Many Spaces in/of Cinema: Ritwik Ghatak's Films

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Conclusion

> Filmed spaces are a part and a product of cinematic, social, industrial, imagined, and political spaces. The study of filmed spaces can expose how cinematic and real spaces carry each other's imprint... (Jaikumar 21)

> Deciphering Ghatak remains a daunting challenge...We might say, echoing popular impressions, that Ghatak's films evince an unbridled passion, a taste for excess and disregard for conventional aesthetic discipline; yet, at the same time, they afford the most subtle, hence all the more searing, insights about the predicaments of individuals caught up in the agonizing unfolding of history. His own personal predilections were equally paradoxical: a Marxist intellectual who was revered for his perspicacity and integrity, he was also dismissed as an inveterate drunk, prone to decadent self-indulgence. (Bhaskar Sarkar 204)

Keeping in mind these observations, I now try to conclude Ghatak's cinematic spaces. Obviously, cinematic spaces are the ultimate products of a filmmaker's social, political and imagined spaces. Ghatak remains a filmmaker who is not easy to be deciphered, given his "paradoxical,"and "decadent self-indulgence" tendencies. I demonstrated, in the preceding chapters, the influences that spaces, be they literal, symbolic, or psychological, have on the narratives, interactions among characters, and overarching motifs of his cinematic universe as a whole as he said, "Each one of my films is quite different from the other, though I fear my personality and inclinations are in all of them. From the compositional point of view, all the films have divergent balancing principles thought to be inherent in the theme" (Ghatak "Film and I" 17). Ghatak's films comprise a complex web of spatiality that functions not merely as passive

backdrops, but as dynamic participants in the narrative processes. He creates, and employs spaces as means to communicate ideas, sentiments, and societal evaluations. They encompass displacement, existential crisis, and philosophical queries. The study illuminated how his films represent, process, and address extensive socio-cultural issues in the context of post-Partition Bengal and India. The films are unique utilizations of space in addition to aesthetic and narrative achievements. This project concludes the comprehension of his spatial aesthetics in the following ways.

Moinak Biswas commented that Ghatak "…partook of a global twentieth century modernism in the art" ("Limits of representation: Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*" 155). On the other hand, Bhaskar Sarkar also says:

> Ghatak's unrelenting engagement with history takes remarkably eclectic forms. Making classical Sanskrit literary allusions jostle with Marxist thought, placing Tagore and Shakespeare side by side, he brings various cultural archives—regional, national, civilizational, global—into creative dialogue, helping to shape an Indian intellectual modernity. (207)

Modernism[90] in cinema might be distinguished by a focus on subjective reality. It is a departure from traditional forms, and explores the medium's properties. It involves the intentional use of

[90] The early 20th century movement in literature and arts. It emphasizes subjective experience, experimentation and abstraction. Social issues, politics and philosophy are aspects of this movement. It was influenced by industrialization, urbanization, technological advancements and geopolitical shifts after the World War I. It is characterized by a search for new means of cultural expression, and self-conscious rejection of tradition. Literary stream of consciousness and cinematic montage are associated with modernism.

techniques to disrupt our sense of realism, subjectivity,[91] and fragmentedness. Space is utilized by modernist filmmakers not only as a backdrop for action, but also as a dynamic element which interacts with characters and themes. Notwithstanding both Biswas and Sarkar's arguments, I further argue that Ghatak's films are modernist as a result of his experimental use of space as well. The challenge was to create a modernity that would aim to alleviate the ongoing interaction with the modern. Choosing cinema as the venue and instrument for experimentation meant adopting an avant-garde stance for him without the cliched cues of the genre that we are all accustomed to. As Ghatak said: "I have tried to experiment with forms of story, treatment, styles of making, images, etc...In the sound tracks, including the music, I have tried to weave different patterns" ("Film and I" 17). We are challenged by Ghatak's idyosyncracy, because it warns against interpreting his case as one of challenging contemporary modes from a traditional perspective, as is occasionally done.[92] Ghatak held the opinion that the term "modern" in art does not exist. There are forms, and since art is a never-ending process, artists constantly re-invent forms after they see something has been applied, tried, and exhausted. He rejects the idea of

[91] For Ghatak, the medium of cinema is subjective. He asserted, "...all art is subjective. Any work of art is the artist's subjective approximation of the reality around him. It is a reaction set in motion by the creative impulse of the human unconscious." He further says, "In art, all that is subjective turns poetic. And cinema, sometimes, seems to be like an art" (36-37). See *Rows and Rows of Fence*.

