BENGALI FILM DEBATES:
THE LITERARY LIAISON REVISITED

MOINAK BISWAS

I take a look in this paper at the film discourse in Bengal in the post-Calcutta Film Society (CFS) period, focusing on one theme: the film and literature relationship envisaged in these writings. So far as this relationship is concerned the two periods before and after the Calcutta Film Society would by and large tend to represent two opposing positions. While the writers belonging to the earlier era would often argue for a grounding of cinema in literature, the second group would see literary techniques, taste and intervention as shackles that cinema should free itself of. What follows is an attempt at putting these positions in perspective so as to reveal certain unexpected connections between the two as well as some of the limitations inherent in both.

There is no reason to believe that the 'film sense discourse' — critical treatment of cinema in its specificity — begins only after the founding of the Calcutta Film Society (CFS) in 1947. While one should not lose sight of the fact that through the CFS and the other events that followed it (the first international film festival in India, the making of *Pather Panchali* and the other 'new Indian films') film criticism takes a new turn, there is enough evidence to believe that some of the questions regarding the nature and function of cinema as a modern medium were being addressed quite frequently at least since the late 20s. In 1929 two journals made their appearance in Bengal dealing exclusively with cinema -- one was the Bengali *Bioscope* edited by the writer Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay and the other was *Filmland* edited by Chittaranjan Ghosh. Their contributors included a number of renowned literary figures of the day. Literary periodicals like *Bharati* and *Prabasi* would carry film reviews and general discussions of cinema from time to time. *Dipali* and *Nachghar*, a journal devoted to performing arts, would be quite regular in publishing essays on cinema by Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, Hemendrakumar Roy and other writers. The writers are found voicing a general concern about cinema, its social role, moral and aesthetic standards etc. As the sound era (1931) draws near, the voices sound more committed, the questions become more pointed in terms of judgment of aesthetic and other values. It is no accident that these literary practitioners are brought into a serious engagement with critical issues with the onset of the

sound era. There are two reasons which are interlinked — the talkie, involving words, would require a new definition of the cinematic practice drawn out in terms of concrete local traditions of literature and, as it so happened in many regions of India, a large number of the writers were now to be directly engaged with the industry. A host of them, especially those from the *Kallol* / *Kali-Kalam* group went on to make careers in film. Gokul Nag and Dineshranjan Das were the early ones to join the industry (mainly as actors). They were followed by Premankur Atorthy, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Sajanikanta Das, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, Premendra Mitra, Iyotirmoy Roy, Manmatha Roy, Binoy Chattopadhyay and others. It was only natural that more writers would take up cinema for discussion and would more often than not touch upon the connection that cinema had or ought to have with literature. The beginning of the sound era was accompanied by a spate of film journals —— *Chitrapanji, Chitralekha, Rupanjali, Kheyali, Ruprekha* and *Filmindia* are a few names that come to mind immediately. The literary journals *Bharati, Bharatbarsha, Prabasi* or *Nabashakti* would also publish occasional pieces of film criticism.

Bringing cinema close to the world of literature was meant to impart respectability to a medium badly in need of it. But through this move it also became possible to discuss cinema as a form and language, as if the use of spoken language necessitated a consideration of the broader dimension of language that would include cinematic utterance. And the language—literature connection also anchored cinema in some way in the domain of tradition and regionality — to be more precise, of cultural tradition and of reality defined regionally. Questions of rationality, modernity and generic differentiation were raised with a degree of regularity. The literary practitioners were instrumental in developing a critique of the existing cinema in terms of standards of taste. They called for a rationalisation of the language. I make a rough sampling of these writings here in order to trace out a line of argument that merges this question with the question of genre. The language question I suppose cannot be raised adequately without taking the generic question into account.

Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, writing about Tajmahal Film Company's *Andhare Alo* in the 'Sraban-Aswin' issue of *Bharati* in 1923 observes that this project launched by Bengali thespians Sisir Kumar Bhaduri and Naresh Chandra Mitra is a positive step towards finding an alternative to Madan Theatre's usual 'non-Bengali' kitsch. Madan Theatres dominated the film scene in Bengal throughout the silent era. The call for a Bengaliness in cinema, or authenticity for that matter, would come frequently with a chauvinistic aside at the Parsee Company. Selecting a Saratchandra story on a 'social' theme is

