

Reviews

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Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray. By Keya Ganguly. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. 262. ISBN 9780520262164 \$60 (hbk); ISBN 9780520262171 \$25.95 (pbk).
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In this remarkable book, the first critical study of its kind on Satyajit Ray and perhaps on any Indian film director, Keya Ganguly makes a boldly compelling case for rethinking Ray through the lens of avant-gardism, and vice versa: an alignment whose perceived incongruence she locates in the blind-spot of both extant studies of Ray from his time to ours, and European theories of the avant-garde. Far from yielding that India never ‘fully’ experienced modernism – an assumption that commonly underwrites assessments of Ray’s aesthetic anachronism relative to the melodramatic realism of post-Independence Indian cinema and the ‘revolutionary socialism’ of his contemporary, Ritwik Ghatak (10) – Ganguly reads such assessments as evidence that modernism is still fully with us, and that furthermore, we are all still emerging, uncertainly, under its sign. From the vantage point she provides, the Eurocentric monikers that have cathected to Ray’s work (at worst, ‘a Bengali Renoir or a Bergman’ (91), and at best, a ‘reformist realism’ (10) or ‘one of the high points of Indian cultural modernism, to the extent that India has had such a thing’ (11)), are revealed as symptoms of a pervasive primitivizing – and self-orientalizing – tendency. The legacy of modernism, argues the author, persists in these labels, which exemplify the tendency of designating postcolonial cinematic modernisms as alternative, belated or derivative of the West.

Conversely, Ganguly proposes that the available interpretive schemas for reading Ray’s *oeuvre* maintain a structural affinity with the narrowly Europeanist frame that continues to delimit the aesthetic and medial coordinates of avant-gardism. In their impulse to articulate a transparent relationship between Ray’s realism and the social conditions to which it was ‘proper’ (Rey Chow has elsewhere called this kind of impulse a ‘coercive mimeticism’ of the Third World), both fail to recognize the radical potential of peripheral aesthetic practices like his, which registered dissent in non-combative, non-negating forms, employing a medium that is inexplicably neglected in historical accounts of mid-century avant-gardism. As an alternative, Ganguly turns to the writings of Eisenstein, Kracauer, Adorno and other modernist film scholars associated with the Soviet and Frankfurt schools, finding in the nexus of their work and that of Marxist literary theorists like Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson the seeds of an expanded spatial and temporal cartography of modernism – and avant-gardism. Assuming this resolutely materialist lens, Ganguly urges attention to the postwar anticolonial and internationalist movements (which characterized Ray’s Calcutta milieu and found expression in his cinema) as an organic dimension of the troubled geopolitical landscape from which the historical avant-garde emerged as only one, contextually specific, aesthetic response. Satyajit Ray’s films crystallize a different, albeit quieter, approach to utopian thinking, argues Ganguly, one that responded to pressures and contradictions that were no less modern for being refracted through and ‘delayed’ by Indian postcoloniality, as an experience marked by overlapping aesthetic, economic and ideological constraints.

The poetically attentive and densely philosophical close readings of six of Ray’s films that function as vehicles for this critique

represent the author's finest achievement. From the weave of Ray's variegated body of work, Ganguly isolates persistent threads of critique, noting that they coalesce around his treatment of those subjective and perceptual modes that were the most vulnerable and sensitive witnesses of Indian modernity's productive violence: femininity and aurality. Ganguly's discussion of the allegorical content of the female protagonists of Ray's films (from Bimala in *Ghare Bhaire* to *Charulata's* namesake, *Devi's* Doya, and *Mahanagar's* Arati) steers clear of the enervated trajectory routinely traced by critics of Indian cinema, who instrumentalize Indian women and film music as tropes for staging the antinomies of tradition and modernity. Instead, she shows how the materiality of Ray's audiovisual choices manifests film's own structuring role in the predicament of feminine desire on the cusp of modernity, suspended between the embodied temporalities of patriarchy and capitalism, the stultification of aristocratic leisure and the alienation of modern labour. Some of the most beautiful points in the book are those that explore Ray's quotidian and yet dialectically charged confrontations between the forms (classical music), subjects (middle-class women, the theatrical elite) and technologies (the lorgnette, the gramophone) that have been reified by and subsumed within a visual regime of which mainstream cinema is both a protagonist and a product. It is by illuminating the unexpected, counterintuitive and ultimately open-ended alliances forged by modernity's uneven supersessions, Ganguly argues, that Ray's practice functions as an Adornian immanent critique of social conditions, as well as a vehicle for redeeming physical reality, in Kracauer's sense.

By recuperating overlooked aspects of Ray's cinematic practice as sites of dialectical inquiry rather than traces of authorial intention or

signature style, Ganguly invests the exhausted form of the single-author study with a new political significance. In both form and execution, her book demonstrates a rare commitment to precisely the kinds of utopian thinking that avant-gardism has sought to recuperate. Ganguly's readings are in fact rich in potential in ways that she does not adequately exploit: although she shies away from engaging with contemporary trends in film theory, her commitment to thinking dialectically about film's indexicality has much to contribute to the current surge of interest in documentary and reality based genres. This resurgence of realism at the moment of film's own displacement by technologies of digital manipulation bears all the hallmarks of the moment of cinematic emergence to which Ganguly's retrospective study is devoted, and begs the very critique she brings to bear on realism, one that is urgently relevant for combating the ongoing resurrection of referentiality as an epistemology of the Third World. Ganguly's is a book for our times, for she illustrates how postcoloniality can name a location through which to rejuvenate reflexive inquiry at a time when reflexivity seems to have lost its potency as a mode of critique.

POOJA RANGAN

THE NEW SCHOOL, USA

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Tensions in Rural Bengal: Landlords, Planters and Colonial Rule. By Chittabrata Palit. Delhi: Cambridge University Press India, under the imprint of Foundation Books, 2011. £40. Pp. 240. ISBN 9788175968080 (pbk).

Chittabrata Palit's book promises to give a critical analysis of the changing political