

Article

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**Voice of History, Voice of Past: Certain Tendencies of the Soundtracks of Ritwik Ghatak's Films**

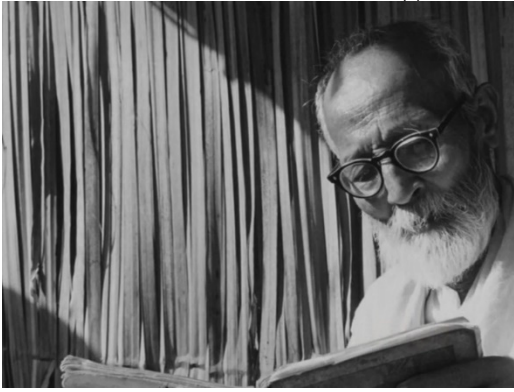
**Instance One:** The famous penultimate scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960). Nita cries out ‘Dada, I wanted to live, I love so much to be alive; Dada, I will live’. The exact time code for the moment is there from 123 minutes onwards (from the new Criterion Collection restored print of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*). I am highlighting the exact time because precisely from here, a wide angle shot of a landscape with Nita’s face at the very bottom of the image – we can sense a non-synchronization of image and sound. A few seconds later, Nita’s voice is heightened by additional reverb and echo effect and the sense of asynchrony gets the complete materialisation – camera starts panning across the hills, falls and forest where only the voice remains dominating over the images of landscape.

**Instance Two:** At the very first half of *Subarnarekha*, the news comes that Gandhi is dead. In the image we see Haraprasad (Bijan Bhattacharya) is reading the news of death, where a non-diegetic lament of Gandhi’s last words (Hey Ram) is hovering over the the Nabajiban Colony. Along with that, a sound of

an old man chanting in Sanskrit Mahabharata’s ‘Maushalparva’ is almost superimposed within the soundscape. We have given no clue of the source of either the ‘Hey Ram’ lament or the Sanskrit chant within the immediate surroundings. However, minutes later, an old man is seen in image reading from a book the same Sanskrit words that were being chanted earlier with the ‘Hey Ram’ lament. Although the voice and the place are same, there is no hint of the old man in the earlier scene we are discussing. And the lament ‘Hey Ram’ comes almost at the end, at the crucial scene where Sita dies, again no source of the voice is given within the image.

**Instance Three:** Again in *Subarnarekha*. We are talking about the scene just after Sita’s frightening meeting with the *bohurupee* in the desolate aerodrome. The strange manager, whom the foreman described earlier as in the verge of becoming mad, comes to Sita’s rescue. He then talked about Sita’s house, who she was, and then started talking about the Ramayana, the great epic of India where a central character were also

named Sita. Then suddenly, from 28 minutes



onwards, the voice of the manager telling the story of Ramayana from Sita's perspective – gets disassociated from his body seen in the image. A long take of almost 50 seconds goes like this – The manager taking Sita home without talking in the image – whereas his voice is telling, apparently to Sita, the story of Ramayana in a nutshell.

Certainly, other instances can be drawn from Ghatak's cinematic oeuvre where these disassociations of image and sound happen almost in a deliberate manner. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to cite all of those systematically, but, one can broadly say that this type of specialised use of sound can be found more in his work from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* onwards. We can use these specific three instances as case studies to understand this deliberate asynchrony as these are the representative of other instances also.

Critics, mostly from Bengal who wrote about Ghatak's works were highly critical of these so called technical 'imperfections' that kept repeating in films after films. One Dipendu Chakravorty, writing on '*Jukti-Tokko-Goppo*', complained that 'the film is nothing but the failed self-searching of a drunkard'<sup>1</sup>. He goes on writing, 'why on earth Ritwik, in a bizarre way, tried to mix both Debabrata Biswas and Sushil Mullik's voice in the same song? Is it anything more than his drunken fatigue?'<sup>2</sup> We have to note here, he was complaining about the non-realistic use of voice, why should one