what Sourindramohan lauds as a positive move in the first place. The inappropriate for him occurs in the form of the occasional spectacles. The drinking scene in the film is singled out as an example. In the same essay another Tajmahal Film is discussed. This is *Manbhanjan*, based on Tagore's short story (Incidentally, Madan made their film *Giribala* from the same story). Another drinking scene is here and this time even more out of place[1]. The scene is revolting, Sourindramohan thinks, but the problem is not only the license it takes in depiction but perhaps the liberty that is taken in its positioning. We have reason to believe so because Sourindramohan is not alone in such reactions. One can find references to scenes of drunken revelry and other spectacular insertions that Madan films indulged in, in Premankur Atorthy's reminiscences *Nirbak Juger Chhayaloker Katha*[2]. One is reminded of how in Madras at a similar moment of engagement between litterateurs and cinema the redoubtable Kalki (Kalki.Ra.Krishnamurthy) was denouncing the scenes of drunken bacchanalia in the *Chandrasena* (1935)[3]. In many of these cases there would also be other reviews arguing that the scenes were attractive and even realistic[4]. One should pay more attention then to those aspects of the arguments in question which indicate that what is at stake is also the rationality of the scene in narrative terms. As it will be articulated in the post-CFS criticism, the interrupted narrative of Indian popular cinema is usually taken as a sign of its pre-or non-modern nature. The modernisation of the film form is thought to involve globally a progressive linearisation of its address, the dissolution of the frontal, spectacle—based communication into a casual, sequential flow of images. That narrative can be negotiated through the spectacle is an observation that could only be made as new conceptualisations of modernity came about. These spectacles where the prohibited and exotic could be glimpsed follow a 'logic of attractions' to borrow a term from Early Cinema research[5]. There is, however, a further point of interest. A generic question gets woven into the debate. The blocks of spectacle, the episodic non-linear structure were seen often as a function of the mythological genre. The pre-dominance of mythologicals were looked upon as an impediment to the development of a modern form. Here is an example from *Filmland*:

> "The general defect (of the Pouranic pictures) is that in none of them, sufficient attempt has been made to modernize the stories...the unfurlment of these stories in ordinary business-like manner will not be relished at all in a sophisticated age like ours, where dreams require some cleverly drawn out psychology to rest upon."[6]

Psychology is another important element that sound cinema is considered specially equipped to introduce. But it can be done best through the mediation of literature. More about this in a moment, but let us now turn to a contemporary critic and see how the generic question raised by the writer quoted above is applicable to the post-CFS perception of cinema as well. Theodore Baskaran, writing about silent Tamil cinema, ascribes the lack of a Griffithian narrative competence to the heavy presence of mythologicals.

> "Through wandering, ininstrels, 'Kalatchepan Bhagabathars', the popular stage and the 'Therookuthu' performances, the audience was familiar with all the mythological episodes ; the film-maker did not need to devise ways of telling the story as he was merely transposing a well-known drama into a different medium."[7]

Baskaran also points out how this necessitated an episodic structure in the films and an open-endedness where the narrator could take liberties with interpretation, become somewhat independent. Textual autonomy, again, is seen to be thwarted by a heterogeneity of address. In mythologicals you had iconic presence instead of psychological character, semiotic clusters rather than temporal, sequential elaboration, community knowledge rather than narrative suspense.

The question of rationality is raised by the writers at two levels: in an indirect manner, at the level of narrative linearisation and, more directly, in relation to psychology. Sound has helped cinema everywhere to re-invent the psychological. Words and sound can centre the character as well as the image in a particularly forceful way, help create a depth in the image and an interiority in the character which psychology can inhabit. While making a case for psychology authors like Srichitra Sen, Achintya Sengupta and Niranjan Pal felt that silent cinema per se was at a disadvantage against sound cinema regarding psychological or contemplative functions. One can refer to Srichitra Sen's, "Bangla Chalachitra O Bangla Upanyas" (*Chitralekha*, Nov. 21, 1930), Achintya Sengupta's 'Film-Sahitya' (*Chitrapanji*, 1933) or Pal's essay in *Filmland*, 'Psychology Versus Action in Scenario Writing' which argues that while silent cinema was based on exteriorised action, sound film is grounded in the human character :

> "…the microphone has certainly restricted the seekers after cheap display and thrills. The writers and directors of talking films seem to be more rational in

> their ideas and they are certainly attaching more importance to human psychology in the progressive development of talkie dramas than the masters of silent pictures ever found it necessary."[8]

By the 1930s the critical discourse could move away from Dadasaheb Phalke's position that the mythological has a realistic function, that it is through the mythological that a 'Swadeshi' cinema can develop since the mythological can be equated with the traditional in the Indian instance and tradition is where the essence of India lay[9] (ref. his *Navyug* articles, 1917). The writers are now gradually formulating an argument for the 'social', which will eventually become the predominant genre and, interestingly, will displace and absorb a lot of the mythological traits. What is important to note is how an overlap of categories is taking place in the writings between the social as a genre, regionality/ locality, rationality/ realism of form and the literary grounding of cinema. As the literature-cinema transaction becomes particularly viable with the advent of sound the argument for regional specificity, novelistic narration and social themes becomes quite common.

