

*Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Paper*

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**Ritwik Ghatak's *Fear***



**Abstract:**

Although generally overlooked in his oeuvre, *Fear* (1965) a short film made by Ghatak with FTII students is a prescient look at the Nuclear Race of the time. Set in an underground shelter, where the alarm of an impending hydrogen bomb traps a cross-section of society, Ghatak's film interrogates the myth of 'progress'.

This paper would focus on two myths – 'the myth of progress' and 'science as salvation', i.e. society as an ever-progressing entity wherein science is a neutral pursuit only aimed towards human betterment. This obfuscates the centrality of values and 'history' (in the sense of Collingwood) that science carries with it, and blinds the modern mind to how it can work hand-in-hand with tyranny. By bringing these themes to the forefront, Ghatak exposes in *Fear* a blind-spot in the Marxist philosophy he adhered to throughout his lifetime.

**Keywords:**

Science, Marxism, progress, myth, bomb, Enlightenment, feminism

*Fear* (1965) is a 17-minutes long short film written and directed by Ritwik Ghatak during his stint at the FTII. Set in the scenario of a probable hydrogen bomb attack, a group of strangers from different paths of life are herded into an experimental nuclear shelter where they await in dread for an improbable future ahead. Restored recently in 4K, we can now situate *Fear* as an important work in Ghatak's oeuvre where he negotiates his tensions with the philosophical tenets of Marxism, a political belief system he held onto until his death. But to understand this, a basic primer on Marx and the place of technology in his body of thought is necessary.

Karl Marx is essentially a thinker who believes that there is an underlying logic to historical processes, that he understands this logic, and can derive from this understanding a normative vision of human action and societal relations. His theory of history takes as a starting point for its analysis the existence of evil. All around the world there are millions of people who spend their entire lives in squalor and poverty, who do not have the basic resources of food, clothing and shelter. The lives of these people are marked by deprivation, diseases, exploitation, and a constant state of unhappiness. Among these deprived, women and children face even worse conditions, subject continually to violence, sexual and otherwise. An opportunity to better their living conditions, so easily available to the rich, seems to have been closed off to these people right from their birth.

But what is the reason for all this evil? Marx analyses the most prominent answer to

this question: the religious answer. Theodicy maintains that there may be various reasons for evil in this world – God may be testing the faith of the afflicted, God may be punishing them for the sins of past lives, God may be maintaining a certain amount of evil so as to turn people towards the good, etc. Whatever may be the reason, it doesn't really matter. As long as one lives a virtuous life in his/her given conditions, they will be given heaven and freed from the cycles of life and death. This, according to Marx, is an ineffectual answer. It asks us to pretend all is well with the world when it isn't. And more importantly, it prevents people from making changes in our present society which will eliminate evil because they are more concerned with getting heaven after death. Hence, according to Marx, the elimination of the ideas of God and religion should be the first steps for human progress. This is why the Quiet Man (Govardhan Asrani) emphatically shuts off the Musician (S. Shah) as he bursts into a tune of religiosity at moment of apparent doom, saying, 'I do not care if we are destroyed. But not music and lyrics'. One must reject a lie at all costs, regardless how it may comfort and exalt us.

But even after this step, the world would not be as it ought to be ideally. In permitting the greed which allows for the exploitation of the deprived masses, something is incorrect with our present state of society. Here, one must note that Marx is conceiving of these problems in Hegelian terms. History is seen as a continuous process by which the 'spirit' (or the Geist) is gradually realizing itself in the world. 'Spirit' is contrasted with 'nature'. 'Nature' is defined

in terms of what is and what is not. For example, a tree is a tree, remains a tree and cannot be anything else but a tree.



But a man does not always remain the same man. By making plans regarding his future endeavours, or holding ideals which he doesn't live up to now, man is negating his present self. Hence, unlike nature, man is both what he is and what he is not/can be. Marx takes the state of complete freedom to be the ideal of what man can be in this world, and hence sees the present society as alienating man from achieving this ideal. But why does society do so?

