

Centenary Tribute
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Mrinal Sen, Detotalized



'In what you call my books, what is first of all put in question is the unity of the book...' thus spoke Jacques Derrida in his famous response to an observation of an interlocutor if his books would go on to form any single unified entity. Characteristically, in that interview Derrida took the arguments further questioning the idea of book 'as a perfect totality' and then the implications of such a concept, spread over the *'entirety of our culture, directly or indirectly'* (Derrida, 1981, p. 3)

While conversing, the celebrated French theorist used the first person plural possessive determiner *our* certainly with regard to the geo-regional location of culture he was referring to (i.e. the culture of Europe), though, as is visible enough, several other cultural landscapes too are no less informed by the irrepressible (cultural) desire to totalize. Accordingly, people are quick to search for a comforting conceptual totality and also to

manufacture one, if need be, whenever it comes to describe any creative personality. Even if her/his multilayered dimensions refuse to be contained within any easy singularization, still perceiving her/him 'as a perfect totality' continues to be the best possible way to look at. One ready and irrefutable case in point is the portrayal of Mrinal Sen across Indian media.

Surely, his centenary is one happy occasion to look back (in awe) at him and now people, with considerable zeal, have started to make it happier by offering different sorts of straitjackets, each seeking to perfectly totalize the kernel of the legendary filmmaker. Such a scene, in a slightly chaotic and shabbily organized screenplay, warrants, I presume, a snappy yet imposing 'Cut!' from the tall director himself who had departed, at the ripe old age of 95, just a few years back. That would, one surmises, be

enough to dissuade the critics from seeking to essentialize Sen, each in her/his respective way.

The imaginary scene, then, might have Sen lighting a cigarette and in his inimitable style, uttering, as an immediate afterthought, a sentence like the one uttered (in reality) by Derrida: *'In what you call my cinema, what is first of all put in question is the unity of the cinema...'*

As in the case of Derrida, the fictive sentence of Mrinal *da* (as Sen was fondly called by his juniors) too marks the *position* of the speaker – something which is enormously significant in the scope of the argument which this essay seeks to build up. This is what Sen didn't really utter, but going by his *position vis-à-vis* the contents he dealt with and also the way he negotiated with them in his films, this (interpolated) utterance marks a substantial signpost for the critic: any attempt to make a sort of unitary wholeness out of what Sen had left behind will hardly be commensurable with the de-totalizing approach he maintained (almost) all along his eventful career. The way the diegetic text is configured in the cinema and the modes of the audience's engagement with the cinema—on both of these counts what remains most intriguing with Sen is the dazzling and disturbing interrogations he makes those said processes pass through.

Hence, the objective of this brief essay is to decenter the very idea of packing the unsettling layers of the films of Mrinal Sen away into any cosy, totalizing singularity that refuses to accept the creases and crevices scattered over his creative terrain. While unfurling the centennial gaze at Sen, such a decentering seems necessary because the (prevailing) notion of constructing totalized version of his persona and the corpus of his films as well would serve to foreclose the magnificent problematics he sought to draw the attention of his viewers to. What constitutes Sen's oeuvre as filmmaker is the carefully layered, hence pluralized approach to films and to the process of making films as well. The disturbing bouquet of his films cannot be put into context until one engages with the questions that he, as filmmaker, threw at the content of cinema and even further, at the concept of cinema itself.

So, on his centenary, it was time one got sensitized to the polyvalent registers of Mrinal Sen. The retrospective gaze of the viewer, exactly a century after he was born, needs to take note of the conceptual threads that suture and simultaneously de-suture films made at different phases of his career, undercutting the cosy possibilities of stitching together any neatly unified whole. Also, it remains to be explored how his (Bengali urban Hindu middle class) *self* would radically embrace the *other* in a way that makes them switch positions, unleashing a kind of polyvalence unique in the annals of Indian cinema. If the mention of a particular religious identity, i.e. Hindu, would leave a few eyebrows frowned, it need to be stated that such a mention is strictly a biographical (hence inescapable) one which would hardly put his secular mind-frame to question.

Coming back to the pluralized construction of his *self*, he owns it up in parts, disowns a few and there also remain some areas in between. Eventually, one is likely to come across more than one Mrinal Sen loitering indignantly with cigarette dangling from the lips. As the filmmaker does not present his pluralized selves as an easy case-study for the critic/biographer, the onus is on the writer to find if one Sen is commensurable with the other(s). Consequentially, if one is tempted to send centenary flowers to the hallowed feet of the maestro, one must figure out his locational coordinates first because Sen, in his pluralized avatar, prefers to be on slippage. But then, all the dismay and unease of the critics notwithstanding, the last thing one would have dared to think of him is an expression like 'and quiet goes the Sen'!