It is interesting to note that these authors often spoke favourably of a sub-genre of the mythological—the devotional films. It was indeed one of the most productive genres in the first decade of the talkies. It could be seen as a generic intermediary between the mythological and the social where religious themes were embedded in historical time and space. These films were often about the Bhakti saint-poets and the specific literary and social history involved should account for the special status of this genre. Bhakti had been instrumental in articulating the local/ vernacular literatures in many parts of India. Jatindranath Mitra, in an essay from which I have already quoted, is dismissive of the mythologicals but finds that *Chandidas* (a Debaki Bose film, 1934) is one film which "can claim some consideration from the modern critics. The montage treatment in these pictures has a certain rationality about it[10]". A similar endorsement of the devotional came occasionally from other writers also[11]. Even Satyajit Ray, writing about the older Bengali films, comments that two kinds of these films showed some originality—the devotionals and the ones that adapted 'pure' Bengali novels[12].

Sourindramohan, in his essay 'Bangla Bioscope', exhorts the filmmakers to treat new themes.

> "Take up good themes. Portray the poverty in Bengal. The luxury of the rich man's life has little to affect the mind of the common spectator. The joys and sorrows of Bengali life, those of the common Bengali man would move the spectator. It is only after this start that the larger problems can be presented to him and elicit enthusiasm. This the people will come to see and to this they would contribute their own inputs of thought."[13]

Srichitra Sen, writing in *Chitralekha* in 1930 suggests that a certain kind of Bengali novel can salvage the Bengali film from its chaotic state:

> "There will be a new technique of cinema, that technique might have to follow the basics of the western film narrative, but its charm and its substance will come from the heart of this colourful, delightful East. I hope we shall witness the appearance of that film-writer and that cinema. But till that happens is it wrong for cinema to adapt these popular classics? The stream of life in Bengal is mostly a slender, quiet one. Rage and anguish do not swell up in the way that they do in western life. At least, its shores are not as unquiet, as much in turmoil as theirs. The novels of Bengal are written about this life—it echoes precisely this state."[14]

Or, in a more lyrical vein, Mohinimohan Mukhopadhyay :

> "We cannot expect anything like the German art films *Destiny* and *Siegfried* in this country. It is neither possible to have a film like Paramount's *Wings* or Metro's *Broadway Melody*. But we have *kirtan* and *bhatiali* in this country; we have paddy fields reaching out to the horizon under the blue sky. In this land the sky plays host to a festival of colours in the twilight, the sweet air is resonant with the strains of *Puravi* as the dusk falls, in the tilled land the peasants prepare our daily bread. How much have we thought about the possibility of the epic that can be composed on their lives? The variety that our everyday life has — who will write its history?"[15]

The Madans adapted Bengali novels, they made films from Bankimchandra and even from Tagore, (at one point of time they held exclusive rights to film Bankimchandra novels) but they were seen by Sen as treating romances, not so much novelistic material, and of course the discourse seemed non-novelistic, the style non-regional. The call for a regional character was, as I have mentioned, hardly ever without the chauvinistic dig:

> "The Parsee owners of the Bioscope do not know the pulse of the Bengali mind. They film social dramas imitating the style of good western films…Moreover, it so happens that they inject a Parsee taste in the costumes they use for a Bengali social play or a mythological play and create a distortion that irritates the Bengali audience."[16]

The grouse has a long history of course. The first feature-length film made by a Bengali producer was Dhirendranath Ganguly's (D. G.) *Bilat Pherat* which got released in 1922 in a hall which was seen as an outlet for Bengali producers, the 'Russa Theatre' (now 'Purna Cinema'). The handbill for the film announces it as a Bengali venture executed without any help from foreigners. Even the music band is Bengali, it claimed. As a satire *Bilat Pherat* was meant to be a commentary on contemporary urban life. None of the accounts of the film that I have come across has credited the film with any authenticity or contemporaneity whatsoever. Achintya Sengupta criticises Madan adaptations of Bankimchandra on more of conceptual grounds. He also directly broaches the autonomy question vis-a-vis the relation between cinema and literature and foreshadows the post-CFS criticism quite clearly:

> "...Whoever has seen *Kapalkundala* would surely not hesitate to say that *Kapalkundala* is no film, it is photography. This is the great danger of borrowing stories for films from novels, and by following the depicted story of the novel *Kapalkundala* could not become a film, it has remained an inchoate combination of pieces of photograph...One ought to have literature which is new and written specially for films, the screen is not the same thing as the written page."[17]

Premendra Mitra voices similar concern in the same journal a year before. His essay 'Chhayalok'[18] refers to *Bishbriksha*, another Madan production, and suggests that the general malady of Bengali cinema stems from a misconception about the relationship between cinema and literature. The relationship, whatever else it may be, is not of simple translation—Mitra reminds us.

The autonomy question then could be raised at various levels. So far as the authenticity of cinema was concerned, 'the social' was centrally at issue, straddling boundaries of various categories—the regional, the rational, the psychological, the realistic etc[19]. Literature at this point could provide a solid basis on which cinema could stand. At another level, more infrequently, the question of the necessity of a mediatory work in the film and literature transaction arose.

