul* and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s." *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*.

Pratidwandi as a Flaneur Text

David Harvey argues that to represent the city as a sentient being runs the twofold

danger of anthropomorphizing it and fetishizing it (Harvey 54). In interpreting

Balzac's writings about Paris, Harvey points out that the inhabitants of the city

imagine and re-imagine their relationships, interactions, encounters and social

values according to the sentiments of their city. In an essentially capitalist system,

the city is transformed into a fetish object by being the container of the fleeting

figments of the commodity market. With its arcades, shop windows, and more

recently, department stores, the city articulates the promise of commodity-

oriented modernity. The act of fetishizing a capitalist city is ontologically

performed through the act of establishing a visual investment in the spectacles of

the city. Permeated through the material world of commodities that bear the sign

of the capitalist system of production and exchange, this fetish becomes legible

through the idea of phantasmagoria. Denial of delving beneath the surface, tactile

rejection of the psychological depth of human relationship and desire for

replacing human relationship with the abstract logic of consumption – all these

are striking elements of such capitalist fetishism. This particular aspect of

capitalism, prevalent in the Baudelairean vision of Parisian modernity, is the

conceptual opposite of what Marshall Berman terms, analyzing Dostoevsky's

writings on St. Petersburg, as the "modernism of underdevelopment" experienced

and inhabited by "the Little Man" and "the Underground Man." There is a discernible similarity between the modernism of Russia, "an archetype of the emerging twentieth-century Third World" (Berman 175), as "the most jagged, halting, blatantly abortive or weirdly distorted" (175), and that of Ray's Calcutta. While the modernity of Calcutta cannot be sweepingly understood through the cultural relativist act of comparing it with any Russian city, the anxiety, the unrest, the paradox, and the uncertainty that fills *Pratidwandi*'s narrative, is symptomatic of a similar modernism of underdevelopment, which "is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts" (232). Siddhartha, Ray's "little man," suffering from the same "inability to single-handedly make history," whips himself into "frenzies of self-loathing, and preserves itself only through vast reserves of self-irony" and burns with "desperate incandescence" that "[w]estern modernism …can rarely hope to match" (232).

Discussing Ray's city films, Supriya Chaudhuri comments, on an autobiographical and anecdotal note,

> *Pratidwandi* and *Jana Aranya* in particular are driven by the logic of the street, absorbing or replicating the physical movements of their protagonists as they walk, take public transport, enter and re-enter public buildings in search of a livelihood. And thirty years on from Ray's Calcutta of the seventies, we are unsure as to whether his films point us

towards a having-been-there of objects and events, or being-there of

imagination and memory. The films are still painful, like memory-traces

of a trauma. As we watch them, we re-inhabit a world we hoped was lost;

the world of the urban unemployed, the job-seeker, the interviewee, the

radical student, the vulnerable young woman, the defeated father, the

cynical friend. (257-58)

Ray's Siddhartha was walking the streets of Calcutta around the same time when

the famous British traveler Geoffrey Moorhouse was describing the city as "a

mighty terrible and frightening place" (20). If they are looking at the same city at

the same time, and we acknowledge the ineluctable facts of history, how do we

comprehend Siddhartha's relationship with his city and his stubborn refusal to

leave this "frightening place"? A modern urban subject, Siddhartha demonstrates

from the beginning an unflinching attachment with Calcutta. His consistent

reluctance to leave Calcutta is not determined by the phantasmagoric lure of a

capitalist city. In fact, Siddhartha's Calcutta, time and again, visually subscribes

to the description of Moorhouse and the recollection of Chaudhuri. To understand

this uncanny affection for the dark degenerate city, we need to see Siddhartha's

city as a fetishized space, but not in the sense of how critics describe experiences

in the European capitals of modernity.

Discussing the representation of the city in Indian films of the 1950s,

Ashis Nandy concludes, "Few seem to love the city in its own terms in India,

even among those who would prefer to lose their identity among its anonymous

masses and seem eager to extol that loss" (Nandy, *Ambiguous Journey to the City*

28). Indian cinema maintains a ubiquitous relationship with the city. "An

ambiguous journey," to borrow the phrase from Nandy, from the village to the

city, a recurring theme/motif in Indian films since the mid-1920s, was generally

represented as a ruptured experience. It is a break from the purer, traditional mode

of existence to the appealing yet morally precarious zone of modernity.[168] This

peculiar and uncertain reception and representation of city space in cinema bears

an immediate and undeniable connection with the image of the city as a

westernized, morally degenerating, ruthless space.[169] Discussing a famous song

from a popular Hindi film *C.I.D.* (1956),[170] Sudipta Kaviraj argues that the city is

aesthetically imagined and imaginatively aestheticized by popular culture and

lyrical literatures. Kaviraj argues that this song, like many of its counterparts,

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[168] See, Ashis Nandy. *An Ambiguous Journey to the City*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, 1-71. In this same context, see the scene I describe from *Subarnarekha* in Note 167 of this chapter.

[169] To understand how the city was imagined and projected in cinema as a possible source of all of India's problems and how it is received as the unreal India, as opposed to the rural real India, see, Manishita Dass. "Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity and Nation in India." Diss. Stanford University, 2004.

[170] The song goes like this, "Yeh hai Bombay meri jaan/ Ay dil hai mushkil jina yahan/ Zara hatke zara bachke yeh hai Bombay meri jaan./ Kahin building kahin tramen kahin mototr kahin mill/ Milta hai yahan sabkuch ik milta nahi dil." (This is Bombay my love/ My heart, it is difficult to live in this place/ Move aside, watch out, this is Bombay, my love./ Buildings, trams, motors and mills/ Everything is here but a human heart.). The song goes on to catalogue the various other predicaments of the city life.

follows, in a specifically Marxist sense, a "Feuerbachian general humanism" that

craves to locate a general humanist sympathy within the soulless apathy of urban

existence (Kaviraj 71). The odd placement of the city on the Indian screen is

fraught with a deterministic approach that psychologizes the space itself. [171]

Instead of representing the city as a neutral, objective locale, these renditions

often fill the streets and alleys of the city with anxiety, tentativeness and

uncertainty fraught with questions of provincial and often national identity.