use two different voices in a song where just one man is singing? (However, the whole system of playback song is pretty non-realistic, which goes well in conventional realism.) Another Dhruba Gupta commented on *Komal Gandhar*, 'this film is filled with all kind of mistakes during representation – that's why it can never become a great, successful work of art'<sup>3</sup>. For the time being, I want to keep aside this clichéd complaining about his alcoholism because I have something more important to discuss. Also, though I have not given instances directly from *Komal Gandhar* or *Jukti Tokko Goppo* in our case studies, the criticism of these writers are quite evident – they judged the technical dissonance in the film-text merely as mistakes. They didn't, or couldn't understand these sudden jerks that disturb the smooth viewing process – these complaining can be compared to Truffaut's comment on Godard's 'A Woman is a Woman'<sup>4</sup>. However, I can't look into all these instances because there are plenty, and most of them need special treatments. So, I am limiting myself to the specific cases of voice in Ghatak's cinema, especially those instances where sometimes the character speaking in the image and their voice in the soundtrack doesn't match (there-

3 Gupta, Dhruba (1961) *Komal Gandhar, Jibon o Shilpo (Komal Gandhar: Life and Art)* in Ray, Rajat ed. Ritwik Ghatak. Translated by me, Pratibhash Publications. pp. 246

4 Truffaut actually justified audience's reactions on Godard's 'A Woman is A Woman' by saying: "If one plays with sound and image in a too-unconventional way, people yell, it's an automatic reaction. They ripped up the seats in Nice because they thought that the equipment in the projection booth was bad. Of course, one can teach people in articles explaining to them what it's all about but, in the theaters where it was shown, the people were surprised. Godard went too far for them in the sound mix. When the girl comes out of the café, suddenly no more sound, there's silence. No problem: people think that the projector is broken.... People expected to see a nice, classical story. A girl, two boys, in a neighborhood in Paris... The very story one expects to be told classically. They were flabbergasted" Quoted in Brody, Richard (2008) *Everything is Cinema, The Working Life of Jean Luc Godard*, Chapter five. Holt Paperbacks.

1 Chakravorty, Dipendu (1979) *Ritwiker Jukti, Ritwiker Tokko, Ritwiker Goppo* (The Reason of Ghatak, the debate of Ghatak, the story of Ghatak) in Ray, Rajat ed. Ritwik Ghatak. Translated by me, Pratibhash Publications. pp. 294.

2 Ibid.

fore, technical mistakes to those writers). I'll also try to comment briefly on the complex network of Ghatak's soundtracks which are associated with the aforementioned voice.

Although Ghatak did write about sound in cinema in a brief essay, he never theorized these dissonances systematically. He divided the use of sound in cinema in five sections - 'words or dialogue, music, incidental noise, effect noise or suggestive sounds supporting a scene, and silence'<sup>5</sup>. The case of dissonance or asynchrony comes closest to the fourth category of effect noise or suggestive sound where 'sounds can be evocative in two ways: through something which is part of the visible or by bringing in a sound that is not part of the visible'<sup>6</sup>. Needless to say, the case studies offered earlier are important for the second category of suggestive sound, namely non-diegetic sounds whose sources are not located within the image. Although Ghatak wrote about any kind of non-diegetic sound, namely 'people rehearsing for ... Karnarjun'<sup>7</sup> or the 'crackle sound of oil simmering'<sup>8</sup> in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, for the time being I am restricting myself to the use of non-diegetic voice only, i.e. the uses of human voice that is not part of the immediate visible. Here, the theorization of Michel Chion can help us to understand a lot.