Another crucial theoretical question that one can project into this discourse is that of the author. The literary connection throws the question of authorship into relief. In the early stages of development it was always difficult to locate the 'author' of a film and that this is a formal problem is by now a well-known fact. It is actually difficult to know who the director of a film was from the filmographies of the early silents. Sometimes the films were not sure about it themselves. Some of our writers used terms like 'natyadhaksha' and 'action director' to begin with The term 'Parichalak' or 'director' gains currency in its contemporary sense as another term 'Chitranatyakar' or 'screenplay-writer' comes to be emphasised. There is again a metonymic logic at work here. If the screenplay-writer is often seen as the filmic incarnation of the literary practitioner the literary liaison seemed to play a major role in defining the directorial function in the film text. There are numerous instances in the writings of the 1930s where the screenplay-writer's unique contribution is discussed. Narendra Deb's essay 'Chitranatya' in *Biscope*[20] is a particularly sophisticated example while, at a more pedestrian level, a writer like Bijoyratna Majumdar argues the need to search for serious 'scenario writers' in his essay 'Chalachitrer Galpa'[21]. It is difficult to locate the individuated and essentially 'modern' figure of the author without locating the supporting instance of the narrator.

But then there is ambiguity about the relative importance of the director and the screenplay-writer, an ambiguity born out of the very necessity to work through literary mediations. Hemendrakumar Roy, a writer involved in the film industry from the 1920s, thinks that the director is the central mind who organises a film, he is the supreme authority, not the technicians or the producer[22]. But then he goes on to

say that the screenplay-writer supplies the most important input—the story. He does not tire of referring to what Sam Goldwyn of MGM reportedly said on the matter.

This ambiguity about the role of the author, or rather, about his real location will be paralleled by a heterogeneity of both the text and its reception. Elements in the body of the film would resist full 'rationalisation', they would often remain detachable, so to speak. Like the star, the spectacle and the song, now the story and sometimes the dialogue would become separable to an extent from the film for independent circulation. I would remind you of what happened to the writer Jyotirmoy Roy's dialogues in Bimal Roy's *Udayer Pathe*(1944). One is also reminded of what was happening in Tamil cinema around the same time. The direct intervention of writers like Annadurai, Karunanidhi, Asaithambi or Narayanan were seen to be providing a necessary modernising, 'rationalist' input while, paradoxically, in the context of Dravidian politics, the relative independence or preponderance of dialogues were considered a positive move.

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The question of authorship can provide a useful link with the film discourse of the post- 1947 or post-CFS period—a discourse that made the film society movement its main vehicle through the 1970s and still holds its sway over a large section of the critics. The director who came to represent the ideal of a film-author was of course Satyajit Ray who, in a radio speech given in 1960[23], said it is desirable that the director write his own scripts. This was the time when he would also start composing for his own films. A year before, in *Chalachitra Barshiki*, he remarked that 'the artist comes first, then comes art. Where there is no artist there cannot be any art (i.e. art in cinema) despite the presence of the artistic materials'[24]. In the radio speech mentioned above he suggests,

> "The screenplay-writer casts the story in the mould of cinema. This is a writing job. But this writing does not have any literary value, or it does not matter if it has."[25]

But then, he has no doubt that the story is the most important element in a film.

> "Whatever helps to bring out the essence of the story, establishes the message—is right, is artistically valid. Whatever outsteps the demands of the story in terms of technique is valueless."[26]

The proximity to the earlier positions surfaces quite unexpectedly. The story is not only central, it also in a sense is 'prior' to the film, the filmmaker works on it and the filmographic object is produced at a later instance. While the whole stress in the film-sense discourse of the period falls on the autonomy question—autonomy with regard to theatre and literature mainly—the issue of literature-and-cinema transaction harboured certain continuities with the earlier era in disguise. Ray himself stresses more than once the crucial realistic function of re-creating a world in 'detail' that cinema learns from the novels of Balzac or Bibhutibhushan, from the texts of Kalidasa, Bharatchandra, Pyarichand Mitra or Abnanindranath Tagore[27]. The other point that he raises is about dialogue where a direct interaction with literature is necessary[28]. The third connection, a more hidden one by now, surfaces through the very anxiety about asserting the autonomy of cinema: in order to be art at all cinema has to be autonomous, independent of other arts but also, in order to be art it has to be like other arts. Respectability is still a very important issue and to be respectable like other arts the cinema is, at one level, expected to mirror them.

