

Only Connect: The Radical Empathy of Mrinal Sen

The sincere desire to connect and converse with others with unfeigned sincerity makes the stature of the man Mrinal Sen even more valuable than his incredible cinematic oeuvre.

SOMAK MUKHERJEE

In a few days, the whole world will celebrate the centenary of Sen: the man who changed India's cinematic landscape forever. As this will inspire a lot of fresh reflections on his cinema, I can guess that there will be a lot of focus on Sen's formal experimentation and the uncompromising political conviction of his subjects. Yet, for me, the man Mrinal Sen can never be summed up only through his cinematic output alone. Unlike many of his (equally illustrious) cinematic contemporaries, his most profound contribution to the field of Indian art and culture is in this radical and self-reflective empathy: guided by his sense of warmth, unpretentious sense of humor (once during a sound check with a Belgian documentary crew he introduced himself as the "King of Belgium" with a straight face) and an all-around collaborative spirit. This sincere desire to connect and converse with others with unfeigned sincerity makes the stature of the man Mrinal Sen even more valuable than



Mrinal Sen (May 14, 1923 – December 30, 2018)

great stature, for example his friendship with Nobel Prize winning Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014). Sen and Garcia Marquez met for the first time as fellow juries for Cannes Film Festival in 1982. By then, Garcia Marquez, who had a very good knowledge of international cinema, had already seen *Khandhar* and *Genesis*. They met again and spent a lot of time together as fellow juries for the Moscow Film Festival in 1986. Sen was invited to visit Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV (EICTV) film school established by Garcia Marquez just outside Havana, in Cuba. They bonded well there and maintained a warm relationship thereon. Such international outreach, going beyond the lucrative film markets of the global north, is sadly missing among most contemporary mainstream Bengali filmmakers, for whom literary adaptation is largely motivated by extraction of the "brand value" of the original story. Would most of them have the courage to choose from such a variety of sources, as Sen did?

Yet, for Sen, more important than choosing a broad range of stories to tell was the consciousness of who gets to tell these stories, and how. He has always been remarkably self-reflective about the ethics of cinematic representation (the 1971 film *Interview* would be a good example) in his films. In his later works, especially, Sen showed a deep understanding of how cinematic subjects are intimately bound to an interrelated media landscape globally, controlling and reflecting the consumerist realities of middle-class lives around the world. A wonderful example of this is his unreleased film *Chaalchitra* (*Kaleidoscope*, 1981). Being one of the rare films for which Sen received solo writing credit, it is a good example to conclude this essay. As the film progresses, we quickly appreciate the reason behind this, especially knowing Sen's quirky and self-reflective persona. In the film, Calcutta's crisis is not a grand narrative principle but filled with much more proximate uncertainties and suspense: just like the speculations on the suave, urbane gentleman stripping down to his bare minimum underwear in his ramshackle apartment in the city. Anjan Dutt (in his debut film performance) plays Dipu: a young and eager journalist in search of a breakthrough story, an "intimate study" of his own "middle-class milieu", commissioned by the editor of a leading city newspaper (played by Utpal Dutt). Dipu's effort to find a sellable story starts from his own courtyard in his shared accommodation, capturing a cleaning spree of the space headed by the women of the household. Yet every effort by Dipu to find a kaleidoscopic portrait of his clan goes in vain. As Dipu struggles to find his subject matter, the city emerges as an atmospherically distended landscape of precarious matter: starch, coal, smoke, hand fans, insecticides, moss, steel, and other material assemblages that are always situated in hazardous conditions. This precarious assemblage of quotidian crises emerges as the real "scandal" that mainstream media is in search of. Sen's Calcutta here is not just a simplistically portrayed "post-colonial" city, it is also very much a part of a global network of consumerism, "a shopping center", as described by Dutt's character. This vulgar yet vital consumer ecology, where astrologers tout their English-speaking skills in front of unsuspecting Western tourists, is Sen's creative inspiration. In a crucial sequence of the film, Dipu's younger brother Apu (played by a young Kaushik Sen) asks him, looking over the roofs of hyper-contiguously situated houses in their neighborhood: how many ovens are there in Calcutta? Instantly, Dipu finds his breakthrough topic. Yet, he still cannot extract a story from the subject of smoke. Unlike his editor, for Dipu, "smoke is not a positive nuisance", but rather a necessary and integral aspect of working-class lives in the city. Sen reframes our understanding of pollution purely from an ecological issue to a fundamental lens through which we look at Calcutta's social, cultural, and ecological crises.

