Centenary Tribute: Uttam Kumar

Abhishek Talukder

Uttam Kumar – The GOAT – No Cuts, No Buts, No Coconuts

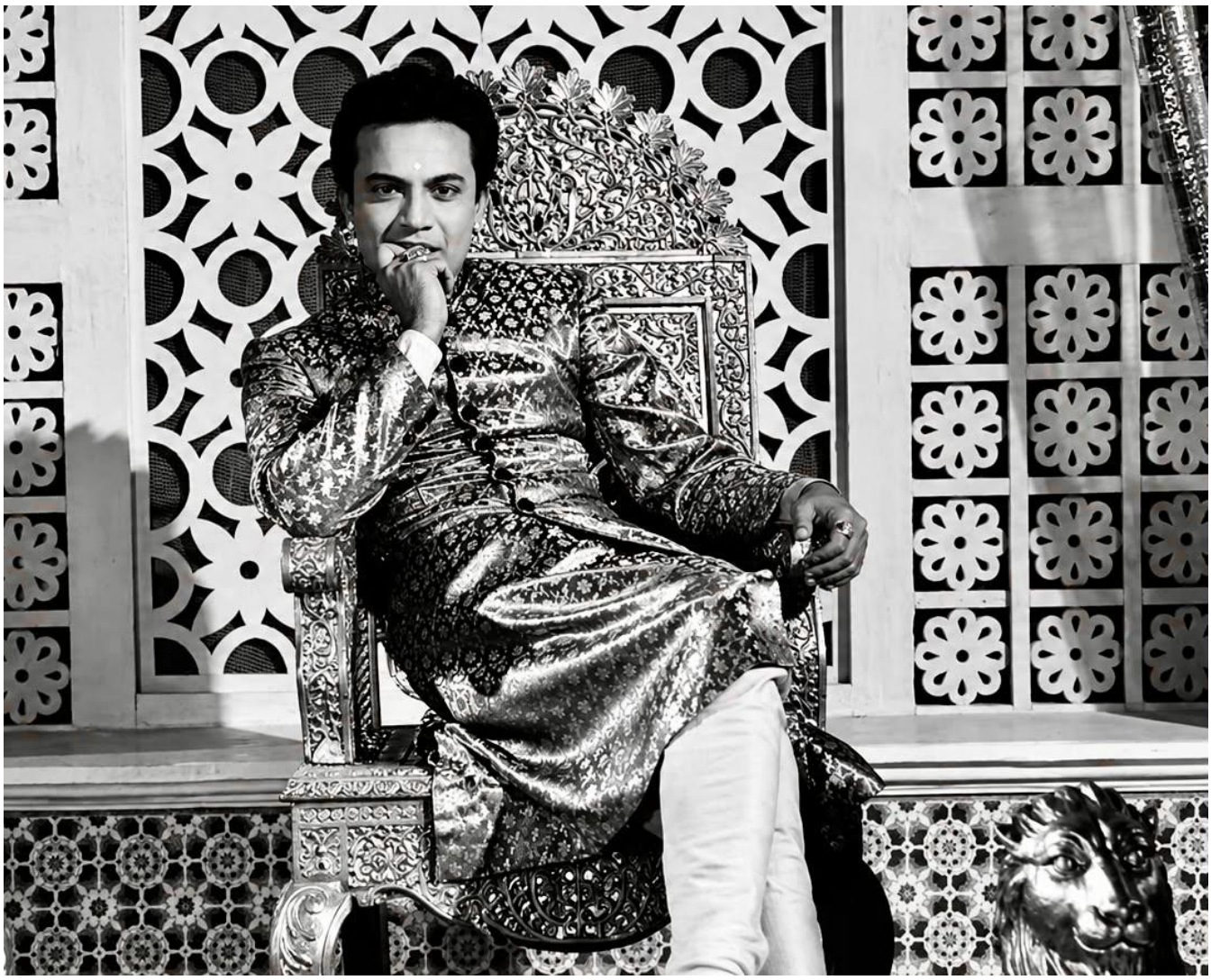


Fig 1A: Uttam Kumar,' in *'Jhinder Bondi'* (1961)

'Glory be to God for dappled things—'

'Pied Beauty' – Gerard Manley Hopkins, **and so it goes** (a Billy Joel ballad, in pentatonic and diatonic motifs in the **key C**). The right honorable readers – Retrouvaille! Well, youse should be informed, before all else, that this essay is a result of my as lief cerebral **CONSTITUTIONAL** around film acting – across the globe and clock; sans any prejudice, any assumptions during a hypnagogic state, or AI-succor. Of course, I used AI to design my piece cinematically, not as an academic paper, throwing caution to the wind. Perhaps this is the kairos for the Orient to shed its inherited self-doubt and low self-esteem – I can't divorce this unalloyed truth – and for the Occident to wake up and smell the coffee. An' film had its Pelé; that **Pelé** would be **UTTAM KUMAR** (interrobang) ‽

Fig 1B: (Clockwise) Pelé in the film *'Hotshot'* (1986) *'Os Trombadinhas'* (1980), Pelé and Sylvester Stallone, on the set of the film '*Escape to Victory' (1981)*.

Hence, I attempt to deliver a lengthy disquisition on Uttam Kumar's empyrean acting skills and expound my opinion – HE IS THE GOAT – with clarity and insight. It seems easy-peasy to nullify (at least in the realm of heroic screen acting) the towering figures of Hollywood, but harder to glorify Uttam Kumar. Let's begin with some interesting pictures, as we – the naughty, natty, and nutty Indians – often call cinema 'picture.' NO, the image below (Fig.1C) is not from Satyajit Ray's '*Nayak'* (1966). But a Nayak-like image of the MAHANAYAK that no one remembers anymore. As an aside, Hollywod fails to capture romance without a 'kiss' or 'cop a feel.

Uttam Kumar as Ananga Dutta, not Arindam Mukherjee. English words and poetry slip into Ananga's speech quite often, like foreign notes woven into a common or garden melody. We shall return, in due course and easy stages, *to 'Nishi Padma'* and to Uttam's artistry therein, a subject meriting exclusive, discerning and sustained appraisal. And yes, for the first time I heard an Indian pronouncing the word 'Hero' correctly. Besides, in this film, he teaches us Q.E.D.

Fig 1C: A scene from *'Nishi Padma'* (1970)

Fig 1D: Ella Fitzgerald,' *Make the Knife'*, Live at Deutschlandhalle in West Berlin (1960).

There is a fun fact for youse – lovely readers. The legendary jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald forgot the words to "Mac the Knife" when performing it live in Berlin. She turned the forgotten lyrics into an impromptu jazz improvisation. I shan't provide a reference, since it's a well-known fact. Anybody could Google it.