In his disquieting manner, Sen kept traveling. This mobility as a distinguishing leitmotif shaped the hermeneutical structure of Sen as filmmaker. For him – and with him also – the road remains multi-directional and effectively refuses to end, marking the polyvalent *position* of Sen as much on the spatial axis as on the temporal. At no point does he allow the viewer/critic to locate any signpost of *perfect totality* and heave a sigh of relief thereafter. Negotiating the pluralized (and ambivalent) personae of Mrinal Sen remains even more difficult since the filmmaker is found to be having an unending conversation with his

contents on one hand and his audience on the other. Thus, his position remains discreetly dialogic.

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As is well known, different phases of his career found Sen *re-presenting* the *present* (continuous) in his films in a way that demands the viewer to reconfigure her/his notion of watching movie at one level and also of engaging with her/his surroundings on the other. Not very unexpectedly though, such a vision of making films had, on the flip side, something like a little or almost no response on the commercial frontier. Certainly, the international market, once the recognition started pouring in, might have provided some sort of financial security, but his home audience in West Bengal, despite their reverence for the feted director, mostly chose to keep his films at bay, save only a few. That, however, failed to deter Sen who clung to his experiments. So much so that he even refused to repeat his success. The commercial (also, aesthetic) triumph of *Bhuvan Shome* could not lure him with a template to be replicated even at the behest of a battery of producers who had queued up to persuade Sen to churn out a similar one. Instead, right through the 1970s and beyond, till his final film he decided to engage with his Bengali urban middle class audience in an interesting Hamletian game, by making his films, one after another, hold the mirror to this category of people. As a result, in the cognitive landscape of the Bengali urban middle class (the *self* hegemonic in the social structure he belonged to), Sen went on to become the intimate *other*, celebrated and also set aside, simultaneously.

While his connect to the *present* has vastly been explored, not enough critical traction has been directed to Sen's negotiation with *past*. Like the legendary Prince of Denmark, Sen too in his filmic diegeses reconstructed the *past* sutured most poignantly to the *present* continuous. As the chronicler of time *present* – the axis his films pronouncedly aligned to – he maintained a rather unusual mode of engagement with the *past*, on both personal and collective level. Intrigued as he had been with the narratives of the bygone, Sen preferred not to construct any sublime grand-narrative of it. For

him, the *present* is ontologized on the *past* that he directs his gaze at in a dispassionate way. Whenever Sen decided to invest in the trope of the *past*, cognitively he treats it as a reflection, in effect tacit reincarnation, of the present.

While elaborating on how the senior Sen would negotiate with time *past*, his son Kunal Sen, in an enlightening conversation with Ina Puri, had some intriguing insights to offer:

True, my father explicitly disliked nostalgia and never indulged in it. He liked telling stories about his childhood in Faridpur, but they were not nostalgic tales, and unlike his friend Ritwik Ghatak, he was not significantly affected by the Partition. He came to Calcutta on his own will and accepted it as his home. Personally, I am affected by nostalgia, so I often tried to probe if his apathy for nostalgia was real, or something he consciously decided to practise. We can never be sure, but I think he was truly unsentimental about his past. (Puri, 2019)

If the above presents us with the lived reality of the late director, there can also be, side by side, the reflections on the cinematic cogito of Mrinal Sen by Ashis Nandy, who approached Sen's indifference to the trauma of partition from an intriguingly different perspective. For Nandy this unsentimental attitude (of Sen) to the past has its direct affective impact on the rural-urban spatial binary in his psychological space: *Perhaps for this very reason, Sen has never been easy with the ambivalent, double-edged relationship between the village and the city, specially, the haunting persistence of the village in a civic consciousness built on disavowal of the village.* (Nandy, 2001. p. 81)

Nandy, with his characteristic perceptive flair, goes on to link Sen's rejection of his native town Faridpur to his pronounced love and longing for Calcutta (his *El Dorado*) and also to *'...his unresolved, insecure, unrecognized discomfort with parental – read paternal – authority. This discomfort shaped his self-redefinition as a radical social critic.'* (Nandy, 2001. p. 85)

