



History, Affect and Memory in Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*

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Abstract

This article reconsiders Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* (1965) through the relationships among landscape, melodrama, memory, and the historical aftermath of Partition. Rather than placing the film within a rigid opposition between classical montage and modernist duration, it examines how camera movement, spatial repetition, sound, and narrative coincidence produce an affective experience of history. Close readings of the abandoned wartime airstrip, the Subarnarekha River, railway crossings, and scenes of delayed recognition show how Ghatak binds private suffering to caste hierarchy, displacement, gendered precarity, and the unfulfilled promises of postcolonial nationhood. The article argues that melodramatic coincidence becomes a means of revealing structural violence, while recurring landscapes retain and reactivate personal and collective memory. Ghatak's epic form thereby complicates the presumed opposition between realism and melodrama and expands how cinema can make historical experience perceptible.

Keywords: Ritwik Ghatak; *Subarnarekha* (1965); Partition cinema; Bengali cinema; melodrama; cinematic space; cultural memory; affect; Indian cinema; landscape; montage



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Introduction

Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* (Ghatak, 1965), filmed in 1962 and released three years later, begins in a Calcutta refugee camp in 1948, shortly after Partition. It follows Ishwar Chakraborty, his younger sister Sita, and Abhiram, a boy from a marginalized caste whom Ishwar takes into his care after the boy is separated from his mother. Hoping to escape deprivation, Ishwar leaves the camp with the children and accepts a position at a factory near the Subarnarekha River, offered by his former classmate Rambilas. The move promises stability but distances him from the collective struggle of the refugees. As Sita and Abhiram grow up, they fall in love. Ishwar opposes their relationship because of Abhiram's caste background and arranges another marriage for Sita. She instead elopes with Abhiram, and they struggle to survive in Calcutta, where their son Binu is born. After Abhiram dies, poverty drives Sita toward sex work. Meanwhile, Ishwar, embittered by estrangement and guilt, travels to Calcutta with his old friend Haraprasad and visits a brothel, only to discover that the woman he has approached is his sister. Sita takes her own life, and Ishwar is subsequently implicated in her death. In the final sequence, he returns with Binu to the landscape of the river, again confronting the unfulfilled promise of a new home.

Ghatak's films have often been described as epic melodramas that draw on myth, archetype, and the juxtaposition of images (Rajadhyaksha, 1982).¹ In *Subarnarekha*, montage carries a tragic irony that connects apparently private events with collective history. This formal practice also complicates influential distinctions in film theory. Bazin (1958/1967) contrasts filmmakers who place their faith in the image with those who place it in reality; montage figures prominently in the first tendency, while deep focus and the long take help explain the second. Bordwell et al. (1985) describe a historically specific classical Hollywood system in which editing, staging, and narration serve causal intelligibility. Neither account, however, should be treated as an exhaustive classification of cinematic possibilities. Ghatak draws on montage, duration, and melodramatic excess in ways that resist a simple opposition between classical and modern film form.

Subarnarekha is melodramatic in its reversals, separations, recognitions, and coincidences. Yet melodrama does not withdraw from history into private emotion. Rather, it makes history perceptible as an affective and social force. This article argues that Ghatak transforms melodramatic coincidence into a historical structure: events that appear accidental acquire a terrible inevitability through the continuing effects of Partition, displacement, caste and gender hierarchies, poverty, and the disappointed promises of the postcolonial nation. Coincidence is not merely an implausible alternative to realism. It becomes a way of representing how history returns within intimate life.

Melodrama or Historical and Affective Realism

Film criticism has often contrasted melodrama's emotional intensity and heightened narrative situations with realism's claims to observation and plausibility.² Such a contrast has particular force in histories of Indian cinema, where popular regional filmmaking frequently draws on melodramatic conventions, while art and parallel cinema have often been discussed through the language of realism. Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955), for example, became a touchstone in accounts of realist Indian cinema. These traditions, however, are not mutually exclusive, and their histories should not be reduced to a simple opposition between popular excess and artistic restraint.