[92] Kumar Shahani further said, "It is these factors that make Ritwik's films a vitally generative force for the young. He does not hide behind a medieval or dead past or a decorative Indianness. Nor is he content with the nineteenth century critical tradition of the novel, moving from the romantic to the iconoclastic frenzies of a basically anarchist political genre. Very few of his contemporaries have avoided these pitfalls, whether they work in the cinema and the other arts, or in the theoretical and cultural sphere. The conservatives have glorified the past in decorative and theological terms and the moderns have rejected tradition and history to deprive even the contemporary of its meaning. The problems of under-development have led them to civilise themselves through chauvinism or a totally alien reference-system. It is as if they were ashamed of being themselves, today, with their true history" (122). See Shahani.

modernity in art, but he views epic as the most important form of expression because it can integrate the modern and incorporate everything that comes its way, and the Indian consciousness is dominated by the epic form. As a result, his use of widely accepted Indian storytelling and performance techniques did not contribute to his popularity. He blurs the lines between the external and the internal, concrete and abstract realms in order to subvert conventional concepts of cinematic space. Such a filmmaking approach of Ghatak might be influenced by the European modernist movements and Soviet montage which employed space in an abstract, symbolic way to evoke specific ideas. He combined these influences with his distinct forms of expression to establish a cinematic idiom that was addressed to historical and cultural context of his. The characters' own uncertain identities and fractured sense of the self are reflected in the impermanence and instability of the physical spaces. And, Ghatak's work proves him to be a modernist filmmaker, and it continues to resonate well beyond his lifetime.

There is a romantic sensibility evident in Ghatak's films' spatial aesthetics. As we know romanticism[93] is linked to nature and the landscape, and emphasises on individual subjectivity, and emotional excess. His films align with these romantic ideals. Ghatak employs the Bengal countryside to evoke the sense of nostalgia. The rural picturesque landscape's wide, open green spaces, captured in long takes with minimal human presence, are a reminder of a lost idyllic past. They indicate the homeland which has been irrevocably divided by the Partition. Another spatiality which evokes romantic connotations is the river, the recurring motif in Ghatak's films. The river in his films is a site for meditating on unattainable dreams, longing, and memory. As

[93] The 19th century artistic movement which advocates for subjectivity, appreciation of Nature in response to the Industrial Revolution. Romanticists see passion as crucial to understanding the world. They usually idealize the past as a nobler era.

opposed to this, Ghatak's depiction of urban spaces is critical, and dystopian. The urban spaces are distinguished by a decadence and alienation for its citizens. They are depicted in claustrophobic, disorienting compositions. They function as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of modernity and industrialization and they are the sites of struggle. The city, with its congested streets, noise becomes a symbol of the fragmented, disjointed nature of modern existence. The camera tilts up and down vertically to depict the city, projecting a certain recession of space, in contrast to the open space of the rural Bengal landscape, which is depicted by the camera panning left and right horizontally, literally creating an opening up of space.[94] Thus, Ghatak's romantic sensibility is apparent in his critique of urban modernity. As a result, his characters always want to leave the city, and want to be lost in the rural spaces.[95] At the same time, the urban spaces in his films are, sometimes, spaces of resilience and resistance. Ghatak's juxtaposition of both dystopian and utopian thoughts in urban spaces is his ambivalence towards modernity—another trait of romanticism. Another central theme in Ghatak's films is the idea of "home," which is both an architectural space and an idea. The home is not merely a place of residence; it is a repository of cultural memory, identity, and belonging. His films explore the theme of homelessness, whether as a result of the Partition, migration, or existential crisis. This loss is depicted through the spatial dynamics of the narrative. In his romantic vision, which is

[94] Another recurring visual motif in Ghatak's films is the low angle shot, which is complemented by verticals and the character's positioning at the far end of the frame. Although Ghatak rarely employs the top angle, when he does, it gives the shot a certain diagonal quality. He occasionally employs the 360 degree angle to convey a particular message. The *salban* sequence in *Subarnarekha*, the sanatorium sequence in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and the scene in *Ajantrik* where Bimal realizes he has completely failed to restore Jagaddal are three clear instances of such use. He frequently deviates from the 180 degree rule in order to challenge accepted forms of audience engagement.