Does the radicalism that Sen had developed in Calcutta – the city mutilated under the trident of the World War II, the Bengal famine in 1943 and the communal strife in 1946-48 – have something to do

with the way(s) he would engage with the sense of time? The space that he consciously migrated himself to and then consistently identified with – i.e. the city of Calcutta – impacted him profoundly. Nevertheless, it has never been a de-historicized space for Sen. he has always sought to engage with this space by having it set against the axis of history. Kunal Sen has shared his insight on this:

However, time, both present and past, had a strong influence on his films. As he often used to say, he was driven by time, and reacted to his socio-political milieu. I think he also had a strong sense of history and tried to see things in the context of history. (Puri, 2019)

Again, Nandy, while problematizing the modes of Sen's negotiation with time *past*, has noted its dual nature as *revisited* (and *reconstructed*) by Sen: The ideological frame into which he fitted himself – Leninism – meant in India a hard-nosed, aggressively positivist, bigamous creed, happily married to scientism and historicism on the one hand, and to an urban-industrial vision on the other. It gave Sen, one suspects, what he had been tacitly seeking: *a collective, linearized, controllable past that would supplant his personalized, disowned past and thereby help maintain the integrity of his self.* (Nandy, 2001. p. 85)

What remains to be seen is how this tale of two *pasts* unfolded itself in the cinematic world of Mrinal Sen. Alongside Nandy's version of Sen preferring 'a collective, linearized, controllable past' (constituted of his aggressively positivist perspective), it needs to be pointed out that the modes of Sen's engagement with the *past* offer scope for further and more detailed problematization. However, for the lack of space, the one example this essay would like to focus on is *Baishe Shnavan* (Wedding Day, 1960). This is principally because here in this film – the first one by Sen with his creative signature firmly inscribed on – he has a tripartite engagement with history. As the very title of the film indicates, Sen negotiates with a metanarrative of cultural history, solemnly observed by (mostly urban middle class and even upper echelons of) the Bengali society as the date of demise of Rabindranath Tagore. Then, on second level of

negotiating with time, the entire film constitutes itself on the personal tragedy of a village couple, located in a village in (then undivided) Bengal during the late 1930s. Interestingly enough, Sen keeps the film as a parallel, even counter-text to the collective sense of grief, imbued with the tragic death of the most revered cultural icon of the modern Bengal.

If the twenty second day of the month of *Shnavana* (as per the traditional Bengali almanac), as a distinct cultural sign, evokes any sense of irreparable loss in the modern Bengali psychic space, Sen reconfigures the sign (of loss) by replacing the mythical demise of Tagore with the tragic tale of a couple, steeped into anonymity. As the sense of tragedy, etched onto the collective Bengali cultural psyche post 1941, is re-signified, the reference to Tagore is elided and replaced with the sad tale of a village couple, haplessly stranded in the rural landscape of Bengal overcast with the disastrous shadow of the Second World War.

Added to this dual face of history – one factual, renowned and collectively observed, another fictive and buried to anonymity – there might well be another level of history informing the tryst with *past*: that of the filmmaker's personal remembrances, as indicated by his son Kunal Sen in the reminiscences of his father.

When he was still a college student in Calcutta, he witnessed the death of Rabindranath Tagore. Like thousands of others, he went to see his funeral procession. There, in the complete pandemonium of this crowd, he noticed a man trying desperately to take in his arms the dead body of a little child to the crematorium. The crowd just pushed him around. Many years later, he made a film called *Baishe Shnavan* (22nd day of *Shnavana*), the day when Tagore died. In this film that was the day the couple in the film got married. People often wondered why he chose that particular date, and I think it was this memory of his, where, to this one individual, the death of Tagore meant nothing. (Puri, 2019)

The position of Sen vis-à-vis the hegemonic cultural history, as per the remembrance of his son, may well have a cognitive link to this real-life incident. Not only does it lead to an interesting way to interpret the structuration of his thought, but this

little nugget of information opens the discursive space to an interesting crossroads where the filmmaker initiates a dialogue with the culturally hegemonic discourse of the *past* in more ways than one. As Sen historicizes the not-too-distant past of Bengal (with regard to the film), he remains a faithful (and positivist, certainly) chronicler of the past. Simultaneously, the elision of the references to Tagore and the diegetic re-signification of an iconic date – already loaded with a specific cultural coinage, especially in the middle and upper middle class urban Bengali psyche – lead to the making of a parallel register of tragedy and trauma, distinctly differentiated from the hegemonic urban cultural one, i.e. the historic demise of Tagore. The spatial qualifier *urban* is significant here since Sen prefers to re-signify the register of trauma with the implosion of the personal world of a non-distinguished couple, enshrouded with sheer anonymity and rooted to the rural, subaltern topography as well.