A contemporary of Ray and Mrinal Sen, Ghatak developed a distinctive cinematic idiom between the 1950s and the 1970s. His films combine the emotional and performative registers of melodrama with an epic sense of collective historical crisis. Rajadhyaksha (1982) identifies this epic dimension as central to Ghatak's engagement with myth and political experience.³ Rather than setting melodrama against realism as a lesser form, Ghatak uses its intensities to expose social relations that more restrained narrative strategies may leave implicit.

Ghatak's cinema consistently makes personal catastrophe inseparable from the condition of post-Partition India. Its displacements, poverty, and violence are not isolated misfortunes; they are shaped by caste, class, and the contradictions of a state that promised development and social transformation. His films interrogate the uneven realization of postcolonial modernity,

particularly where Brahmanical and feudal hierarchies survive within ostensibly new political institutions. The familial plot becomes one means of making those historical contradictions visible.

In “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” Bazin (1958/1967) distinguishes two tendencies: those placing their faith in the image and those placing it in reality.⁴ His account associates montage with the active construction of meaning through the relation between images, while deep-focus composition and longer takes can preserve ambiguity within the filmed event. This is an illuminating historical distinction, but Bazin does not make editing and realism categorically incompatible. For the present argument, the question is how a filmmaker makes duration, juxtaposition, and spatial organization work together in a specific historical setting.

Duration is equally important to the history of modernist cinematic form. Tarkovsky (1989), in *Sculpting in Time*, understands film rhythm through the pressure of time experienced within the shot, rather than through editing alone.⁵ His reflections are often invoked when distinguishing the sustained temporal experience of a long take from more visibly constructed montage. Yet the difference is not absolute: duration also exists within edited sequences, just as a long take may be formally expressive rather than neutral. These terms become most useful when brought back to the particular movement and sound of a film.

Bordwell et al. (1985) analyze classical Hollywood as a historically organized system of narrative causality, spatial continuity, performance, and stylistic norms.⁶ Editing is central to this system, but the classical style cannot be equated with montage as an end in itself. Conversely, the presence of a long take does not automatically make a film modernist. The terms “classical” and “modern” describe influential tendencies; they should not become standards by which all other filmmaking practices must be measured.

A close reading of *Subarnarekha* suggests an aesthetic formation that unsettles this familiar opposition. Ghatak’s epic melodrama mobilizes pans, extended views of landscape, abrupt cuts, music, and coincidence to produce a form of political knowledge grounded in feeling. Its stylistic operations differ from both the dominant realist models associated with European modernism and conventional expectations of the melodramatic plot. I focus particularly on the film’s landscapes and recurring spaces, which are neither neutral backgrounds nor merely symbols of a ruined modernity. They bear traces of war, colonialism, displacement, and hopes of settlement. The river, abandoned airstrip, railway, and derelict house become sites where personal memory encounters historical violence. The argument is not that Ghatak supersedes realism, but that his cinematic treatment of land, memory, and affect expands what historical realism can mean.

The way the film moves between these sites is as significant as the sites themselves. A

railway crossing can promise access to a new home at one point and return as a threshold of dispossession at another. The ruin of an airfield can sustain a child's game while retaining traces of wartime violence that the child does not understand. The river promises continuity and beauty, even as the family history unfolding beside it is marked by separation. In each instance, the film gives historical meaning to a location through the relation between an image and its previous or subsequent appearances. Such formal recurrence offers a challenge to the assumption that memory is primarily expressed in dialogue or retrospective narration. Ghatak lets the spectator remember images, rhythms, and spatial relationships that the characters may themselves be unable to recover. This is a cinematic politics of history embedded in the experience of seeing again.

Space, Landscape, and Land in *Subarnarekha*

From the opening sequence, Ghatak's camera movements connect human figures to their historical setting. The film begins with the Indian flag fluttering among trees before the camera pans downward to a gathering in the refugee camp. Haraprasad speaks at the opening of a school and encourages the children to sing "*Vande Mataram*." Yet the promise of national renewal is interrupted by the coercive removal of vulnerable refugees. The pan binds patriotic ceremony to the material insecurity of those the nation has ostensibly welcomed.

