

# Cinema as Poetry

## A conversation with Dhritiman Chaterji

Aryanil Mukherjee

**AM:** Lets begin with a Luis Buñuel quote from the 1920s - ‘The cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply’ - which, compounded with related thoughts on the same subject by others, like D. W. Griffith for example, goes to show that cinema, as public arts in the West, might have been initially conceived as something close to poetry. Then in 1965, at the New Film Festival in Pisaro, Pasolini is heard saying - ‘The inner law of the film, that of "obsessive framing," thus shows clearly the preponderance of a formalism as a myth finally liberated and hence poetic. But then, gradually, the language of poetry, that is cinema made way for the language of the narrative.’ What are your own thoughts on this transformation of the cinematic art form?

**DC:** Let me begin by saying that I am, neither by training nor by inclination, a film theoretician or academic. My grounding in film history is not strong. Also, I think that people tend to find affinities or draw parallels between art forms where their natural sympathies or enthusiasms lie. It is well known, for example, that Satyajit Ray found the structure of Western classical musical music to be very useful to the construction of his films. Now, while I enjoy poetry and particularly certain poets, I have no difficulty in saying that it has not formed a major part of my reading. So, whether cinema was initially conceived of as something close to poetry...I’m not in a position to say. I’m willing to ponder the question, but it finds no immediate resonance with me.

**AM:** But what Pasolini refer to as the “inner law of obsessive framing”... you know he was as important a poet as an auteur... although I agree with you about the affinities of artists....

**DC:** See, this idea that cinema beginning as the language of poetry and then being transforming into the language of narrative makes sweeping generalizations on

both sides of the 'divide' that I have difficulty in accepting. Cinema, like any art form, is almost always partly a product of socio-political circumstances. When we read Bunuel's autobiography, we find surprisingly little reflection about his own cinema but a vivid portrayal of the extraordinary political and artistic ferment of his times and the extraordinary people surrounding him and we begin to understand why he was making the kind of films he was.

Were they, though, the same kind of films Vertov, Donskoi, Kozintsev were making in the Soviet Union at the same time and the kind of films that were being made in the US?

**AM:** Now, the Buñuel quote in my previous question is from the 1920s. When we talk about film theory here, there is a ceaseless and obsessive referring to the West. But as we know, having arrived at the hundredth year of Indian cinema, we were making films here in the 20s too. What kind of film language do you think early Indian cinema assumed and why?

**DC:** This whole business of the centenary of Indian cinema is problematic. Firstly, because, if indeed it is to be celebrated as such, it has to include the cinemas of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Secondly, questions are recently beginning to be asked about whether Indian cinema should not be dated from the post-colonial period.

Leaving that aside, because it is a huge topic on its own, I think certain trends can be discerned in the idioms that developed in Indian cinema. On the one hand, there was an extension of the traditional forms of Indian theatre, song and dance to make cinema accessible to mass audiences with the kind of devotional themes they had been used to. On the other hand, there began to emerge, say by the late 1920-s, a more sophisticated, urban, middle-class cinema for audiences that had been used to the Hollywood product. Many people who came to work in this cinema had actually trained abroad, in Hollywood and Europe.

**AM:** But outside this duality...

**DC:** Yes, I am getting there...it is necessary to recognize a 3rd phenomenon to understand the Indian cinema of that time. Quite apart from artistic tendencies, an industry was taking shape, driven by the vision of entrepreneurs in the South

and in Calcutta. And the contours of the industry would inevitably influence the kind of cinema that would be made.

Cinema is not an autonomous art. It has never been completely independent of the industry that sustains it.

**AM:** Do you really think there is any tangible connection between film and poetry or it is nothing more than a wishful romantic association ?

**DC:** I just took out a book of poetry from my shelf, opened it, I promise you, at random, and found these lines

যতক্ষণ তুমি কৃষকের পাশে আছো, যতক্ষণ তুমি  
শ্রমিকের পাশে আছো আমি আছি তোমার পাশেই।

(as long as you accompany the farmer, as long  
as you back the worker, I am with you, alongside.)

I'm sure you recognize the lines.

**AM:** Shamsur Rahman<sup>1</sup>?

**DC:** No, Nirmalendu Goon<sup>2</sup>. The construction and the meaning are simple and easy to understand. So what makes this pair of lines poetry and not prose? A choice of words, a deliberate repetition building up to a cadence, a rhythm that you don't often find in prose. It is a cadence that you find in good cinema. So of course the connection between poetry and cinema is not fanciful. Or when I read a poem like Shakti<sup>3</sup>- da's এ-সুখ শতায়ু হবে ( This bliss will turn centenarian ), what is it if not terrific cinema? You could take it as it is and treat it as the screenplay for an extraordinary opening sequence. What happens with lines like

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<sup>1</sup> Shamsur Rahman (1929-2006) was a major Bangladeshi poet whose clandestine poetry written during the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 made him a name.

<sup>2</sup> Nirmalendu Goon (b.1945) is a renowned Bangladeshi poet famous for his anti-war poetry.

<sup>3</sup> Shakti Chattopadhyay (1933-1995) was a famous Indian poet who wrote in Bangla.

ডান ও বাঁহাতি দিই সুপারির একহারা গরাদ,  
যেন মনে হয় আমি মুক্ত জেলখানায় রয়েছি।

(Betel-nut trees on the right and left and the lean grill  
make me think I live in an open jail.)