Is the process of re-signification (of a particular date) meant to de-hegemonize the cultural space too? A person with avowedly urban sensibilities and (as Nandy has mentioned) Leninist ideological frame, Sen thought it necessary to point out the traces of alternate histories that are regularly smuggled to oblivion yet keep pulsating with their own verve of space and time. Hence, Sen clearly suggests that history is layered, open to investigation and if needed, re-signification. Even a specific day, widely celebrated as a distinctive cultural signpost, must not foreclose itself to alternative and less privileged narratives of history.

Taking a step further, can't it also be argued that the intended privileging of the rural perspective along with the elision of the references to Tagore is in effect an ethico-political assertion of the agency of the *rural* and privileging the cultural economy of *Bharat*, as distinct from the overtly hegemonic *India*? Expectedly with his distaste for the trope of nostalgia, his visits to the pasts (in the urban and also rural spatio-cultural nodes) are never fixated on either mushy or sublime ruminations over any stipulated *pastness*. Instead, what is foregrounded is the dynamic *presentness* of the past – ruptured, enmeshed with futilities yet radically open to traces

of interpretative possibilities. In the operative modalities of the cinematic representation of time, the filmmaker himself prefers to remain Janus-faced, engaging with both urban and rural, time present and time past, privileged and less-privileged, self and other. Nevertheless, if the coupled expressions listed above are taken to be forming any binary, Sen knows that neither part of the binary is self-contained entity, like thing-in-itself. On the contrary, each part is unmistakably informed by the other at some subterranean level.

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Why doesn't Mrinal Sen offer his audience a nice and secure diegetic plain to tootle around? Why does he persistently explore the schism, covered yet unmistakable, rupturing the middle-class urban Hindu Bengali people – the principal segment of his cinematic population? How does he expose the foreclosures that these people are desperately fond of? Certainly, this is not the first time such questions, now clichéd enough, are being put forward nor, one surmises, is it the last time either. A number of scholars have attempted to proffer answer/s with varying degrees of substance packed into arguments. Here in the concluding part of this not-too-long essay the final objective would be to interrogate these issues. For that, the beginning proposition would be something like the following: Most of his works – intriguingly nuanced and upsettingly varied – would hardly allow the watchers to follow the content without being conscious of the process of watching. Despite knowing it well that such a self-conscious mode of film watching is not going to entertain most of the watchers, Sen had repeatedly chosen to put his audience through such loads of unease. The point that remains to be looked into is the subject position of the filmmaker. Does he choose to place himself in the conventional coordinates of the invisible and unobtrusive storyteller weaving the narrative(s) for the audience? This is what he had actually begun his filmmaking career with. However, the more he distanced himself from that non-visibility and started aligning to the aesthetic of discomfort, the closer he got to the conceptual structuration of cinema that he

remains remembered for. Did this change drive any significant locational shift in his position vis-à-vis his audience?

This essay will argue that it did and the said shift needs to be cognitively attended to with proper theorization. For that, the present essay would make a detour through some strands of thought, lexicalized by Slavoj Žižek.

In his exhilarating essay ‘Why Does a *Letter* Always Arrive at Its Destination?’ Žižek has offered some interesting insights on Chaplin’s iconic character ‘tramp’ as unfolded in ‘*City Lights*’. While articulating the argument, Žižek remembers a piece of insight offered by Michel Chipon that helps him posit the locational nodes of the endearing vagabond. Building on the insight borrowed from Chipon, Žižek places the tramp in a curious in-betweenness that refuses to end:

...the fundamental feature of the figure of the tramp is his interposition: he is always interposed between a gaze and its "proper" object, fixating upon himself a gaze destined for another, ideal point or object – a stain which disturbs "direct" communication between the gaze and its "proper" object, leading the straight gaze astray, changing it into a kind of squint. (Žižek, 1992. p. 4)

So, Chaplin finds himself as a precariously interposing figure that, as Žižek explicates, divides the gaze from its scheduled ‘proper’ object. He is, always already, an improper figure, mistakenly considered to be something that he, in diegetic reality, is not. Hence, the figure of tramp remains there as a stain, incongruous yet inescapable. This specific locational node of *Interposition*, manifesting itself as an improper stain (on something purported to be proper) is what this essay would like to build its final argument on.