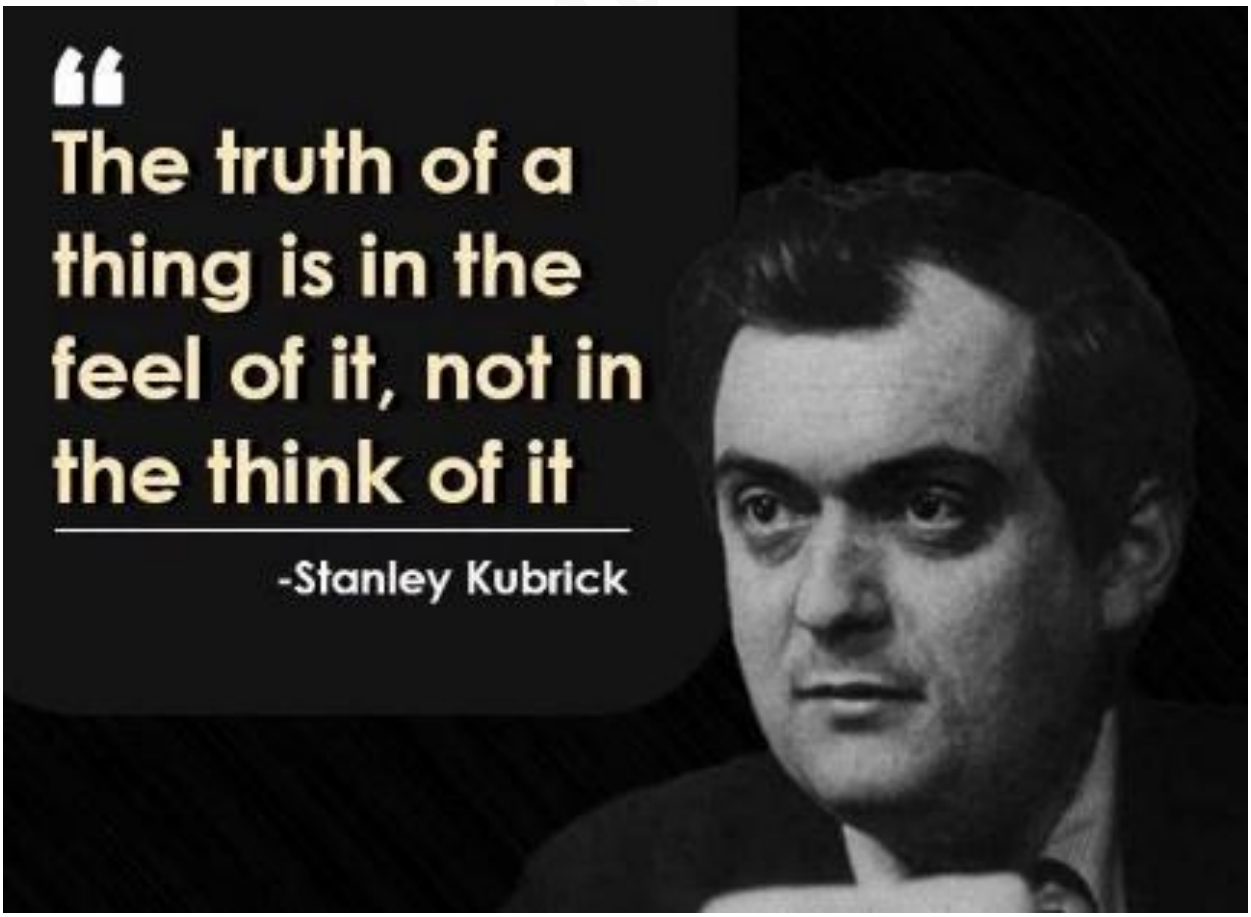


Fig 1E: A Stanley Kubrick quotation

Well, we are discussing how Uttam's acting (film) skill (dialectical beauty) draws sources from myriad social, political, religious, and cinematic influences to achieve its sophistication and complexity; how orphic vision of film-acting blends myth, music, and emotion into a single experience, by comparing some of the great cheeses from Hollywood & British (e.g., Marlon Brando, Sir Richard Burton, Sir Anthony Hopkins, Sir Daniel Day-Lewis, and Dustin Hoffman; and, if required, yes, if required, Humphrey Bogart, James Stewart, Paul Muni, Peter O'Toole, and Al Pacino) heroes, and a few heroines – like Meryl Streep or Viola Davis, as well as different schools of acting. Yes, no Indian actors, save Utpal Dutt, can even offer a real challenge to Uttam; hence, I discard them totally, willingly.

No one wears an accent quite like Meryl Streep. It can't be gainsaid.

And I wish not to include artists like Marcello Mastroianni or François Cluzet since I don't understand the languages involved. As simple as that, huh! Romance / romantic hero part shall be examined later, as Hollywood has never really produced a romantic hero like Uttam Kumar, who combined romance, cultural impact, and enduring widespread acclaim, not only in the Bengali circle, but in the entire country. The closest La La Land equivalents in terms of romantic influence would be Cary Grant, Clark Gable, and Richard Gere. Ryan Gosling's perhaps the modern counterpart.

Considering the development and demise of different types of concepts and movements throughout the history of visual art, realism is no bolt from the blue. Typical realist movements emerged in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as a reaction to Romanticism, from Champfleury to Courbet and beyond, and evolved in many ways. Its primary aim was to depict objects as well as the experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary, of coeval life accurately, and more importantly, close to reality, avoiding the hitherto artistic conventions and clichés. The basic idea of realism cancelled out imaginative idealization in favor of a close observation of outward appearances. It became prevalent primarily in modern European painting and then slowly spread to other branches of art. That transformation also took place in film acting. And Hollywood greats are no exceptions. We will explain this in detail in the next section.

Uttam Kumar kicked the bucket 46 years ago.

He was eighty-sixed by many early in his career as a film actor. After that hiccup, and continuous contumely, (when every newcomer was put through the wringer) there was no looking back, or decline in popularity or evanescence unlike - Marlon Brando. Charlie Chaplin. Al Pacino. Amitabh Bachchan.

Still, Uttam is more than alive. No superstar, I repeat, NO holly-bolly-molly-tolly-dolly-Shelley-wood superstar has never touched this pick. And it keeps raising in the EP series. His is the last word on film acting, especially as a protagonist: A 'HERO.'

- The tenderness of Romance, the sparkle of Comedy, the ache of Tragedy, and the infinite shades of the so-called character roles: as a friend and as a fiend, as an elder brother and as a father, as a lover and as a loser, as a muker and as a murderer, (in the same film, mind

you: for example, '*Sesh Anka'* (1963), as a virtuoso and a villain, as a victor and as a vindicator. Please refer to the images below, from the same film.

Fig 2: Image A

Fig 3: Image B

Fig 4: Image C

Image A: Early in the film, Sudhanshu Gupta, the romantic hero and paramour, has no idea about the female protagonist's past. He uses the rearview mirror astutely and cleverly.

Image B: The woman he once married lies abandoned upon the rails, and the approaching train becomes the keeper of his terrible secret. Amid the train-chugging sound and the stillness of conscience, Uttam delivers a masterclass in film acting. Kindly notice how he embraces the fleeting light, allowing it to dance across his features like the echoes mind that betrays no guilt on Sudhanshu's face whatsoever – a jackal.

Image C: When Sudhanshu is trapped, his past deeds slowly come to light.

He is very pernickety about his craft. I know I must not offer this kind of analysis at the very beginning, when the essay is in an inchoate state. But in English, this is called 'for a start'. Nevertheless, I do it to bestir the readers, the cross-cultural and cross-border film lovers (especially those who are mostly acquainted with Hollywood stuff only) who have not had a chance to watch a single Uttam- Kumar-film.

The list would turn into a Time, an Ocean.

"I made more lousy pictures than any actor in history." – The quote is widely attributed to Humphrey Bogart. Players must deal with the most indefinable and transeunt medium possible - human emotion. The 'human' questions every so often leave them with a puzzled countenance. However, history has seen some potent players bursting on the scene with sheer force and echt novelty, embodying a new era at the double.

Uttam Kumar is a reminder of an era that is losing its brilliance with celerity in Indian cinema, when creativity was unimpeded yet mirrored the true extent of tradition. He graced the silver screen with his magical magnetism and ability to become the very person he portrayed. His is not a typical product of the cine-merchants' dream factory. And being the edificial talent that Uttam is, international recognition of his contribution to this form of art is ineluctable.

'each style belongs to a different person [1]

I found this sentence in 'THE NECESSITY OF ART' by Earnst Fischer.

So true for Uttam Kumar. Marlon Brando? Only 40 feature films – dramas, romances, westerns, historical epics, and crime thrillers. Let's challenge our inkling about his greatness by starting with Elia Kazan's 'apologetic' film '*On the Waterfront'* (1954), as Terry Malloy, an erstwhile boxer and longshoreman. An Oscar for him; presented by the ever-radiant Bette Davis.

Fig 5: Bette Davis announces the Oscar in 1955.

Fig 6: A scene from the film – *'On the Waterfront'*, featuring Marlon Brando.

…let's get back to the main topic. I shall labor to make the canvass riveting!
The political history of America shapes Hollywood cinema – both in terms of art and craft - in no small measure. In many ways, the unfolding of Hollywood's modern acting echoes the land's own evolution.

1. The Frontier Spirit and Individualism
2. Immigration and Cultural Diversity
3. The Great Depression (1930s).
4. World War II, Post-War Disillusionment and Method Acting
5. Civil Rights and Social Change

Over the years, realism, with all its possible ramifications and problems, has emerged as one of the most notable terms in cinema history and has embraced many artistic currents from different countries. In this sense, realism sits somewhere between the rules of classical cinema and the path-breaking innovations of the avant-garde, where the visual language it uses to captivate the audience often encourages overt stylization and abstraction. Therefore, American screen presence differs largely from the formal traditions of European theatre acting.

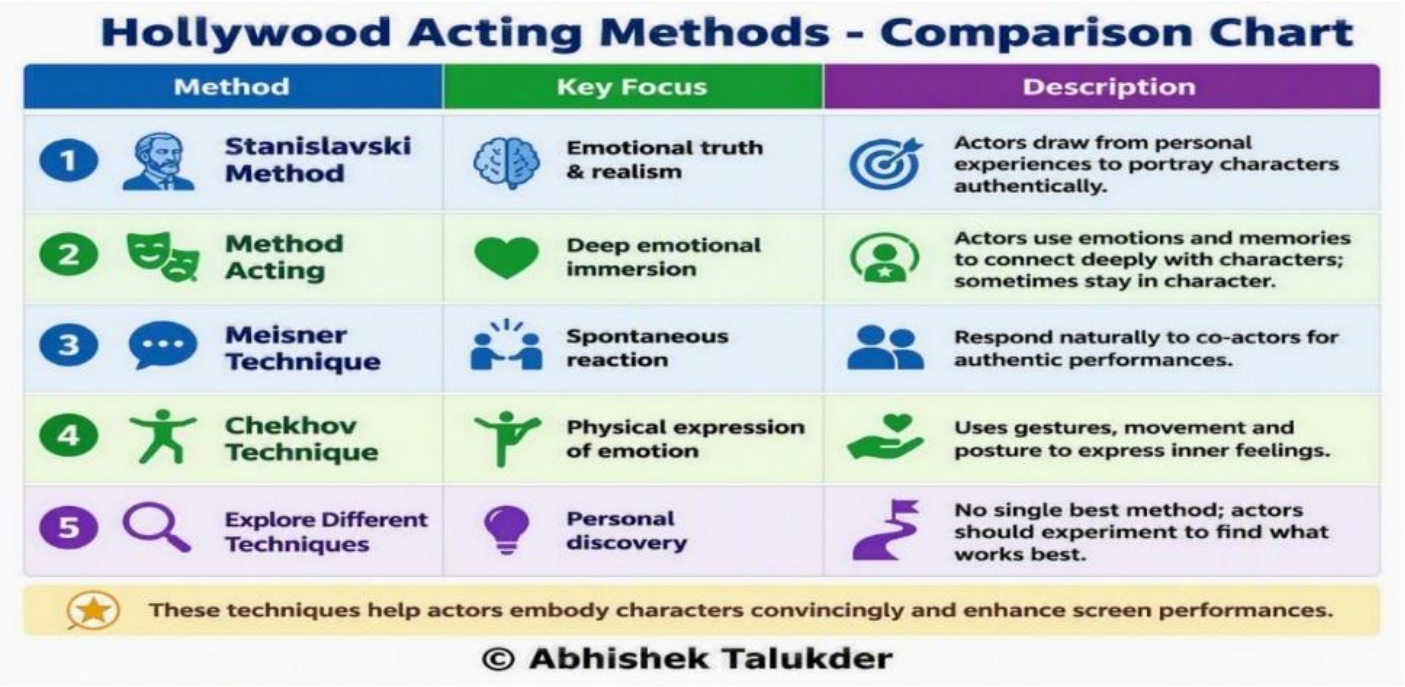
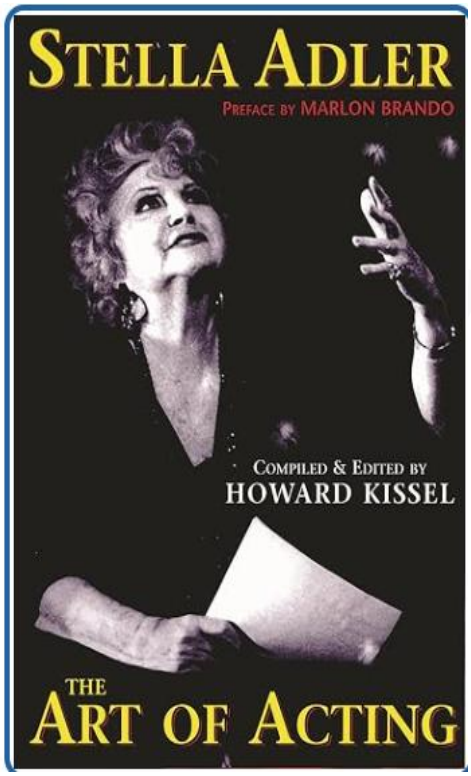
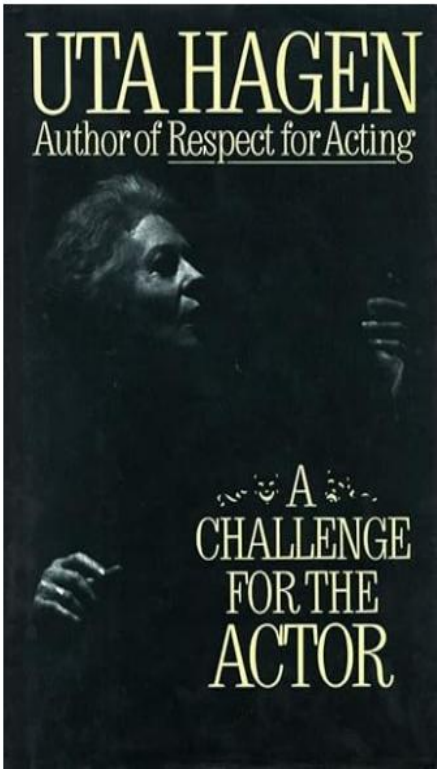