- Shakti Chattopadhyay

**AM:** Reminds me of another of his famous poems “সে বড়ো সুখের সময় নয়...”  
(*Not Great Times, Not The Happy Hour*) where he writes in a section,  
(fast translation)...”*the cops dump me outside their dark van/ but inside  
another one, darker/ where someone has been waiting, in some corner/  
holding a golden spider web close to her chest/ a garland/ she wants to  
greet me with/ we’ll marry at midnight*”. A romantic union with death at  
the darkest minute of midnight, in a world that is free, as free as a  
prison...

**DC:** Yes, note the words. They are chosen with extreme care, like pearls harvested  
from the depths of the ocean. That is what poets do, they choose words with  
care. That’s what filmmakers do too, they choose images with care. Then they  
string them together, or edit them together. In poems, and in films. So the  
connection is not fanciful. What I find difficult to accept is that one is somehow  
cast, or was one day cast, in the image of the other; that filmmakers said ‘All right,  
we’re going to write poetry with our cameras’.

**AM:** ...like you were saying the other day, that when people get touched  
by a certain kind of cinema, the word “poetic” is used to cover up their  
entire unspoken space...it has probably become a verbatim for  
uncomprehended pleasure...

**DC:** Sure. But let us step aside for a moment here and think about what we mean  
when we bandy about words like ‘good cinema’ in literary and film journals. They  
seem to have elitist connotations which I am deeply uncomfortable with, as if we  
are part of a charmed circle into which ordinary people have no means of entry,  
even though we ourselves are not quite sure what the rules of entry are. To me,

good cinema, as indeed other forms of art, invites the active participation/ engagement/ interpretation of the audience as opposed to merely passive entertainment. This arises, in turn, from the engagement of the artist/ author/ filmmaker with her internal reality as well as the social reality around her.

This is not to say that we should not take entertainment seriously or that we should take all efforts at obscurity, whether in cinema or poetry, and I say this in all humility, seriously. I think astute viewers and readers are discerning enough to be able to differentiate between material that is a challenge to their intellects and motions and material that is just a shroud for mediocrity.

Having got that out of the way, shall we go back to Shakti-da's<sup>4</sup> lines?

**AM:** Absolutely...

**DC:** I was saying that that poem could become cinema. But is that the same thing as saying that that film is a poem? That film, after all, is a film, made according to its own rules. A film is a poem. What does that mean? To me, nothing. I remember, After Aparna Sen<sup>5</sup>'s Japanese Wife, a number of people (not film critic types but regular filmgoers), praised it for being very 'poetic'. This I found irritating. (Smiles...)

**AM:** (Laughs)...I remember having seen you tweet something about that...

**DC:** Now, Aparna excused this not because she thought it was legitimate praise but because she felt that they had no alternative film vocabulary with which to express their appreciation.

Back to Shakti-da. Having used his verse as a passage in a film, it would be perfectly normal for a filmmaker to move on to something very prosaic in the following sequence.

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<sup>4</sup> It's a custom in India to address close acquaintances, especially elders, as relatives, for example, an elder male friend is called "da" (elder brother).

<sup>5</sup> Aparna Sen, a contemporary of Dhritiman Chatterji, is a noted Indian actor and internationally reputed auteur.

Cinema and poetry do have natural affinities, but a filmmaker, if she is true to herself, goes where her inclinations lead and I think it would be terribly limiting for her to say to herself: 'I'm going to write poetry with cinema.' Because cinema is not poetry. It is cinema.

In this context, let me bring up a difference – a relevant and a fundamental one. If one's lucky one could get rich by making films. Writing great poetry, from what I know, may not even provide a living. And that makes poets a special creed.

**AM:** Lets talk about the language that bears these two arts. A poem, except for performance or visual poetry, is primarily made up with words, composed either on paper or more impersonally on a computer screen. But a film's language comes from a plethora of things - words, text, voice, language, sound, music, light, silence, texture...etc. Adoor Gopalkrishnan, in a recent interview, upheld cinematic language as something "like poetry but more powerful than that". What are your thoughts on this comparison?

**DC:** I have often thought about this, whether cinema is an integrative medium, that is to say, whether it blends different elements it has access to or whether it is a reductionist medium, whether there is something essential about it that other media do not have access to such as, let us say, time. Remember Tarkovsky's phrase, 'Sculpting in Time'.

After a lot of thought, you know, I feel if there's a thing called the "essence of cinema" it's this ability to play with time. I could offer scores of examples from films - ones I've acted in or otherwise – but that would be another interview. Satyajit Ray, Orson Welles, Amos Gitai, Nuri Bilge Ceylan ... sometimes a certain shot just continues to stick with us. Makes us spellbound. While at other times it ravages our sense of time. Now, listen to this one -

প্রবাসে, দৈবের বশে  
আমাদের দূরের ঘরের মেয়েরা  
দূরে যেতে যেতে  
স্টেশন থেকে  
বাগানে চিঠি দিও।

(স্বদেশ সেন)

Abroad and destined  
our women move farther  
from their faraway homes  
Remember to send us letters from railway stations  
to these gardens of the moment

(Swadesh Sen<sup>6</sup>)

The poem was working fine in present tense, but near the end it took this sudden turn towards future. The poem chose to border on cinema. This is something that lots of people, filmmakers and theorists, have thought about. But I can't help thinking that, at the end of the day, filmmakers don't get obsessed with these notions. They just go ahead and make films! Putting theory before practice is probably not a very sound way to make films...

**AM:** I am not trying to place theory before practice either. Rather, I am only trying to study the art to see if a certain trend or pattern emerges out of the pile that one could use for reasons of "identification"...