Madhava Prasad argues that the narratives of these films are stitched together with

thematic obsessions with crime, poverty, urban squalor and alienation (Prasad

89). At the same time, the politics and aesthetics of representing the city in Indian

cinema often face the dilemma of an uneasy negotiation between tradition and

modernity. Almost as a generic pattern, the hero, the primary target of moral

degeneration in the urban milieu, is caught within an external and internal battle

to redeem himself, often by finding the invincible locus of morality and ethics in a

woman. This journey remains a prominent theme of Indian films even in the

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[171] In her recent book on city in Bombay cinema, Ranjani Mazumdar argues that the cinematic city of Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay) provides the spatial locale for the development of "tragedy and myth" through the representation of "angry man" and "psychotic" heroes in the Hindi films of 1970s and 1990s respectively (xxxvi). Mazumdar's book, *Bombay Cinema: an Archive of the City* (2007), is the first comprehensive study of the representation of the city in Hindi films. Reading a set of films from Bombay film industry, she studies the development of various genealogical discourses in Bombay films in the backdrop of the metropolis.

1990s.[172]

Pratidwandi opens, as the titles roll, with a long shot of the protagonist on a public bus. Though this particular sequence does not come immediately at the beginning of the novel, Ray opens his film with Siddhartha trying to get to his destination. The over-crowded bus, the ticket-collector's repeated nagging for the fare, along with the city noise create a suffocating, claustrophobic angst. The hero of the novel does not buy the ticket and ends his journey with a sharp exchange of expletives with the ticket collector, but the film shows him forcefully shoving his hands in his pocket to pay for the ride. Immediately after comes another interpolation. Siddhartha's destination is a job interview. Following a few anxious moments in a claustrophobic waiting room with a number of co-interviewees, he faces the interview panel. The ensuing sequence contains the interpretive core of the film. Ray's hero faces a panel of officious interviewers:

> Interviewer: what do you regard as the most outstanding and significant event of the last decade?
>
> Siddhartha: The … war in Vietnam, sir.
>
> Interviewer: More significant than the landing on the moon?
>
> Siddhartha: I think so.

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[172] Starting from the protagonist of social realist films of the 1950s like *Shree 420* and *Awara* till the hero of the romantic thriller *Satya* (1998; Dir. Ram Gopal Verma), a series of Indian films present a male character who goes spiraling down the dark alley of urban crimes like gambling, mafia and underworld and get simultaneously held back within the moral periphery by their lady-love.

Interviewer: Could you tell us why you think so?

Siddhartha: Because the moon landing …. You see. We … we … weren't entirely unprepared for the moon landing. We … we … we knew it had to come sometime. We knew about the space flight, the great advances in space technology … so we knew it had to happen. I'm not saying it wasn't a remarkable achievement, but it wasn't unpredictable. The fact that they did land on the moon …

Interviewer: Do you think the war in Vietnam was unpredictable?

Siddhartha: Not the war itself, but what it has revealed about the Vietnamese people; about their extraordinary power of resistance. Ordinary people. Peasants. And no one knew they had it in them. This isn't a matter of technology; it's just plain human courage. And it … takes your breath away.

Interviewer: Are you a communist?

Siddhartha: I … I don't think one has to be one in order to admire Vietnam, sir.

Interviewer: That doesn't answer my question. However, you may go now.[173]

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[173] It should be mentioned here that Vietnam received almost unanimous support from different political parties in India. It did not remain limited within the leftist parties. There were several rallies and meetings arranged just to express solidarity with Vietnam during the US-Vietnam war. Even streets in different Indian cities were named after Ho Chi Minh. One cannot ignore the conscious symbolic move to name the street on which

This segment, an interjection by Ray, exposes the conflict within Siddhartha: in one answer he dismisses one aspect of modernity, the universalizing, civilizational thrust of technological modernity, a teleological culmination of a gradual process (*stufengang*) – and recognizes another, that is the promise of a break and an abruptness of modernity, a rupture unexpected by the linear coherence and chronological causality of history.[174] While Siddhartha's tentative and somewhat stultifying answer uncovers the historical paradox within the conception of modernity, the expectation of the interviewers contains the reverberations of a monolithic and heuristic project of modernization. The ambiguous answer to their pointed question does not please the men on the panel, as they expect Siddhartha to acknowledge the unquestioned significance of the scientific progress in an almost culture-neutral manner; but what they hear is a tentative endorsement of a political event that in many ways undermined the idea of technological dominance. This reluctance to acknowledge the teleological absolutism of Western modernity[175] and the effort at commenting on the state of

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the United States Consulate General's office in Calcutta is housed as "Ho Chi Minh Sarani" ("Sarani" meaning street).

[174] David Harvey reads this promise of absolute rupture and "radical break" from history as one of the myths of modernity. He begins the introduction to his classic *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (2003) by arguing that this idea of radical break helps maintain modernity's assumed project of "creative destruction" (1).

[175] Several theorists of modernity—theorists like Weber, Habermas and Foucault— consider scientific rationalism, pragmatism, and instrumentalism as inherent to the narrative of modernity. Conceptually connected to the idea of "instrumental rationality"

global politics on Siddhartha's part sets the scope for delineating an alternative

modernity of the city by introducing the political overture of the narrative.

The first invitation to leave the city comes right after this futile first

interview, as Nareshda, the party activist who remains unseen to the camera, first

invites him to work for the party, and then, offers him the job of a medical

salesman outside Calcutta. Hesitantly, Siddhartha tells him that he has never

thought of going outside the city. Yet, the narrative is strewn with scenes of his

fond memories of a childhood trip outside Calcutta to Deoghar, a small town. In

the present city of unconsummated modernity, this trip brings memories of

happiness. Like many others of his generation who were trying to salvage

themselves from the turbulent memories of the 1950s and the 1960s, Siddhartha

does not find any pleasurable memory within the city-space. The chapter on his

recollection of that trip in the novel provides a scenic description of that small

town in vivid details. Tunu was scared of everything; "the same Tunu was making

hand-grenades these days" (62); "Sutapa still went around in a frock then" (62);

"Mother had looked absolutely different in those days" (63). "Looking back it

seemed to Siddhartha that the grass and leaves he had seen six years ago in

Deoghar were somehow more green" (63). In such recollections, Siddhartha is

neither wallowing in nostalgia for a lost tradition against the evils of modernity,

discussed in chapter 2, the supremacy of technology is acknowledged by accepting its
indispensible role in advancing the project of humanity's mastery and control over
nature.

nor engaging in a metaphysical desire to return to an agrarian and rural serenity. Rather, the memories of Deoghar days simply symbolize an escape from the burden of reality and a mnemonic device to deepen the painful existence in the city. The cheerfulness and exuberance that he associates with that holiday are reminders of a time when life was 'simpler' for him. But the juvenile enthusiasm and suppleness of Siddhartha, who is now contemptuous, powerless and non-committal, have already been replaced by a cynical dilemma and disconcerting disillusionment. The film shows how he would hold his brother Tunu's and sister Tapu's (Sutapa) hands to take them to the nearby hills. The novel tells us,