Certainly, Chaplin had been there in those movies as a corporeal figure, intruding the *proper* space and rupturing the propriety of the scene. Mrinal Sen, as filmmaker, performs the same dissipating effect as the stain, but he intervenes as a non-corporeal, conceptual entity, situating himself in a canny *interposition*, somewhere in between the gaze of the audience and what they consider to be the *proper* cinema, invested with the comforting sense of

totality. As the audience expects the kind of cinema commensurable with their film-watching practice, Sen, locating himself in the improper position, keeps on disrupting the habitual comfort of watching a film. In the process, he shifted the idea of realism to a different plane as he would regularly incorporate footages of real-life happenings in his films with impeccably disconcerting effect. As he himself recounted, a number of times someone or other in the audience was shocked to find deceased/assassinated friends/immediate kins in the real-life footage of crowd scenes, inserted by Sen in the film. In one of such incidents (as recollected by Sen) an elderly woman got fainted in the theatre while watching *Calcutta 71* after she had accidentally spotted her young son, who was gunned down allegedly by the police force only a few months back. Quoting this incident, Moinak Biswas in a brief, pithy article has recently argued that in the films of Mrinal Sen, the conventional (and apparently inviolable) boundary separating the diegetic construct from the non-diegetic real remained consciously blurred (Biswas, 2023).

When the processes of recording and archiving audio-visuals were much tougher, Sen with his humble available means would keep on filming real life moments of public uprising on the streets of Calcutta. Those moments, as deployed by the filmmaker, marked one of the magnificent manifestations of stain soiling the neat textual corporeality of Cinema.

Interestingly, the filmmaker-as-stain is radically self-reflexive. It is conscious both of the disruption it has brought in the process of watching cinema and also of the operational modalities of that rupture. Thus, he disrupts the practices of watching films on one hand and the practices of making films too, on the other. As stories, woven seamlessly on screen, hegemonize the practices of making and watching films, Sen has, time and again, preferred to disrupt the narratives, interjecting at points he thought to be necessary and injecting into his films what, echoing a phrase coined by Žižek, can be called ‘nonsublime vitality’ (Žižek, 1992. p. 1).

The fractured and self-conscious processes of unfolding the narrative, as is consistently visible in

the oeuvre of Sen, do not seek to invest the films with any sublime grandeur, leading the audience shed any cathartic tear, nor does it seek to construct any grand denouement. The locational node of *stained* interposition, as stated above, enables the filmmaker to keep the audience at an alienating and discomforting distance from the content. As the film unfolds itself in the self-reflexive manner, with the filmmaker himself being the disrupting intermediary (the irrevocable stain, as it were), it was sort of necessary to maintain a line of demarcation dividing the audience from the content. Sen does not demand the grand subsumption of the audience in the spectacular audio-visual symphony of the cinematic content. Again, in a rather Hamletian way, he wants his audience interrogate themselves in a self-conscious way.

The (imaginary) sentence fashioned after a (real) statement by Derrida and ascribed to Sen earlier in the essay – ‘In what you call my cinema, what is first of all put in question is the unity of the cinema...’ – needs to be reflected on in this context. To be more specific, vis-à-vis the pluralized cogito of Mrinal Sen. Firstly, unlike most of his contemporaries he experimented, in so many ways, with the non-linear modes of the diegetic text(s) in his films. Not every time he could elicit the result he had aspired for, but with his pronounced intent for interrogating the

(much valorized) linear narratorial logic of unfolding the story (or stories), Sen himself questioned the idea of having *unity* as the irreplaceable suturing thread lurking beneath the tale(s).

Next, for the same reason, Sen is least likely to proffer any totalized metanarrative bundled into the comfortable and monolithic rubric of *the Cinema of Mrinal Sen*. He had engaged with the idea of cinema, both conceptually and on operative plane, in so diverse ways that the unique dissipation of the purported unity of *the Cinema* has become the unmistakable signpost of Sen. Or, putting it differently, *the Cinema of Mrinal Sen* remains invested with an intense plurality that continues to undercut the movements leading towards the monolithic and overarching construction of cinema. Hence, he sought to negotiate with his audience in more varied ways than most of his contemporaries did.

Does that also mean to say that he had more respect for the audience than most of his compatriots? If one prefers to put it that way, looking at the filmography of Sen, few would object. Maybe that is why he did not prefer to go gentle into the good night. He lived his (cinematic) life the way Nietzsche would advise to do.

He lived dangerously.

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