Space in Ghatak is never merely a location occupied by characters. When Ishwar visits a newspaper office to place a missing-person notice for Abhiram's mother, the scene continues

after his immediate business has ended. A news dispatch announces the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The journalists' reaction is followed by the shock spreading through the refugee camp and the cry "Hey Ram." The scene moves from an individual search for a missing mother to a collective experience of betrayal, making the newspaper office a junction between intimate and national histories.

The newspaper office is revealing because the camera does not regard the completion of Ishwar's errand as the endpoint of the sequence. Instead, it remains among workers whose attention is redirected by the news. The shift is subtle but crucial: an institutional space devoted to recording people's losses becomes the place where another loss is communicated to the nation. Ishwar's missing-person notice and the announcement of Gandhi's death occupy different scales of experience, but their juxtaposition refuses to keep them apart. The individual does not stand outside political history, just as a major political event has no meaning independent of the people receiving it. The cries in the camp make the announcement social and embodied. What matters formally is the relay from printed message to voice and from one space to another. Ghatak converts a piece of public information into a collective reaction without requiring a single character to explain the connection.

The house of Ishwar's former classmate Rambilas likewise becomes a site of critique. The wealthy factory owner inhabits a spacious mansion filled with devotional display, music,

and carefully arranged objects, including a golden Buddha figure. His offer of employment promises Ishwar a route out of refugee poverty. Yet the mansion's abundance also exposes the distance between a newly privileged elite and the displaced people whose futures remain insecure.

A subsequent transition makes this relation between movement and place especially vivid. After Rambilas leaves Ishwar near a construction site, Ishwar's moving figure dissolves into the image of a tree. Baul music accompanies a downward pan to a singer in the refugee camp, followed by a wider view of the settlement. The dissolve and the sound transition refuse a clean separation between Ishwar's new prospects and the world he is leaving behind.

The landscape begins to organize the story as Ishwar, Sita, and Abhiram arrive at Chhatimpur. An employee escorts them toward the factory and their new home, while a wide shot situates their passage across railway tracks. The crossing suggests arrival and possibility, but its visual emphasis on distance also recalls earlier displacements. Settlement is presented less as a completed journey than as another crossing whose outcome remains uncertain.

The children's encounter with their new surroundings sharpens this ambiguity. Abhiram, still distressed by his separation from his mother, cries, while Sita discovers the garden and invites Ishwar to share her excitement. The landscape is therefore registered through contrasting emotions: loss and anticipation coexist within the same space.

Later, the arid terrain and the thin ribbon of the river complicate the hopeful account of the place offered to the children on their arrival. The long views of land do not simply illustrate a setting. They allow the promise of home to be measured against an environment already marked by scarcity and historical abandonment.

Mr. Mukherjee tells the children that a nearby airstrip was built by the British during World War II. Soon afterward, Ishwar announces that Abhiram will be sent away for his education. Upset by the coming separation, Sita runs toward the abandoned airstrip, followed by Abhiram. The sequence brings the children's play into contact with the remnants of imperial war. Rajadhyaksha (1982) describes this disjunction between their innocence and the violent history of the ruins:

The silence that grips us now, as we absorb through the stilled atmosphere the ruins of an airstrip from which bombing missions once took off, is pierced by little Abhiram imitating an aeroplane. The fragile innocence of the children who relate at one level so strongly to the milieu and at another are so ignorant of the violent history of the decrepit structures, suddenly turns frighteningly ominous. (p. 100)

The sequence begins with Sita and Abhiram running toward the former runway as a train crosses the background. The children occupy a small portion of a frame otherwise dominated by the open ground. The camera surveys the dried landscape and the remains of aircraft and buildings, allowing the abandoned military infrastructure to acquire a presence independent of the immediate dialogue. The expansive framing places their conversation about Abhiram's departure within a setting whose earlier violence they cannot fully understand.

A tracking view of the runway is accompanied by the sound of an aircraft taking off, temporarily bringing the airstrip's military past into the present. In a comparatively sustained shot, Abhiram imitates an airplane and runs away from the camera while Sita remains nearer the foreground. Their playful exchange about "flying ships" and airplanes occupies only part of the image; the runway stretches behind them. Music shifts the scene's mood between apprehension and delight. At a ruined building, the children's laughter is juxtaposed with the decaying structure before Mukherjee calls them back. The following sequence returns to Sita walking and singing across the land, until an unexpectedly costumed figure interrupts her song. These changes in sound, scale, and movement make the landscape an active medium of historical recollection rather than a scenic backdrop.