> He was sixteen then, just out of school, strong and robust. He was already beginning to consider himself much older and superior to his younger brother and sister. He had always been rather headstrong, even in childhood.
>
> […] But life was so gay and carefree during that holiday in Deoghar. There was no fight, no unhappiness of any sort. Early in the morning he would go for a walk, with Tapu and Tunu on either side. There were regular steps along the path which went to the top of Nandan Hill, but they climbed from rock to rock on the way up. They raced each other scarcely touching the sharp edges of the boulders. From the top they could see the checkered yellow and blue of the paddy fields, the trickling stream under the bridge, the railway line which looked like a toy track. At their back

was Digria Hill and in front the Trikut range spread like dark clouds. It

was a carefree life, where there was such joy in having the whole earth at

one's feet simply by standing on a hill-top. (Gangopadhyay 64)

The same Siddhartha is reduced to an inconsequential non-entity even within his

family. The same younger brother mocks him for his bourgeois aspirations; the

same younger sister uses her physical charm to retain her job as a secretary in

order to support the family. The same younger brother makes grenades; and, the

same younger sister takes Siddhartha to the terrace to exhibit her body that she

wants to use to become a model. The masculine vigour and the middle-class

morality of Siddhartha are shattered by the same siblings he would take on a walk

in Deoghar.

Chaudhuri points out that *Pratidwandi* could be considered an assemblage

of photographic shots. "The camera," she argues, "records a succession of images:

a face, a gesture, a cigarette being lit, shirt-sleeves rolled up to the forearm, shoes

being shined" (Chaudhuri 252). This is Ray's vision of that time: it is always

transient, fleeting, discontinuous, and protean. The erratic and unpredictable

camera-eye makes the spectator restless. Ray's response to the modernity in

Calcutta tries to present a vision constituted of fragmented fantasies and fractured

narratives. The world of Siddhartha—inchoate, incoherent, and approximate at the

same time—only moves forward through his recurring walks along the Calcutta

streets. The essential purpose of streets is "sociability" and the exchange of

vision—a communication that acts as a setting for people's fantasies and provides "true knowledge" of "who people really are" (Berman 196)—between the inhabitants of modernity (196). Imprisoned in his lonely desperation, Siddhartha the postcolonial *flaneur* finds an aperture for his existential angst on the nocturnal streets, punctuated with neon-lit signs, bustling market-places, luxurious restaurants and walls filled with political graffiti.

These signs of a paradoxical moment in the history of Calcutta are reflected in Siddhartha's self-irony, which becomes immanent in his oblique political conviction and the sporadic expression of his desire for a better life. It becomes even more evident in his desperate need for a job and his puzzling refusal to leave the city. The conversation with his cynical friend Adinath evokes this irony within the postcolonial modernism of underdevelopment. With a stethoscope, the reminder of his unrealized dream of being a doctor, in his ears, Siddhartha is lazying around in his friend's room:

Adinath: Yes, Siddhartha, It seems you have left everything at its pace.

Siddhartha: What to say? It seems that I have to leave Calcutta at last.

Adinath: Why are you bothered about that? You say that you like it outside Calcutta.

Siddhartha: That is when I go out to places like Deoghar and spend a vacation there for fifteen-twenty days. But this is not like that. It is some corner of the world, and that too as a medical salesman. I don't like it.

Adinath: I don't know about you; I can't stay a minute outside Calcutta.

Siddhartha: I know. There is something about the city. Tell me what it is.

Adinath: It's life. It may be tough life, but we like it. In other places you are either dead or burnt out. What a condition? When I think of going outside Calcutta, I feel sick; but, however, they will not permit us to stay here.

Siddhartha: Tunu is right. There is no way out other than a revolution.

At a time when Calcutta became extremely volatile and dangerous for young men and women, this exchange reveals something that immediately exposes the perplexing relationship between the city and its increasingly disenfranchised citizenry: these two young men declare their last hope of seizing on their right to their own city. The desire to return to the "traditional city" of equal rights survives somehow in the failing locale of Calcutta. The "life" of Siddhartha's Calcutta is not generated by the accumulation of capital and the display of commodities; rather, it comes to life through the struggle of a generation's desperate attempt at survival. Instead of the displays of commodities in shop windows, Siddhartha's flaneur-like vision of the city is determined by discernible material imperatives. When Adinath asks him mockingly if he would start a revolution, he quickly shifts back to his essential dilemma and says, "No, I will not, but if it starts I will fight in it." This vacillation can be interpreted as symptomatic of a bourgeois turn among a section of the youth. On the other hand,

Siddhartha's disillusionment with any collective political movement, much like

Ray himself, can be ascribed to the fractured nature of leftist politics in West

Bengal during the 1960s. Caught between the two ends of this dilemma, these

young men cannot find the answer to the question about why they cannot leave

the city.[176]

Like a typical *flaneur*, who is also a stroller, a detective, a decipherer of

the secret texts of the city, Siddhartha too, engages with the hidden corners of

Calcutta's nocturnal streets. His encounter with the nurse who moonlights as a

prostitute is the moment of the revelation of that secret city. In Siddhartha's case,

atypical of the metropolitan strollers, his discovery of the urban secrets overlaps

with revelations about his family. The financial problems of his family, his

brother's increasing engagement with the Naxalite revolution, and his sister's

consensual participation in her boss's exploitation of her: all these are intertwined

with Siddhartha's desperate marginalization in his own city. Throughout this

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[176] Interestingly, a similar question was raised by the French documentary filmmaker Louis Malle, who made a film titled *Calcutta* in 1969. Banned in India till date, this film presents the city with all its problems around that time. Completely detached from the people of the city and made as a series of impressionistic shots stitched together, Malle's film asks one dying Calcuttan in Mother Teresa's home, "Why are you here?" Without even bothering to find an answer to this question, Malle presents the assumed ubiquity of filth, hunger, political unrest and squalor in Calcutta. Ray, among many others, was scathingly critical of the film's approach towards its subject:

> The whole Malle affair is deplorable…. Personally I don't think any director has the right to go to a foreign country and make a documentary film about it unless (a) he is absolutely thorough in his groundwork on all aspects of the country – historical, social religious, etc., and (b) he does it with genuine love. Working in a dazed state—whether of admiration or disgust—can produce nothing of any value. (quoted in Robinson 328)

narrative, Siddhartha can only exert his control when he rescues Keya, a newcomer to the city, during a power-cut. It is Keya who gives an opportunity to Siddhartha to re-claim his fading right to the city. Siddhartha guides her through the streets and roads of the city. The scene where he boasts of the fact that he can take Keya to the roof of the towering Tata Centre, the tallest high-rise in the city, is testimony to how Siddhartha's relationship with his city becomes a veritable expression of the postcolonial citizen's uneasy negotiation with modernity. His unwavering attachment with Calcutta is neither a dismissal of the city's problems, nor a fascinating phantasmagoria of the commodity-filled marketplace. David Frisby argues that the city of capitalist consumerism comes alive only through a visual consumption of its surfaces. Moreover, he points out, the capitalist city is fetishized as inter-personal relationships are reconstructed according to the transforming world of commodities, as the "social relations are embodied within things" (Frisby 55). In a certain sense, although Siddhartha's Calcutta is transformed into "*Welstadt*: a topos of the imagination where the city becomes the world" (Harding 133), as an inhabitant of "modernism of underdevelopment," Siddhartha resides outside the logic of the capitalist consumerism of Western modernity.

In his study of the flaneur figure in Charles Baudelaire's poetry, Walter Benjamin asserts that "Strolling could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades" (*Charles Baudelaire* 36). In the figure of the flaneur,

Benjamin diagnoses the symptoms of modern existence, where "the commodity

… celebrates its triumph" (*Arcades Project* 345), that is reified in correlation with

its phantasmagoric obsession with the visible city. The phenomenological

conception of the act of strolling on the streets of the modern capitalist city is

discursively defined by a visual attachment not specifically with the city but the

marks of modernity that are visible on the facades of the city (see Buck-Morss,

Dialectics of Seeing). The locales—boulevards punctuated with signboards,

glittering shops, commodities on display, the glitzy interior of the arcade, etc—of

the metropolitan cities, where the lure of commodities remain the defining fallacy

behind the flaneur's obsession with the city. Baudelaire's flaneur, not a regular

city-dweller as analyzed by Benjamin, is characterized by visual obsession and

empathy. Taking Georg Simmel's proposition that "interpersonal relationships in

big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye

over the activity of the ear" (38) as his theoretical foundation, Benjamin presents

the figure of the flaneur as one who consumes and is consumed through the

dialectics of vision. In this sense the flaneur conflates his subjectivity with the

flow of commodities produced by capitalist modernity. Benjamin observes that

the flaneur, abandoned in the crowd, who "shares the situation of the

commodity," surrenders to "the intoxication of the commodity around which

surges the stream of customers." The commodity and the metropolitan flaneur—

both empathetic in their abandonment—are determined by their peregrinations on

the streets of the capitalist city. This empathy, generated by the soul of the

commodity transforms the streets and arcades of metropolitan cities into an ever-

expanding interior for the flaneur. The urban exterior becomes his home; the

modern subject becomes the idle observer of the "plethora of unassimilable

stimuli" (Gilloch 143). "An investigation of *flanerie* as *activity* must therefore

explore the activities of observation (including listening), reading (of metropolitan

life and of texts) and producing texts" (Frisby 82). Thereby, flanerie is "a form of

reading the city and its population (its spatial images, its architecture, its human

configurations), and a form of reading written texts" (83) – texts that become

decipherable through "the rationality of capitalism and, especially,

commoditization and the circulation of commodities" (Tester 13). The

topographies of the flaneur's consciousness were subsumed by the order of capital

that was being originated in the colonized corners of the world and transferred to

metropolitans centers like London, Berlin and Paris. In her remarkable work on

the flaneur in Weimar Germany, Anke Gleber reads the flaneur on the streets of

Berlin as somebody who "perceives the world as a celebration of pleasures of

perception" (Gleber 86). Although Siddhartha's flanerie bears some tactile

similarities with that of his Western counterparts, a standardized understanding of

the flaneur needs to be investigated to expose its limitations.

Film critic Vincent Canby writes in his review of *Pratidwandi*,

For a number of reasons, a Ray film doesn't demand our immediate

attention in the way that a Buñuel or a Bergman or a Godard does. A Ray

film carries no guarantee to shock. Its characters are too involved in one

form or another of daily survival to fret about metaphysical matters. It

won't outrage us. Regarded in India as the most un-Indian of Indian film

directors, he is, to us, quintessentially Indian.

The New York Times October 9, 1972 [177]

The shock Canby misses in Siddhartha's involvement with "daily survival" is

ontologically connected with the capitalist plethora of stimuli. The flaneurs of the

metropolitan capitals of Europe do not get subsumed by political (and

geopolitical) antecedents and quotidian impediments. In his reading of Dublin as a

late-colonial city in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Enda Duffy argues in a decisive tone

"that the acceptance of shock in an ontological account of city life, or of flanerie

as a signifier of the twentieth-century subject reacting to such shock, is ultimately

essentialist and mystifying. It is essentialist to the extent that it envisions all cities,

and their citizens' experiences of them, as largely similar" (*Subaltern Ulysses*

56).[178] Duffy continues to contend that the concept of flanerie, in a specific sense

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[177] *The New York Times* review also found the film to move "so quietly, with such
seeming politeness to jaded film senses, that it takes a while to realize that for all its
somberness it's a particularly moving comedy." This characterization of the film as a
comedy is particularly surprising. Even while maintaining an objective openness to the
validity of critical reading, I find no possible position from where the film could be
considered a comedy.

[178] Duffy also contends, "Baudelaire's flaneur is the apparently *déclassé* modernist
version of *homme moyen sensuel*, now allowed to succumb to 'the temptation to lose

as used by T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (1927), and as theoretically ratified and expanded by social theorists like Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel and Max Weber, is unscrupulously Eurocentric. The *erlebnis*, the experience without cognition, that forms the central tenet of the urban existence, is thereby universalized and standardized according to the encounters on European streets and boulevards of high imperial cities like London and Paris.