Such attention to both the human and non-human agency is a key aspect of understanding Sen's late cinematic style. It complements his radical materialist politics. As we celebrate the first hundred years of Mrinal Sen's extraordinary life, we should pay attention to this larger politics, whose potential transcends the scope of any archive.

Somak Mukherjee is finishing his PhD in the Department of English at University of California, Santa Barbara.

the film told the story of a Chinese immigrant street vendor (played by Kali Banerjee) in the city forming a platonic yet tender relationship with a Bengali house wife, played by Manju Dey. Another one of Sen's early films, *Pratinidhi* (released in 1965, now sadly lost) is based on the novel *Prachhadpat*, by Bengali writer Achintya Kumar Sengupta (1903-1976). Sen's earlier film *Punashcha* (1961) too was adapted from a story by Sengupta. *Akash Kusum* (1965) was adapted directly for the screen by Sen's long-time comrade and collaborator Ashish Barman (1927-2002) who also wrote the stories of *Interview* and *Padatik*. Sen's first foray into Odia film, *Matira Manisha* (Man of the Soil, 1966) was based on the eponymous novel by noted Odia polymath Kalindi Charan Panigrahi (1901-1991). Later

Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956) was probably the most active political thinker among the trio. His story *Atmahatya Adhikar* (The Right to Suicide) was set in 1933. It is about the plight of a working-class family during a night of torrential rain in a city slum. Prabodh Sanyal's (1905-1983) *Angar* (Ember) is the second story, set during the devastating year of the Bengal famine of 1943. Sen again turns our attention to a working-class family of a mother and two daughters driven to prostitution by hunger. The third story is by Samaresh Basu (1924-1988), a writer who was a dedicated Communist worker in his youth, even going to prison for his belief. His story, *Esmalgar* (The Smuggler) is about a band of teenagers smuggling rice. The final story was written directly for the screen by its main protagonist,

radical step to broaden his creative horizon, by visualizing *Kafan*, a Hindi story by Munshi Premchand (1880-1936), but making it in Telugu. A scathing tale of social injustice in rural India, the film was acclaimed nationally and internationally. For two of his films, Sen collaborated closely with his comrade Amalendu Chakraborty (1934-2009), a progressive writer and school teacher. Sen's *Akaler Sandhaney* (In Search of Famine, 1982) was made on the basis of a novelistic draft by Chakraborty. The film would actually precede the publication of the full version of the novel in 1982 by Dey's, a noted Bengali publisher. Previously, for *Ekdin Pratinidhi* (And Quiet Rolls the Dawn, 1979) he collaborated with Chakraborty, basing it on his novel *Abirata Chenamukh*. Another masterpiece of his "Absence Trilogy," *Kharaj* (The Case is Closed, 1982) is based on Ramapada Chowdhury's (1922-2018) novel of the same name. It brutally exposes the hypocrisies of Bengali middle-class morality. For his 1989 Hindi film *Ek Din Achanak* (Suddenly, One Day; 1989) Sen would turn to Chowdhury for inspiration again, basing it on the writer's novel *Beej* (Seed). The film, which also has one of the earliest cinematic references to the then-emerging Metro Railway Service in Calcutta, is about the sudden disappearance of a college professor, and his family's struggle to cope with the reality of the situation.

Khandhar (Ruins, 1984) was based on Premendra Mitra's (1904-1988) short story *Telenapota Abishkar* (*Discovering Telenapota*). Sen's most conceptually ambitious (yet clumsily executed) film *Genesis* (1986) was based on a Samaresh Basu short story. *Mahaprithibi* (World Within, World Without, 1991) is about the Post-Cold War global order and anticipates the effect of the neoliberal turn in the everyday lived realities of Bengali middle-class life presciently. The story was directly written for the screen by Anjan Dutt, who also acts in it. In the elder son's (played by Victor Banerjee) return from Germany, one could find some hints of the autobiographical experience of the author, as Dutt himself worked in Germany as a theater worker in the 1980s. Sen's penultimate film *Antareen* (*The Confined*, 1993) is based on a 1950 Urdu short story by Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), titled *Badshahat ka Khatimah*. For his final film *Amar Bhuvan* (*This, My Land*; 2002) Sen chose to work on the novel *Dhan Jyotsna* by Afsar Ahmed (1959-2018).