**DC:** On the issue of "identification" the first thing one will remember is that cinema, unlike poetry or the novel or painting or even dance or theatre, is one of the most collaborative forms. The skills of a number of people go into the making of it, into the realization of the director's or the producer's or even the financier's vision...and, no, I am not going to look down my nose at any of it! The performers in dance or theatre do not get a second chance, in cinema they do.

So, whether cinema is more powerful than poetry I do not know. It's certainly more expensive. And exhausting. And reaches much larger numbers of people. But doing great poetry can sometimes be vastly more difficult than doing "chalta hai"<sup>7</sup> cinema.

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<sup>6</sup> Swadesh Sen is a much neglected Indian Bangla poet closely associated with the Kaurab group.

<sup>7</sup> Popular, easygoing

**AM:** In the 1960s Pasolini said something about a change in the character of the camera-eye since Neorealism - that prior to the movement the camera was operated in a way so as to conceal the character of the onlooker, sort of like the third person narrator of a novel, whose own character the reader never gets to know. The Neorealists began to use the camera in a radically distinctive way - it was played as an unseen & unspoken actor in the film. Would like to hear your thoughts on that.

**DC:** It'll need a little more elaboration. Could you...

**AM:** sure...let's say during the 1930s in the Keaton, Chaplin, Marx Brothers movies for example, the camera would stay static for the most part and narrate something visually in a rather impersonal way. The Neorealists were the first that gave camera its own character. There's a mob on the street rushing towards a car - something anarchic forms its head at the center of our field of vision, and right at that moment, the camera might turn away from that commotion and look at a dropped handkerchief or tilt up to a third-floor balcony from where a beautiful woman is looking down at the mob. Neither have anything to do with the story. The camera seems to have a mind of its own. This "mind", according to Pasolini, is that of a poet's, not a story-teller's. Would like to hear your thoughts on that...

**DC:** There is no doubt that this subjectivity, the filmmaker's point of view, came into play at a certain stage in cinema. But saying that this is an assertion of the poet's, rather than the storyteller's mind, isn't that a bit of an overstatement? Why not just say that it is an assertion of the filmmaker's mind! All I'm saying is: grant cinema its independent space. Would you appreciate it if your poetry kept constantly being talked about in terms of how dramatic or filmic or painterly or musical it is?

Let's also look at this issue from a completely different point of view. I've always held that every form of expression has very importantly, and perhaps above all else, been influenced by technology. Alphabets in all languages were angular when they were hewn on rocks. As sharper styluses were developed because of improved technology, calligraphy began to be done on softer media such as leaves and alphabets became more rounded. Cave temples were replaced by free



standing ones when ways were found to cut rocks to precise sizes. Artifice has always played a big role in how art has moved forward.

Acrylic instead of oil paint. The use of amplifiers at even the most remote *baul melas*<sup>8</sup> in Birbhum<sup>9</sup> (I was at Lohagore last winter and saw how even the most committed performer at this small gathering insisted on well- balanced monitor speakers). Do you write by hand now or on the computer? The examples are numerous. In cinema, too, a lot of the things that we now see as the brave new ideas of directors happened simply because new technology allowed them to happen. Faster film allowed the crew to move out of a cage which had to be bathed in light. A lot of the time, Chaplin, Keaton and the Marx Brothers were in the situation Pasolini describes simply because the camera was too heavy to move around; in spite of this, they left their unique signatures on their films. So I think it is a little foolish to say that their films were impersonal. Otherwise they would have got lost in the plethora of comedy shorts that were churned out at the time.

‘The Neorealists were the first that gave the camera its own character’?. Come on! Wake up. There was a certain gentleman named Eisenstein making films decades before the Neorealists, you know. Remember the Odessa Steps?

By the 1940-s, on the other hand, cameras had become much lighter. Kodak had brought out the 16 mm camera. It was possible to hand hold the camera. So a lot of stuff the director did technology enabled him to do.

What a coincidence Pasolini should cite the example of a mob moving towards a car. You remember the scene in **Pratidwandi**<sup>10</sup> in which Sidhartha<sup>11</sup> comes out of his sister’s superior’s house, seething in anger, and chances upon a street accident. Now, Ray had got together the car, the driver, and the little girl inside it (who, by the way, soon thereafter became Mrinal<sup>12</sup>-da’s daughter-in-law) but everything else was pretty much improvised...and Ray was ready with his...guess what...Arriflex handheld camera, a triumph of technology!

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<sup>8</sup> Baul – Bards of Bengal, Mela - Festival

<sup>9</sup> A district in West Bengal, India, the home of many Bauls

<sup>10</sup> Aka “The Unvanquished” – Satyajit Ray’s seminal 1970 film with debutant Dhritiman Chatterji as the protagonist.

<sup>11</sup> The character played by Dhritiman in the film.

<sup>12</sup> Noted Indian auteur Mrinal Sen – a contemporary of Satyajit Ray.

So, there I was, trying to push my way into the crowd to land a blow or two on the hapless man who by now was regretting playing the driver. But I wasn't making much headway because the others in the scene were having a whale of a time beating the poor man up and forming an impenetrable barrier between me and my target. So, I decided to beat a graceful retreat and Manik-da followed my with his trusted Arri. And, of course, my behavior was applauded for how true it was to Siddhartha's character.

Something of the sort may well have prompted the cameraperson in Pasolini's example to go away to the handkerchief or the woman in the balcony. Critics, after all, have to make a living too!

**AM:** Since you brought up one of Aparna Sen's recent films, why don't we walk back a few decades to her first. That was also one of your films that many (myself included) think of as "poetic cinema" - 36 Chowringhee Lane. Many critics still see it as her best film. Could you tell us a bit about your experience of doing that film?

