

Paper

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The Star Re/Disfigured

Abstract: Satyajit Ray's cinematic and literary canon has time and again returned to themes of performance and disfiguration. In some of his short stories, the drama of performance and transfiguration escalates further as the performing body suddenly starts acting awry by disavowing the agency of the performer. In this essay, I would like to read *Nayak* (Ray, 1966) as an emblematic text in this regard, as it not only embeds these issues by focusing on the predicament of a famous film star but also devises various strategies to dramatise it through the star's performing body. I shall attempt to contextualise this point in relation to the debates on creative labour, authorship, and agency of a film actor and see how the notion of contested authorship might inform our reading of the film. Instead of delineating the authorship of the film's star-performer, namely Uttamkumar, which has been a much-debated issue since the very inception of the film (Chowdhury 2012), my aim is to show what bearing the authorship debate might have had on the presentation of the performing body itself, in the film.

The Star Re/Disfigured¹

A fake moustache?... Why does it not come off if it is a fake? A moustache stuck with spirit gum should come off easily with a single pull- then why?... This moustache does not seem fake at all! It has grown on his skin! There is no sign of glue on this moustache!... This wig, too, does not look like a wig- is this his own hair? Even the four-day-old stubble, each of which he has planted on his cheek- even that does not show any sign of artificiality!

-Satyajit Ray, *Bahurupi* (1984, 383)

A significant part of Satyajit Ray's artistic career consists of his literary works. He wrote numerous short stories, novelettes, rhymes, essays and translations in his lifetime- some of which have been canonised as outstanding specimens of Bengali literature and translated into other languages. Many of his short stories focus on ordinary, middle-class, city-dwelling men and display remarkable attention to detail to render the milieu realistically. But they also dramatise these familiar settings with incidents of deception, performance, and

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misrecognition. Stories like *Bahurupi*, *Bhuto*, *Manpatra*, *Spotlight*, *Dhappa*, *Firstclass kamra*, *Bhakta*, etc., feature characters who take pleasure in a disguise or have no choice except to maintain the identity projected on them. In some of them, the drama of performance and transfiguration escalates further as the performing body suddenly starts acting awry by disavowing the agency of the performer. In *Bahurupi* (2001, 375-384), a camouflage artist's masterful disguise suddenly begins to feel too real, as if it has become an inseparable organic part of his body. In *Bhuto* (2001, 285-293), a ventriloquist's puppet starts speaking for itself, defying the command of its puppeteer; in the horrific climax of the story, it shows signs of life. The performing body succumbs to the character which the performer has been enacting as if the fictional character is trying to become a sovereign and conscious entity, a monstrous being born out of an actor's experiment with her role, which thereafter will jeopardise her very existence.

This concern with performance can also be observed in some of Ray's films- for example, in *Devi* (1960), where the young housewife Daya is forced by her family patriarch to believe that she is an incarnation of the goddess and therefore has to abandon her identity as a housewife and perform as the goddess-incarnate; in *Chiriyakhana* (1967), where the detective goes after a couple of murderers who are hiding in a reformist colony; in the diptych *Kapurush o Mahapurush* (1965), in which either the circumstances or malevolent intentions are reasons why some of the characters have to conceal their true identity (or part of it) from the others; in *Agantuk* (1991, adapted from Ray's own short story, *Atithi*), where the tension arises from the sheer inability of the family members to detect whether the stranger is a con artist or not. The issues of performance and refiguration of the performer become most self-reflexively prominent in *Nayak* (1966), in which the plot is concerned with the predicament of a film star named Arindam Mukherjee (played by the inimitable Bengali star Uttamkumar), whose performative identity of 'a two-dimensional dream figure in shades' (Iyer 2018) suddenly turns out to be an interminable source of crisis for his real being. The centrality of the star as a character in this film brings to the fore the anxiety of losing oneself in the roles being played whenever appearing in public. In this essay, I will attempt to illustrate this point with some examples from the film; I will try to contextualise this point in relation to the issues of creative labour, authorship and agency of the film actor, which have recently become a major concern in the academic discourse of film studies.

