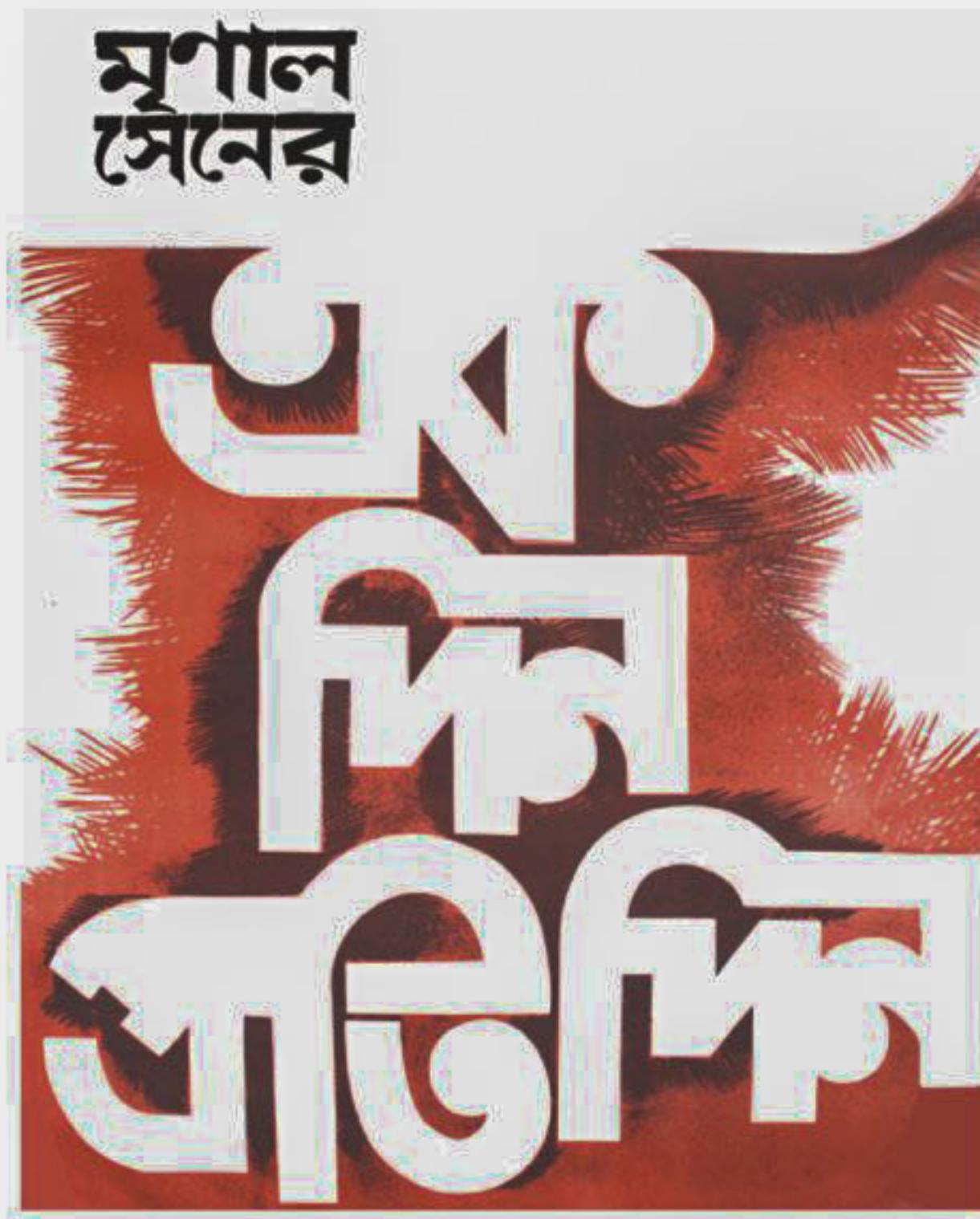




Mrinal Sen dropping political leaflets from a high rise on Calcutta streets for a scene in *Chorus* (1974). Cinematographer K.K. Mahajan is capturing the moment.