The narrative of *Pratidwandi* as a flaneur text can be explored along various trajectories: Siddhartha's periodic walks along the streets and pavements of the city, his perceptible freedom from the chains of time symbolized by the broken-down wrist-watch, his abrupt encounter with and excavation of the city's underbelly—all these commingle to give shape to a modern, urban consciousness. Unlike the flaneurs of Western texts who almost inadvertently surrender to the commodity economy and consumption, Siddhartha navigates a cityscape that is by and large devoid of commodities. If the flaneur of colonial metropolis immerses himself in casual and visual consumption of the staggering conjuration of commodities gathered from different corners of the world, their postcolonial counterpart gets lost in an ontological angst that converges with material

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himself in a flood of human beings,' as he learns 'the relationship between unrestrained behavior and discipline' needed to absorb the continual effect of shock generated by the technologized cityscape" (*Subaltern Ulysses* 55).

determinants like unemployment, economic penury, and revolution.[179] It is not to

generalize any preclusion of emerging and "belated metamorphoses" (Patke 2002)

in the face of consumer capitalism.[180] Though there is no such moment of

indulgence in *Pratidwandi*, Ray's other city film *Seemabaddha* (*Company*

Limited, 1971) implicitly depicts experiences of the protagonist, Shyamalendu, an

executive in a British electrical company, and his wife, participating in acts of

consumption.[181]

It might be suitable, at this point, to mention two more characters from

Ray's films—Arati and Somnath—characters who bear an uncanny resemblance

to some of the signature traits of the flaneur. Arati, the housewife in Ray's

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[179] Theodor Adorno expresses his reservations about Benjamin's formulations about urban modernity and flanerie in a letter he wrote to Benjamin in 1938. His objections to Benjamin's work stems from his recognition of the fact that Benjamin's effort at reading culture through materials does not pay sufficient attention to the mediation of the "total social process." See Adorno's letter and Benjamin's reply to him in, Theodor Adorno. et.al. *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Verso, 2007, 126-33, 134-41.

[180] Rajeev S. Patke argues that Bombay (Mumbai) and many other postcolonial cities of the "new" nations of Asia experienced an asymmetrical and belated expansion of modernity as eschewed by Benjamin. The temporal gap between the Western cities and their Asian counterparts is partially caused by the fact that the most of the colonized cities were denied the entrance into the world of modernity by their colonial masters (Patke 2002).

[181] I am particularly thinking of the scenes in the race course, in the posh city club, where Shyamalendu and his wife are seen to be consummate consumers of the pleasures and luxuries of capitalist modernity. In contrast with the backdrop of political unrest in the city, their unperturbed existence in a peaceful paradise not only underlines the detachedness of the bourgeois from the historical immediacy, but also the accessibility of a miniscule class to a world of objects and commodities that are representative of material modernization.

Mahanagar (*The Big City*, 1963), takes up a job as a traveling product-canvasser

for an automatic knitting-machine company. Walking the streets of Calcutta to

demonstrate the automated knitting machine to prospective buyers, Arati becomes

most probably the first female character on the Indian screen to emerge as a

female counterpart of Benjamin's sandwichman.[182] Somnath of *Jana Aranya* (*The*

Middleman, 1976)—an educated young man unsuccessful at getting a job—tries

his luck at a career of traveling middle-man between the seller and the consumer.

Arati loses her job after she protests against her boss's unfair behavior with her

Anglo-Indian colleague; Somnath reaches the nadir of moral degeneration when

he tries to pimp out his friend's sister for getting a contract. The Calcutta of these

two films remains a dystopic space for the postcolonial flaneur and flaneuse.

There are few occasions in *Pratidwandi* where Siddhartha is seen to enter

any place for buying anything: immediately before the first interview, he

frantically hunts for a tailor to get his torn trouser mended. Following this, he

goes to a watch-shop to get his broken wristwatch repaired and then he goes to a

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[182] Benjamin's sandwichman on the streets of Germany is a denigrated version of the flaneur (Buck-Morss, "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore" 109-10). Unlike the sandwichman, Arati does not become a human sign-board, but her quests and travails behind the facades of the city's plush houses do certainly transform her into a modern flaneuse. In a recent essay, Brinda Bose explores the connection between an object and the arrival of modern woman through a perceptive reading of the film. Bose argues that the lipstick that Arati is almost coerced (in a playful way) to use by her Anglo-Indian colleague performs a metaphorical function of representing a material culture and a liminal space of sexuality that would stand for Arati's sudden encounter with the urban modernity outside the boundaries of her domestic habitat. See, Bose (2008).

medicine-shop to buy pills for the headache he gets from roaming around in the sun. Finally, he goes to a pet-market to look for the bird he had heard sing during his childhood trip to Deoghar. And towards the end of the film he goes to a restaurant with Keya. Apart from these, the world of Siddhartha stays away from any obsessive involvement with commodities.

First, let us look at Siddhartha's frantic hunt for a tailor to get his torn trouser mended. In a jerky frenetic manner the camera scurries through signboards to find a tailoring shop. Finally he gets one, but the tailor refuses to work on a worn piece of clothing. The search continues until Siddhartha finally finds a small shop where he manages to get his trousers repaired. In this scene, the abrupt interjection of Siddhartha getting lost in a reverie, and imagining himself as an economically successful man standing inside a greenhouse, further accentuates the ontological challenge Siddhartha's story throws at the spectator. Instead of the emptiness lying within the commodities and the hollowness of the egoistic individual (Tester 13) reflected through the figure of the flaneur, Siddhartha embodies his ontological and material angst by seeking refuge in an eternally deferred dream.

The other commodity—the only one that Siddhartha hunts without a palpable purpose—is a bird. Walter Benjamin in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," persuasively argues that the "scent" in Baudelaire's "Spring, the Beloved, has lost its scent"—an "inaccessible refuge of the *memoire involuntaire*"

(180)—comes across as the poet's involuntary effort at seeking refuge in the safe

haven of memory. The involuntary memory of the bereaved poet tries to revive a

sensory register by reminiscing an experience that is now inaccessible amidst the

fleeting existence of the city. Lost in the perplexing phantasmagoria of modernity

on the streets of the city, the scent symbolizes a metaphysical desire to return to a

lost bucolic simplicity. Ray conspicuously departs from the novel to interject the

motif of a birdsong that Siddhartha remembers from the trip to Deoghar. This

birdsong—like Baudelaire's 'scent'—represents a sensory locus of remembrance

of a lost past and childhood simplicity and innocence. Looking for an escape from

the frustrations of his current life, Siddhartha hunts frantically for the same

birdsong in the city. Scurrying through the cacophonous bird-market, the

postcolonial flaneur—now a consumer—frantically looks for the elusive and

enigmatic birdsong that "deeply drugs the sense of time." The commodity the

postcolonial flaneur craves to purchase is only an escape from the painful

realization that he does not have access to the world of commodities. While the

montage-like barrage of urban images such as street-signs, store-signs, and

crowded vehicles shows the fleeting urban phantasmagoria, the birdsong exposes

a pastoral drive within that. Like Baudelaire's literary figure, this hunt for the bird

makes Siddhartha similar to a flaneur who "goes botanizing on asphalt."[183]

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[183] This is not specific to *Pratidwandi*. In a number of Indian films visual and aural
reminders of the village life symbolize a possible escape to a metaphysical pure space far

Ironically, Siddhartha gets to hear his birdsong again only when he finally goes outside Calcutta for his job.