***Nayak* (1966)**

Many a time, it is seen that (...) through playing different types of characters, an actor, unbeknownst to herself, has broken through the exterior and gained access to the heart of a character. As she comes out as a wholesome composition of interiority and exteriority, it may happen that the actor would fail to recognise her own self.

-Ahindra Chowdhury, *Chitra o mancher abhinay* (1948, 19)

In an essay published in *Chitrabani* (1948), Ahindra Chowdhury, a veteran theatre and film actor, tried to explain the differences between the coveted ideals of stage and film acting. He expressed deep dissatisfaction with how films of his time routinely adopted typecasting. He observed that the filmmakers were more comfortable casting an actor for a certain type of role that she has previously played with adeptness than spending money and time on moulding her for an atypical role. On the contrary, in theatre, an actor could only excel in their art by losing her body and soul in the character she plays. Chowdhury seems to think that there is no reason why film acting should not go in that direction, where an actor would be allowed to traverse various roles and defamiliarise herself in the process. In Satyajit Ray's *Nayak*, we see an ironic re-casting of this proposition: Arindam, the film star, has been so much ingrained in the character he is playing that he cannot get himself out of its tight grip. Even when he is not on the set, he is inside the character (of a star), and the major existential drama in the film arises from his effort to break through that obstacle. If we think in this line, *Nayak* becomes an exciting commentary on film acting and film stardom, as I shall try to show in this paper.

The train in the film that transports Arindam and his co-passengers from Calcutta to Delhi becomes a stage for individual characters with vested interests to run into each other (often intentionally) and act out different personae: Their behaviour can be distinguished as performances from the fact that as soon as they avert eye-contact or isolate themselves from their interlocutors, perceptible changes seem to occur in gestures and expressions that make us suspect the credibility of their previous utterance. Ray's camera lingers over the surface of the passenger's body, intent on capturing these fleeting expressions: the businessman Haren Bose attempts to be a cordial co-passenger to the Bengali film star for whom he has nothing but moralist spite and condescension; Molly, the wife of a conniving salesman has to play the role of a coy seductress to allure Haren into a business contract; the travelling saint has to play indifferent to the worldly affairs of the next bed couple; and Aditi, the progressive editor of a women's magazine has to appear sociable to her prodding co-passengers. The presence of the star amid this volatile force field is quite emblematic. His charisma remains intact by always keeping up his on-screen star persona during public appearances. One might say that *Nayak* foregrounds as its theme the theory of Erving Goffman, according to whom 'all social life is a kind of performance' (Naremore 1988, 14). Within a social-cultural context, we all play out our roles according to the predetermined codes of convention- of which acting on stage or in the film- an 'exaggerated roleplaying,' as James Naremore puts it- is just an ostentatious extension. To elaborate on how a similar argument emerges in *Nayak*, I have chosen three scenes from the film, which are centred around its protagonist Arindam- played by Uttamkumar, who was arguably the most popular star of Bengali cinema at that time.