Fig 7: (© Abhishek Talukder. The chart's generated with AI, self- written program, using C++ and Python).

And the three best-known Holly-acting books: Below three images: Fig 8.





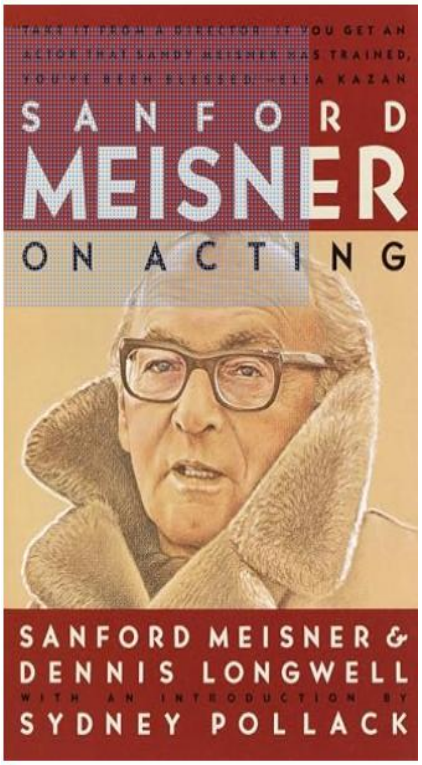


Fig 9: A scene from the film *Braja Buli* (1979), featuring Uttam Kumar. Free image.

Yeah, we are discussing Brando's performance in '*On the Waterfront'*. Let's resume.
"She taught me everything." [2] **-** Brando on Stella Adler.
Let's look back on Stella Adler's approach to acting, briefly.
She mostly accented on imagination, espial, and a clear understanding of a character's socio-political and socio-economic surroundings in lieu of relying on personal, emotional fantasies & memories. Doesn't it echo the approaches of the great Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami and the master Mrinal Sen?

She taught actors to elevate themselves through art, history, literature, and real-life observations so they could deliver authentic and fully apprehended performances (on screen). Her primary belief was that an actor's greatest tool is a 'trained imagination', and not simply personal experiences.

- Use your imagination to delve into the character's reality.
- Bone up on the character's social, historical, and emotional circumstances.
- Amplify your knowledge of life, literature, art, and culture.
- Act truthfully, as close to the reality as possible, instead of theatrical tricks.
- Focus on serving the story and not fueling your ego.

Put simply, Adler wanted to teach actors to observe life closely and use a rich imagination to create realistic, true-to-life human behavior on screen.

Aside from a few scenes, where do these rules apply to Brando in the film? His early conversations with Edie (played by Eva Marie Saint) failed to ooze confidence, for example, in the riverside scene where Terry (Brando) confabs with Edie, a murder of crows flutters over the trees. We sense that Terry's feelings for Edie have begun to blossom.

Fig 10: Two shots from the same scene from the film *'On the Waterfront'*.

Please look carefully at the eyes, not the stares (see the blue arrows in the images), of Brando and Eva. It's a complete role reversal as far as the screenplay is concerned. In the entire 'over the shoulder' scene, Brando seldom eyeballs her, let alone with a romantic and confident look. Although Brando is extremely intelligent with a propensity for fits of anger, he makes some real gaffes throughout the film. And he carries his nasal tone throughout his career, religiously. What a polka!

The maladroit way the matter has been handled, mostly with shoulder-acting, is not expected from a giant like Brando. It's a director's fault, and an actor's as well. Now carefully examine the image below.

Fig 11: A scene from the romcom *'Deya Neya'* (1963), featuring Uttam Kumar as Hero.

The above one is such a geometrically fantastic frame (mind the clouded lines I inserted in the image). Uttam plays a timid character that accidentally connects with the heroine's family while posing as a chauffeur. However, he stills the entire drama with his eyes; just his eyes, **as if he replaced the D minor chord with E7th while performing a piece (or say: scene) in C major scale.** (C major scale, Thaat Bilaval, has all the natural). This scene would follow Uttam's seraphic smile, completing the car-drama in its entirety. As an aside, in both cases, romance is in an inchoate state.

"Cinema is everything – literature, sculpture, music, painting, everything." – Pier Paolo Pasolini[3]

The photographic space is constructed along the axis of an action that assumes everything takes place along the discernible and predictable line (I am talking about the framing and construction of the images), and an unobtrusive style of cinematography that always struggles to prove the believability of the images, enforcing the viewers to simply accept the story, identity and the place and arrive at a single truth that Prasanta (the protagonist, played by Uttam) must not be blown away with the coaxing and cajolery offered the two women, in the backseat, as he has to shield his clandestine appearance and still hold the scene as handsome hero, who happens to be a big singer.

A realist scenarization and dramatization of the events ensures that, although different in nature and magnitude, they will surely cohere most conventionally and linearly within a narrative space, blurring the distance between the image and its referent. Uttam's conscientious performance helps the director achieve this. No shoulder-dependent acting here, no conspicuous physical mannerisms that Western critics have so often mistaken for the essence of realism or natural acting, and that Brando himself carried through much of his cine-career. Western critics (read ultracrepidarians) acclaimed his performance as the apotheosis of natural acting. If it were so, Uttam Kumar had already redefined nature in *'Basu Paribar'* (1954), two years earlier. He went on to reshape, revise, correct, edit, recast, touch it up, redraft, and emend it repeatedly, with an ease at once uncanny, fearless, and embarrassingly easily. Brando's greatness is beyond dispute, yet he never entirely escapes his theatrical inheritance. The actor in him is always visible. It's only the 'BRANDO'.

Fig 12: *'On the Waterfront' (1954*)

Fig 13: A scene from '*Julius Caesar'* (1953)

Lovely readers, cast your gaze upon Fig. 8 and Fig. 9. In the former, Marlon Brando hurls his words toward Johnny Friendly, magnificently portrayed by Lee J. Cobb, with the force of a public challenge. In the latter, following Caesar's tragic demise, Brando stands before the masses, addressing the common folk with an air of official gravitas. Between these two moments, separated by scarcely a year, do you discern any profound evolution in his craft? Has the cadence shifted, the bearing altered, the voice acquired a new resonance? I shall shortly turn to the fascinating question of pronunciation. An Aamir Khan exhibits a more striking transformation within a comparable span of time. Yet only Brando's journey is made to seek serious examination, always, and not others like Richard Gere – who's not only a handsome, sexy figure but also a fascinating actor, an intellectual.

Fig 14: *'Jawani Zindabad'* (1990)

Fig 15: A scene from *'Afsana Pyar Ka' (1991)*

Two celluloid misadventures, though. However, in *'Jawani Zindabad'* he shares the screen with the legendary Utpal Dutt – no trifling matter, you see! In one year, an Aamir Khan changed his acting style, better than Marlon Brando. Now, I'll present a collage of Uttam Kumar stepping into the public gaze.