The airstrip sequence is also a particularly strong demonstration of the coexistence of incompatible times. The runway belongs to the infrastructure of a past war; for the children it can become a space for play, imagined flight, and a promise of return after Abhiram's schooling. The audience can recognize both meanings at once. The sound of an aircraft momentarily restores a technological and military activity no longer visible in the empty landscape. Abhiram's imitation then redirects that sound toward an embodied childish fantasy. Neither register cancels the other. The passage from ruin to game and back again produces an uneasy experience of historical continuity. The children's movement across an apparently open horizon also contains a troubling irony: they can traverse the land, but they cannot determine

the separations that adults and institutions impose. The striking emptiness of the frame thus does more than signify desolation. It measures the disproportion between a child's immediate freedom of movement and the larger structures that govern where that child may live.

The frightening figure is a poor man dressed as a mythic demon to earn money. Manager Babu reassures Sita that he means no harm and questions the man, who explains that he frightened her unintentionally. The encounter turns apparent supernatural danger into a glimpse of material deprivation. Ritual imagery is inseparable from the economic precariousness of the people inhabiting this postcolonial landscape.

As Manager Babu and Sita walk away, he tells her a version of the *Ramayana* centered on Sita, the daughter of the earth who ultimately returns to it. The tale unfolds while the two figures move through the terrain, linking the visual presence of land to an inherited narrative of loss and return.

This brief exchange acquires several resonances. Manager Babu's version privileges Sita's experience rather than a heroic masculine vantage point. His own estrangement from his daughter lends a personal undertone to the story. At the same time, it anticipates the film's Sita, whose marriage to Abhiram will challenge the caste boundaries enforced by her brother. Myth does not stand outside the history of the place; it becomes another register through which the film anticipates its violence.

The invocation of Sita in the *Ramayana* gives this relation between place and narrative an additional dimension. It introduces an older cultural story into a location already marked by colonial infrastructure and post-Partition poverty. Rather than supplying a timeless explanation of the film's events, the myth is refracted through the circumstances of the people who tell and hear it. The mention of a daughter returning to the earth intersects with images of the ground across which the younger Sita walks. The echo is at once affectionate and ominous. We can read it in retrospect as a structure of anticipation, but its force depends on the film's refusal to announce a single symbolic meaning when the story is first told. The land holds the possibility of childhood attachment even as the viewer gradually comes to see it as a site of separation. This layering makes an important qualification to any treatment of Ghatak's epic form as a mere retrieval of familiar national myth: the inherited story is transformed by the displaced lives to which it is addressed.

The sequence suggests why the category of "background" is inadequate for Ghatak's treatment of space. In *Subarnarekha*, land and landscape help determine the relations between characters, rather than merely providing information about where the action occurs. The visual return to the ruined airstrip, the river, and the railway unsettles the assumption that spatial organization exists only to support immediate narrative causality. These places connect the personal and political, the historical and affective. There is no simple narrative of homecoming without the land through which its promises and losses are made visible.

The camera's sweeping pans repeatedly locate people within the landscape. In one sequence, an extended view of rocks moves toward the Subarnarekha River and then reveals a seated woman singing. The film cuts to Ishwar watching his now-grown sister Sita, before returning from the river to her figure. Song continues across the edits, joining the human voice to the river and the surrounding ground. Movement, duration, and sound collectively produce the space of remembrance.

A later sequence establishes the romance between Abhiram and Sita after his return from college. They walk into the sal forest and sit among the trees, initially with their backs turned toward the camera. The staging withholds a conventional frontal romantic exchange. Abhiram discusses his writing, and their voices soften as intimacy develops. Only gradually do closer views disclose their faces. A circular camera movement among the trees makes the surrounding landscape part of the emotional scene, rather than an inert setting against which dialogue unfolds.

The song "Aaj ki ananda" celebrates the day's happiness as the camera circles toward the riverbank. Sita sings while Abhiram listens nearby; another pan passes from the couple to the boats on the water. The sound and spatial movement extend their intimacy beyond the two figures, even as the viewer knows that this attachment is vulnerable to the social prohibitions awaiting them.