Film acting and the Question of Agency

The contemporary academic discourse on film performance considers it a major foray into the interpretation of a film text. Many scholars, such as Richard Dyer, have argued that acting consists of ‘performance signs,’ i.e. gestures, expression, vocalisation etc. (1998, 132-150). They contend that rich and layered performance texts come to exist through the manipulation of these signs. The actor’s craft lies in the projection of a composite of gestures and expressions, which in turn become meaningful in their arrangement with other non-performance elements in the film. Reading films in this respect not only throws light on the actor’s contribution to the richness of textual meaning and disputes the general understanding of screen acting as naturalist or organic but also offers innovative ways of reading films. As Paul McDonald, in his essay titled ‘Why Study Film Acting,’ writes, “analysing film acting will only become a worthwhile and necessary exercise if the significance of the actor can be seen to influence the meaning of the film in some way” (McDonald 2004, 26). Aaron Taylor is one of the scholars whose contribution in recent years has reinvigorated academic interest in film acting; his claims (2012) are somewhat more ambitious than McDonald’s, as he not only argues in favour of viewing performance analysis seriously to understanding how meaning is encoded in film texts but also attempts to identify it as a ‘philosophical assertion.’ ‘An actor’s performance,’ Taylor argues, ‘functions as a special type of performative utterance (i.e., a kind of speech act) in which she establishes her responsibility to the truth of the proposition, the larger evidence, or reasons for which can be provided by the film itself in its entirety (2012, 20). Thus ‘the assertion itself, then, is in support of (the film’s) broader philosophical argument (...), and one that would not have been possible without the contribution of the actor’ (Taylor 2012, 20). Here, Taylor is clearly locating his argument in the burgeoning field of film-philosophy, where films are studied as instances of thinking through sound and image. His major claim is that the individual actor’s choices of gesticulation often facilitate the arguments and propositions processed through the film by bringing it to the awareness of the audience: “This coming-to-awareness is the effect of an actor’s utterance, one that seeks to cause a viewer’s cognition- her consciousness of the film’s particular line of thought- by making this utterance” (2012, 21). The philosophical proposition of the film, in other words, emanates greatly from the actor’s ‘profilmic physical activity’- a combination of gesture, posture, movement, expression and vocalisation that the actor manoeuvres- which Taylor broadly categorises as ‘performative indices.’ His argument has a polemical tenor, which is important for our concern because he insists on crediting the actor for the bodily intelligence that transpires on the screen and makes the philosophical assertion tangible. By making us aware of the actor’s role in our apprehension of the film and acknowledging her intentional agency, Taylor is challenging the alleged practice of usurping the performer’s authorship that is pervasive in academic and non-academic film discourses, whereby film performance is often taken, without any second thought, as a result, affected by the director, screenwriter, or producer (Heath 1981, Riis 2009), or is generally studied in terms of social-

cultural history, where the performance becomes a correlative of contemporary upheavals in society and culture [here, Taylor is particularly critical of Dyer (1998)]. In such discussions, the actor's body becomes more like an automaton that cannot but act out the instructions programmed into it. An actor's conscious contribution to the magnification of a film's object is routinely undermined or deliberately ignored in these discussions. Taylor demonstrates his argument by invoking Marilyn Monroe's acting in her first scene as Sugar Kowalczyk in Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* (1959) (2012, 22-29). Here, Taylor suggests that the self-referentiality that emanates from Monroe's performance should be attributed to her canny understanding of the audience's expectation from her star-persona, which has accrued a solid iconography across various previous film appearances and other mediated public images. Her willingness to play with the assortment of gestures that have come to be associated with her star persona not only enriches the scene with a ludic sensibility- which carries a critical awareness of the meticulously constructed femininity that her images have refined- but also initiates an argument on the 'realities of feminine experience' that the film then carries on. Here, it is Monroe herself, who intentionally manoeuvres the performance indices (gestures, expression, voice, etc.) to activate a range of connotations in the sequence, and, to a great extent, her choices gain meaning from the larger discourse about the instability of gender, femininity and stardom, and filter these references into the film.

My point in this essay is not to identify the autonomous impression of *Nayak's* actors. Nor is it my intention to determine how an actor's performance facilitates the film's existence as a thinking entity. Rather, I want to show how this issue of agency (a contentious one in academic, especially auteurist and counter-auteurist film discourse) is an object that the film seems to be interested in. My primary aim is not to scale the authorship of performance in the film and then identify what an ideal division of authorial labour should look like (for an extensive discussion on *Nayak's* 'dual authorship', see Dey 2021). Instead, I will enquire into the film's awareness of this issue. I propose that there is a distinct possibility of discovering a running argument in *Nayak* that enfolds the film around themes of self-expression and performance.

Throughout the film, almost all the characters seem to be performing one role or another. The star's predicament gains more emphasis because his incessant role-playing in public defines his identity as a star, and it emerges as a source of anxiety for his real self, as the latter is continuously under threat of getting dissolved by the shifting registers of the star-identity. He cannot afford any break between the two to retain his status as a star. On the contrary, it is expected that he would seamlessly blend in the star persona whenever in public, and his real self should look not so different from the star identity.