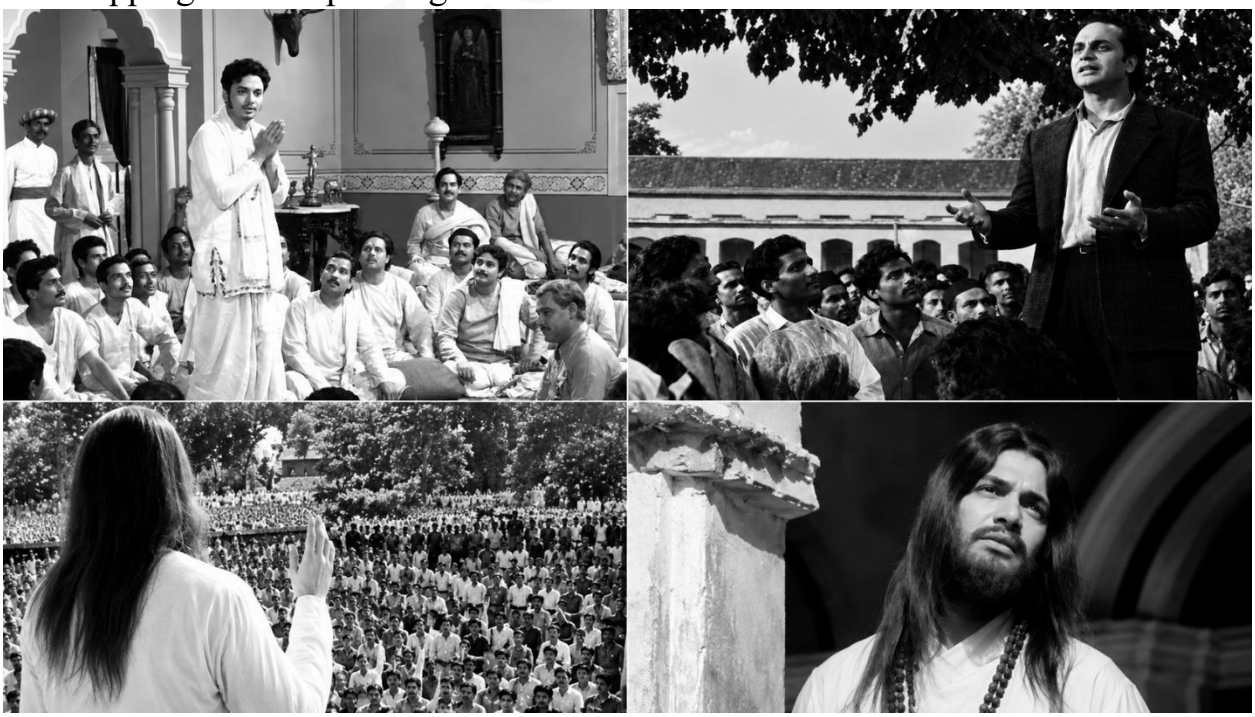


Fig 16: (Clockwise) Scenes from *'Antony Firingee'* (1967), *'Sabar Uparey'* (1955), and the other two are from '*Sanyasi Raja'* (1975).

I purposefully abandon chronology. Darling readers, this must enable youse to appreciate the evolution and spectrum of Uttam Kumar's artistry, even within the boundaries of one character mould. **Slant Imagery.** Please look once again at the 4th image in this series – BEATIFIC! Isn't it? Could you name any so-called Hollywood stars who could stand only this? Wait a jiffy; I shall further.

ACCENT and MARLON BRANDO

No one, howsoever anxious to wrench Brando's legacy off that of the history of cinema, can dispute and much less deny that basic and incontrovertible fact. He has carved out a reputation for himself as a high-powered film actor. However, here's an image (on the next page), suggested by the (al)mighty Google when asked two simple questions[4]? I am offered a page containing gobbets of information. And as the old saying goes, there are lies, damn lies, and statistics.

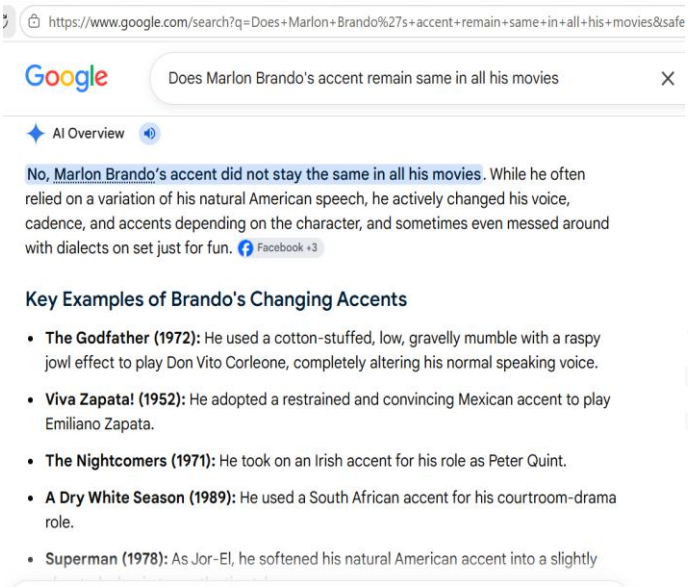


Fig 17: Image A

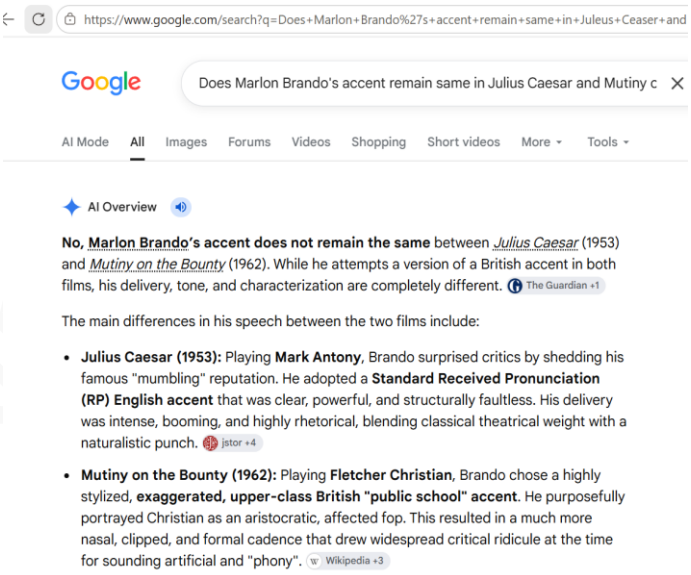


Fig 17: Image B

Image A: My question is: Does Marlon Brando's accent remains same in all his movies?

Image B: My question is: Does Marlon Brando's accent remains same in '*Julius Caesar'* and *'Mutiny on the Bounty'*[5]*?*

And one may read the answers. I recall John Grey and the Myth of Progress[5]. Let's break the 'Brando-and-accent' myth. Same film, same character - **Fletcher Christian**. Information: The image below is my pictorial analysis, using simple AI techniques (Python and C++). The words inscribed on the page belong only to yours truly.

Fig 18: AI-generated image, comparing Brando and Gibson's performance.

Then cometh, '*Julieus Caesar'* (1953). Brando hires a coach to master the accent, but not as you'd expect. The bell rings to me when he utters the word – **STURNER** (Fig.13).

My acquaintance with RP (Received Pronunciation) is close enough that my ear tends to raise an immediate eyebrow at wayward pronunciation or imperfect enunciation. Brando's diction as Mark Antony is definitely faulty. Let alone the RP. A famous video, NO COPYRIGHT VIOLATION, is available on YouTube, titled – 'Julius Caesar (1953) - Mark Antony's Forum speech (starring Brando).'

Here, Antony addresses the hoi polloi. He piques himself in his beautiful costume: draped in a paludamentum, the military cloak of a Roman General, secured at the shoulder by an ornate fibula and falling in broad classical folds that lend him martial authority as well as

sculptural grandeur. The director, however, does not capture the special temporality masterfully. However, let's stress Brando's accent, sounds to me, in poetic terminology, like a 'Skeltonic Verse.'

I have used **Claude Opus 5.5** to analyze the diction, the elocution, the pronunciation, and the enunciation – in which Uttam Kumar reigns supreme – of Brando using the YouTube link mentioned before. I simply copy and paste the output, which is nearly 100% accurate in this case. Dear readers, please be kind to me. The output sits, as an image, on the next page. Pray allow me this eloquent blank upon this page, pregnant with suspense; where absence – or nothingness – itself becomes a form of art, which a multifaceted, multifarious, kaleidoscopic talent named Uttam Kumar himself depicts on screen many times, showing little or no effort. My essay also follows Uttam's evolutionary style.