The autonomy question carried a great urgency for Ray and his contemporaries. One cannot miss their point, but an appraisal of the terms of the debate, now armed with hindsight, should also reveal the theoretical limitations and point to the aspects of cinema neglected by it. The three representative volumes of film writings between 1947 and 1970 would be *Chalachitra Pratham Parjay* (1950, edited by Kamal Kumar Majumdar, Chidananda Dasgupta, Naresh Guha, Radhaprasad Gupta, Satyajit Ray and Subhash Sen), *Chalachitra Barshiki* (1959, edited by Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Chidananda Dasgupta, Gopal Haldar, Bimal Bhowmik and Subhash Mukhopadhyay) and *Chalachitra Katha* (1969, edited by Ashim Som). The lists of contributors cover almost all the prominent writers participating in the film sense discourse in question. Apart from the editors mentioned the writers included Debipada Bhattacharya, Gurudas Bhattacharya, Kiranmoy Raha, Mrigankasekhar Roy, Parthapratim Chowdhury, Dhruba Gupta et al ; also, occasionally one or two veterans from the earlier period. The film society journals, particularly those of 'Calcutta Cine Club', 'Cine Central' and 'North Calcutta Film Society'[29] carried on a similar task in their pages. That the first generation of these writers created a model that lasted long beyond their polemical moment is evidenced by the fact that a collection of writings brought out by

the Federation of Film Societies of India's Calcutta centre in 1983 re-publishes most of the pieces from these and the ones added from the 1970s mostly read exactly like them. The editors could hardly choose anything that signifies a shift in the emphases through the decades so far as the conceptualisation of cinema was concerned. This is a volume called *Chalachitra Samiksha*, edited by Mrigankasekhar Roy and others. The refrain about the autonomy of the film medium is set in the very introduction of the first of these volumes, Clialachitra. One well-known expression from Chidananda Dasgupta's essays from the period is that the dependence on literature has clouded the common perception such that people often call films 'books' or 'boi'[30]. Dasgupta brought out a collection of essays later on cinema called *Boi Noy Chhabi*, which would literally translate as 'Pictures, Not Books'. I shall avoid listing the references for the sake of brevity here but one could mention a couple of instances from the 1990s where similar arguments are made about the necessity of cinema to free itself of literature — I am thinking of a book on *Bengali Cinema* by Kironmoy Raha[31] (1991) and an essay on *Charulata* after Ray's death by Nityapriaya Ghosh[32].

I have chosen the expression about pictures and books because it points to the other, constantly harped on theme of the essence of literature lying in words and that of cinema in visual images. The dominance of the visual is stressed in relation to literature in a specific articulation actually—it seems there is no harm if cinema becomes musical or poetic. This word vs. vision scenario had to neglect the dialectic of the two – a dialectic that Eisenstein and the avant-gardes argued for as cinema entered the sound era[33]. In later phases the argument got a shot in the arm from the discovery of a letter by Tagore to Murari Bhaduri written in 1929, where he says that it is the flow of images that constitutes cinema. This flow, he says, should be used so that it can communicate without the help of words. "The cinema ('chayachitra' in his words) is still enslaved to literature", Tagore writes, and attributes that to the general ignorance of the people to whom cinema caters[34]. This relates to silent cinema as the case was, but Tagore is seen to be prodigiously foreshadowing a major conceptual point for the modern critic. It was inevitable, going by the history of film criticism globally, that in the autonomy argument the cinematic essence will be located in the visual. To put this claim in perspective one framework is provided by the fact that it was being made in a context where the 'high' and 'low' art division was also being worked out for cinema for the first time in India. It is only recently that this very motive of equating the cinematic with the visual has been critically examined and put in historical perspective. Here again, a consideration of the broad imperatives of modernity and capitalism has thrown open new areas of inquiry. Cinema is seen as one apparatus among many of the societies developing since the 19th century where a historical conjuncture of

specific social structures, technology and an ocular drive or what has been called the ‘hegemony of vision' has taken place[35]. On the other hand, the new work done on the historical genesis of cultural forms and discursive boundaries (classic examples being Bakhtin and Williams) have prompted us to look at the production of the paradigmatic boundaries of the artistic media rather than take these boundaries as absolute. After the necessary stage of emphasising the potentials of a medium like film it is possible to see how its borders keep extending and contracting in relation to the ongoing transaction with other cultural forms. Avant-garde cinema has always overstepped the limits of cinema and brought it into contact with theatre, the literary word or painting and also thereby often transgressed the divisions of high and low arts. Mrinal Sen, incidentally, in one of his early articles points out this aspect of the avant-garde[36]. The increasing circulation / dispersal of cinema in the media field, through video, TV, digital fares of every variety demands that we develop a critical framework which keeps the movement between art and culture in focus in the way that we have in mind here. The point is that it is theoretically not improbable at all that cinema can be defined as an art from the perspective of the critics who were looking at it through literature; theirs was also a film sense discourse and that they did speak about the autonomy of the film medium (as passages from Premendra Mitra, Achintya Sengupta and Narendra Deb cited above show) is no accident.