Naturalist Acting and the Star System

This is analogous to the general principle of naturalist acting, whose proponents favour an acting style that represses the labour involved in crafting a role. The illusion of transparency that the naturalist style endorses, whereby an actor's real self becomes inseparable from her screen identity, seems to have become a major parameter for 'good' acting in the Western realist discourse. Film acting in Classical Hollywood cinema has long been promoted as an actor playing herself. A sharp line was drawn in the critical discourse between the theatrical and cinematic performance, where the latter eventually came to be shorn of all exaggerated emotions, emphatic intonations, and any direct address. It was by disowning the paraphernalia of music-room histrionics, which was rife in cinema's early decades, that classical cinema came to its own. Henry Fonda, the Hollywood star, claimed that he had learned his lesson in film acting when Victor Fleming (his director at the time) accused him of 'mugging': "I then realised that I was giving a stage performance that I had been giving for months in New York'. After that, apparently, Fonda knew that in film acting, 'You do it just like in reality'." (Dyer 1998, 140) Such statements give rise to an assumption that film acting is nothing but playing oneself. With the formation of the star system, the Hollywood publicity press insisted on the identity between stars and the characters they would enact in film after film- without any reference to the conscious artistic input deliberated on set by the actor or the training that she had to undergo. As James Naremore claims in his book on the art of film acting, "a substantial body of intelligent critical writing has described the performances of the classic stars as if they were little more than fictional extensions of the actor's true personalities" (1988, 18). The method acting school, which drew much attention in the 50s, continued with this claim that acting is supposed to be an exercise of the actor's 'real' personality. Lee Strasberg, one of the progenitors of method- training, insisted that an actor does not need to imitate another human being. Instead, she should create a character out of her being by rediscovering the capacities innate to her (Naremore 1988, 18). Strasberg's argument that the actor's role-playing on screen is an extension of her everyday performance in real life seems to bolster the earlier presumptions about the star system instead of contradicting it.

Again, film acting is far from playing oneself and requires intense creative labour, rigorous training, calculated use of bodily motion, gestures, expression, voice etc., which have been stressed in the many scholarly, pedagogic and popular writing on the subject. I invoke this issue here to illustrate the fact that Ray's film seems to suggest an awareness of this discourse. The Ray-Kumar duo undoubtedly encoded this bitter truth of stardom in the film by foregrounding the very phenomenon of performance in the body of the star actor. However, this is one aspect of it. While the stars are conventionally taken as a mirror of their onscreen roles and worshipped, loved, detested, and ridiculed as a result, there is also an active interest on the part of the audience in the inner life of the stars, about their domestic life, wealth, romantic intrigues, illicit activities, etc. As early as in the 1940s, Bengali film magazines like

Roopmancha would often publish short fiction about various dramatic situations in the life of film stars, for example, Narendranath Mitra's *Asamayik* (1944, 66-74), Ajay Bhattacharya's *Nayak* (1944, 85-88), Nirmal Dutta's *Natir Janma* (1948, 27-32) etc. They were published alongside photographs, interviews, biographies, and autobiographies of real film stars of the time. What is common in some of these stories is the motif of fate, the melodramatic turn-of-events that displace an actor from her stellar fame. The drama of accidental success or fall from grace in their imagination seems to be connected with the unpredictable nature of the market and sudden changes in the audience's taste and demand. There is a suggestion that dwelling on such fictional 'behind-the-scenes' details has the potential to reveal a dissonance between the star's screen appearance and her real life, and this tension between the real and reel self is counterproductive.

On the one hand, it generates pathos for the star for her tragic haplessness in the face of an overwhelming system; on the other hand, the failure to determine where the real being of the star ends and the reel identity begins plays a significant role in sustaining the enigma of stardom- it reactivates the audience's desire for her. *Nayak* not only dramatises the crisis of identity that the star system and its naturalising tendency entail, thereby generating pathos for the star- but it also mines the desire of the audience to see the 'real star' on screen. In the following sections, I shall try to delve further into this contradiction through a close reading of the performing body in some of the sequences.