**DC:** 'Poetic cinema'...hmm...never occurred to me why you think so. Perhaps you can tell me more. Certainly never came up when Rina (Aparna Sen) and I talked about the film, though I know that she is poetry minded. All I can say is there is a certain underlying lilt, rhythm to the film that charms me. There is that difficult-to- describe essence about all films one likes, what one of my directors, Sanjay Leela Bhansali<sup>13</sup>, calls a *sur* (melody). No surprises there, because his essence is musical. I'm not necessarily a great admirer of his cinema though I do greatly respect his filmmaking abilities.

In performance, too, and I'm speaking personally here, one needs to hit that note. For me, most of the time, it happens intuitively, you could say meditatively. Not after a lot of research, rehearsals, workshops and all that. But I need to be sure that I can grasp that note when I want to. Only then can I let go of it. The pity of it is that one doesn't get that many opportunities to let go of it, tread uncharted waters and then come back to it.

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<sup>13</sup> Bollywood filmmaker

Experience in *36 Chowringhee Lane*<sup>14</sup>...well...a lot of firsts in it. An English film after a long time. Rina's first film. Shashi's (Sashi Kapoor) first film as a producer. If I'm not wrong. Ashok Mehta's first art-house film as director of photography. As for me, shedding the 'Pratidwandi', 'Padatik' image, by playing a thoroughly unpleasant yet irresistible young man. Perhaps the biggest compliment I got was from a certain young Anglo Indian lady from Bandra who said to me: You were so bad in that film. You can't believe how good that 'bad' felt. And you must remember that the Anglo Indian ladies from Bandra had an enviable reputation in those days.

I can tell you I felt quite apprehensive playing opposite Debashree (Roy), who's much, much younger than me especially with the kissing scenes to do, which, by the way, are the most convincing kissing scenes that have been done in Indian cinema till now, even though I say so myself! But Rina kept saying 'Trust me', and it all worked out. She does have this disconcerting habit of saying 'Trust me' even when there's chaos all around but it always works out. She did it to me in 15 Park Avenue too.

She was a very accomplished director, for a first timer; knew her shot divisions, camera angles, what she wanted from her actors...exactly. And she was sure of her aesthetics, very much a part of the Satyajit Ray-Chidananda Dasgupta<sup>15</sup> *gharana* (school). And it was a masterstroke to team her with Asoke Mehta<sup>16</sup> as DoP.

As far as my experience on the set is concerned, I hadn't done this before, but I don't like using that overused word 'challenge'. It was a new experience and it was 'fun'- another overused word! As I said before, it was necessary to hit the right note: the young, charming, but quite unscrupulous young corporate type who thinks of himself as being anything but unscrupulous. And, of course, I had to keep in mind that I was playing someone younger than I was in real life. Other than that, my tasks were to keenly observe somebody making cinema and to thoroughly enjoy myself in the company of people I liked.

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<sup>14</sup> Aparna Sen's maiden film (1979) featuring Dhritiman Chatterji among others.

<sup>15</sup> Satyajit Ray's close associate, contemporary film maker and author. One of the founders of the Film Society Movement in India.

<sup>16</sup> Bollywood cameraman, later Director of Photography.

**AM:** Often, during our chats you describe the present state of an old film as “looks dated” or “didn’t age very well”. Could you elaborate on these expressions? What makes a film “age well”?

**DC:** The resonance of an idea or an image to me as I am today, with all the changes that have happened to my sensibility and my understanding, is what keeps a film contemporary. I can’t answer for others. This may sound arbitrary. I can’t help that. I may be capable of reading a film, or a painting, or a novel, in its historical context but it may have lost its appeal, its relevance.

I can keep re-visiting the *Apu Trilogy*<sup>17</sup>. I can’t re-visit *Kanchanjanga*<sup>18</sup>. I can see what Ray was trying to do at the time, but it seems too formulaic, too predictable now. I can re-visit *Pratidwandi*, *Jana Aranya*<sup>19</sup> I can’t, although I admired its blackness, both literally and figuratively, for a long time.

Most of Bergman and Fellini, most of Ray and Sen transcend time for me. There is something there both thematically as well as in the visual texture. Mrinal- da, wise man that he is, though he tries to hide it, had told me something valuable once: Contemporary doesn’t it only mean dealing with the so-called *Modern*. Contemporary can be looking at the past with a contemporary consciousness.

If an image, a moment, a look, a comment, an idea from a film comes back to me at an unguarded moment, I consider that film timeless.

**AM:** I have noticed amongst the film-loving connoisseurs of the literary arts in Bengal a profound respect for you - as a creative and thinking actor with an admirable socio-political awareness. I am not trying to get hagiographic, merely making an observation. You happen to be a polymath being first a bright student of Economics, next an actor - both on stage & silver screen, a short filmmaker, ad-Guru, traveler, voice artiste, collaborator and someone who seems to have a voracious curiosity about world politics, the other arts and a plethora of things. This digressive, multidisciplinary engaging is famously a great tonic for

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<sup>17</sup> Satyajit Ray’s famous trilogy based on Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay’s novels on the life of Aparajita or *Apu*.

<sup>18</sup> 1962 Satyajit Ray film

<sup>19</sup> 1976 Satyajit Ray film

actors - e.g. Dustin Hoffman, Marcello Mastroianni, Erland Josephson etc. How does this actually help you, can you explain?