But there is another perspective from which the literary connection as an issue takes on a new urgency for Bengali cinema. Over the last two decades a serious crisis has been afflicting the industrial cinema in Bengal. There is commercial success, but the kind of cinema that Anjan Choudhury and then Swapan Saha have come to represent is one where a certain project of the ‘popular' has failed completely. I do not have the scope to elaborate this observation here but the lumpenisation that this cinema has undergone can be directly related to its severance of all links with other popular traditions, particularly with literature, popular or otherwise.

Ray’s cinema is crucial in putting the whole post-CFS debate in perspective. He was one who could put many of the contemporary critical claims in practice. One remembers a letter published in *Chalachitra Barshiki* from Shombhu Mitra, the dramatist who made a number of films in the1950s. He expresses his disappointment with the limitations of cinema when compared to great literature. Citing Tagore’s story ‘Postmaster’ he says that the final bit of description cannot be shown on the screen because

the latter lacks the essential interiority of written language[37]. Ray's film version of the story made two years later could be seen as a successful settlement of the doubt.

In his writings Ray repeatedly stresses the visual essence of cinema. One of the more familiar passages is where he claims that he looks for visual transitions between shots rather than speech or sound connections. While defending his adaptations of classics he comes back to this question to explain the liberties taken with the literary texts. The famous piece is of course 'Charulata Prasange'[38] in this respect where the most detailed account is given by him about the processes that a literary narrative must go through if one is to acknowledge the specificities of the film medium. *Churulata* (1964) for me would be a film which problematises the very terms of the debates about film and literature. Ray's most favourite in terms of the perfection achieved in film craft, it is a film that, from a current perspective, completely unsettles the whole question of adaptation as we usually address it. I end this paper with a short discussion of *Charulata* where I claim that it is an instance where Ray took up the Tagore story and turned it over to 'literature' in his search for the cinematic.

3

It is possible to find in *Charulata* an adaptive work that goes way beyond the limits that Ray the critic would set for adaptation in general. It is not the same story told again in a different medium. One can argue that the film takes its distance with *Nastaneed* (1901) as a constitutive one, works on it and adaptation thereby becomes a politicisation of the story in the film. In a certain sense he faces not only a world captured in a story but a world that is woven as a literary work, a world that can be glimpsed through literature. Is it only a task of finding the precise visual details for making real a time and a life that Tagore portrayed? Or is it also an unrelenting search for literary signs of all kinds to create a semiotic universe where the story can be embedded? If the second is true the cinematic task of detailing that Ray never tried of emphasising would take on a new meaning.

Writing is of course a major thematic focus in both the texts. By positing a series of binaries around this theme a rich texture of interrogation is created in the narrative and it can be shown that the film emphasises this aspect of the original story over its other pre-occupations. Bhupati writes politics and in English, Amal and Charu create literature in Bangla. And then a further division, Amal writes for public

circulation, in an ornate register overlaid with conventions of style; Charu would write for a strictly private exchange, in an unadorned style through which she can ‘write herself’ into the literary discourse. Towards the end, after the escape of Amal and after failures have looked Bhupati and Charu already in the face, they go on a visit to Puri and plan a poignantly illusory reconciliation between the poles of the masculine and the feminine, the home and the world, the political and the affective that the film constantly plays with. Why not bring out another newspaper, they discuss, which will have politics in English and literature in Bangla. One can see Charu never believing in this. She is coming to a harder knowledge, she has to grow up paying a dreadful price. The film brings out this irony of growing up in its most acute historical-po1itical dimensions. It does away with a whole lot of events presented in the story not so much to bring out its essence as such but the political essence of the predicament that it deals with. Growing into modernity, into citizenship, into subjectivity of a namable kind—all this, marked indelibly with the reality of living through colonialism, would not have been so strongly captured without the grand design and the game of polarities that the film is grounded in. In this operation the literary functions at the levels of both theme and form, image and speech. Bankimchandra is one major motif in this design. Through him arguments are made and also a time and a place are re-constituted. Charu sings his name in her idle browsing through the book-shelf. Amal enters the household in a moment of raging storm, the lyrical connection between mind and atmosphere in the scene is immediately complicated as he utters the line, “Hare Murare, Madhukaitabhare”. We are then told where he has got this slogan from; he asks Charu if she has read *Anandamath*. Charu and Amal in the first scene of conversation are shown sharing their knowledge of Bankim before everything else. In the same scene Bankim’s essay ‘Prachina and Nabina', a paradigmatic statement on the women’s question in the 19th century is introduced in the dialogue. This essay will henceforth be woven into the very fabric of the political thematics of the film, will form one of the main strands around which the story of *Nastaneed* will be re-written. His name will appear in the alliteration with the alphabet ‘ba’ in a later conversation. References to *Bangadarshan*, *Bishabriksha* and ‘Bandemataram’ would also be made. Literary motifs would create the reality of a specific historical time and also comment on it. There is a great fecundity about this universe of words and letters enveloping the story, the film almost wallowing in the proliferation of references to authors of all kinds—Taraknath Gangopadhyay, Rammohan Roy, Shakespeare, Byron, Addison, Steele, Emerson. The film can also introduce the author Tagore himself into the story—through his songs, constantly hummed, sung or played in the background.