In the forest sequence, the camera's reluctance to establish the lovers through a conventional frontal exchange matters as much as the eventual close-ups. Their bodies initially share the composition with trees that restrict and open the view. The gradual change in distance alters the spectator's relation to their privacy; what begins as an observation of two figures in a place becomes an experience of intimacy emerging from that place. The moving camera does not simply disclose emotion already contained in dialogue. It organizes the movement of attention among faces, foliage, the river, and the people passing on the water. Music extends the encounter beyond what the lovers can speak aloud. The scene thus demonstrates a recurring characteristic of the film: affect is neither located wholly inside a character nor projected onto scenery as a decorative metaphor. It emerges across voice, bodily position, camera movement, and environment. The landscape remains implicated in the social prohibition that will later force the couple away from it.

Revisiting Spaces

Ghatak also returns to earlier locations to activate memory and foreknowledge. After Ishwar becomes increasingly isolated, Haraprasad visits him, appearing almost like a specter.⁷ Together they revisit a deserted building where Abhiram and Sita had played as children and later met as lovers. The site now gathers multiple temporal layers. It recalls their intimacy and the caste hierarchy that made that intimacy precarious, while the building's material ruin also

evokes the violence of war and colonial occupation. Its significance arises through repetition: the same place is seen again under the pressure of changed circumstances.

The film's ending offers an especially powerful return. Ishwar and his nephew Binu arrive at the railway tracks, where a passing train echoes the framing of Ishwar's earlier arrival with Sita and Abhiram. At the station, a letter from Mukherjee tells Ishwar that he has lost his job and the house attached to it. The landscape once associated with a prospective new beginning no longer promises security. The scene cuts between Binu and a close view of the fields. Recognizing the scenery from his mother's stories, Binu recalls her song, which the child Sita had sung in the same place. His memory is inherited rather than directly experienced, and Ishwar responds to it with a mixture of recognition and grief.

Their journey continues along the Subarnarekha, where familiar rocks and views recall the family's first arrival. Binu repeats the story his mother was told about a welcoming home beyond the river, surrounded by hills and butterflies. The river appears again in montage as he asks whether they are going to that promised home. Ishwar answers affirmatively, although the audience knows that the house is no longer theirs. From above, the camera observes the two crossing the terrain; closer views of their feet give way to their figures disappearing beyond a slope. The ending preserves Binu's hope without resolving Ishwar's dispossession.

This ending makes the film's politics of memory especially acute because Binu's recollection has been transmitted through his mother's words and songs. He does not recover a past he lived in the same manner as Ishwar; he carries an image of home assembled from someone else's account. The revisited location therefore contains memories that belong to different generations and are not equally reliable as promises about the future. For Ishwar, the path is marked by a failed search for security; for Binu, it remains the place of an anticipated discovery. The spectator is made to occupy both positions. The repeated train and river compositions have accumulated an irony that the child cannot yet recognize. In this sense, the last walk is neither simply hopeful nor simply desolate. The image of bodies continuing to move creates a fragile temporal opening, while the knowledge of dispossession prevents any easy reconciliation. Landscape becomes the medium in which the aspiration for home survives its own historical defeat.

These returns render space inseparable from historical time. Places hold the memory of childhood, love, forced migration, and the promise of settlement; they acquire new meanings when later characters move through them. Repeated songs and musical phrases intensify this process, carrying an earlier moment into a later image. Land thus becomes not only a geographical setting but a medium through which personal and collective histories are experienced together.

Coincidence and Irony: Heightened Affect in *Subarnarekha*

Coincidence is a central device in *Subarnarekha*, as in much melodrama. Instead of treating it as a failure of realist probability, Ghatak builds the film's most consequential recognitions around apparently unlikely meetings. The results are not arbitrary twists but encounters in which the accumulated pressures of history are suddenly exposed.⁸ These moments intensify the relation between private suffering and social structures, showing how the logic of Partition, caste, and poverty can be made emotionally legible through narrative chance.