A simple answer is scarcity. Since the beginning of time, mankind has been faced with the scarcity of food, clothing and shelter. It is because of this scarcity of resources that a particular group of people seized control over economic life (the means of production). This led to the formation of classes in our society. To legitimize their rule, this group of people came up with government, laws, culture, religion, etc. so that the existing structures of power in the society would seem as the natural state of things. But advances in technology makes it impossible for a class to

impose its control over society as a whole. For example, in 19th century India, the means of production were chiefly land, and hence the zamindars and Rajas were the ruling class. However, in the 21st century, with the advent of industrialization, globalization, commerce and manufacturing, the middle class has arisen in the cities of India which now has sufficient power to challenge this land-owning class.

Hence, Marx believed that domination over nature (in the Baconian sense), expressed in terms of technological advance, is the way for the liberation of the people. No other thinker accords the level of importance to scientists and innovators as Marx does, conceiving of them as the primary agents who will spearhead new technological advances which will increase the levels of freedom in our society. Marx praises capitalism for having technologized society in a way unprecedented in human history, and hence helped to bring about a stage where scarcity could be technically overcome. It is a necessary stage of economic development, which according to Marx is to be followed by the abolishment of the private control of the means of production by placing them under public control, and eventuating in the creation of a society where everyone can realize their 'spirit' by engaging in a life of philosophy, art and culture, freed from lives of drudgery and squalor, with this liberation being propelled by the advances in technology.

Although they are traditionally considered to be at odds with each other, perhaps because of Marx's insistence that it is so, Communist theory really is a radical outspring of Enlightenment. Indeed, there are points of contention, with the suspicion of

liberal democracy and the social contract in Marx being the major ones. But the basic premise of both these strands of thought are common. They both start out with what Thomas Sowell has called the ‘unconstrained vision’ of man – the idea that with the correct theory in hand, the weight of traditions and customs can be safely discarded, and society could be refashioned from year zero. They also significantly share the morality of utilitarianism, since they both measure moral progress by the maximization of happiness of the greatest numbers. Both also share the utopian belief that science will bring about human emancipation.

To demonstrate the centrality of scientific thought in the Enlightenment paradigm, merely consider this quote of David Hume: ‘If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion’<sup>i</sup>. See how anything outside the ambit of ‘scientific knowledge’ is dismissed as mere sophistry by Hume, and we can see the reason why Marx endeavoured so hard to present his theories as ‘scientific’.

Now whatever contradictions that the Marxist vision may be filled with, of which we are now painfully aware of due to the fall of the USSR and the writings of Leszek Kolakowski, can be kept aside for now. The main point of concern here is the impetus that Marx gives to technology as the primary mechanism for liberating mankind. This opens to us a way of analysing *Fear* - as

Ghatak’s interrogation of Marx’s conception of technology.

First in the line of attack is the ‘myth of progress’. As the philosopher John Gray points out, ‘The idea of progress rests on the belief that the growth of knowledge and the advance of the species go together — if not now, then in the long run. The biblical myth of the Fall of Man contains the forbidden truth. Knowledge does not make us free. It leaves us as we have always been, prey to every kind of folly’<sup>ii</sup>. An ignorance of this is demonstrated by the Science Student (Subhash Ghai) when he says, ‘My father would say that in 30 years the world would change drastically. There wouldn’t be pain. He had full faith in science. He belonged to the generation which freed our country’. The Science Student’s father had quite evidently forgotten that leap forwards in scientific advancement was one of the major reasons that British colonialism was made possible, thus leading to the subjugation of the India which he had to struggle to attain independence for. The same blindness is shown by the student himself, who is amazed throughout the film by the Professor’s experiments and theories, forgetting that the whole world may cease to exist precisely because of these scientific endeavours. Scientific advance may be an unmixed good, but human advancement is rarely so; it can always be the case that the highest points of scientific advance may come at the times when barbarians are at the helm, and in these cases, science only adds to the arsenal of destruction rather than being a harbinger of peace. To interpolate the destiny of mankind into the narrative of scientific advancement, and to then pretend we are always in a state of

progress, is a lie which was concocted during the Enlightenment era to justify the eminence of its own dominant class – of scientists, who engineered scientific progress; of philosophers, who provided the philosophical basis for interpreting scientific progress as the preeminent form of epistemology for the era, and the royal or business class, which provided patronage to these scientists and philosophers in their work through private means or through financing universities. That Marxism, which had positioned itself as contra-Enlightenment in important aspects, took up this idea of progress without adequate questioning of its positioning within the Enlightenment narrative is the first critique that Ghatak advances in *Fear*.



