



Review of Ritwik Ghatak's *Cinema and I*

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Abstract

This review considers Ritwik Ghatak's posthumously published collection *Cinema and I* (1987), focusing on his reflections on the social purposes of cinema, cinematic form, and the relationship between artistic subjectivity and collective experience.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; *Cinema and I*; Indian cinema; film criticism; political cinema



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What kind of cinema can respond to the political and emotional upheavals of its time without becoming a vehicle for slogans? Ritwik Ghatak returns to this question throughout *Cinema and I* (1987), a posthumously published selection of his essays, reflections, and interviews. First issued by the Ritwik Memorial Trust with a foreword by Satyajit Ray, the collection offers an unusually direct encounter with the filmmaker's thinking. Its importance lies not in proposing a single, finished theory of cinema but in revealing the tensions through which Ghatak understood filmmaking: as personal expression, collective labor, technical craft, and an obligation to the lives of ordinary people.

Ghatak's account of his artistic formation provides a useful starting point. His early involvement with literature and political theater preceded his work in film. He entered cinema through Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1950), on which he worked as an actor and assistant director. His first completed feature, *Nagarik* (1952), was released only in 1977, after his death. That delayed reception is worth remembering when reading a volume that repeatedly asks how an artist might reach an audience. His later association with the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune also points to his role as a teacher as well as a filmmaker. These elements of his biography establish the practical stakes of the collection's recurring concern with the relationship between intention, production, and public response.

In the opening reflections, Ghatak insists upon the filmmaker's subjectivity while refusing to isolate artistic creation from social experience. He approaches storytelling as the foundation of film, yet he understands a story to be more than an arrangement of incidents. The subject must emerge from an attentive engagement with people and their environments. Here the volume's central tension becomes productive: cinema is made through an individual consciousness, but its subject matter and meanings are inseparable from the collective world. Ghatak's impatience with conventional entertainment follows from this conviction, although his position cannot be reduced to a simple rejection of popular forms.

The discussion of Indian filmmaking makes these positions more pointed. Ghatak questions formulaic productions, the dependence on literary prestige, and the assumption that expensive spectacle or declared political principles automatically generate artistic value. The target is not popularity itself but work that mistakes scale, sentiment, or moral certainty for insight. His criticism of commercial filmmaking can sound categorical, and readers may reasonably question the breadth of some of his judgments. Nevertheless, the passages are most valuable as statements of an aesthetic ethic: political seriousness must find an expressive form, rather than merely announce a position.

One of the collection's most revealing discussions concerns *Ajantrik* (1958), in which the relationship between a driver and his aging automobile becomes the vehicle for reflections on human attachment and modern technology. Ghatak's commentary helps explain why an apparently eccentric premise could sustain a complex emotional world. The mechanical object does not function simply as

an emblem of progress or alienation; it becomes part of the character's everyday experience and emotional investment. This account is especially engaging because it links an artistic choice to the filmmaker's larger understanding of cinema as a medium capable of discovering feeling in unexpected materials.

Elsewhere, the essays on experimental cinema, documentary, color, and sound show Ghatak at his most attentive to the capacities of the medium. Experimentation, in his account, is not novelty for its own sake but an attempt to extend what film can express. His reflections on sound are particularly suggestive for viewers of his work, in which musical and sonic disruptions frequently exceed the immediate demands of dialogue or plot. The discussion of documentary similarly enlarges the volume's conception of realism. Recording the world is not an artistically neutral act; decisions about framing, rhythm, juxtaposition, and perspective shape the realities a film can disclose.

The section on cinematic subjectivity sharpens this argument. Ghatak describes the camera as an instrument guided by the maker's perception rather than a transparent observer of events. The image may derive from a physical reality, but the completed film is formed through choices about what to record and how to transform the recording through editing and sound. For Ghatak, neither the presence of the camera nor the factual nature of an image removes the filmmaker's responsibility for its meaning. This view also clarifies the collection's refusal to separate cinematic technique from the questions of life, history, and political commitment that animate his filmmaking.

The interviews give the book a different rhythm. Less programmatic than the essays, they trace his movement from writing to theater and then to film as a search for more immediate forms of public communication. Ghatak discusses filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, the importance of international cinema, and the collaborative but highly planned nature of filmmaking. His distinction between film and live theater is especially revealing: theatrical performance continues in front of an audience, whereas cinema asks the director to organize many elements before the completed work is seen. Such observations make the volume useful not only to scholars of Ghatak but also to students of directing and film form.

The collection also preserves contradictions that should not be smoothed away. Ghatak's political commitments coexist with a resistance to treating cinema as straightforward propaganda. He is drawn to the possibility of reaching a large audience, yet distrusts commercial conventions that might secure that audience. He calls for fidelity to lived experience while celebrating stylization and subjective transformation. These are not necessarily signs of intellectual inconsistency; they register the difficult artistic problems faced by a filmmaker for whom the social world could never be divorced from questions of form. At times, however, his judgments are delivered as sweeping assertions rather than sustained arguments, and the interviews do not always resolve the tensions they introduce.

As a book, *Cinema and I* is therefore more compelling as an intellectual and artistic self-portrait than as a systematic introduction to film theory. Its relatively brief pieces range from direct reflections

on particular films to broader statements about art, documentary, acting, and filmmaking. A reader unfamiliar with Bengali cultural history or the circumstances of Ghatak's production career may want fuller contextual explanation than a collection of writings and interviews can provide. The volume is strongest when read alongside the films themselves, where the practical consequences of his ideas become visible and audible. Its conversational directness is an advantage, even when the positions it records invite argument.

The enduring value of this collection is its portrait of a filmmaker thinking in public about what cinema owes to experience. Ghatak emerges neither as a detached theorist nor as an artist whose political convictions can explain every formal decision. His writing returns instead to the uneasy encounter between individual vision and shared historical life. For readers of Indian cinema, *Cinema and I* provides a valuable point of entry into that encounter; for a wider film-studies audience, it is a reminder that debates about form, audience, and artistic responsibility are inseparable from the social circumstances in which films are made.

REFERENCES

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