Two moments of recognition are especially important. Ghatak himself addressed the criticism that *Subarnarekha* relies excessively on coincidence. In his account, the brother's arrival at his sister's room as a client is the event around which he developed coincidence as a formal principle:

I have often had to face the criticism that *Subarnarekha* has made too much use of "coincidences." No doubt there are far too many of them in the film. But the central event, the brother ending up at the doorstep of his sister in his search for paid sex, is such a great coincidence that I thought of using coincidence itself as a form in this film. (Ghatak, 2015, p. 19)

The first recognition takes place at the railway station, where Ishwar hears that a woman traveling among refugees is near death. Abhiram has gone there independently, shortly after Ishwar began to suspect his relationship with Sita. Rambilas has also warned Ishwar that Abhiram's family background may complicate the proposed marriage. At the station, Abhiram recognizes the dying woman as his mother, whom he has long mourned, just before she dies.

For him, the encounter briefly restores a lost connection; for Ishwar, it publicly confirms the caste background he fears. The same coincidence therefore delivers both intimate recognition and social exclusion.

Montage gives the station scene its force. A boy swinging from a rope is intercut with Abhiram's arrival, a grieving companion beside the dying woman, Ishwar's approach, and the surrounding crowd. Abhiram's recognition is mediated through a blurred point-of-view image that gradually resolves as he cries "Ma." The reactions of Ishwar and Mukherjee register the social consequences of this encounter. The sequence returns to the swinging child and the passing train. These images link childhood, the lost mother, and the precarious mobility of refugees; editing brings an earlier absence into the present at the moment when its caste implications become unavoidable.

The second coincidence occurs when Ishwar, intoxicated and despairing, enters a room in a Calcutta brothel and finds Sita. The sequence is again structured through montage and delayed recognition. Sita prepares herself before a mirror; a hand pushes open the door and Ishwar enters. From his unsteady perspective, Sita appears out of focus. Rapid close views of her eyes and the object she reaches for precede the fatal act. Blood appears on Ishwar's clothes; a musical instrument falls, objects shake, and the image shifts between darkness, his staggering figure, and the now sharply visible face of Sita. The cry "Hey Ram" links this private

catastrophe to an earlier invocation of Gandhi's assassination.⁹ A rising camera movement finally diminishes Ishwar within the surrounding darkness. Editing, sound, focus, and performance make recognition both sudden and almost unbearable.

Rajadhyaksha (1982) relates the sequence's expressive scale to folk-performance traditions, including Kathakali:

There is an extreme close up of Seeta's eyes, a shot of the scythe raised, sudden blood, a shot of only her hands as Ishwar is seen in reflection in a mirror, a total silhouette of Ishwar holding the same weapon, and then only spots of light against the black screen starkly isolating Ishwar's body. This is an expressionism that has almost certainly been drawn from the gigantic imagery of the folk forms. (p. 114)

The two coincidences are linked by the formal act of recognition. The blurred image of Abhiram's face resolves before his dying mother; the blurred view of Sita becomes sharp only after irreversible violence. In both cases, focus and montage make the arrival of knowledge inseparable from loss. A chance encounter thereby exposes more than an individual's predicament. It reveals how caste hierarchy, displacement, and gendered poverty shape the conditions under which people can recognize one another. Heightened affect is not separate from the film's political argument; it is one of the means through which that argument becomes perceptible.

The political implications of recognition also differ for the two figures. Abhiram's encounter with his mother discloses a stigmatized family history in public, before the gaze of employers and guardians whose decisions will shape his future. Sita's final encounter, by

contrast, is inseparable from the collapse of the domestic protection that Ishwar believed he was securing when he refused her marriage. The film's melodramatic reversals reveal how an apparently protective authority can become destructive when it is organized around caste respectability and the control of a woman's choice. Neither tragedy is simply a punishment for an individual error. In each case, the narrative makes an intimate relationship vulnerable to collective distinctions of status and value. The shift between blurred and clear images is therefore not only a device for suspense. Recognition reveals a social truth that the characters have tried to keep outside their arrangements for life.