**DC:** Firstly, let me politely say “a bright student of Economics” is an exaggeration. It’s true, though, that I went to Presidency College and then to Delhi School of Economics. Studied under people like K. N. Raj, Tapan Roy Chowdhury, Jagdish Bhagwati, Amartya Sen<sup>20</sup>. Went to engineering college before that. Left because classes began at 7 am and there were only 3 girls in the first year.

The fact is that my life has been, and continues to be, somewhat unplanned. Experience has been more important to me than career, achievement, success and so on. When I worked with Ray and then with Sen, I had a full time job in advertising which I enjoyed thoroughly.

Now every choice has its upsides and downsides. The upside of my choice was that I had the luxury of picking and choosing my roles and of seeing a fair bit of life while travelling, making films, peeping into corporate India, knocking about in the bars and other disreputable dives of Kolkata and so on. The downside was that I stayed an outsider as far as the film industry was considered. People in the industry never thought that I was one of them. They still don’t.

But knocking about has its advantages. It brings a certain awareness to your work. I don’t mean that just in the literal sense of being able to imitate what a school-teacher or doctor or farmer does. But a kind of being connected, a kind of buoyancy, shows through. Especially in your eyes. And the audience is able to sense that.

**AM:** Back to **Pratidwandi**. Looking back at it past four decades what do you think was Ray’s single biggest achievement in that film?

**DC:** I’ve gone at great length in the past to talk about Pratidwandi on many occasions, so I’ll keep it brief. You know, I’ve got this hypothesis that Ray, especially with his principal characters, first cast and got to know them and then wrote their final dialogue etc. Also, his direction was pretty minimal. He let you do pretty much what you pleased unless you really were fucking it up. Some actors,

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<sup>20</sup> All well known Indian economists

though, he directed almost mechanically, telling them their every step, every movement of the head, almost every drop of the eyelid. I was, fortunately, not in the latter category.

I think I've said this earlier. I don't either intellectualise or agonise overmuch about my roles. I came from the same socio- economic background as the protagonist. I pretty much knew all the characters in the film. From what Sidhartha did and the way he spoke, any idiot could tell that the thing to do was to keep things simple and low key.

**AM:** Could you share some anecdotes from that experience you hold very close to your heart? Maybe something that might inspire poetic imagination...

**DC:** In the early part of the film, there is this pretty complicated dream sequence on the beach- a massive set up, especially for a low budget production- I'm facing a firing squad, there's a bus burning in the background, my sister's running towards me in a nurse's uniform...Well, the shot gets taken, Ray okays it and then an assistant runs up to him and whispers, with great hesitation, that it'll have to be taken again because a hair clip was hanging loose from the actress' hair. 'Oh, that's all right,' replies Ray, with that characteristic booming laugh of his, 'this is a dream sequence after all. The critics will invest the clip with some meaning.'

**AM:** We met over this idea, so let me go back to it for once. The idea that cinema has always been based on or affected by literature, but its about time that the relationship became reversible in that literature gets fermented by cinema too. Do you think that has become a natural gradient at this time?

**DC:** I'm not sure that I can give you an answer to this but let me try and give you some thoughts. Do the poet, the novelist, the painter, the photographer and the filmmaker 'see' in the same way when they stand in front of, say, a tree? Maybe they do, but what kind of mediation goes on when they think about the medium they have to express themselves in? Does the seeing, and their expression of it, remain spontaneous? Are they not, however subconsciously, influenced by the "*guna*"s (attributes) that are intrinsic to their medium?

Sometimes, when making documentaries, we're faced with this very real problem of 'This seems very obvious when you write or say it. But how do you show it?' So then what do you do? You take material from one medium and try to transcreate it into your own. Sometimes you do it well, sometimes you don't. I saw a marvellous travel film on TV, for example, in which the narrator was speaking about some very complex ideas. 'How are they going to visualise these?' I thought to myself. The filmmaker didn't even try to. The anchor simply stood by the roadside, drank some water from a tap and spoke to the viewer. Simple as that!

The point is, though, that you do try to shift, superimpose- call it what you will- one medium into another. Which brings us back to the poetry- film relationship we started this discussion with. You can turn poetry into cinema but it becomes cinema. Cinema leaning on literature, you said, specifically, on narratives. Of course, because it needs the raw material to turn out stories. Because that's what cinema has become- a medium to tell stories with. And there seems to be a consensus, even among well- known filmmakers, that that is the purpose, even the destiny, of cinema.

Can it lean the other way? In a commercial sense, of course. Scores of American books, particularly, are written to be turned into multi- million dollar movie deals. But in an artistic sense? I really don't know. Look, I may or may not agree with you that cinema was developing a language, a voice when it was akin to poetry before it got hi- jacked into becoming a narrative, story telling medium. But there is no doubt about the fact that, with a few honourable exceptions, it has no independent language today. It is merely a means to something else- to telling a story.

This is nothing to get frantic about, however. It is a young medium, compared to the 1000 years and more of literature. But when its own anchoring is so unsure, can it lend a firm shoulder to literature? I mean, you won't be able to get 2 film scholars to agree on what 'film language' means, except perhaps at an obscure, theoretical level!

Even so, when I read certain novels, I do say to myself 'How cinematic'. Not because they're visual in a superficial kind of way. But because they pose one of the toughest cinematic challenges to a filmmaker who's willing to take it up- how to climb into the mind of a character. Shirshendu<sup>21</sup>-da's '*Ghunpoka*' (Woodworm) is one example. A recent novel, Nabarun<sup>22</sup>'s '*Judhho Paristhiti*', is another. And they have that hard- to- define thing called literary quality, which for me often has to do with the delight of unexpected words, without wasting words. It is like coming across tightly edited but magical images.