The tribulations of a jobless, young man map a material world that overlaps with a political world; this world is starkly different from the commodity-laden colonial capitals. Instead of surrendering his consciousness to the display of commodities, Siddhartha, the postcolonial city-dweller, experiences an angst that is conspicuously caused by a material immediacy that is starkly different from that of the world of imperial flaneur texts such as Woolf' *Mrs. Dalloway* and Eliot's *Wasteland*. His unfulfilled dream of a medical career, desperate joblessness and his growing frustration with his loss of control over his surroundings form that immediacy. This becomes even more prominent and bleak in the third film of Ray's city trilogy. Somnath in *Jana Aranya*, a much more genteel version of the rough, impulsive Siddhartha, is seen to walk the streets of Calcutta in his search for a job before, ironically, turning into a traveling order-supplier.[184] The predicaments of a postcolonial existence haunt the peripatetic

from the fractured, transitory zone of urban modernity. For example, in Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the protagonists, Ramu and Nita, both involuntarily brought to the city by different events, stare at images of rural scenery to yearn for a return to a pre-modern, pristine past.

[184] To elaborate on the inevitable material connection of the postcolonial citizen's urban anomie, I would like to give an example of a famous song from a Hindi film, *Gharonda* (*The Nest*, 1977). It is a story of a couple who want to have a home of their own before they get married. Before they lose all their money in a fraudulent housing project, the couple is seen scampering in a building under construction: "Do deewane shahar mein/ raat aur dopaher mein/ Abdana dhundte hain, ek ashiana dhundte hain" [Two lovers in

narratives of these films; the frustration of a young generation comes to the fore; the inaccessibility to material security is prohibited because of the lack of commodities and of the money to purchase them. Baudelaire's flaneur takes a turtle for a walk on the busy streets of Paris to symbolically express his disgust for and protest against the escalated pace of the circulation of commodities, traffic and thoughts (Tester 15), but Ray's Siddhartha, rather involuntarily, falls out of the loop of time because he cannot afford to repair his wristwatch. If the metropolitan flaneur of Paris and London—the man of the crowd—expresses his mastery over the same crowd and its home, the city, by practicing his sleuth-like inquisitiveness, the flaneur of Calcutta experiences alienation from the same crowd because of his perpetual loss of his right to the city.

Siddhartha's Vision: Gaze of Counter-Visualism

A famous English travel-writer Geoffrey Moorhouse writes the following about Calcutta in 1971,

> It is the easiest thing in the world to come close to despair in Calcutta.
>
> Every statistic that you tear out of the place reeks of doom. Every half

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the city/ at night and day/ looks for a home, searches for a refuge]. The symptom of homelessness, such a characteristic theme of Western modernism, becomes literal for the postcolonial subjects. Later in the movie, the hero, after his lover has got married to a rich person, sings the same song in a tragic tune. The lonely man's dejected figure among the towering high-rises in the city emerges as the site of both the ontological and material reality of postcolonial existence.

mile can produce something that is guaranteed to turn a newcomer's

stomach with fear or disgust or a sense of hopelessness. It must be a

generation at least since anyone stayed here for more than a day or two

unless he was obliged to, or had a phenomenal sense of vocation, or a

pathological degree of curiosity. (350)

When Moorhouse was touring Calcutta, Siddhartha was strolling the streets of the

same city. Moorhouse's representation of Calcutta is not an isolated or a unique

one. His "fear" and "disgust" are typical of a number of Western travelers who

visited and still visit Calcutta. The city filled the Western traveler with "fear,"

"disgust," and "hopelessness," Siddhartha, the native city-dweller, too gets a

similar feeling; yet he manages to find "life" amidst the endless turmoil of

Calcutta. The myriad cultural representations that make up Calcutta for the

audience are often contrasted with the more exotic visibility of poverty in the

city.[185] The Western travelers' description of the debilitating condition of Calcutta

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[185] Even before Moorhouse, a number of Western travelers represented Calcutta in their travelogues in a similar light. For instance, sometime in the 1950s after reaching Calcutta on a typical rainy day after the devastating period of partition, Claude Levi-Strauss wrote,

> What we are ashamed of as if it were a disgrace, and regard as a kind of leprosy, is, in India, the urban phenomenon, reduced to its ultimate expression: the herding together of individuals whose only reason for living is herd together in millions, whatever the conditions of life may be. Filth, chaos, promiscuity, congestion; ruins, huts, mud, dirt; dung, urine, pus, humors, secretions and running sores: all the things against which we expect urban life to give organized protection, all the things we hate and guard against at such great cost, all the by-products of cohabitation do not set any limitation on it in India. They are more like a natural environment which the Indian town needs to prosper. To every individual, any street, footpath or alley affords a home, where he can sit, sleep,

is embedded in the visual economy that is paradigmatically appropriated by orientalist exoticism. Their "reductive gaze" (Hutnyk 89)[186] not only projects Calcutta as a bathetic alter-ego of the bustling Western ideal by creating a rigid binary between "organized" Western cities and its disorderly Indian counterpart, but also comfortably refuses to acknowledge disorder as an indispensable part of development of modern cities.

In *Pratidwandi*, too, there is a recurring presence of Western tourists, albeit without much effect on the narrative of the film. There is a brief interjection in the film where Siddhartha takes refuge in an afternoon city park to escape the feeling of destitution. He comes across a group of dancing and laughing hippy travelers. The emphatic group of Western travelers is there to experience the proximity of the origin of human civilization. They look at a stray cow to burst

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and even pick up his food straight from the glutinous filth. Far from repelling him, this filth acquires a kind of domestic status through having been exuded, excreted, trampled on and handled by so many men….

A single obsession, hunger, prompts this despairing behaviour; it is the same obsession which drives the country-dwellers into the cities and has caused Calcutta's population to leap from two to five millions in the space of a few years; it crowds refugees into stations, although they cannot afford to board the trains…. (134-35)

In "Vasco Returns," a section on Calcutta in Gunter Grass's *The Flounder* (originally published in 1977), the author's alter ego Vasco comments about the city, "Why not a poem about the pile of shit that God dropped and named Calcutta" (186).