But here is where Ghatak's critique grows more radical – is scientific advancement an unmixed good? Or are its 'misuses' a reflection of the nature of the technological revolution itself?

One of the commonly shared assumptions of our culture are that technology

by itself is value-free. It can be used for both good and bad purposes, and what the user will use it for is a reflection on himself, not on the technology. That this assumption is commonly shared can be evinced from the way it is regarded as a fact or common sense in our modern society. But a wide host of thinkers, from Martin Heidegger to Jacques Ellul have differed on this consensus.

In his *Counter-Revolution of Science* (1952), Friedrich Hayek points out that modern science finds its inception in the vision to make human beings 'masters and possessors of nature' (Descartes' words). But this endeavour can only be achieved by focusing one's research on those facets of the natural world which can be predicted and empirically tested, and this requires a quantitative, methodological approach. But where does this leave our sensory experience, our emotions and thoughts? Take the colour red. Science can explain quite satisfactorily why our eyes perceive the colour red as red and none other, but what about the difference in our experience of seeing that colour in Bergman's *Cries & Whispers* and Kieslowski's *Red*? That datum of our manifest experience, (which Descartes grouped under the name of 'qualia'), but because of its qualitative nature it cannot be explained by science. Yet the astounding success of the scientific method (owing to its limited field of study) blinded thinkers, and they ended up making a 'metaphysic of its method' (to borrow EA Burt's phrase). What this means is that because researchers obtained great results by using the scientific method which treats the universe as a merely naturalistic, material phenomenon, they gradually came to assume that the scientific

method itself can be a viable metaphysic to perceive the entire world, and hence the universe and all its experience came to be understood as a merely naturalistic phenomenon. It was this system of thought, which separated the spirit from nature, whose assumptions grounded the Industrial revolution and its technological advances, and the subsequent development of capitalism.

The technological revolution in which Marx foresaw the potential liberator of mankind cannot be divorced from the total historical situation which gave rise to it. As Heidegger pointed out, the word ‘technology’ is a word which came into existence only around the 1850s. If we break it down, it is a combination of two Greek words: ‘techne’ and ‘logos’. Techne, which could simultaneously mean skill and art in the classical world, was used to refer to the act of making an art out of production. A carpenter carving a table, a goldsmith fashioning a necklace, all of these people were ‘artisans’ who were producing beauty combined with practical need.

In contrast logos was knowledge. Philosophers, scientists, doctors, etc. were engaged in the pursuit of logos, which was the quest of knowing things as they are. Since this was before the Newtonian revolution, this pursuit meant a hylomorphic understanding of the subject, i.e. to divine out the four causes as put forward by Aristotle. Although somewhat nebulous, a distinction was however made by these men between techne and logos. The former was to explore the ways a thing can be, and the latter to understand things as they are. Hence it was not just linguistic curiosity that was produced when the word ‘technology’ was coined, but

rather a paradigm shift on how we conceive the world. With technology came production as science, i.e. to understand the world itself as raw material to be worked upon with the help of scientific knowledge. This presumes a disenchanted view of nature, a stark contrast to the Romantic conception, and combines the drive of understanding the world (traditionally a disinterest pursuit) with the need to make it subservient to human will. By making mastery the primary aim rather than understanding, the technological paradigm is anti-truth, for truth is a pursuit to understand the ontology/essence of something, while technology’s aim is to direct that essence towards achieving its own ends (hence producing the nuclear bomb, whose capability to destroy humanity radically proclaims its lack of connection to any conception of human good, which separates it from the from technics of the classical world).