[95] Even Mrinal Sen, one of his contemporary filmmakers, and one of Ghatak's closest friends, pointed out that his cinema lacks the traits of urbanity. See Mrinal Sen interview in Anandabazar Patrika published on 11 May, 2013.

rooted in a sense of cultural and emotional displacement, this tension is central. The fluid, transient nature of memory and identity is reflected in the constantly shifting spaces of home in his films. But, Ghatak's romanticism is not a straightforward idealization of the past or a denial of the present.[96] It is a poetic use of space that facilitates a complex engagement with the realities of his era. Thus, Ghatak's films are a contribution to the romantic tradition, as they simultaneously address universal themes of romantic sensibility, while remaining rooted in the specific historical and cultural context of Bengal.

> Ghatak presents a style that does not exist only to serve or express his story, but to formulate itself as a vital proposition, materially, in the multiple times and spaces created by cinema, before our very eyes. He gives us a world, his ambivalent attitude toward that world as it is, and something still more: he brings to the surface of film the forces and energies that transform the world, violently or magically, from moment to moment. (Adrian Martin 216)

Yes, Ghatak's films always offer "something still more." Hence, it is imperative to read the interplay between the shots, between the scenes, and between the films in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the depth of his works. The juxtapositions establish a spatio-temporal dialectic that encourages us to engage with the film on a more profound level. Only then we find the spatiality in shots, the contrast between the modern and the traditional, the animate and the inanimate. Even a car is endowed with a spatial presence which is comparable to that of the human characters. It erodes the distinctions between the personal and the impersonal,

[96] Chidananda Dasgupta wrote, "Ghatak seems to have been torn between the two strands: the Ravindrik (i.e. Tagorian), rationalist, Marxist, secular, world-embracing on the one hand, and the tribal, magical, nostalgic and regionally self contained on the other" (52). See *Seeing is Believing*.

the living and the non-living. Employing pauses between scenes Ghatak does suggest occurrences that must have occurred in the intervening span despite their absence. In an effort to suggest a crucial happening, he employs such pauses. The narrative interval is not connected to this method of progression, as the intervals also appear to present absence (Biswas "Limits of representation: Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*" 165).[97]The absence of any happening in the shot and scene intervals suggests that the existence of a substance is beyond the reach of our empirical knowledge. In order to address the non-existent in the gap of narration, it is necessary for us to "practise thinking"[98] philosophically, perhaps. Again, Ghatak's spatiality is not limited to specific shots and scenes of films. It is a theme that unites his entire body of work.[99] The space markers thematically connect all his films. Nevertheless, Ghatak also introduces progressive variations in the portrayal of the spaces. So, the submerged layers of meaning that lie beneath the apparent can be revealed by reading between the shots, scenes, and films, much like the iceberg

[97] For Biswas, it is an influence of Indian philosophy (*Nyaya-Vaisheshika*) on Ghatak. He argues: "The intervals also seem to present absence, what Indian philosophy calls 'abhava', as real" (165). See Limits of representation: Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha.*

[98] In *Arguments and a Story*, the drunkard Neelkantha is offered money by one of the intellectual friend who started writing as socially conscious writer but now surrendered to money-making business, to buy liquor, he only accepts what he requires. Upon leaving, he says, "Think, practise thinking." It became an iconic Ghatak epigram.