AI-GENERATED IMAGE, created from the Author's specific inputs and a YouTube video

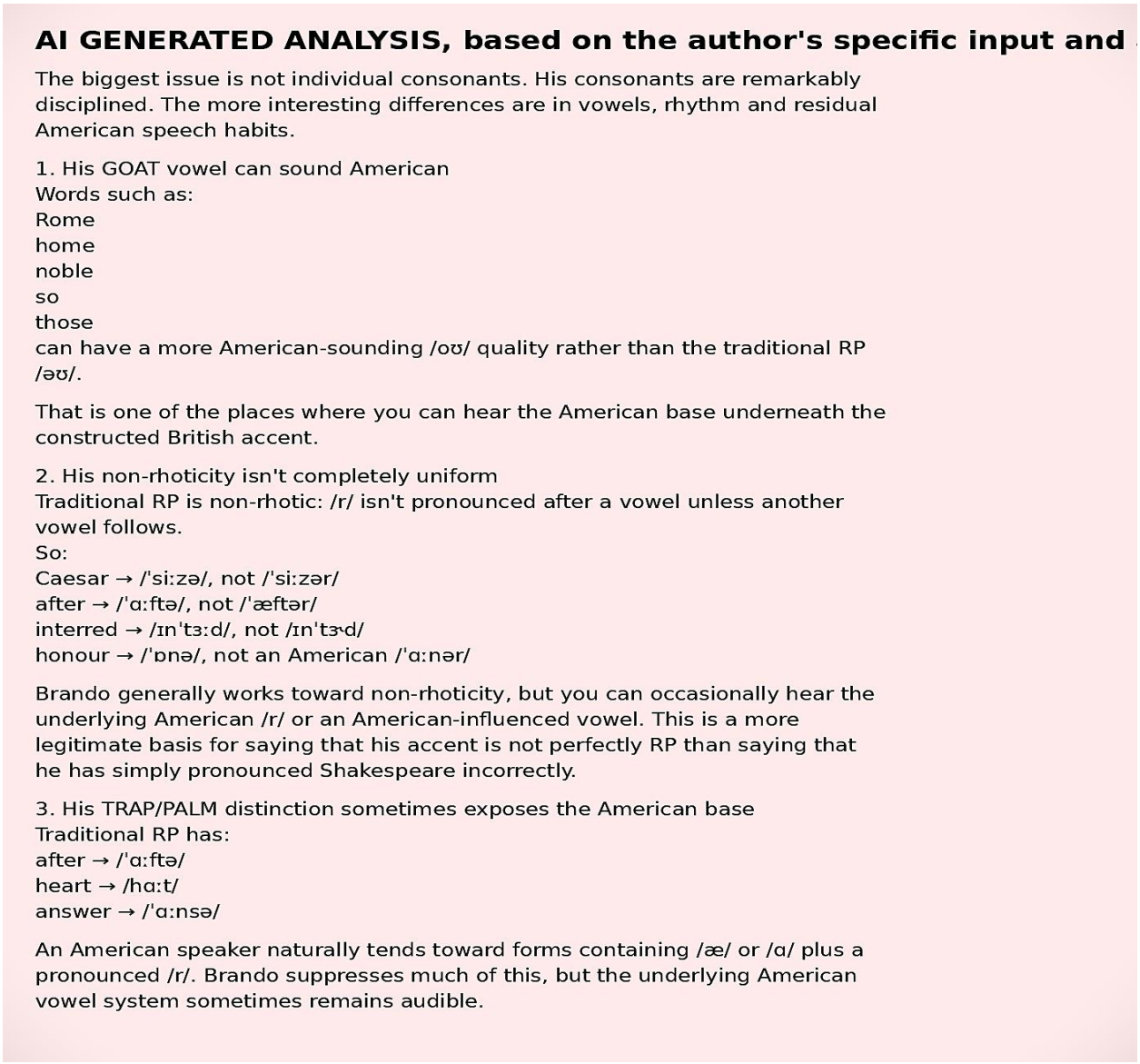


Fig 19: AI-generated image, explain the faults in Brando's accent in a particular scene mentioned before in the article.

Therefore, reiterate I, it is always Brando and not the character. It's not Mark Antony but Marlon Brando, with his rebarbative accent, not Terry Malloy but Marlon Brando, not Johnny Strabler *The Wild One*, (1953), not Vito Corleone *'The Godfather'* (1972) but Marlon Brando, not Col. Walter Kurtz *'Apocalypse Now',* (1979). One can scarcely say the converse. On the other hand, across more than two hundred films, Uttam Kumar does not inhabit a character so much as surrender himself to it, until actor and role are almost inseparable. They are like two peas in a pod.

And Mr. CHARLIE CHAPLIN would be very pleased if we had not discussed Brando's performance in *'The Godfather'*. It would be a 'silly point' (a cricketing term). Therefore, Brando's the greatest – invalid ab initio.

PHOTOPLAY

MAY, 1948 * p. 53

I'm No Communist

by

Humphrey Bogart

AS the guy said to the warden, just before he was hanged: "This will teach me a lesson I'll never forget."

No, sir, I'll never forget the lesson that was taught to me in the year 1947, at Washington, D. C. When I got back to Hollywood, some friends sent me a mounted fish and underneath it was written: "If I hadn't opened my big mouth, I wouldn't be here."

The New York Times, the Herald Tribune and other reputable publications editorially had questioned the House Committee on Un-American Activities, warning that it was infringing on free speech. When a group of us Hollywood actors and actresses said the same thing, the roof fell in on us. In some fashion, I took the brunt of the attack. Suddenly, the plane that had flown us East became "Bogart's plane," carrying "Bogart's group." For once, top billing became embarrassing.

And the names that were called! Bogart, the capitalist, who always had loved his swimming pool, his fine home and all the other Hollywood luxuries, overnight had become Bogart, the Communist! Now there have been instances of miscasting, but this was the silliest. I refused to take it seriously, figuring that nobody else would take it seriously. The public, I figured, knew me and had known me for years. Sure, I had campaigned for FDR, but that had been the extent of my participation in politics. The public, I figured, must be aware of that and must be aware that not only was I completely American, but sincerely grateful for what the American system had allowed me to achieve.

It was in that comfortable frame of mind that I reached New York City. I first learned how wrong I was in my reasoning through a newspaper pal of mine, Ed Sullivan. He and I have been friends for close to twenty years and when we met, at Madison Square Garden during a big charity show, he called me aside and bawled the life out of me. "Stop it, Ed," I told him. "Suppose I have lost a few Republicans—likely as not, I've picked up some Democrats." Sullivan looked at me as if I had two heads. "Look, 'Bogie'," he said, "this is not a question of alienating Republicans or

OldMagazineArticles.com

Fig 20: "I'm No Communist" (Photoplay Magazine, 1948). H Bogart. [8]

Fig 21: A scene from the film *'Casablanca'* (1942), directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

Spectacular cinematography (Arthur Edeson, the DOP), low-key noir lighting with tenebrism and chiaroscuro qualities. We want to marvel at the scene forever. Throughout the film, the cinematography reaches its zenith, with each image revealing the medium at its most persuasive and expressive. However, you wouldn't need a Bogart for this. Legends like **Soumitra Chattopadhyay or Victor Banerjee** could deliver the same elegance, capturing the nuances and underscoring the dilemma that disturbs the character's mind. Bogart's most memorable work is *The African Queen* (1951). Incontrovertibly!

Fig 22: A scene from the film '*The African Queen'*. Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart.

Humphrey Bogart (another actor with a nasal tone – the result of some unfortunate injuries back in his salad days – greets every emotional contour of the character with sheer brilliance and plays with hardihood – especially using the open bite. Unlike Brando's often self-conscious physical expressiveness, Bogart, in *'The African Queen'*, relies on the understated eloquence of voice, timing, and presence. His slightly open-bite delivery, far from being a defect, becomes an instrument of naturalism, making the character – Charlie Allnut – appear real, as a Canadian boat captain. Thus, cometh the Oscar. And who are the other contenders? Gordon Bennet! Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Arthur Kennedy, and Fredric March. Quite a justified decision made by the Academy. However, Boggart is reportedly refused to accept the 'Cockney' accent needed for the character, as he was unable to do so.

With a strong foundation in the craft and immense talent at his disposal, Bogart successfully establishes himself as a multifaceted powerhouse performer. Howbeit, the same argument stands for Bogart as well – variety, accent, change of mannerism, and underacting. I just searched for the word 'Underacting' using Microsoft 365 Copilot, and the answer came. Refer to the AI reply image below. Kindly check the last line of the image.

Underacting is a style of acting in which the performer expresses emotions and thoughts with **restraint, subtlety, and economy**, avoiding obvious gestures, exaggerated facial expressions, or theatrical delivery.

Definition

> **Underacting** is the deliberate minimization of external expression so that emotions are suggested rather than overtly displayed.

Examples

- **Humphrey Bogart** often underacted, relying on voice, timing, and presence rather than dramatic gestures.
- **Gary Cooper** was renowned for his understated, laconic style.
- Many critics consider **Uttam Kumar** a master of underacting, conveying complex emotions through slight changes in expression, gaze, and vocal inflection.

Contrast

Fig 23: An AI-generated (Microsoft 365 Copilot) image, explaining the word 'Underacting'.

Fig 24A: A scene from *'I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang'* (1932), featuring Paul Muni.

Fig 24B: Paul Muni.

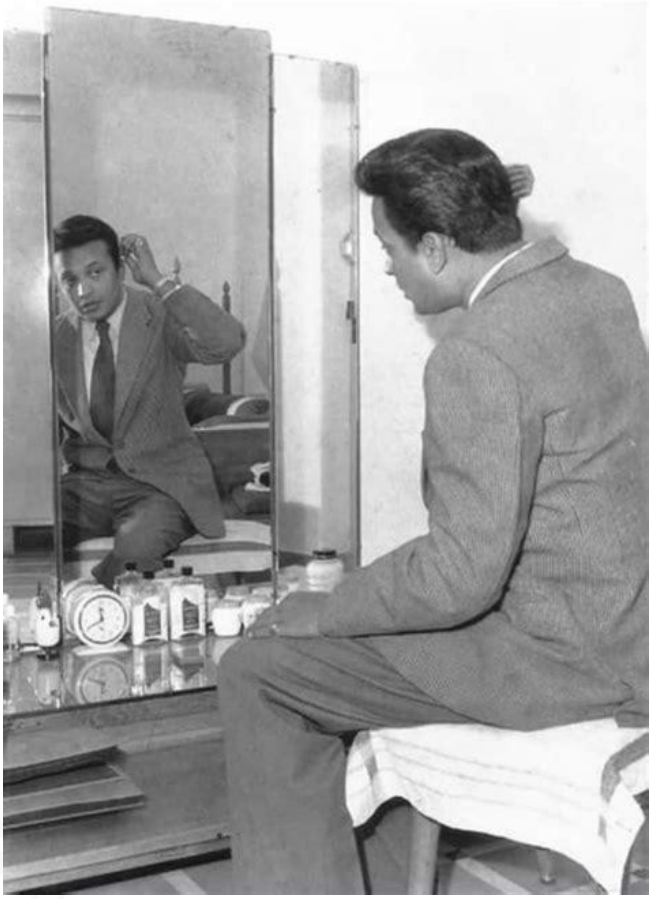


Fig 25: Uttam Kumar, in a vanity room.