Michel Chion, a French music composer, sound designer and critic of Cahier du Cinema, theorized a concept of 'acousmetre' which is concerned exactly about our problem - 'a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen'<sup>9</sup>. He took the concept from the original meaning of the word acousmatic which 'was apparently the name assigned to a Pythagorean sect whose followers would listen to their

Master speak behind a curtain, as the story goes, so that the sight of the speaker wouldn't distract them from the message'<sup>10</sup>. Here Chion connected the idea in cinema, where in certain instances; there are voices in cinema those are not anchored in a visible body. The French term 'acousmetre' is actually a neologism, which in English can be called 'acousmatic being'. 'When the acousmatic presense is a voice, and especially when this voice has not been visualized - that is, when we cannot yet connect it to face - we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name acousmetre'.<sup>11</sup> Chion cited the example of Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, where the voice of Dr. Mabuse is not anchored in the visible Dr. Mabuse in the image. Also, there is the voice of Norman Bate's mother in *Psycho*, which also acted in the same manner. Although Chion systematically theorized different kinds of acousmetre in cinema, I have no time to discuss it in details. Rather, I would cite Chion once more to understand the difference between the disembodied voice of a mere commentary and the real acousmetre. Chion wrote about a 'dialectic of appearance and disappearance'<sup>12</sup> of the voice, where 'the voice doesn't merely speak as an observer (commentary), but that it bears with the image a relationship of *possible inclusion*, a relationship of power and possession capable of functioning in both directions; the image may contain the voice, or the voice may contain the image'<sup>13</sup>. I'll come to this containing of voice by image and vice-versa later. The idea of a voice whose presence is dialectically connected with the body in the image in precisely what happens at the end of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, our case study number one. Moinak Biswas, in his essay 'Speaking through Troubled Times' also brought in the idea of 'acousmetre' to understand aspects of Ghatak's use of human voice and also insisted us to read those beyond the technical mistakes, as noted earlier<sup>14</sup>. Although there he

5 Ghatak, Ritwik (1966). *Cinema and I*, Dhyandindu & Ritwik Memorial Trust, 2015. Published originally in Bengali in Parichay, vol 35, no 6, January 1966. Translated by Shamik Banndopadhyay. pp. 55

6 Ibid pp 56

7 Ibid pp 58

8 Ibid pp 58

9 Chion, Michel (1999) *The Voice in Cinema*, Edited and Translated by Claudia Gorbman. Columbia Univeristy Press. pp 18.

10 Ibid P.19

11 Ibid P 21

12 Ibid P.17

13 Ibid P 23

14 Biswas, Moinak (2007) *Speaking Through*



also talked about the psychoanalytic dimensions of this ‘acousmatic’ voice, like gaze in image, I am not going to those details, and otherwise this formal analysis will become unnecessarily complex.

*Meghe Dhaka Tara*, as we all know, is the story of Nita, who sacrifices all her earthly pleasure, including her fiancé, in order to establish her family members. At the end, the family almost abandon her when she is suffering from TB. Ghatak here alluded several mythic connotations with the character of Nita, mainly through *misen-en-scene* and sound design. At the end of the film Nita’s brother Shankar, the person only who apparently understands her, comes to the sanatorium and surprisingly, starts talking about the happy family which Nita almost forced to leave behind. Throughout the film, Nita behaved like a ‘good’ girl, conformed herself in a patriarchal order and never talked against any injustice aimed at her. Her voice was suppressed; she even never talked in a loud voice. At the end, after Shankar’s happy description, Nita started screaming loudly, almost in a hysteric manner. Here, as noted by Raymond Bellour, her voice becomes autonomous<sup>15</sup>, gets disassociated from her body, starts hovering over the entire landscape of the hills. A close textual analysis of this moment can reveal further insight and bridge the gap between Chion’s *acousmetre* and Ghatak’s cinematic practice.



We all can understand the terrible importance of the moment when Shankar starts talking about the happy family, ‘The child made Father’s life hell. He’s always climbing the stairs by himself! The kid is so full of life, always raising a racket! He can’t resist the urge to climb those stairs!’ We all can get the implied sense of this cruelty – this child is supposed to be Nita’s, because her sister has married Nita’s fiancé. Nita bursts into that frantic cry just after those words, it is crucial for the final moments of the film. Ghatak prepared us for the final moment very intelligently – not only just the words, cinematic language started highlighting the importance of Nita’s hysteria. We see Shankar starts strolling around saying those words, within seconds he exits through the left side of the frame. Ghatak didn’t pan, the frame stay focused on the wide angle where at the bottom edge of the frame we see Nita’s head from behind and an unknown person walks towards the depth of the image. The image gives us a certain sense of desolation – a wide angle frame where the subject is almost at the edge – formally this frame echoes the starting image of Nita coming behind the huge, gigantic, dominating



tree.