Disputing the Transparency: the Star Disfigured

In *Nayak*, we see a double awareness regarding the transparency discourse of film acting that the anecdote about Henry Fonda endorsed. In the film, Arindam is shown to favour a naturalistic style of acting, in which it is believed that the character and the actor, enmeshed with one another, emerge as one, and there is no expressive decoherence apparently, that might reveal a rupture between the two entities. Arindam's confrontation with the theatrical style boasted by the veteran actor Mukunda Lahiri on the set of his first film; and his idealisation of Paul Muni, Humphry Bogart and Marlon Brando- actors representing three generations in the history of American male stardom- are staged to propose a more contemporary alternative to the traditional stage-inspired acting style, as well as to challenge the claim that actors are mere cogs in the wheels of an enormous apparatus. In the latter case, Arindam's angst is directed against the gross characterisation of cinema as a Taylorist production system that denies any room for self-expression of the actor-artist and imposes a tailor-made persona on her.

I want to bring attention to the penultimate sequence of the film, where the guilt of his past misdeeds crushes Arindam. This sequence also takes away the optimism from the notions of naturalist acting as well as the belief in actor's autonomy that Arindam upheld earlier: while Arindam started his career with the conviction that film actors have an autonomous agency in

enriching the film experience despite the terms and conditions of the system that overwhelms the efforts of self-expression, in the penultimate sequence we see his autonomy totally negated by the sheer absence of any ‘real being’ that is distinct from his star persona. Arindam’s physicality in the aforesaid sequence reveals this. It shows a series of rapid shifts in the performance frame, and the fact of crisis is conveyed as a cumulative effect of each performative assertion.

One may begin with the encounter with Bulbul, the ailing child in Arindam’s coupe. Arindam returns from the diner and seems disconcerted by the recent recapitulations; nonetheless, as he enters his coupe, he is compelled to move into the star role. The role he has to play in front of is that of an affectionate figure, a caring individual, and a surrogate father figure. But Arindam’s expressions appear strained and mannered (fig. 1, 2).

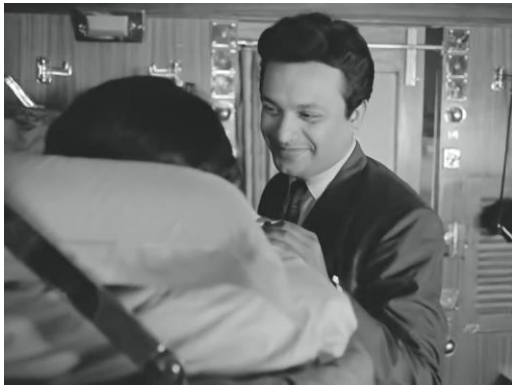


Fig. 1

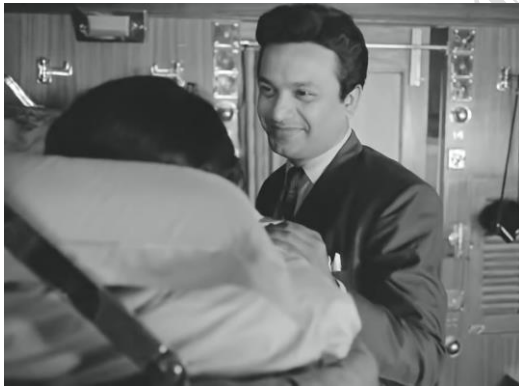


Fig. 2

The smile disappears as soon as he turns away from Bulbul to take sleeping pills. He means to be a slightly stern yet loving elder brother, taking the girls’ concern about his health mock seriously. What interests me is the time Arindam takes before breathing out each answer. As if he is too tired to entertain Bulbul, he cannot glide in and out of the star's jacket with his usual swiftness. As if a gaping hole is opening up between Arindam the person and Arindam the star persona, which is ruining the roleplaying. As Arindam drinks the water, the actor, no longer able to sustain the expressive coherence, breaks the character. He is out of character as soon as the eye contact is gone.