**AM:** In a 1989 interview with Pierre-Andre Boutang Satyajit Ray remarks, "...for me its the density of the film that is most important, how much material one can pack into a film". For many poets, our generation and younger, the success of the poem, similarly, depends on the density of content and its linguistic innovations. The immediacy of evoking feelings, stirring one's spoon in a cup of emotions and sensations, is not so important; that is not good poetry neither it is good cinema. Now, although the ideals remain the same, we often see the arts fail to talk to each other. Why do you think that happens?

**DC:** How curious that you can change the letters in 'density' around to spell 'destiny'! You have raised a core issue, about which we can talk for a couple of hours at least. But we've got to end somewhere, so let me try and be brief.

First, Ray. I had a long conversation with him- much like this one, not that I'm suggesting that I come anywhere near him!- in 2 or 3 installments soon after Ganashatru. I'd interviewed him on various occasions before that so we decided we'd talk less about cinema and more about things like music, the environment, politics, even spirituality...on which, let me tell you, he had definite views! Anyway, we were talking about classical music, particularly Carnatic music, and the concept of the '*rasika*'<sup>23</sup>. And I asked him why, if the *rasika* was important to the understanding of music, that shouldn't be the case in cinema as well.

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<sup>21</sup> Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay (b.1934), a Bangla novelist and author from India.

<sup>22</sup> Nabarun Bhattacharya, a Bangla poet, novelist, scenarist, author, editor and publisher from India.

<sup>23</sup> A Sanskrit word meaning connoisseur of "*rasa*", which is juice, essence, flavor, meaning etc.



What he said in reply was interesting. He tried to make his films layered so that you could view them on the surface or go deeper and deeper and decode them, if you were a rasika. So packing material was not an easy exercise. He was clear in his mind that he had a responsibility to a middle- class Bangali audience and a financial responsibility to a producer. He was not some esoteric underground filmmaker making masterpieces that only he would see.

But we see his films, at least some of them, again and again, precisely because there is this density. We observe every frame keenly. Our eyes try and discover, decode meaning. We delight in being able to make fresh discoveries. But...it is density with a purpose. The purpose is the narrative.

So, cinema and poetry deal with different audiences, different compulsions, different formats.

Second, stirring the cup of emotions and sensations. You said that poets are experimenting with packing a rich array of thoughts and intellectual material into a short span. Fair enough. Good luck to them. Why, though, should this experiment be relevant to cinema, particularly when, by and large, it has become a means to an end, that end being the telling of a story?

**AM:** I was trying to mean it a little differently. Lets say, for purely socio-economic reasons, a certain art gets a certain orientation at a given time-section in its social history. Simultaneously, we observe, in another art very similar concerns, causes, processes and devices come into play. Maybe from an entirely different conditioning. But the urges being similar, isn't it natural for these arts to establish bridges? For example, in the early period of Cubism, Picasso and his associates extensively studied engineering (factory) drawings of products and machinery. Purely for artistic equivalence. When Rainer Maria Rilke experienced a period of lean productivity, he moved to Paris as August Rodin's secretary. He banked on Rodin's ceaseless creative energy, stamina and artistic prolificity hoping to find a way to loan his yeast. And he was finally able to.

**DC:** Let me get to it a little later, something else came back to me. Perhaps, there's this "insider/outsider" thing when it comes to experimental poetry. I am not sure how much you & your coterie of poets are keen to stretch it. I've had transactions on this subject with most of the august film-makers I've worked with. However, I can't recall having had such exchanges on poetry with them. Why is that!

**AM:** Well, from what I know, I would say that it does happen in other places. In other countries. Probably less these days. Our times, society and education are gradually shaping up more like that of the US where "poetry" ceases to enjoy the "public place". What does one expect in a market-economy? An art that doesn't have a market has no future and is at once reduced to the status of a "cottage industry". Like Bengal, poetry, in the 1950-70s had a very high public profile in the USSR. *Perestroika* has diminished that place. Although in another way, it has helped it.

**DC:** From the connoisseur's perspective one must also add that for thousands of years poetry has been practiced/presented throughout the world as a "performance art". Now, the question is whether you'll accept or reject it? From a personal point of view, I don't claim to be a regular reader of poetry, but I do love reciting it. And it doesn't need to beckon an audience. I always try to withdraw from the cup this "stirring spoon" you mention. The word, its binding, construction, the language have precedence. When I am reading a verse-play, it's the same. I don't think of play-reading as some sort of a poor-man's theatre. Reading and acting are two different vocations.

Such creative presentations need help from poets. Are they getting it? I don't know, I'm asking.

**AM:** You've seen it work in the US. Similarly in England, France etc. *Performance Poetry* has its own place. In Bengal, that'll be "recitation". You're a revered reciter, but the majority stuff-up the poem with intense emotion and speak it operatically. This, as poets, we find repulsive. Only the publicity-seeker would like such presentations and some poets are. But they're less-numbered. Personally, I'd say just as Sambhu Mitra might be hailed as the originator of modern Bengali "recital art", he did an equal harm to the art of poetry reading in that he imbibed the poem with drama, at times, doing it without proportion or relevance. Poetry is not drama, why fake it as one just because one's a great stage-actor?