To achieve a mastery over nature, it was first required that man could perceive nature as intelligible, bound with laws which remain constant over time and phenomena which can be quantitatively analysed. This requires a ‘mathematization’ of the world, which makes it necessary that the dominant conceptions of rationality be favoured towards the scientific ways of knowing (rather than philosophical as in ancient civilizations). This means that the assumptions of these dominant ways of thinking will be reflected in the technological apparatus developed by people coming out of such a paradigm of thought, a paradigm which has been caused precisely to give rise to such a technology (hence sharing a mutually-reinforcing relationship). A mathematical model works only when facts are abstracted

to be stored as information via the process of classification. But the very nature of classification homogenizes reality, and any identities and differences which exist can only appear with regards to the terms of classification. The capabilities of technology do not make it possible for the technology to operate neutrally towards the facts of heterogeneity in the society. Hence, even if the purposes for which technology can be used are dependent on the user, the capabilities with which a particular technology is constituted is already determinative of the ways it can be used. Therefore, technology cannot be value-free in any real sense, and the technology which has arisen out of the capitalist revolution will be congruent with the aims and conceptions of capitalism, because the kind of reasoning which gave rise to capitalism is precisely what helped to make these machines and formulated their purposes. The technological revolution in which Marx sees the liberation of mankind is hence a false notion.

This critique of technology is embedded by Ghatak in the narrative of what will happen to the scientist after he comes up with his creation of the hydrogen bomb: this monster of technology, created without a reference to any vision of human good, will turn on its creator and destroy all that is in the creator's orbit of affection. The God of the religion and his salvation story that Marxism cried out to be false has only been replaced by another God, that of science (hence  $E=mc^2$  marked in the like of religious iconography) and its new salvation myth. Ghatak reminds that this too is a false God, and yet one which slipped under Marxism's notice.

That we find it difficult to conceive of the problems caused by Enlightenment rationality is owing to the fact that our very concept of thinking rationally has been defined in Enlightenment terms. We are trying to understand something which is the very form of how we understand. And yet there is a way out; but that requires female intervention. It is in lieu with Ghatak's feminism that he applies Alice Von Hildebrand's insight that, 'Women place the concrete over the abstract, individuals over universals'<sup>iii</sup>. Femininity sees through masculine braggadocio the truth that it is more often than not a metaphysical rebellion against human nature, which women by virtue of being more at home with their bodies (due to menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause) and the hearth (due to domestic responsibilities) see to be ultimately a form of immaturity, as in when teenagers act out to evade the onset of responsibilities that adulthood brings. Thus, it is the Voluptuous Woman (Urvashi Dutta) who points out, 'You men, all of you! All of you are devils! You destroyed me. Now you want to destroy the entire world!'. She sees the interconnection between the flight from virtue to political irresponsibility, which the men do not. It is The Wife (Sudha Rani) who asks, 'What is the point of bringing children into a world like this?', thus considering the planet not only in the present moment, but as an inheritance which has to be received from the previous generation to be given as a gift to the next generation, an attitude much in contrast to the presentism of men. And it is the Village Girl (Pratima Naik) who speaks out the only moral dictum within the movie, 'You can destroy

yourself, but you have no right to destroy life. Even if it is a tiny form of life’.

The only two insights allowed to men are that to the Quiet Man (as aforementioned) and finally to the Drunkard (Nooruddin), a figure which Ghatak uses a stand-in for himself [for proof, see the character of Nilkantha Bagchi in *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (1974)] His words, positioned after the bomb siren has been found to be false, are, ‘Humans are out for each other’s blood. People are killing each other’, thus implicating the entire body of human reason driven from the Enlightenment which carries implicit within itself the possibility of violence erupting anytime, even in the conditions of peace.

But Ghatak does not allow cynicism to have the last word. The Scientist’s Wife says,

with a smile on her face, that ‘Lovely earthly scent had filled the air’. In his violations of extreme rationality via the logic of dystopia, Ghatak exposes the fallacy of Marx’s idea of technology as the liberator of mankind in particular, and of Enlightenment reason in general, deflating the myths of ‘progress’ and ‘science as salvation’. The way he approaches these troubled waters of thought with immense steadiness, and charts us to safety from a reason which leaves in its wake ‘neither joy, nor love, nor light’, leaves the spectator with the same feelings which once made Keats write: ‘Then I felt like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken’<sup>iv</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford UP, 2000. Section XII, Part III.

<sup>ii</sup> Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. Granta Books, 2002 (paperback ed. 2003), p. xiii.

<sup>iii</sup> von Hildebrand, Alice. *The Privilege of Being a Woman*. Sapientia Press, 2002, p. 60.

<sup>iv</sup> Keats, John. “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, edited by H. Buxton Forman, Oxford University Press, 1906, pp. 41–42.

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