[186] John Hutnyk presents more detailed critique of Levi-Strauss and similar travel writings on Calcutta; see, John Hutnyk. *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation*. In his excellent study of the representations of Calcutta by Western travelers, filmmakers and writers, Hutnyk points out how many of the stereotyped images of the city arise out of mythic constructs that are informed and appropriated by imperialist and orientalist biases.

out in collective exuberance: "This is where the world started. This is where the magic is. Great. Look at the cow. Delightful. Wow, what a place? Fantastic. We come to Calcutta and we like all you people. You are truly our friends." Siddhartha, destitute after an unsuccessful interview, rather inadvertently, becomes a part of the spectacle. The orientalist gaze of the Western eyes objectifies the spaces of the postcolonial city along with its inhabitant. As Siddhartha, somewhat despaired and perplexed, looks back at them, the anachronistic perception of India as the origin of civilization, as opposed to the west as the locale of modernity, is challenged by his reverse gaze. Through this visual dialectic the Western traveler too immediately becomes the object of consumption by the native viewer.

A similar moment occurs when Siddhartha goes to watch a Swedish film with his friend. In an act of voyeurism, as Siddhartha and his friend wait for some uncensored sexuality on screen, which is the actual reason behind going for this movie, the film within the film shows a couple running through a household furnishing store—most likely, an Ikea department store, "the last promenade" of the European flaneur (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 31), and looking for a suitable nuptial bed. The Western consumer, scampering through the model bedrooms, here inadvertently becomes the object of native visual consumption by the curious workings of a sexual economy.

These are not isolated incidents in the film. But aside from showcasing the

body of the Westerner, the film also periodically grants Siddhartha a visual

volition to acquire mastery—which he otherwise has had to relinquish—over his

surroundings.[187] In the previous section I suggested that *Pratidwandi* can be read

as a text of flanerie, though the very concept of flanerie needs to be challenged

and rethought within the contextually specific geo-historical framework of

Calcutta. In this section I attempt to identify visual overtures that re-institute

Siddhartha as a wary consumer. In a sense, the argument of this section is almost

an inadvertent extension of and envoi to the previous ones. There is a conceptual

connection between flanerie and vision. As the chapter started—with lines from

Shankho Ghosh's "Face Hidden behind Advertisements"—urban modernity in

Calcutta is characterized by a barrage of capitalist signs; but the scopic landscape

of Siddhartha projects a different visuality – a visuality that cannot be mapped

onto the available cartography of commodities.

Let me get back to the *New York Times* review of the film I quoted earlier.

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[187] The idea of "mastery" here is particularly inspired by what Kobena Mercer identifies
as the way Robert Mapplethorpe practices artistic mastery in his photographs of Black
male nudes. Mercer comments,

> As an artist, Mapplethorpe engineers a fantasy of "absolute" authority over his
> subjects by appropriating the function of the stereotype to stabilize the erotic
> objectification of racial otherness and thereby affirm his own identity as the
> sovereign I/eye empowered with mastery over the abject "thinghood" of the
> other…. (312)

Laura Mulvey makes a similar point about the male consumption of the eroticized female
body in her canonical essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989 [1975]).
Though both Mercer and Mulvey argue within the framework of erotic objectification,
the "ontological reduction accomplished through the specific visual codes" (Mercer 310)
is somewhat similar to what happens in *Pratidwandi*.

Explaining why a Ray film does not demand the enthusiasm that other famous filmmakers' works do, the reviewer comments,

> This has to do with the rhythm of his films, which is so regular as almost to lull us to sleep in a place (a movie theater) where custom has taught us to expect a continuing succession of alarms of varying tones and volumes. It also has to do with Ray's vision of Indian life, which is anything but exotic or sensuous. His male characters, especially, seem at first somewhat timid, dressed in their occidental clothes that hang on them like the hand-me-downs from someone else's civilization.

This section of the review points out two opposing things: first, Ray's film does not cater to the orientalist vision of the First World critic because its depiction of Indian life is not "exotic" or "sensuous;" and second, the reviewer's unwitting eyes manage to find the exotic even in its perceived absence by identifying the protagonist's "occidental clothes" hanging on him "like the hand-me-downs from someone else's civilization." The recognition of the exotic even in the absence of it reproduces a racialized fixation of the oriental other seen through the prism of the inscribed logic of objectification. Canby, the critic, Moorhouse, the travel-writer, and the hippy tourists in the film objectify the exotic landscapes of the postcolonial city and the "Indian" cinema to enact a visual consumption.

The hippy tourists in the park can certainly be considered as an expansion

of the nineteenth-century European flaneur.[188] Their visual consumption of the

postcolonial city is the expression of an epistemic assumption similar to what

Johannes Fabian termed "visualism."[189] This mode of visually consuming and

recording—through an ethnographic gaze—appropriates the object of vision

fixating them in an approximated anachronistic space.[190] Though Fabian's

formulation argues that visualism mainly denies a temporal and spatial

"coevalness" between the beholding subject and the beheld object, it also creates

an erasure of interpersonal engagement between the two. In the reaction of the

hippy tourists, much like their literary counterparts Moorhouse, Levi-Strauss and

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[188] Recent scholarship on tourism often interprets the act as a version of the flaneur's movement through the display of commodities in the city. John Urry in a genealogical study of tourism contends, "The strolling flaneur was a forerunner of the twentieth-century tourist" (138). Though, it must be said, there are scholars, like Susan Sontag, who refuse to equate the two figures: "The flaneur is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations" (Sontag 55).

[189] In his remarkable book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (1983), Fabian investigates the epistemic predominance attributed to vision in the Western tradition. "Visualism" connotes "a cultural, ideological bias toward vision as the 'noblest sense' and toward geometry qua graphic-spatial conceptualization the most 'exact' way of communicating knowledge" (107). The emphasis on visual observation is predicated on the assumption that the "ability to 'visualize' a culture or society almost becomes synonymous for understanding it." Through objectification and textualization, visualism contains an "antipersonalist orientation." "Persons, who alone speak (and in whom alone knowledge and science exist), will be eclipsed insofar as the world is thought of as an assemblage of the sort of things which vision apprehends—objects or surfaces" (Ong 9).

[190] Fabian comes up with the neologism "allochronism" to signify a denial of the dialectical relationship between the subject and the object. Among other scholars, Rey Chow in *Woman and Chinese Modernity: the Politics of Reading between East and West* (30-31) identifies the lack of epistemological simultaneity between the writers and the object of their writing in the Western representation of the "non-modern" world.