**DC:** ...this'll take me back to your earlier question(s) about the similarities of cinema and poetry. I maybe missing something here. I understand the personal preferences, the metaphors, density of language, sincerities of the word and its metaphor etc. All that is true. But there is so much space between a film's intention and the audience's...including attitude...poets prefer to work inwardly, alone, at least in the daytime, which filmmakers can't afford to. I don't want to evade your question, but we need to take it offline and dig into it perhaps.

**AM:** It's very true what you say about the nature of artists. Poets, most of them, work in complete isolation, at least at the time when they're cluttering the page with words. Conversely, when I think of an auteur, I find it hard to imagine an unsocial person devoid of any people management skills...

**DC:** ...other than that poetry is still autonomous, free, able to conduct its experiments on its own terms, owing nothing to anyone for a living. They don't have the compulsion to address large audiences, they can talk just talk to their peers and be happy...or unhappy...with what they're doing. Cinema was like that too, not many people were involved in it. Especially in Europe, where cinema was far more innocent than today, unaware of commercial convolutions. There is, of course, cinema like that too, but very very few people practise it. Remember what

Godard recently said! That “films are being made, but the cinema is dead”. I wouldn’t be so much of a downer...

**AM:** You made me think of the aviation industry. Think about it - cinema and the aircraft are contemporaries. The Wright brothers flew their first plane in 1905, while the Manakis brothers in the Balkan, made their maiden documentary in 1905. The aircraft - such a stupendous invention of science of technology took an evil turn within the next two decades. People figured out how to use it as a bombing machine. Lawrence Ferlinghetti writes about it in his recent book *Americus I* - “soon it fell into the hands of the Wrong Brothers”.

**DC:** Right, let me now go back to your question about why people from these arts not talk to one another. Surely that’s nothing new. When people ask me why I don’t make films, I often say there have to be some of us left to see films, because filmmakers don’t- except sometimes to borrow ideas from. I know, for example, because I live in an artists’ community from time to time, that artists look at other artists’ work only to find out what price they’re fetching. But seriously, to take one comment on density from a Ray interview and a tendency among some Bengali poets and link them into a broader pattern seems to me to be untenable. Desirable, but untenable. Cinema is still a means to an end. It isn’t brave or liberated enough to do these things.

**AM:** Mrinal Sen’s *Padatik*<sup>24</sup>. The film’s language was clearly ahead of its times - a political plot that is inclusive of gender-war; avoids easy romantic escapades, employs documentary-style narration, newsreel, newspaper clips, social commentary, voice-over introspections, interviews of contemporary feminists etc. etc. - a language Bengali post-modern literature of the early 2000s would aspire to imbibe. But how was your experience of facing up to all that in the early 1970s?

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<sup>24</sup> Mrinal Sen’s 1974 Bengali (Indian) film, both political in content & experimental in language where Dhritiman plays the protagonist.

**DC:** I was very excited. I'd got to know him well, was supposed to work in Interview, but that didn't work out, and was determined to work with him at some point. Working with Mrinal-da meant that you could get involved in the filmmaking process if you wanted to. The script, the situations were constantly evolving. In fact, a few days before shooting was to finish, nobody knew, including the filmmaker himself, how the film would end. This uncertainty created a wonderful kind of tension.

Also, I was out of college and University in 1969 and was completely familiar with the issues involved, had debated them interminably with friends who were part of the movement. So being an actor was just a part of the excitement. It seemed more worthwhile to be part of the analysis and the statement that was being made and to be part of a multi-layered film that was taking shape.

See, there have been very few films that I've approached as just an actor: come to the set, do your work and go home. Observing the filmmaker, veteran or first timer, and being involved if possible, has been of equal interest to me.

Speaking of which, it occurs to me that, starting with Aparna, I've done, and continue to do, a number of first time films- Ashoke Viswanathan, Malay Bhattacharya<sup>25</sup> ...a number of others. I'm starting one soon. I sometimes wonder why. I love it. Because first time filmmakers have a lovely fresh enthusiasm. Sometimes they can be insufferable, of course, with a I-know-it-all-attitude...

**AM:** As an actor, was it challenging to switch to Mrinal Sen's carefree style of movie-making from Ray's methodism? ...You were very very young back then, the characters you were playing were not just hot fresh from the streets (both films based on emergent novels & short-stories) but were, frankly, unseen on the Indian screen until then...

**DC:** Ray was a methodical director, whereas Sen was much more improvisational, but there was no 'methodism' in Ray's directing of actors. As I've told you earlier, he adopted different methods with different people. He didn't mind in the slightest bit if you modified the dialogue a little bit to become more comfortable

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<sup>25</sup> Younger & lesser known non-mainstream Indian experimental filmmakers.

with it. Sen, of course, went further than that. In *Aakaal*<sup>26</sup>, there are a couple of scenes which Smita and I improvised completely after the camera started rolling. At the risk of being repetitive, I'll say again that your awareness of the world around you- the Bengal famine, its meaning in contemporary politics, your own political tendencies- all of these make you a better actor, just keeping your eyes and ears open.

At the risk of being repetitive, I'll say again that your awareness of the world around you- the Bengal famine, its meaning in contemporary politics, your own political tendencies- all of these make you a better actor, just keeping your eyes and ears open.

**AM:** Let me turn to Sen's **Aakaaler Sandhaane** now. We have had a prolonged conversation about it in Cincinnati in the fall of 2011. Film-within-a-film or *Mise en abyme*, no matter what one calls it, the many triads, the many layers of reality at play etc. Also, many of us consider it your best performance ever. I would ask no specific questions about it but would request you to comment on the film and your work in it...