Coincidence thus becomes an articulation of historical determination. Ishwar does not simply stumble upon Sita by arbitrary chance: the encounter has been prepared by migration, poverty, gendered vulnerability, family estrangement, and his despair. The spectator experiences it as shocking because recognition is withheld, yet the conditions leading to it have long been visible. Melodrama holds accident and structural pressure together. It relocates narrative causality from isolated individual choices to the historical circumstances that narrow those choices.

Realism and melodrama consequently need not be treated as mutually exclusive in Ghatak. The film's improbable encounters make structural violence visible within the most intimate relationships. Montage creates an affective field in which different temporalities

coexist: childhood and adulthood, independence and displacement, love and caste prohibition, recognition and death. Ghatak's historical melodrama is not a transparent reproduction of society. It is a cinematic construction through which history returns as feeling, memory, and loss.

Conclusion

In *Subarnarekha*, coincidence, heightened tragedy, and the recurring visualization of land work together to make history, affect, and memory inseparable. These operations complicate rigid divisions between a "classical" cinema organized around continuity and a "modern" cinema organized around duration or ambiguity. Such categories remain valuable when used as specific historical descriptions, but they cannot exhaust the aesthetic practices of regional or national cinemas. Ghatak's use of montage, sound, and landscape makes another experience of time and space available: one marked by displacement and the unfinished aftermath of Partition.

By transforming coincidence into a way of perceiving historical conditions, Ghatak gives melodrama an epistemological force. The film does not require a choice between emotion and analysis, or between narrative excess and realism. Affect becomes a mode of historical understanding, and knowledge arrives through painful recognition. *Subarnarekha* ends without the recovery of a lost home: two figures move through a landscape that carries memories the younger of them has inherited. This unresolved movement is perhaps Ghatak's most compelling response to the question of cinematic form. History is neither a fixed image nor uninterrupted

duration; it is a relation among bodies, spaces, sounds, and memories that continues to return.

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ENDNOTES:

Editor's note (additional scholarship): Biswas (2021) offers a directly relevant reading of *Subarnarekha* as an exploration of homelessness, representation, and the relation between bodies and surrounding space. Banerjee (2023), in *CINEJ*, examines cultural memory, Brahmanical traditions, caste, and the politics of Ghatak's Bengali refugee imaginary. Dass (2017) considers the theatricality and affective force of Ghatak's film form. Sarkar (2009) situates Ghatak's films within the cinematic mourning of Partition, and Ghatak's collected writings on cinema (2000) show how he understood myth, epic, and folk forms in his own practice. Brooks (1976) offers a foundational account of melodrama as a mode that makes moral and historical forces legible through heightened feeling. Emmanuel and Rego (2026), in *CINEJ*, compare how Ray and Sen represent the Bengal famine of 1943 and the tension between emotional engagement and political accountability, a useful companion to the present essay's attention to how Bengali cinema renders historical catastrophe. These approaches complement the present essay's focus on landscape, montage, myth, and historical experience.

¹ Rajadhyaksha (1982, p. 57) describes the epic in Ghatak as a form in tension with myth, rather than a simple repetition of mythic structures. The epic registers the struggle through which inherited myth becomes available for critical representation.

² Vasudevan (2011) considers the realism–melodrama relationship central to the aesthetic and political history of Indian cinema.

³ Gledhill (1987) similarly treats melodrama's stylistic excess and narrative disjunction as resources for investigating contradictions in film's ideological and aesthetic organization (p. 6).

⁴ Bazin's "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" appears in *What Is Cinema?*, volume 1 (Bazin, 1958/1967, pp. 23–40).

⁵ Tarkovsky's reflections on duration and rhythm appear in *Sculpting in Time* (Tarkovsky, 1989). See also Totaro (1992).

⁶ See Bordwell et al. (1985) for the integrated norms of classical Hollywood narration and film style.

⁷ Haraprasad describes himself as a ghost when he reaches Ishwar's house during Ishwar's crisis.

⁸ Landy (1991, p. 18) associates melodrama with a challenge to the epistemological language of empiricism and rationality.

⁹ “Hey Ram” recurs in the film and has long been associated in public memory with Gandhi’s last words, although the historical attribution is disputed. Its repetition links Sita’s death to national violence without establishing the utterance as an uncontested historical fact.