Fig 26: A scene from *'Pretty Woman'* (1990).

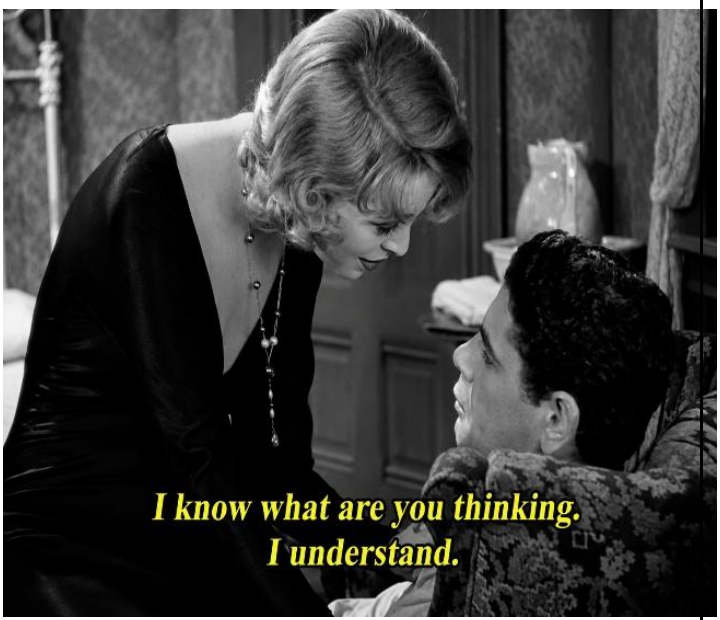


Fig 27: A scene from *'I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang'*.

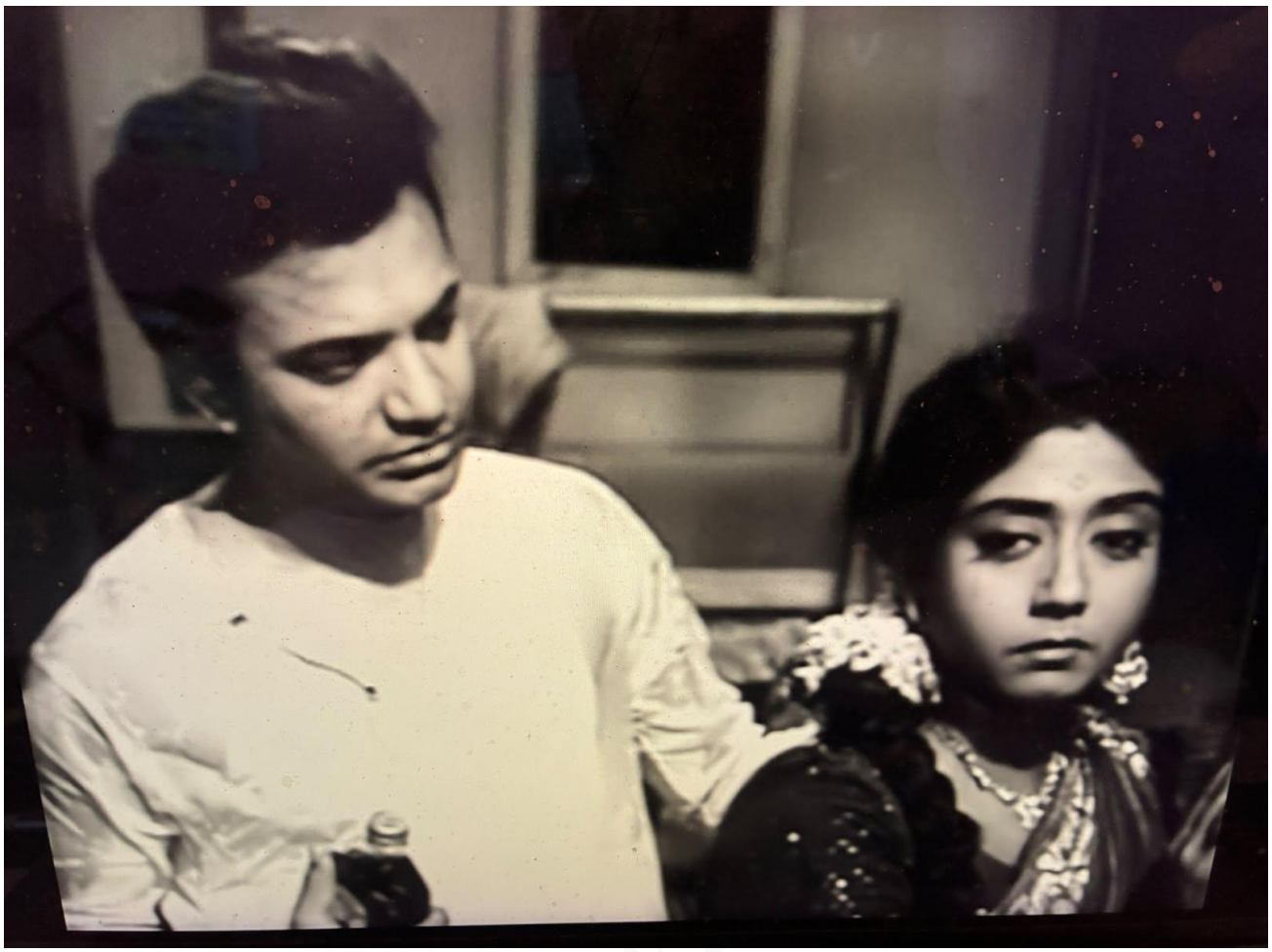


Fig 28: scene from *Nishi Padma'* (1970), featuring Uttam Kumar.

Readers, once again, it is just a case of "playing with the eyes." All three male characters – (clockwise) Richard Gere, Paul Muni, and Uttam Kumar – encounter 'public women'; although in Uttam's case, the character knows the lady beforehand. However, look at Uttam's eyes and facial expression. He is not Uttam anymore; he is the genuine sympathizer who cares for the lady society has dubbed. He is no longer a hero – 'NAYAK', although this film subtly pays homage to Ray's *'Nayak'*.

The kind of nicely calibrated and nuanced acting on display here is not only just a fleeting flourish but also a recurring phenomenon, observable across more than 150 films – and remember a few of his works are no longer available – and an astonishing range of emotional registers; one would search the world in vain for a comparable achievement. Creating marvel in one or two films is not a big thing; to create that magic on, and on (and embarrassingly easily) – makes someone greatest of all; likewise, we call **John Keats** as the **'Poets' Poet'.** Keats is to poetry what Uttam Kumar is to cine-acting: the actors' actor, the connoisseurs' and cognoscenti's delight. No sooner does he enter the frame than the eyes involuntarily find its natural destination – only HIM. Thereafter, the rest of the screen, including the other players, at times extraordinary character actors, exists merely in the periphery of one's awareness. And to achieve that, he never resorts to skullduggery or

vilipending others' hard work, a common practice in film industries around the globe. He does not need it.

Well, Paul Muni is not as handsome as Cary Grant, Marlon Brando, Uttam Kumar, Al Pacino, Richard Gere, Mel Gibson or Imran Khan – a vintage disadvantage.

Fig 29: Imran Khan, file photo.

Fig 30: Ingrid Bergman, file photo.

Fig 31: A couple of scenes from *'All the President's Men' (1976)*.

'All the President's Men' (1976) is a peerless film, unlike the other Hollywood classics we have discussed thus far. It was the Watergate scandal broken by two journalists that ultimately cornered a lying Richard Nixon, the then-president of the United States. Following the director's (Alan J. Pakula) instructions, Hoffmann gives the novel a fresh, conscientious reading. Carl Bernstein's character is a stratified one, and the film demands a talented head above a determined shoulder to satiate the expectation surrounding it. Hoffmann, a meticulous

apprentice of his craft, is indeed cerebral in grasping the nerve of the character. His nuanced acting and felicitous bearing become the portal through which the audience enters the investigative journalist's being and nothingness. His comfortable yet mundane existence in affluent surroundings is thrown into delightful chaos upon the presence of another superstar, Robert Redford (Bob Woodward).

He enters Carl's stagnant, tranquil life with a metamorphic storm. From an acting standpoint, Hoffman demonstrates the Hollywood method tradition at its best. Yet unlike the emotional intensity of his other films, here he channels that method into observation, listening to fellow characters and reacting, and behavioral details – every phone call, interruption, half-finished sentence, and quick reaction – all of which Hoffman brings out on screen with his subdued and sublime acting, touching every aspect of the turmoil (multiplied by political pressure) that the senior editorial minds of 'The Washington Post' are impelled to pass. Hoffman's performance humbles Redford's in this film.

It looks like Hoffman taxes his patience. His fervent, articulate eyes and comely visage elevate the film. The finesse of the script, and the execution of the same with Hoffman playing a pivotal role, make the film an edifice in terms of achievement in Hollywood cinema. Hoffman's temperate yet emboldened performance can arguably be dubbed one of his best; however, Mr. Nixon remains in melancholy. His 20th appearance in *'Rain Man'* (1988) helped him stand streets ahead of his contemporaries in Hollywood.

We seldom see art as beautiful and communicative as cinema, though many still struggle to accept it as a complete art. However, it's a harmonious blend of individual artistic talent and technology. Cinema is like a horizon where science and art kiss.