Later in the sequence, as Arindam falls asleep, a surrealist space materialises on screen, which is readily recognisable as Arindam's dream. What is important to note here is the way his body is presented to us: the sequence begins with a dissolve from the electric lamp in the train compartment to a bright spotlight; then it cuts to a low-angle close shot of Arindam- his charming face is warped and almost defamiliarised because of the choice of a wide-angle lens (fig. 3). Arindam is illuminated with a bright spotlight and an oddly thick layer of makeup. A hand holding a light meter makes a brief appearance, and the instruction of an invisible director ('action') is heard. These details give us the impression that Arindam's dream begins on a film set. The space is littered with fragments of past events. Various cues from earlier sequences and flashbacks make fleeting appearances. The baritone voice of his hostile co-actor; fading echo of workers' sloganeering; reverberating cackle of a mysterious woman with whom Arindam had a strange nocturnal encounter; enormous film banners; the restaurant/club where a scandalous brawl took place the night before- all these spills into the impossible dark space where Arindam is wandering listlessly. The figure of Arindam belittled against the magnified image of himself on an oversized film banner (fig. 4), the thick layer of makeup on his face, and the scattered fragments associated with film sets, emphasise Arindam's growing anxiety and unease regarding his star persona. The defamiliarisation of his face in his dream reasserts the film's underlying concern.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

After waking up from the disturbing nightmare, Arindam looks distraught. He goes to the bathroom, drinks a bottle of alcohol, and then moves into the role of a boorish drunken brawler that will escalate the ruin he wants to bring upon his star persona. He turns toward the

next cabin, where Jogesh, the ageing critic, is about to ravage a chicken leg. Seeing Arindam's face bobbing in the narrow opening of the sliding door, his hand stays suspended at a distance from his mouth, and the bone does not reach his parted lips. Arindam groans out a love song, "*Jodi pranosakha na dile dyakha.*" The devilish grin on his face turns the love song into a mockery of romantic sentimentality that commercial films have tried to reassert time and again. After two lines, the song gives way to a peal of guttural laughter, which sends nausea up the older man's nose. In doing so, Arindam stages a parody of his romantic roles in films, albeit in an unpleasant manner (fig. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

The immediate next beat is an encounter with the little girl who is already in the passage, inspecting Arindam cracking up in his drunken dizzy spell. Realising that he has gone too far and terrorised the girl, Arindam tries to restrain himself and revert to his star role by restoring his charming smile (fig. 7). But it is useless. The smile on Arindam's face only serves to break the stupefaction of the girl, and she runs straight to her cabin. The smile on his face recedes, and the glimmer of victory over the elderly critic is no longer traceable. Rather it exposes a slow spread of bitterness (fig. 8, 9).

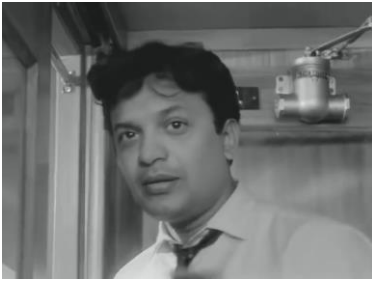


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

This sudden disruption, perpetrated by the girl's presence, pushes Arindam to another bleaker realisation, that he has no other personality to choose from when the problem is to appear congenial, polite, humane and affectionate. The iconography of the star persona, accrued across publicity materials and numerous film appearances, has become his sole reservoir of emotive gestures. Whether playing a ruffian or a morally upright hero, his expressions are delimited to the system of signs deliberated upon him. It is either by parodying the iconography or embracing it that he can be himself. This inevitability is more pathetically emphasised by the gesture of rubbing his face while conversing with Aditi Sengupta (Aparna Sen). In the scene, as Arindam is about to pour his inside out in front of Aditi, Haren Bose comes between them and goes over to the bathroom. Seeing Haren, Arindam feigns to wipe his face as if to avert meeting his eyes. Although Haren immediately leaves the bridge and leaves them alone, Arindam does not relax his hand. On the contrary, the rubbing becomes oppressive. Eyes are closed, facial muscles more strained, while his hand repeatedly scrapes his face, up and down, as if to tear the hideous skin that has moulded his body. As if the body, which has gone awry, presents a greater obstacle to his self-expression.