[99] Diamond Oberoi Vahali argued: "Ghatak's entire cinema can be viewed as an epic and each film within it, as an episode in this vast epic of the endless, ever-moving exodus. For instance, as almost all the films are divided into episodes, they are integrated through recurrent thematic and formal motifs. Since these motifs are common to all his films, Ghatak's films never appear to end with the formal ending of their specific narratives, which varies in each case. At the level of discourse, each film flows into the other. Thus, each film is an aperture, a point to be continued and an episode loosely knit within the broader framework of Ghatak's epic structure" (3). See *Ritwik Ghatak and the Cinema of Praxis.*

theory[100] suggests, since, Ghatak's spatiality is not merely a representation of the physical reality; it is also abstract, and intangible.

The *mise-en-scène* of Ghatak's film is a significant factor in the spatiality of his films, which is evidenced by the shots. Each shot is richly conceived in deep focus.[101] The foreground and background are the two spatial zones that Ghatak occasionally splits the frame into. By projecting a still image of a character in the foreground, he pauses the action there, while movement continues in the background. Despite the widespread belief that he improvised on location, Ghatak was incredibly inventive, and meticulous about the staging of his *mise-en-scène*, including the framing of his shots, for which he primarily had a pattern. They defy conventional cinematic notions of staging to achieve such electrifying expressivity. Almost every shot possesses a charged intensity as a result of the inherent conflicts and tensions that are inherent to them. These tensions, as Sarkar argues, include the tension between bodies that are caught in odd and constantly shifting proxemic relations, the tension between empty space and voluminous bodies, the crowdedness of bodies and the space that is caught in deep focus, the tension between what is visible and what is blocked from our view, the tension between shadow

[100] Ernest Hemingway, the American novelist and short story writer, introduced the iceberg theory or theory of omission as a writing technique. He maintained a minimalistic approach. He emphasized surface elements without explicitly addressing underlying themes. Hemingway was of the opinion that the deeper meaning should be implied, rather than immediately apparent.

[101] In this regard, Safdar Hashmi wrote: "...Ghatak used deep focus to place his characters firmly, in their social environment...Ritwik showed for the first time that the movie camera was not merely an unobtrusive eavesdropper but a commentator, philosopher, historian, critic and poet, a testament of life itself" (97). See The Genius that was Ritwik Ghatak in *Ritwik Ghatak: A Tribute*.

and light, and the tension between objective and subjective interiority (224-225).[102] The shots are assembled to create scenes of immense emotional impact. They are not only elements of montage, they are sometimes cells of violent ruptures.[103] This involves abandoning the conventional master shot and eschewing any naturalized sense of spatial relation. The juxtaposition of extreme close-ups with deep focus, wide angle shots, and crowded medium shots results in disorientation and a sense of cramped doom. The loaded moments reveal Ghatak's complete reluctance to resolve spatial contradictions, and thereby to domesticate them, as they present no straightforward solutions. Ghatak becomes a philosophically inclined powerful film theorist in terms of his spatiality. The film(s) "contributes not only to the film's realistic tenor but also to its symbolic subtext about how socio-historical forces pervade and reshape the intimate space of the personal" (Dass 62). The setting's mundane materiality is also utilized in suggestive shot compositions, theatrical staging, and an expressionistic use of natural light. A sense of entrapment or claustrophobia is frequently visually conveyed or reinforced by the use of doors and windows as frames. Ghatak transforms even a *mise-en-scène* of dimly-lit room into the characters' internal landscape of anguish and despair through the atmospheric use of shadows, low-key lighting, and strong contrasts in the scenes, as well as unexpected framings and camera angles. This also enhances the expressive nuances of the faces in focus, and gestures in the screen space.

[102] For Sarkar, the force of Ghatak's melodrama derives largely from such formalization of shots (224). See *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*.

[103] Ghatak wrote: "Pudovkin understood that each shot after the other shot leads to build a film, Eisenstein said that every shot is in conflict with the other, that is, cinema is made through conflict. A shot in itself has no meaning even the subsequent shot does not have any meaning, but the union of the two leads to a third meaning, in other words, a thesis, antithesis and a synthesis. This is dialectics. In this way, we understand Marx's thesis on approach to reality" (89). See Chhabite Dialectics in *Chalachchitra manush ebang aaro kichhu.*