Not only do these signs do the work that vision is supposed to be specially equipped to perform, i.e. find a reality-basis on which the story can stand, they also appear on the visual plane with a particular luminosity. The letter, the act of writing, the written page-these weave a pattern of their own. As the film begins, we see an image of Charu's hands in close-up embroidering, the alphabet 'B' over the length of the title shot, signalling the insistence of the written word in the film as well as the fact that it is a world that is already textually worked upon, embroidered, that Ray is taking up as his material. The act of writing will be shown with great emphasis. Amal writing in his new exercise book, Charu writing. And Bhupati, enchanted by the power of the printed word, enjoying the smell of the ink on fresh paper in his newly printed issue of 'Sentinel'. On the last image, the name of the original story is printed—'Nastaneed'. One has come across reactions a little baffled by this intrusion of the word. But the point is not about the word coming to explain the image here, it can be easily read as an indication of the process where the literary sign actually produces the visual. And also of the fact that Ray's material is a text found among texts, not so much a story. One particular scene that comes to mind in this connection is where Bhupati finally discovers the truth about the Charu-Amal relationship. Charu and Bhupati come back from Puri, as they come into the house the camera waits for them in Charu's bedroom. We hear their voices off while the camera rises along the legs of the marble table in the room to the top to reveal Amal's letter lying on it. This motion would not normally conform to the logic of story-telling that Ray refers to often in his writings. It indeed seems a very tendentious movement on the part of the camera, telling before showing, too much of intrusion from the narrator. But the whole logic becomes clear if one remembers how things written have a vital role in the whole business of narration here. The letter is the point at which the story-teller's presence is revealed. It is lying in wait therefore, like an omniscient eye.

In a recent article in *Camera Obscura* Keya Ganguly has commented on the role that music plays in articulating the gap between a modernity that Charu is offered and the one she would desire.[39] But the question of desire that she poses can be deflected more clearly into the domain of the literary at a formal level. It is possible to see a process where the visual is negotiated through the literary so far as Charu's subjectivity and the question of 'look' is concerned. I can only suggest one point of entry to the discussion here. Tagore's story had this suggestion that after a point Charu comes to terms with her relationship with Amal by creating a further 'antahpur' or interior within herself. Only by doing that could she reconcile her secret self with her reality. How to transpose this introjection into film? What could be its cinematic equivalent? One can find an answer to the question in the way the opera glass is used by Charu. In the film

it is a projection, a casting of look. Imprisoned in the household Charu's vision is literally limited. The interior, metaphoric vision offered by literature compensates for that lack. If she has to own a look, it has to be produced first. She crosses over usual boundaries of vision and has her own spectacle created within the filmic frame through the opera glass at crucial points—as she watches the street outside, watches the indifferent Bhupati passing by on the corridor, Amal writing, a neighbouring woman with her child, the scene on the sea—beach. In each of these moments a necessarily inwardly turned gaze can momentarily extend outwards. To frame Charu is the conventional task of the filmmaker as a visual artist, to hand a frame over to her is a political task. The vision, modernity, and the cinematic apparatus conjunction we have hinted at cannot be taken for granted in its known forms so far as the woman or the colonised subject is concerned. Hence the importance of stretching the limits of vision, of bringing it into contact with other media. That cinema can be produced through heterogeneous means is also a point that this politics can claim to make.

Notes:

1. Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, 'Bangla Bioscope', *Bharati*, Sravan-Aswin, 1923, collected in Debiprasad Ghosh ed. *Bangla Bhashay Chalachitra Charcha* 1923-1933, Calcutta, 1990.
2. *Nirbak Juger Chhayaloker Katha*, Calcutta, 1990.
3. Kalki, 'Disappointment', *Ananda Vikatan*, June 2, 1935. Compiled in catalogue Tamil Cinema: History, Culture, Politics. Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, 1997.
4. See P.R.N., 'Chandrasena', *Cinema Ulagarn*, May 19, 1935. Compiled in the same volume.
5. Tom Gunning, for example, has used the term 'Cinema of Attractions' in his essays on Early Cinema. See Thomas Elsaesser ed. *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London, 1990.
6. Jatindranath Mitra, 'A Review of Indian Pictures', *Filmland*, 1934, Puja Issue. Collected in Samik Bandyopadhyay ed. *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties*, Jamshedpur, 1993.
7. Theodore Baskaran, *The Message Bearers*, Madras, 1981.
8. Pal, *Filmland*, Puja Issue, 1931. *Indian Cinema, Contemporary Perceptions from The Thirties*, Jamshedpur, 1993.
9. Phalke, 'Essays on Indian Cinema', Navyug, November, 1917. Cited in Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era, Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology'. *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Numbers 14-15, 1987.
10. Mitra, *op.cit.* If one thinks that 'montage' is curious word to come by in Calcutta in 1934 one should have a look at some of these pieces in *Filmland* where, for example, Nikhil N. Sen would write about the 'Photogenique', with a 'que', referring to the contemporary French avant-garde film debates.