Although the last sequence escalates the existentialist drama of the hero, Arindam can be seen throughout the film as playing a motley of different roles before most of the characters he encounters in his life. Under the pressure of constant performance in front of his assistants,

friends and fans, the actor loses himself in the persona he creates. The penultimate sequence of the film is underlined by this devastating realisation, which spirals his crisis to a vertiginous limit. The actor, a perpetual puppet in the hands of the director, editor, and the audience, desperately tries to break free from the existential maze, but in vain.

Conclusion: Gestures of Collaboration and the Star Refigured

On the subject of Uttamkumar's acting in *Nayak*, Sayandeb Chowdhury writes, “...in Arindam Mukherjee we see two matinee idols: one, which Ray imagined, and one, which Kumar is in his own lifetime. This meant a constant tension in the figure of the hero” (Chowdhury 2012, 84). The tension Chowdhury talks about is an issue of self-expression and authorship. I have tried to show how the tension between the imagination of the star and the director is localised in the narrative, as well as the body of the hero, and shapes the dramatic conflicts that drive the narrative, i.e., between the self and the role, and the actor and the character.

Before I conclude, I want to appraise two sequences that have intrigued me since my first viewing of the film. The first one comes at the very end of the film. We see Aditi with her uncle in the railway station, moving past Arindam, apparently oblivious to his presence. Their eyes do not meet for one more time, nor do they say their last goodbye. Meanwhile, the gang of followers encircling the hero are lavishing bouquets and garlands on him, ensuring that their star remains unassailable (Fig. 10). Then comes a bizarre and abrupt cut, whereby we are wrenched out of the ‘real’ station, the ‘natural’ light and hard to focus lensing and lodged straight inside a studio set (Fig. 11). The change in the hue of the train is hard to miss; one wonders whether this shot was taken earlier and if a train with a similar density of colour was not available. The gross mismatch is also emphasised by the fact that the hero’s dishevelled hair is now sitting in a well-groomed repose. In the same spirit, the brawling fans of the earlier shot now stand like genteel disciples (fig. 11-12).



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

What transpires in this last shot is an instance of self-referentiality, an awareness of the presence of the star (Arindam as well as Uttamkumar), quite similar in effect to the Marilyn Monroe sequence in *Some Like it Hot* (Taylor 2012). The star actor, Arindam, standing as a garlanded godlike figure in the middle, start feigning as the beloved hero by tilting down his benevolent gaze at the eager *bhaktas*. All of a sudden, the forlornness disappears from his visage, substituted with a glowing smile. His smile acknowledges his fans on the railway platform and those in front of the screen watching the film. With that expression, he becomes their familiar hero, a benevolent deity acknowledging the admirations of his earnest worshippers.

In light of Nayak's theme interpretation, the aforesaid break in realism- an abrupt dislocation from a real railway platform to a studio set- can be read as a commentary on the entire film business. 'Bastob' or the reality, as Arindam confesses, has been thrown out from commercial Bengali cinema. One may add to this another observation that the naturalist acting is just a manoeuvre to cover up the artificiality. The actor's body, present with all the familiar performative gestures and mannerisms, gives credibility to that artifice. His flesh and blood become testaments to the materiality of a space and its liveability. While redeeming that enchanted world from its falseness on a regular basis, the actor's fate is to be alienated from the body of his own.

But at the same time, does this discontinuity of mise-en-scene not portend an exhibitionist impulse? Throughout the film, Banshi Chandragupta's masterful production

design condenses the realism of the space. The scenes inside the train show careful orchestration of details to endow the sequences with verisimilitude. This is quite in contrast with the two nightmare sequences where all principles of realism are denounced to generate an altogether different effect of uncanny. In the nightmare sequences, Arindam is transported to spaces of his dreadful anticipations and must relive the unsettling realisation that occurred to him the night before he set out for Delhi. These fantastic and defamiliarised spaces show direct influences of the surrealist movement. The strangeness filters through the gaping holes in reality created by the free association of dissimilar objects and their fragments.