Sound and music not only serve as bridge between shots, but also carries the shots on its melodic and rhythmic arc. The narrative gets disrupted by sonic detonations, which elevate the domestic drama to a more expansive figurative or socio-historical realm. He employs sound to expand or contract our perception of space. Sound appears in multiple variations throughout the films. He creates a dynamic interaction between the auditory and visual senses. The use of sound, which links to the topography and aids in the expansion of the spatial zone, creates the filmic space. By situating the work within a specific historicity and advancing it at the temporal level, sound acts as context. For instance, the Oraon dance sequence and the particular indigenous music are used in *Ajantrik* to develop the Ranchi-Singhbhum belt. Similarly, the chhau dance presentation in one of its sequences and a specific type of music is used to establish the locale in *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*. This way the emotional impact of a scene is heightened by the auditory manipulation of space. Ghatak eliminates or neutralizes an image when a sound can take its place. While the eye moves toward the outside, the ear moves more inward. Conversely, he gives nothing to the eye if the ear is completely won. Sound and image function as relay rather than complementing each other.[104] Ghatak perceived that a film is "conceived" and "fully born" as a result of the synthesis and collision of words, music, various sounds, and silent pauses. Rather than pursuing the "audiographic realism" of location recording, Ghatak opted to conduct pilot recordings on location to obtain a guide-track and capture discrete elements of environmental sound. He then composed his soundtrack on the editing table from the assembled sounds, and used to redesign the audioscape. Ghatak's essay on film sound demonstrates his keen sensitivity to the creative potential of "incidental sound" which emerges within the diegetic

[104] For further knowledge in this regard see Robert Bresson's *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1975).

space and the pro-filmic space, as well as the process of sound montage that transforms them from mere sounds that accompany the visuals to suggestive sounds.[105]

Though Satyajit Ray could not find traces of Ghatak in them,[106] Parichay Patra argues, "Ghatak's influence on New Wave exponents like Kaul and Shahani was enormous" (96). Apart from ideology in the craft,[107] Ghatak's influence on them was his approach to the use of space in cinema as well. The common traits in both Ghatak and Shahani[108] are the epic modes of narration. Shahani's utilization of space is impacted by Ghatak's methodology. Shahani's utilization of fertility symbols, like lush green hills and a smooth expanse of water in *Maya Darpan* (1972), are indicative of Ghatak (Rajadhyaksha "Return" 137). Shahani's spaces also serve as symbols, evoking a sense of ritual and myth that surpasses the immediate narrative. Shahani, like Ghatak, employs space to reflect the psychological states of his characters. He expands this to investigate the broader cultural and historical contexts, referencing Indian classical arts. Another disciple of Ghatak, Mani Kaul's minimalist approach to space is evident

[105]See Ghatak's Chhabite Shabdo in *Chalachitra manush ebang aro kichhu* (121).

[106] He said, "It is strange that both Kaul and Shahani should acknowledge their debt to Ritwik Ghatak, who taught them at Poona, when the only Ghatak trait they seem to have imbibed is a lack of humour. In every other respect—in their avoidance of strong situations and full-blooded characters, in their lack of concern for social issues, in their use of camera and cutting, there is not a trace of Ghatak to be discerned" (106). See *Four and a Quarter*.

[107] Ghatak worked at the Film and Television Institute of India (1964-65) in Pune for nearly a year. Kumar Shahani himself Said, "In an atmosphere where our cultural attitudes and artifacts have been identified with the objectification of effete Brahminism and European humanism inflicted on us by the colonials, Ritwikda's work is violent assertion of our identity. It is the cry of dying girl in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* that echoes through the hills, our right to live" (764-65) (qtd. in Rochona Majumdar).

[108] Ghatak acknowledged, "I pin my faith on Kumar Shahani and John Abraham. Mani Kaul is there too... Kumar Shahani is my best student" (96). See Interviews in *Rows and Rows of Fences.*

