

intrinsic yet differential relationship. Literature is itself a rewriting of the social text with implications for other relations: between the modern, the postmodern and the postcolonial; the center and the periphery; the scripted and the improvisational; the high and the low; the contained and the surplus; the placed and the displaced. South African writing, in this account, is hugely important not only in its own setting but also in its implications for the colonial histories from which it derives and the dispersed postcolonial condition it illuminates; it becomes (to use another of Pechey's phrases) "the context for its context" (159). Pechey's literary touchstones are Schreiner, Ndebele, and Coetzee, and for theory he draws preeminently on Bakhtin (on whom he wrote a book) for manifestations of carnival, the grotesque, and the dialogic—the dialectic that registers difference but postpones resolution.

All this produces insights on virtually every page, too numerous to mention in a short review, but there are many moments that resonate: for instance, that both *The Story of an African Farm* and Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* present themselves as "radiant fissures in the continuous text of our history, priceless resources in our own 'moment of danger'" (45). Or the way that in its fictional mode, autobiography is "an act of renunciation—a refusal of the privilege of epic omniscience" (160). In Ndebele Pechey finds a set of localized and indigenous cultural resources that will forever escape the logics of orthodoxy and containment. In Coetzee and a lineage from which he derives, there is a sense of Africa as neither infernal nor Edenic but rather (the reference is to Dante) purgatorial, a testing ground that also offers the prospect of grace. There will be objections: Must Africa always be a psychic proving ground, even for the postcolonizing white African? Elsewhere, Pechey is remarkably tolerant in glossing over the fact that Roy Campbell, whose aesthetics he can dissect to the point of an almost parodic close reading, was also a supporter of the fascist Franco. But nonetheless, this is a volume to read with great reward, a fitting tribute to one of South Africa's most original, idiosyncratic, and provocative critical minds.

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Rochona Majumdar, *Art Cinema and India's Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony*. Columbia University Press, 2021, 320 pp.

Politically, art cinema is often seen as a failed project. For its fierce opposition to escapist entertainment, for its sophisticated formal experimentation, and for the cerebral quality of its content, art cinema has been long regarded as a domain reserved to a small elite, quixotic in its aspirations to educate the masses but inconsequential in its political outreach. Majumdar's book offers a long-overdue reevaluation of this view by undertaking a radical shift in the

method of inquiry itself: instead of probing art cinema for a political agenda, Majumdar asks whether art cinema can help us redefine the very notion of what is political in the first place. Her book is the first English-language book-length study of the art film in India, but its innovation lies not just in its subject matter but most importantly in its approach. Majumdar approaches art cinema as a mode of doing history, that is of advancing historical reflection by discursive means specific to the medium of film. She demonstrates how the medium's iconographic potential of condensing multiple temporal planes within an image, its multi-sensory audio-visual address, and its capacity of capturing and preserving the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience allowed the filmmakers to document the contradictions of India's postcolonial condition—anticipating by decades the work of postcolonial historians.

The book draws a distinction between statist and populist forms of democracy as they have historically informed a debate on the purpose of film in India. From its very inception, Indian art cinema was through and through democratic. But which democracy did it reflect? Standing in the tradition of the British democratic humanism of the Labor government of the 1940s, the postcolonial Indian government formed a Film Enquiry Committee, which in 1951 produced a report calling to promote “good,” realist cinema as an educational project and instrument of state-building. Many cinematographers embraced this mission of the newly founded independent state committed to democracy and modernization program launched by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. But their relation to the Indian state soon became complicated. The focus of the book, 1960s art cinema, emerges at a time when the initial postcolonial consensus was already in disarray, and the “pedagogical commitment” to democracy changed for many into a project of “seeking truth.” Focusing on the work of the three Indian masters Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, and Satyajit Ray, Majumdar reconstructs their cinema as the “problem-space” of postcolonial democratic negotiation and inquiry. Their films captured a disenchantment with the postcolonial Indian state and expressed a historical confusion in contravention of “the teleology of world-history” (18) while maintaining openness toward the future.

Majumdar shows that in contrast to the Indian government's top-down presentation of a democratic agenda premised on the British model, art cinema has always been part of a global circuit of ideas emerging from below. The relevance of these findings is not limited to India, precisely because an impact of Indian filmmaking came not from an international consensus but from the diversity of regional colors. A unique Bengali regionalism and focus on the local is what raised the art cinema discussed in this book into world cinema. In fact, Majumdar's study suggests that the appeal of Indian art cinema around the world, from East Asia to Europe to Latin America, hinges on its capacity for what can be called “translocal” connections rather than universal identifications. For example, Majumdar writes about Gathak's films: “They were not cosmopolitan; they did not believe in the ‘universal accessibility’ of the language of films; they mixed elements of the regional, popular, and folk with those drawn from high culture in an effort, actually, to blur the distinction

between entertainment and art” (52). With no interest in hegemonic ideologies, Gathak, Sen, Ray, and others took their subjects from everyday life, exploring the humble and habitual. Their cinema became a laboratory of popular democracy, a realm of independent thinking, criticism, and analysis, resulting from the experience of ordinary people and feeding back into a debate that proliferated through cinema clubs and publications. Art cinema offered a form of democratic inclusivity denied to “class enemies” or ideological others by India’s Marxist Left. Such activism without ideology relies on the formal nature of democracy as a necessary condition of freedom and diversity, a presupposition often decried today but worth reevaluating vis-à-vis our current yielding to new ideological totalities.

Art cinema was thus an open space where the filmmakers “sought to understand the present as a culmination of a multiplicity of pasts and paths,” trying out many nonsynchronous histories, concerned more with the “planetary” than with the national. Dedication to the complexity of the historical moment and to capturing history as it is rather than as it should be is precisely what made the new film aesthetics possible: “Once the teleological certainty underlying the ideology of development is upended, another kind of aesthetic potential opened up that many contemporaries misrecognized as apolitical” (17). Majumdar’s discussion of the 1960s-film trilogies by Ghatak, Sen, and Ray demonstrates the interrelation of the historical moment and the filmmakers’ aesthetics. Her close readings often highlight a particular scene or element in a film, be it sound, photography, or *mise-en-scène*, which stands out for its incongruity and thus gives a glimpse of alternatives it preserves. Approaching each film as a historical palimpsest, the author looks to reenter history through openings where the past and future encounter each other and yield a witness to the concerns of the filmmakers’ present. Today’s India, as seen through these films, was not predicated on one vision of the future, but contained many other, now forgotten, futures. Majumdar’s book is an invitation to explore this portentous past preserved by art cinema in order to make it newly relevant for the revisions of the present.

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