**DC:** I've asked for a role only twice in my life. I've actually asked someone for a role only twice in my life. 'Aakaal' was the 1st time. As always with Mrinal-da, the evolution of the film, from a yet- to- be- published short story, to the script, to the casting, was an open and involving process. And I wasn't going to let go of this chance to play a film director. And, as I've been trying to tell you, I've never approached the business of acting with any trepidation. I knew the business of filmmaking, having made documentaries and advertising films and so on. I'd known Mrinal-da since 1970. And I trusted him implicitly. And I knew I'd get lots and lots of leeway during the actual shooting. So, as always, it was 'go with the flow'.

To me, the actual strain, the desirable tension, is during the shot itself, when everything else ceases to exist. The actor is in his zone, his emotions and intellect

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<sup>26</sup> *Aakaaler Sandhaane* (In Search of Famine) - Mrinal Sen's Berlin award-winning 1980 film with Dhritiman in the lead.

taut, his adrenaline flowing. There's nothing else. If you're not exhausted after the shot, something's wrong.

**AM:** When Satyajit Ray was working on his last film "Aguntuk" (The Stranger) he was apparently under the spell of Levi Claude-Strauss. This we've only recently learned from you. I'd like to invite you to shed some more light on the subject...

**DC:** Well ... he was still quite unwell when he was scripting 'Aguntuk'. Had asked me over to read me my bit but, such was his enthusiasm, ended up reading the entire script, lying in bed, in spite of protests from Bijoya- di. Told me he'd been reading Levi Strauss. (A lot of our conversation when I dropped in on him tended to be about literature, music, philosophy, anthropology...not necessarily about cinema.) He seemed interested in the ideas about primitive man, civilization which he tried to reflect in the main character. In fact, he told me: 'I've told Utpal, you're playing me'.

I know it's an interesting recollection, but I don't really like making private anecdotes public. They end up sounding like one had some special relationship with great people!

**AM:** No no, it will never be seen in that light. Ray's concerns, motivations in his last film centered around completely new elements. No one I know has explained that well. Naturally, there is a great deal of curiosity on the subject. Thank you for your sharing this anecdote and your own reflections on it.

You have played a poet, at least for once, from what I know...Arun Kolatkar...is that right?

**DC:** Yes. Arun Kolatkar was a *Marathi*<sup>27</sup> poet who wrote in *Marathi* and English in the 1970- s. He wrote of *Bhakti*<sup>28</sup> poets and ruined temples and so on. He was

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<sup>27</sup> A major Indian language from the western part of the country

also a jazz musician. He was very elusive and difficult to get hold of. Only a small circle of friends knew where he was at any point of time. In short, very much a man after my own heart!

Soon after Arun passed on, a friend, Gowri Ramnarayan, an arts journalist with The Hindu, wrote a script based on Arun's poetry and interviews she had done with him after tracking him down with great difficulty. We did this material as a reading in Chennai as a homage to Arun. People liked it a lot, including his close friends, because no tribute had been organized either in Mumbai or in Pune, where he spent his last years.

The reading took on a life of its own and became a performance. Gowri had this theory that Arun, in reality, was a modern day Bhakti poet. So Bhakti songs and classical songs came into it, with a singer performing on stage. Dancers came on, dancing as I read his poems.

You could say that this was one instance in which poetry and theatre came really close, when we tried to push performance as close to Arun's poetry as we possibly could. We performed widely, in Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune. Delhi... Even now, when I'm at a promising performance space, I say to myself 'How wonderful it would be to do *Dark Horse* here'. So if there's anybody reading this willing to sponsor a performance. let us know! *Dark Horse*, by the way, is after the *Kala Ghoda* area in Mumbai, which was Arun's favorite hangout.

**AM:** As an actor, how different or difficult is it to play a poet than lets say a doctor or a con-artist? Anthony Hopkins opines that it is not necessary to know the work of poet in order to play him on screen, its more important to know his biography...

**DC:** I tend to agree with Hopkins, who, by the way, is a favorite actor. At this stage in life, there's not much point admiring people like Tom Cruise, is there? Not that I think much of him. One might as well admire people like Hopkins and Ben Kingsley and Gene Hackman and hope that one gets at least 10% of the interesting roles that they do.

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<sup>28</sup> A Hindu poetic & religious school of thought practice



When I've played 'specialist' roles like, say, the psychiatrist in 15 Park Avenue, I've tried to study them casually. Psychiatrists, I found, try and project a very neutral kind of image- in their clothing, their tone of voice, their body language- so that they never intrude into their patients' space. But poets don't come in only one model where personality is concerned. I mean, Shakti- da is not the same as Joy!

And they go to the bazaar in the morning and eat their *maachh bhaat*<sup>29</sup> and have their constipation and acidity (I'm talking of Bengali poets, of course!) the same as everyone else. So what's there to study? Arun used to drink a lot. Classic poet syndrome. Almost a platitude. Something you'd actually rather not do if you were playing a poet on screen. And sometimes, they're the worst reciters of their own work.

So, yes, knowing their life is probably more important than knowing their poetry, but then their poetry is very much a part of their life, isn't it, so I don't know that you can separate the two.

But for me, as a general principle as an actor, two things are of paramount importance: the screenplay and the director's vision. People often talk about whether a screenplay has stayed true to the original novel or not. It doesn't matter in the slightest bit to me. I often don't read the original so as not to be influenced by it. I sign a film on the basis of a screenplay, not a novel. And on the basis of who's making the film, regardless of whether she's a veteran, newcomer, star, failure, whatever. My obligation is to her, to interpret her vision.

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<sup>29</sup> Fish and rice – a staple Bengali dish