Filmmaking is a collective noun and therefore can't be compared with writing or painting. It is more like sculpture or music, where a team of talented human souls works to produce aeonian memories. Uttam Kumar is one of the HIMALAYAN outcomes – like Abbas Kiarostami, Theo Angelopoulos, Satyajit Ray, David Lean, Chantal Akerman, Charlie Chaplin, Ingrid Bergman, Meryl Streep, Sidney Poitier, Roger Deakins, Al Pacino, Thelma Schoonmaker, to name a few – of the labor of love for cinema. Unlike others, Uttam always wanted to understand the hidden cogs and springs of the scene before deciding how apply his crafts.

Fig 32 A: 'Sunil Gavaskar collecting his thoughts'[9] - after his epic 172 against Australia at the SCG (1985-86).

Fig 32 B: Daniel Day-Lewis in *'Lincoln'* (2012).

Fig 33*: My Beautiful Launderette'* (1985)

I started this article with a couple of lines from the great poet Hopkins, since cinema is the moving image of beauty itself. But often, even for the most beautiful filmmakers, beauty becomes a problem when they become too occupied with making squalor look beautiful. Then we are forced to ask: is 'beauty' a burden on the film or its subject?

Throughout the film, one senses that the events and actions are premeditated, and the narration's primary aim is to justify the director's excessive trust in the images and in the power of Abraham Lincoln. The gossamer threads are left for us to weave in accordance with our own historical and socio-political factuality. Still, the problem is, Spielberg's rigorously maintained system of framing and shooting, as done by the earlier European masters, sometimes makes the subtext a burden to the text. And then comes the rescue: Lewis' mathematically beautiful acting. He depicts the different layers of THE character so masterly. The historical factuality becomes a dialectical factuality of beauty – a viewer's delight. A memorable performance that copped an Academy Award, unlike Brando's for 'The Godfather.'

There is no doubt that Lewis keeps pushing the limits of what we expect from a film. However, style should not be invoked only as a useful language for talking about the 'totality of a work of art'[10], as asserted by Susan Sontag, but for abstracting the larger totality of socioeconomic heterogeneity as well. A powerful actor could elevate a film to this level. Hollywood (and the other 'woods') biggies do it occasionally, but Uttam Kumar makes this a natural inclination towards the art of film acting.

In this essay, unlike treatises that analyses (and present information containing who said what and when about Uttam Kumar) a legend's work from film to film, I instead try to understand Uttam Kumar's all-inclusive and paranoiac-critical approach towards the art of screen-acting on balance, fancies that kept crowding in upon him, and how he has ascertained his own form that is manifested as an infallible aesthetic sensibility and acute responsiveness to traditional cultural impulses that makes his cinema resonate as a significant cultural event in West Bengal as well as India. Critics and scholars mostly talk about the complex web of temporalities in the maestro's cinematic space; however, here, I hanker after going beyond that, reflecting on his cinema's heterogeneity and interdisciplinary nature, unescorted by chronological order, assuming that the readers are more or less versed with Uttam's life and work.

This essay is also unique in that it focuses less on the 'romantic Uttam Kumar'. I believe that the romantic image belittles his overall prowess as an actor who gives flesh and blood to all kinds of characters, sans caring about his 'public image'. He never suffers from Megalothymia, mind you, sweet readers. Self-confidence is not simply a trait in Uttam Kumar; history says that it is an aura so inseparable from the Mahanayak that the two appear synonymous. His Titan-like commanding presence on screen always betrays that fact. No other player, however popular, on earth could claim this confidence. Never! Never!

The master of accent – UTTAM KUMAR!

Fig 34: Meryl Streep in *'Sophie's Choice'* (1982).

When accent is acting.

Fig 35: Meryl Streep in a play.

Fig 36: Meryl Streep in *'Iron Lady'* (2011).

Fig 37: Meryl Streep in *'The Bridges of Madison County'* (1995).

Telephone and Uttam are inseparable; it seems, after 'Nayak'. Below is the image from the film *'Aparichita'* (1969) – a story by Samaresh Basu, inspired by 'The Idiot', by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Not a matter of a joke. Another doyen, Soumitra Chattopadhyay, was blessed with the role of the hero, while Uttam played the villainous part. Could you imagine? Uttam just did not care two hoots about his romantic image, however large it loomed in the public mind and soul. (Consumption of alcohol is injurious to health).

Fig 38A: Uttam Kumar in *'Aparichita'* (1969).

Fig 38B: Uttam Kumar in *'Aparichita'* (1969).

Uttam's acting is like a Shostakovich-symphony or a Kishori Amonkar's Ahir Bhairav. It is ineffable.

Fig 38C: Uttam Kumar in *'Aparichita'* (1969).

Uttam's (Ranjan) first appearance in the film – at the very beginning. A party is going on. Look at his style and gaze. Watch the hands as well. Even through thousands of rebirths, Marlon Brando/Bogart/Paul Newman, or Anthony Hopkins, would struggle to touch this excellence. Only the great Utpal Dutt (also an important part of this film) could match this charisma. Magic, isn't it? A complete actor's encyclopedia – a romantic hero playing the role of an antagonist, and not producing dross, an absolute intellectual refuse like Vito Corleone.

Fig 38D: Uttam Kumar and Aparna Sen in *'Aparichita'* (1969).

Fig 38E: Uttam Kumar and Soumitra in *'Aparichita'* (1969)

Two figures, two different characters, and different genders. In both figures, Uttam's character is shown holding the wheel high. Wonderful and patient readers, kindly recall Fig. 11. Same setting, yet Uttam pilots different types of cars: in Fig. 11, it is LHD (left-hand drive), whereas in Figs. 38C and 38D, it's RHD (right-hand drive). How wonderfully he employs his eyes (character-wise, relationship-wise, and gender-wise) together with the rear-view mirror. Fig.38B is worth special mention, as it captures two doyens of Indian cinema – Uttam Kumar

and the effervescent Soumitra Chattopadhyay. It is inexplicable. The time difference between *'Deya Neya'* and *'Aparachita'* is almost six years. When it is Uttam, time corrects itself. Time questions its very essence.

in omnia paratus

Now cometh the denouement. Again, a still.

Fig. 38F: Uttam Kumar and Aparna Sen in 'Aparichita' (1969). The image is created using AI techniques.

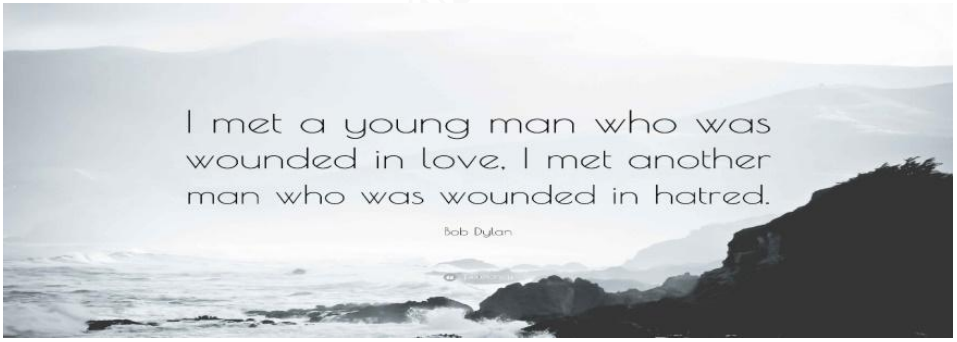


Fig. 39: A few lines from a Bob Dylan song: *'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall.'* [10]

"Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue."

– Robert Browning[11]

A few lines from Browning and Dylan explain it all. Ranjan's crossed the Rubicon with regard to the use of violence as an option. It takes an Uttam Kumar to depict the swinging sentiment of the character with aplomb. Scarcely ever do we chance upon a performance like this, especially in a Bengali film, in which an actor's style cannily abstracts itself frae the immediate socio-political and socio-economic milieu that causes its very appearance to keep a tryst with reality, without drifting away from its commitment to communicativeness. Cinema is truth and beauty when it's created truthfully. How many lines must one man write before he can measure Uttam Kumar? And I have discussed only a handful of Uttam's films, while he covers every genre. As an aside, he was a good dancer as well.

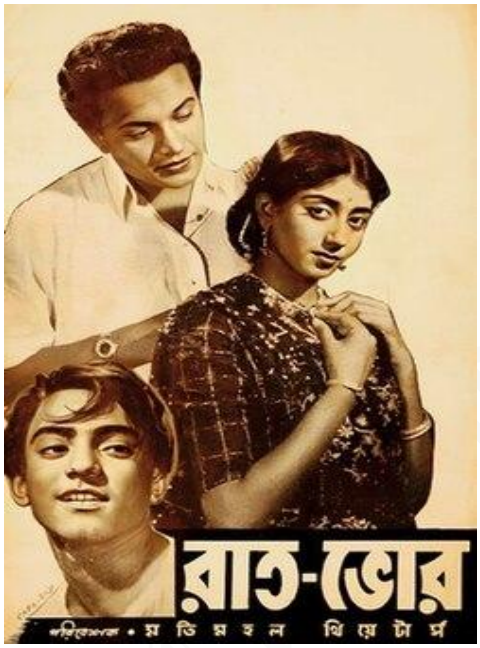


Fig. 40: Film Poster: 'Raat Bhore' (1955).

An act of God – Mrinal Sen's first film, by which time Uttam had already reached the acme of his career. He dared to direct a film by a 'no-one.' Later we would call him Mrinal, with a capital M. The Mrinal Sen.

Fig. 41: Poster: *'Bondhu'* (1958).

Fig 42: Richard Gere, file photo.