Grass, there exists an element of visualism; but interestingly Siddhartha, the

postcolonial flaneur, as a visual consumer looks at his subject through the prism

of visualism too. This becomes apparent not only through his act of looking back

at the "white" subjects, but also the way his periodic gazing often treats the object

of vision as an assemblage of impersonal facts. Siddhartha's visual appropriation

of his surrounding gives him a detached mastery, while underscoring the

inquisitorial dichotomy between the subject and the object. This is not necessarily

a process of commodification in the capitalist sense; nonetheless, this perpetuates

an ocular possibility of a "chronically voyeuristic relation to the world" (Sontag

11).[191]

I would like to draw attention to a few specific scenes in the film that

contain narrative elements that almost become a motif. The first—right in the

beginning of the film—shows Siddhartha staring at a woman. Apart from just

looking at the female body through an eroticized gaze, he suddenly—ogling her

breasts—recapitulates a lecture from his medical class: "Lymphatics of the female

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[191] Susan Sontag makes an exquisite connection between the flaneur and photography. In
her canonical book, Sontag contends that photography first comes,

> […] into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flaneur* … The
> photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking,
> cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a
> landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of
> empathy, the flaneur finds the world 'picturesque'. (55)

This connection between flanerie and photography is pertinent to the understanding of
Siddhartha's almost aimless perambulations on the streets of Calcutta and his observation
of the scenes of the city.

breast, if you remember, begins with the plexus around the gland itself. Now this

plexus, if we note, is quite different from the lymphatics which drain the central

region of the gland…." Siddhartha not only transforms the female body into an

object of masochistic voyeurism; he objectifies the object of his vision in an

existential manner. There are several similar moments in the film. When

Siddhartha meets Keya's father and her aunt, the aunt tries to swallow a pill for

her headache, and Siddhartha remembers as he watches: "The mechanism of

swallowing or deglutition as we call it is a complicated but a very interesting

process. It really starts with the action of…." In a sequence, sitting in a restaurant

with Keya, Siddhartha clinically explains how all human beings are anatomically

similar. As Keya asks if there is no difference between a man sitting at a table and

her, he adds that there are some differences because of their sex difference. Again

in the final interview sequence, as he looks at his co-interviewees, all exhausted

from a long wait in the heat, he reminisces: "In many animals as in all vertebras,

the general form of the body is maintained by means of the skeleton. The skeleton

consists of a series of bones supplemented in certain regions by pieces of

cartilage. A striking characteristic of bones is its hardness. The skeleton persists

after death for a variable length of time after the rest of the body disintegrated."

The last sequence becomes even more intriguing as the series of bodies of other

interviewees gradually transform into skeletons in Siddhartha's vision.[192] Before

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[192] Supriya Chaudhuri argues that these scenes along with a number of others that show

the scene, the camera casually shifts from scene to scene to portray various scenes of the city life: the hippies, a Calcutta slum, a homeless person sleeping on the street, a plush house. These are not necessarily Siddhartha's vision; rather, they constitute an assemblage of images beheld by both the camera and the protagonist. Through this montage-like interjection, the filmmaker's camera captures the diverse topography of the city, while keeping the audience oblivious about the identity of the onlooker. Somehow the filmmaker's vision of the city enhances Siddhartha's almost surreal sight. As the camera comes back to the interview, Siddhartha finally decides to barge into the interview room and ransack the office in protest against the interview panel's dispassionate attitude towards the interviewees.

The anatomical registers of Siddhartha's "clinical gaze" (Foucault 108) arguably cast him in the role of an observer who visually consumes in "antipersonalist orientation" and transforms flesh-and-blood human bodies into something "picturesque." Discussing the history of modern medicine, Foucault argues that the advent of the medical gaze transformed the interior of the human body into a remarkably legible surface. "This gaze, then, which refrains from all possible intervention, and from all experimental decision, and which does not modify, shows that its reserve is bound up with the strength of its armature"

the claustrophobic collection of human bodies in the film make *Pratidwandi* a film about bodies (264).

(108). The epistemic connection between the emergence of anthropology and modern medicine is undeniable; thus, the impersonal orientation of Fabian's visualism and the non-interventionist approach of Foucault's clinical gaze bear each other's reverberation. The particular mode of Siddhartha's X-ray-like vision discerningly overlaps with both. This same symptom appears time and again in the film on several occasions in different forms. The scenes where he transforms his brother and sister into mere objects of hallucinations particularly employ similar ocular strategies. In his lonely deliberations, Siddhartha visualizes his sister posing in skimpy clothes as a model, his brother being shot by a firing squad, Keya transforming into the nurse who moonlights as a prostitute. In this moment of aberration, all these people, who are related to Siddhartha, become mere objectified figures to fill a dreamscape. They are textualized as objects of vision—human and inert alike—to maintain a dispassionate distance between the observer and the observed, to isolate the protagonist into a "phallic solitude."[193]

Although, as I argued in the previous section, the cityscape of *Pratidwandi* lacks the exhibitionary display of capitalist commodities, the strategic deployment of the meticulously anatomical details establishes the possibility of a different

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[193] Henri Lefebvre coins this phrase in his *The Production of Space* to argue,
> The space where nature is replaced by cold abstraction and by the absence of pleasure, is the mental space of castration (at once imaginary and real, symbolic and concrete): the space of a metaphorization whereby the image of the woman supplants the woman herself, whereby her body is fragmented, desire shattered, and life explodes into a thousand pieces. Over abstract space reigns phallic solitude and the self-destruction of desire. (309)

kind of commodification. This not only underscores Siddhartha's alienation from his surrounding; it also counterpoises the intrinsic politics of the Western gaze consuming the Third World. A contextual examination of Siddhartha's detachment from other human beings could enable an interpretion of his indecisive distance from the politics of the time as well. Although Gangopadhyay's novel ends with Siddhartha roaming the streets of the small-town he had moved to and shouting diatribes against the system, Ray's conclusion is much more subdued. Ranjit of Sen's *Interview* reaches the realization that the revolution is the only option available; Ray's Siddhartha, on the other hand, now estranged from his fetishized city immerses himself in a self-absorbed reflection as he listens to the elusive birdsong of his childhood memory and the chants of people taking a dead person on the last journey.

The experience of modernity in *Pratidwandi* is fundamentally divorced from the spectacle of consumption and commodities: it is conjured up through the material experience of political urgency, joblessness, and economic insecurity. At the end of the narrative, the disenfranchised, postcolonial flaneur has been displaced from his beloved city. The characters in the previous chapters—Biswambhar, the ousted feudal lady, Rajmohan, Maqbool, and Ranjit—mark a critical historical impulse in their material expediencies. Their relations with inanimate objects excoriate the material narrative of capitalist modernity. Although Siddhartha's story is not such an explicit form of protest, the scopic

possibility of Ray's film gestures towards creating a sensory register that forces

Siddhartha to depart the capitalist city where humans become commodity-objects

of impersonal gaze.

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