in *Uski Roti* (Our Daily Bread, 1969)[109] and *Duvidha* (Dilemma, 1973), where the emphasis is placed on the interplay of light, shadow, and texture. Kaul's utilization of space is influenced by Ghatak's symbolic and psychological spaces. However, he simplifies it to its essence, generating a cinematic experience that is both contemplative and meditative. Kaul's cinematic spaces encourage us to engage with the film on a more introspective level. Kaul also attempted the systematic application of the interval as a creative principle of negation in his films (Biswas "Limits of representation: Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*" 165). Both Kaul and Shahani further developed his ideas by incorporating his spatial dynamics into their own explorations of Indian modernity. Richard Suchenski argued that, apart from a shared interest in epic forms, Ghatak influences Kaul and Shahani "...in a form of cutting that is used to fragment the human figure, in the prominent use of windows and doorways as framing devises, and in circular camera movements that sensuously traverse space" (3). Adoor Gopalakrishnan, one of the pioneers of Malayalam New Wave cinema, was also influenced by Ghatak, particularly in his use of space to investigate cultural identity and social change. In *Swayamvaram* (One's Own Choice, 1972),[110] Gopalakrishnan's settings are influenced by the cultural and social environment of Kerala. Gopalakrishnan employs space to reflect the emotional states of his characters. He also employs it to investigate the dynamics of power, tradition, and resistance within the community. The interplay between social structures and individual identity is reflected in the cultural and historical resonance of Gopalakrishnan's cinematic spaces. Ketan Mehta's experiments with myth and reality, which resulted in the cinematic replication of reality to a greater, mythical

[109] Like Ghatak in *Subarnarekha*, Mani Kaul uses a telephoto lens of 135 mm systematically throughout *Uski Roti*.

[110] In this film too, like Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*, a runaway couple makes their journey to the city space in order to escape the clutches of the rural space. But, ultimately their dream collapses in the cruel city.

significance, also appear to be influenced by Ghatak (Rajadhyksha "Return" 141). Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani and Adoor Gopalakrishnan, despite their differences, share a common thread in their use of space as a tool to explore deeper psychological, cultural, and historical themes. This legacy can be traced back to the teachings and films of Ghatak.

Thus, this thesis contributes substantially to the extant body of knowledge on the spatial interpretations of cinema through Ghatak's films. Incorporating conceptual frameworks derived from the fields of philosophy, sociology, architecture, geography, and cultural studies, this investigation demonstrates the adaptability and practicality of spatial theories in the domain of film studies. One can easily understand how they provide a space to investigate the interconnections between space, identity, and philosophy in cinematic narratives. It broadens the range of methodologies available for scholars who are occupied with the exploration of filmic texts. The spatial readings in this thesis not only enhance our comprehension of Ghatak's cinema but also illuminate more extensive inquiries concerning the correlation between tangible spaces and human encounters, and how spatial staging influences the significance of stories and how we interpret them.

Ghatak's films establish that spatial components are of the utmost importance in communicating thematic motifs, character interactions, and emotional reverberations. In the future, both academics and filmmakers can derive advantages from embracing a more sophisticated comprehension of cinematic space. The broader comprehension of spatiality extends an invitation to filmmakers to utilize the evocative capacity of space in order to enhance their narratives and captivate audiences on a more emotional and intellectual planes. Ghatak was able to link individual life thrown into upheavals with a consciousness spread over space and time. His method of figuring the human body in relation to the landscape helps that goal.

Although the research methodology utilized in this investigation has enabled a thorough examination of the spatial aspects of Ghatak's films, it is fair to acknowledge specific limitations and constraints. Although qualitative methods are highly appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study, their utilization might have led to a subjective analysis of the spatial components present in the films. Furthermore, the research is constrained to specific scenes of Ghatak's films. Moreover, the investigation encountered various obstacles, including limitations in the primary sources (poor quality of the film prints), and contextual restrictions. Despite diligent attempts to obtain archival materials and engage in expert writings, there remains a possibility of misreadings.

Expanding upon the ideas drawn from this investigation, new avenues may open up and they demand further scholarly inquiry, as well as their wider ramifications for the field of film studies and cultural dialogues. Investigations may be warranted to study the developed concepts in other filmmakers and their films across the globe.

As I conclude, I am prompted to reflect upon the process of undertaking this research and my admiration for Ghatak's films. It illuminates the complex interaction that exists between spaces and the art of storytelling. I am overcome with appreciation for the chance to make a scholarly contribution to the body of work of Ghatak, Indian cinema, and cinematic space.