After page 10

The protagonist, a fugitive forced into isolation, uses that time to reflect on the rigid establishment politics of Leftist organisers and the abuse and exploitation created by that structure. But Sen was careful not to delegitimise the movement. He said, "We were very aware that the line between self-criticism and slander is very thin. We were not trying to slander the movement, but to be self-critical in the form of reappraisal." The film's



contemplative and sombre approach to the political psychology of a movement is resonant of Robert Bresson's aesthetic overture, while its cinematic technique is similar to that of Jean-Luc Godard, two French filmmakers whom Sen admired and repeatedly referred to throughout his career.

His later films, notably The Absence Trilogy—*Ek Din Pratidin* (And Quiet Rolls the Dawn), *Kharij* (The Case is Closed), *Ek Din Achanak* (One Day Suddenly)—marked a distinct trajectory in his style which forayed into heightened interiority and existential nihilism. Sen critiqued middle class morality by exposing its doublespeak.

In the 1980 drama *Ek Din Pratidin*, the family's eldest daughter, the bread-winner of the household, goes missing for a night. The family breaks into a frenzy as they wonder what had happened. The film thrives on the evolving, delicate interpersonal interactions between the characters. A patriarchal anxiety looms throughout the plot and the neighbours



Mrinal Sen directing Ranjit Mallick and Shekhar Chatterjee.

start questioning the character of the daughter, with occasional interjections by some of the minor characters.

Like in *Interview*, Sen's ideological groundworks is in his masterful endings. The audience never gets to know where the eldest daughter went that night. But the real question is, is it even important? Why? Because it will allow us to defend the situation? How different are we, then, from the family's neighbours? The eldest daughter, upon returning in the middle of the night, feebly cries, "Do I have no say in this?" The story never resolves itself further, leaving the audience in utmost discomfort—absolutely barring them from taking a moral high ground.

In *Kharij*, the death of a couple's servant boy drives them into hysteria as they figure out an escape route from the crisis. With the couple, Sen exposes the underlying class antagonism prevalent in our society. The beautifully crafted end scene shows the boy's father paying respects to the couple instead of being enraged. There is no justice. Sen said in an interview, "We were engaged in doing a post-mortem of society... my militant friends thought that now the boy's father will give a slap to the employer. And that way, our spectators would've been very happy. But this is a kind of wish fulfilment. And since they enjoyed seeing it, they would think that their revolutionary task is finished—so status quo would be maintained." And thus, Sen again deprived the audience of a closure, hoping that a revolution will be stirred out of their inability to reconcile

with the narrative.

While open about his political intentions, the filmmaker was also consciously self-critical of himself, of his ideology, and of his craft. Perhaps nothing better illustrates this than *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine) which is a meta-film so to speak. A film crew, much like his own, visit a remote village to recreate the Bengal Famine of '43. This premise eventually questions the director's own position during a film production. It points a finger at urbanites who extract benefits from the conditions of rural, lesser incomer villages, only to retreat into their comfortable city lives—perhaps an early example of what we now recognise as voluntourism and parachute journalism.

In terms of form and content, Sen was fearlessly experimental. He wrote in his book, *Montage: Politics, Life, Cinema*, "And, for reasons of my own, I henceforth made it a point to constantly break new ground, cast off the shackles of conformism and evolve new modes of expression." While Sen's radical cinematic vision led to international critical success, his political associations led to exclusion from several programming and festivals at home—most recently, the cancelled retrospective of Sen's films at 2016 Kolkata International Film Festival.

With Sen's passing, legends and luminaries of generations past, his peers and friends, are writing his obituaries—only fitting for such a real filmmaker. But for me, a millennial new-gen to write one only goes on to prove Sen's contemporaneity with today's problems. When I watch his cinema, I do not do so with a lens of nostalgia or with an introspection of the past. The indifference of the middle-class, the ghost of colonial oppression, frustrations with joblessness—none of that has faded away with the new millennium. If anything, it may be getting worse. The social function of his cinema remains unrealised. And thus, Sen is relevant as ever. His cinematic and political philosophies are one to keep re-emerging in the hearts of young people who seek to (dis)engage with cinema. With that, we bid adieu to the maestro, the last of the holy trinity of Bengali filmmakers.



Sarah Nafisa Shahid is a writer and art critic. Follow her on Twitter @I_Own_The_Sky for more art and film commentary.

When I watch his cinema, I do not do so with a lens of nostalgia or with an introspection of the past. The indifference of the middle-class, the ghost of colonial oppression, frustrations with joblessness—none of that has faded away with the new millennium.