A man is known as his thoughts reveal him to be, and the thought becomes what everybody would display about him – his belief and belief as being. It is not what anyone understands or interprets, but what inspires one to communicate in unambiguous language. And true artists reveal what they believe to be true, regardless of method, approach, or reflection.

Fig 43: Uttam Kumar's last film 'Ogo Bodhu Sundori' (1981).

Above's one is an out-an-out comedy film. His comic timing is impeccable. Yet, remarkably, the star never ever intrudes upon the character. Whether the screen demands two Uttams, three, or four, what we see is not the star multiplied, but the characters brought vividly, with aplomb, to life.

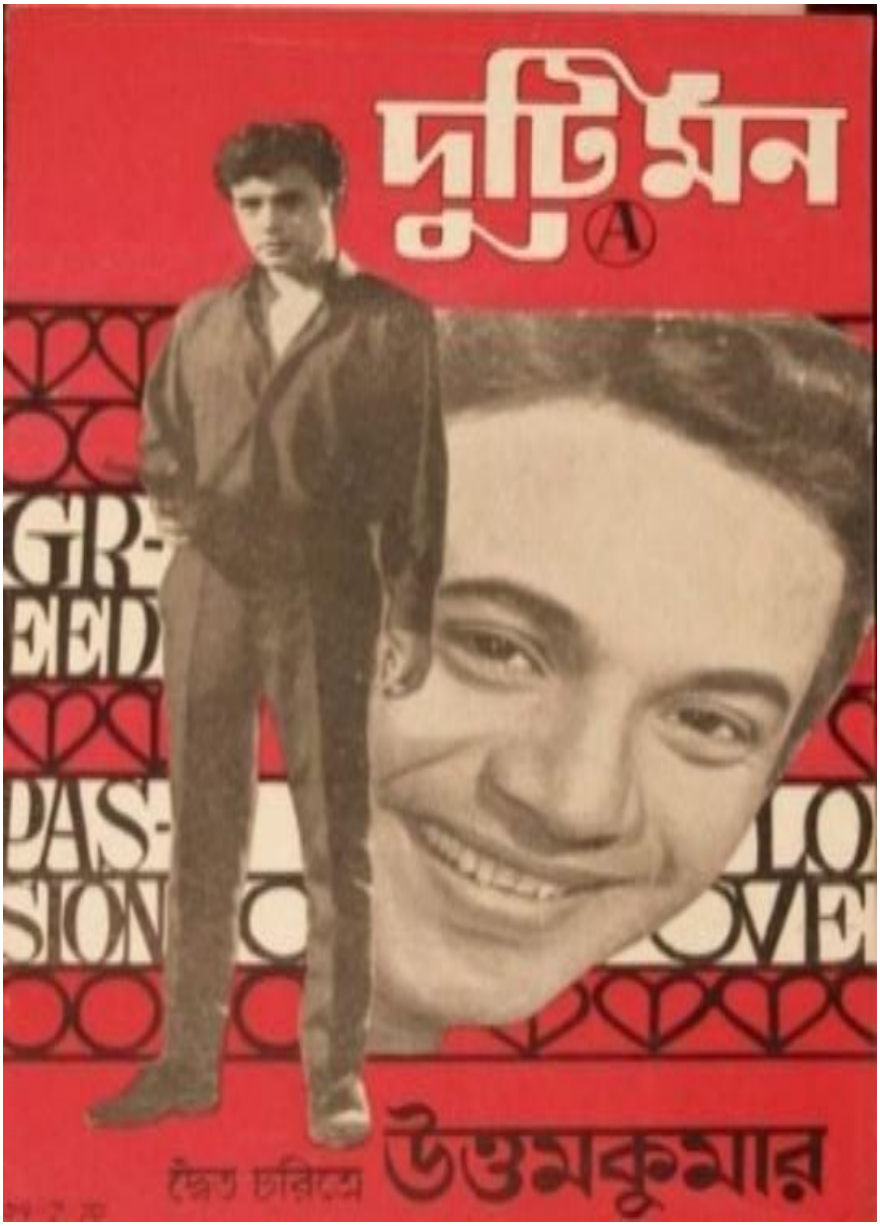


Fig 44: Film *'Duti Mon'* (1970)

His mastery's compact to the point of ellipsis, often arcane; however, it never fails to arrest the hoi polloi. His is the next-door lover, both the character and the hero.

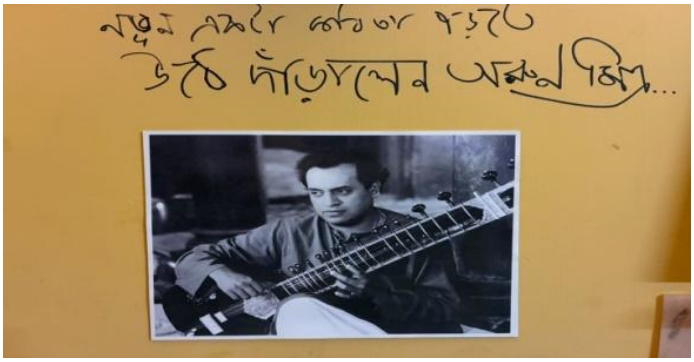


Fig 45: Utpal Dutt: a scene from the film *'The Ascension'* (2025), by the author.

In today's world, when capital's terror writ large, greed romps in the nude, hatred roves the globe, pusillanimity is rewarded routinely, skullduggery, improbity and devilment are celebrated in every sphere of life, and art loses all its seriousness, Uttam Kumar's lifelong contumacy and supremacy on the silver screen will keep viewers in awe for aye. The curtain has fallen on his career, but the waves will keep eroding the shore. Happy 100, and more…**MAHANAYAK**… … the GOAT… … the die is cast.

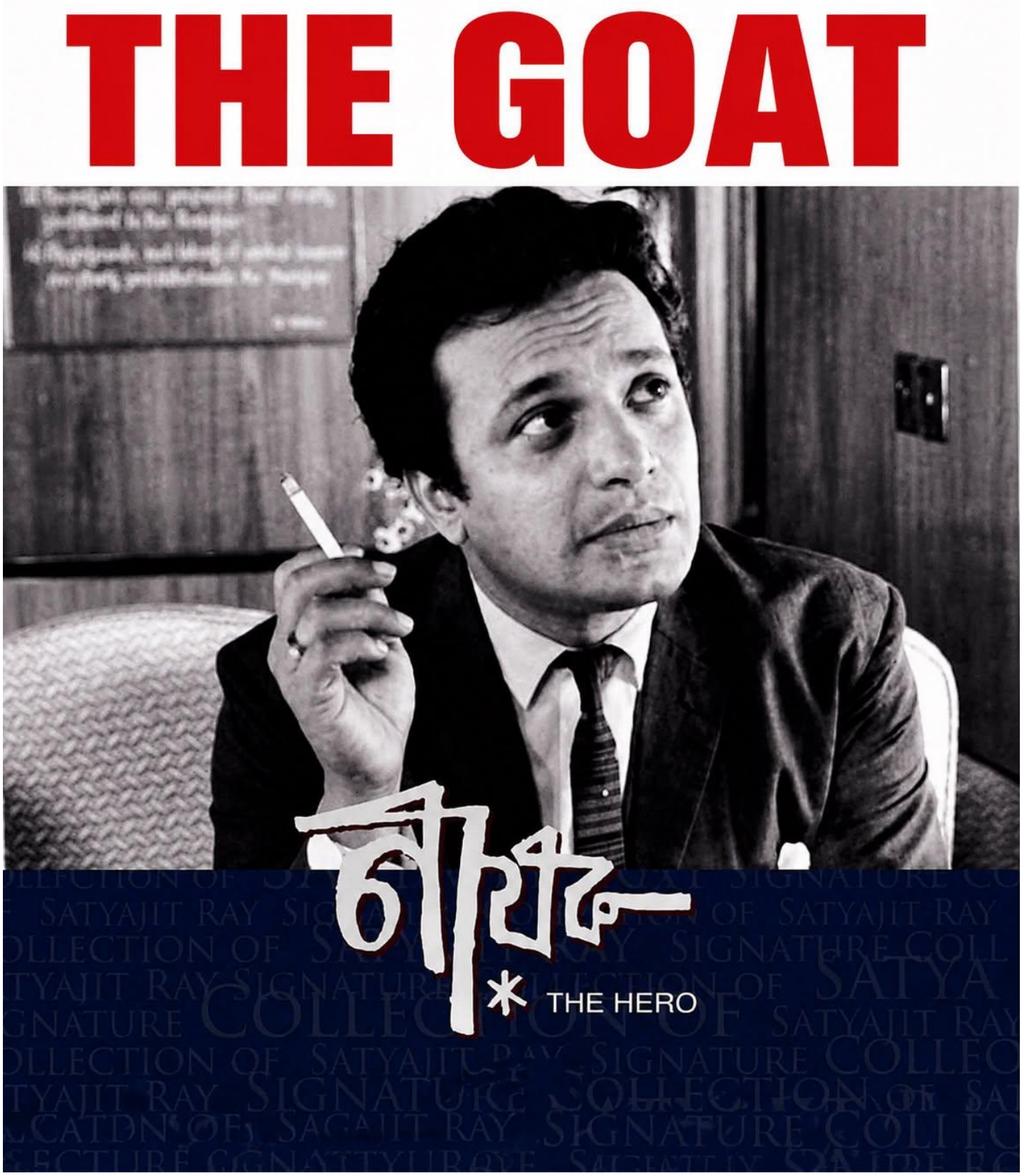


Fig 46: AI-generated image of Uttam Kumar, using a scene from *'Nayak'*.

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8. Humphrey Bogart's statement, published in the "Photoplay' magazine, 1948.

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Abhishek Talukder is an independent filmmaker, writer, poet, and musician.