On the other hand, the realism of the train's interior invites a suspension of disbelief through which a realist aesthetic becomes effective. As the dream sequences are bracketed off by Arindam falling asleep and waking up, it is easy to identify them as belonging to a different order of imagination from the rest of the film. For the same reason, the last shot is supposed to coexist seamlessly with the rest. However, the mismatches which I have listed above go against this reasoning. The shift from a real location to an artificial setting, with relatively flat lighting and the garlanded figure of the star in the middle, seems like an attempt to revisit Arindam's star persona briefly.

At the same time, the very frontality of the shot and the flatness of the background foregrounds not only Arindam but also Uttamkumar, the star actor of the film. In the last shot, it seems as if the film has become aware of the autonomy of the actor, their entangled existence with the role or persona, or as Joerg Sternagel writes, he comes to be regarded “as an active and acting agent,” instead of being “reduced to a passive and imaged object” (209, 10). Here, the film and its star become appealing by disclosing its awareness of the audience’s desire to be aligned with the star’s on-screen fans. Similar instances can be found in Uttam’s other films, like the opening sequence of *Nabarag* (Bijoy Basu, 1971), where accompanying his heroine, Suchitra Sen, Uttam makes a grand entrance at a party (Fig. 13). The camera swoops down from behind a chandelier as if to briefly greet the stars (their names come up in the title credit at the same time) before they slide into their assigned roles in the film. In *Jiban Jigyasa* (Pijush Bose, 1971), a similar situation is restaged when Uttam arrives at an airport: we first see him on the runway, climbing down the airstair. As he approaches the passageway, a group of his friends and colleagues receive him with bouquets of flowers (Fig. 14); the soundtrack throbs with upbeat music, and Uttam, sporting his usual candidness and a hearty smile, exchanges greeting with every one of his admirers; the camera, as if enchanted by the star's arrival, simply follows his steps from various angles. Both *Nabarag* and *Jiban Jigyasa* share with *Nayak* the awareness of the star's spectacular presence and the intent to disclose it to their audience.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The double awareness that I mentioned earlier manifests not only in the showcasing of performances that the characters of the film play out before each other but also in acknowledging the performance that the film star himself is carrying out in *Nayak*. The shift in performance registers that break the coherence of the actor's expression (especially in the penultimate sequence) attests to that. Ray's comments on Uttamkumar's performance in *Nayak* is revelatory: "But did you see Uttamkumar? In a two-hour film that centres around him, he is perfect from every angle and scene. The story, the script, and the making is mine. But Uttam made it his own with the charisma and effortless-ness that only an actor of his calibre could do" (quoted in Chowdhury 2012, 82). It is fascinating to read Satyajit Ray as he articulates his film in terms of how it is centred not around a character, but a charismatic star actor, as if it is an exhibitionist act that the director could not help but showcase with his equipment. We can recognise this exhibitionist impulse in the last shot, which I have read as an acknowledgement of this fact, and trace a different mode of address which is not commonly associated with the realist aesthetic, where the audience's desire to see the actor has been duly noted. While the last sequence is an explicit instance of such direct address, one might also find this in other sequences, such as the scene where Uttam/Arindam seems to be trying out different ways to write with a dry nib. Despite the possibility of embarrassment, the very composed and unperturbed appearance of the actor gives him away as Uttamkumar the actor. Finally, Uttam dips the nib in a glass of water and keeps writing on the page, even though the

page remains white- not a single spot of ink on it (fig. 15). Ray does not throw away the scene and replace it with a perfect retake where the writing really shows, instead he keeps this scene with the dysfunctional pen nib intact. This looks like waving at the viewers who would readily recognise Uttamkumar in this scene and, at the same time, might discover that the director, enamoured by his charismatic presence, is collaborating with him.



Fig. 15

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