11. See K. Ahmad Abbas's letter to Gandhiji in *Filmindia*, October, 1939. *Indian Cinema, Contemporary Perceptions from The Thirties.*
12. Ray, 'Atiter Bangla Chhabi', *Anandalok*, 1978. Collected in Satyajit Ray, *Bishay Chalachitra*, Calcutta, 1982.
13. Mukhopadhyay, *op.cit.*
14. Sen, 'Bangla Chalachitra O Bangla Upanyas', *Chitralekha*, November 22, 1930. Collected in *Bangla Bhashay Chalachitra Charcha*.
15. Mukhopadhyay, 'Chhabir Nutanatwa', 1934. Reprinted in *Chitrasutra*, November, 1996.
16. Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, *op.cit.*
17. Sengupta, 'Film-Sahitya', *Chitrapanji*, Kartik, 1933. Collected in *Bangla Bhashay Chalachitra Charcha.*
18. Mitra 'Chhayalok', *Chitrapanji*, No. 1, 1933. Collected in *Bangla Bhashay Chalachitra Charcha.*
19. For a discussion of the 'social' and its function in providing a middle-class respectability and legitimacy to cinema see Ravi S. Vasudevan, 'Addressing the Spectator of a 'Third World' National Cinema: The Bombay 'Socia1' Film of the 1940s and 1950s', *Screen*, No. 36/4, 1995, London.
20. Deb, 'Chitranatya', *Bioscope*, Special No., 1930. Deb wrote one of the first book-length treatises on the techniques of cinema in Bengali '*Chhayay, Mayay Bichitra Rahasya'*, which was serialised in the periodical *Bharatbarsha*.
21. Majumdar, 'Chalachitrer Galpa', 1930. Reprinted in *Chitrasutra*, January, 1998.
22. Roy, 'Jatrapathe Chalachitra', serialised in *Basumati*, 1952-1953. Also see Roy, 'Chalachitre Parichalaker Sthan', *Basumati*, 1950. Collected in Debiprosad Ghosh ed. *Hemendrakumar Roy, Prabandha Sankalan*, Calcutta, 1990.
23. Published as 'Bangla Chalachitrer Arter Dik', *Betar jagat*, Puja No. 1960. Collected in Satyajit Ray, *Bishay Chalachitra.*
24. ''Chalachitra Rachana : Angik, Bhasha O Bhangi', *Chalachitra Barshiki*, Calcutta, 1959.
25. *ibid*.
26. *ibid*.
27. 'Detail Samparke Duchar Katha', *Desh*, Binodan Issue, 1968. Collected in Ray, *Bishay Chalaehitra*.
28. 'Chalachitrer Sanlap Prasange', *Anandabazar Patrika*, Sharadiya, 1963. Collected in Ray, *Bishay Chalachitra*.
29. Cine Club brought out *Chitrakalpa*, and *Kino*; Cine Central *Chitrabikshan* and North Calcutta Film Society, *Chitrabhash*. There were numerous others to follow.
30. Dasgupta, 'Chalachitranatya', *Balaka*, 1954. Compiled in *Chalachitra Samiksha*, Calcutta, 1983.
31. Kironmoy Raha, *Bengali Cinema*, Calcutta, 1991.
32. Nityapriyo Ghosh, 'Charulata'. Compiled in Subrata Rudra ed. *Satyajit Ray: Jiban Ar Shilpa*, Calcutta, 1996. Intersetingly,Ghosh does not endorse most of Ray's deviations from the original Tagore story in his adaptation.
33. S. M. Eisenstein, V. Pudovkin and G. Alexandrov, 'Statement on Sound', in Richard Taylor ed. *Eisenstein, Selected Works*, Volume I, London, 1988.
34. Rabindranath Tagore's letter to Murari Bhadhuri, 1929. Cited in Arun Kumar Roy, *Rabindranath O Chalachitra*, Calcutta, 1986.
35. For discussions of the historical emergence of the category of vision see essays collected in David Michael Levin ed. *Modernity and the Hegernony of Vision*, California, 1993.

36. Interview with Sen, in Mrinal Sen, *Chalachitra, Bhut Bartaman Bhabishyat,* Calcutta, 1977.
37. Shombhu Mitra, 'Ekta Chithi', *Chalachitra Barshiki*, 1959.
38. 'Charulata Prasange', *Parichay*, 1964. Collected in Satyajit Ray, *Bishay Chalachitra*.
39. Keya Ganguly, 'Camal Knowledge': Visuality and the Modem in Charulata', *Camera Obscura 37*, Bloomington, 1996.