This tracing and indexing of Sen's multilingual oeuvre is crucial, as it signals a critical aspect of his creative personality. Sen was not just an "avant-garde maverick" with an edgy style and radical politics. For Sen, who referred to himself as a "private Marxist", filmmaking was intimately connected to his broad and immersive readings in literature, and his sensitive understanding of Indian history. Such a capacious range of inspiration too contributed to the generosity of his spirit, and forever cements his place in the broader artistic community of India, and not just the cinematic community. This also explains Sen's broader international appeal among writers

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(L) Mrinal Sen's memoir *Tritiyo Bhuban* (R) A poster of Mrinal Sen's acclaimed film *Baishe Srabon*.

Mrinal Sen made feature and documentary films in five Indian languages: Bengali, English, Hindi, Odiya, and Telugu. This is a feat unmatched by even his contemporaries Ray and Ghatak. Just like them, Sen constantly looked for inspiration from literary sources, but Sen's literary influences and inspirations were uniquely pan-Indian.

his incredible cinematic oeuvre. Sen's spirit of belonging to the community requires greater attention in our anxious, paranoid, and narcissistic times. This December it will be the fifth anniversary of his death in late 2018. I was in Kolkata for Christmas vacation when the news of his death reached us. My father has been a film critic and journalist for many decades and conversed with Sen on many occasions in both formal and informal capacities. As the sense of loss in our house was personal and profound, my father recalled how Sen would solidly grip the shoulders of colleagues and journalists in Nandan or other adjoining areas during long hours of interaction. Many of Sen's colleagues fondly recall that embrace of solidarity and presence, including directors like Gautam Ghose or Sen's protégé Anjan Dutt.

This spirit of reaching out has constantly provided the rich creative amplitude of Sen's films. He made feature and documentary films in five Indian languages: Bengali, English, Hindi, Odiya, and Telugu. This is a feat unmatched by even his contemporaries Ray and Ghatak. Just like them, Sen constantly looked for inspiration from literary sources, but Sen's literary influences and inspirations were uniquely pan-Indian, which further testifies to his position as one of the most important "Indian" filmmakers of the last century.

Sen's debut film *Raat Bhoire* (1955) was based on the eponymous novel by Bengali writer Swaraj Bandyopadhyay, published only two years ago in 1953. Sen would later consider his debut film to be a forgettable experience. For his next film, *Neel Akasher Niche* Sen adapted the short story *Chini Feriwala* by prominent Hindi writer Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987). Sen's first film to prominently feature Calcutta as a backdrop,



Utpal Dutt in a still from *Chorus*

for *Mrigayaa* (1976), he would adopt another Odia short story, *Shikar*, by Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi (1908-1943), one of the most fiercely political writers in Odia literature, and a staunch Communist activist.

Bhuvan Shome (1969), the pathbreaking Indian New Wave film that catapulted Sen to the national and international stage was made in Hindi. But it was based on a charming Bengali novel published in 1957 by Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay (1899-1979), a physician cum writer who wrote under the pseudonym Banaphul (the wildflower). Sen's next Hindi film *Ek Adhuri Kahani* (An Unfinished Story, 1972) too was based on a Bengali story: *Gotrantar* by Subodh Ghosh (1909-1980). Probably among Sen's most well-known works, *Calcutta 71* (1972), is an anthology film, featuring four interlinked stories about the social and political crisis of the times. At least three of the four storylines were based on short stories written between the 1930s and early 1950s, by writers steeped in then emergent progressive and realist tradition of Bengali literature: Manik Bandyopadhyay, Samaresh Basu and Prabodh Kumar Sanyal. Manik

Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay (1933-1983). Bandyopadhyay was a doyen of Bengali theater who had translated many plays into Bengali. He was also one of the founding members of the theater group *Nandikar*. The story too is the most theatrical both in the setting and the narrative structure among the four. Later, for *Chorus* (1974) and *Parasuram* (1979) Sen would collaborate with another well-known contemporary thespian and playwright, Mohit Chattopadhyay (1934-2012). *Chorus* probably has the most surrealistic elements in all of Sen's films, yet it was based on real-life scenes of youth desperation and mass unemployment on the streets of Calcutta observed by Sen himself, and his co-writer Golam Kuddus.

For *Oka Oori Katha* (The Marginal Ones, 1977) Sen again took a



A scene from *Chaalchitra*