*Troubled Times* JMI 2007.

15 Bellour, Raymond (1992) *The Film We Accompany*, Translated from the French by Fergus Daly and Rouge 2004. <http://www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html> accessed on 06.06.2020



However, the real important element of this moment is Shankar's voice. Shankar starts speaking within the image, but in a few seconds he leaves the frame, but his voice remained intact in the soundtrack; its density, dominance and volume remain unchanged. Therefore, a sense of disembodied voice is there, the dialectic of appearance and disappearance of the image with respect to the voice starts taking place. If we think of an aural 'close-up' of the Shankar's voice (like close-up in an image) where it is heard with density and loudness, the image of Shankar goes beyond the frame immediately, the image goes faint and reduced, in Chion's language, the image is contained within the voice<sup>16</sup>. A sense of acousmetre is already taking place here.



But it is still a sense. The complete materialisation of this 'sense' comes with the voice of Nita. For the first time in this film, we watch Nita not supporting the status quo, cries out hysterically but helplessly. The voice is loud

and importantly, out of sync with the image. What seems at a casual glance as mistake (according to those Bengali critics cited above), the deliberate asynchrony actually prepares us for the disembodied lament which comes a moment later. Through the asynchrony of Nita's body and voice (therefore, through the alleged mistake), the moment actually prepares us for the final cry, Nita's voice becomes an 'acousmetre', relentlessly hovering over the desolate hillside landscape, almost contains the image.



Her lament gains the power of acousmetre, a ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient and omni-

16 Chion, Michel (1999) *The Voice in Cinema*, Edited and Translated by Claudia Gorbman. Columbia University Press.

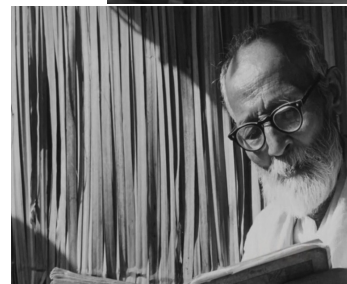


present voice<sup>17</sup>, highlighting and creating the necessary melodramatic excess needed for this final catastrophe. The idea of acousmetre helps us to read Nita's voice beyond the immediate story; this voice contains the pain and pathos of patriarchy, and at the same time creates a resistance through its excess<sup>18</sup>. Anindya Sengupta, while commenting on Partition Trilogy, wrote about two levels of narrative at Ghatak's films – 'Firstly, on the level of narrative proper and secondly, on the visual level of iconization and on the archetypal overtures of feminine characterizations.'<sup>19</sup> I would argue, this acousmatic voice, like visuals, evokes the second level of narrative where Ghatak's favourite idea of collective memory and historical trauma are embedded. Moinak Biswas argued, 'the excavation of memory in his films is ... meant to bring back the moment of rupture to consciousness, a moment that the traumatised do not know how to remember'<sup>20</sup>. Nita does not know where to locate the actual problem of her forced exile from the beloved family. She does not consciously remember the exact moment of rupture, only the acousmatic voice floats across the hills which is withdrawn 'from the Symbolic, from the realm of social meanings, produces silence and primal cries, inexplicable pain. How else can one explain ... the voice travelling through the hills (are) beyond the limits of the familiar world'.<sup>21</sup>

In the connotative level, this acousmatic voice alludes to the myth and history, whereas in *Subarnarekha*, we shall see, the acousmatic voice will itself become myth and history.

In *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak tried to tell the story in the form of a chronicle play<sup>22</sup>. I don't

want to tell the story in a nutshell because of the sheer impossibility of such an attempt. Rather I want to talk directly about the second case study I offered earlier. There, the news of Gandhi's murder comes suddenly at a news room. Out of nowhere Ghatak added some non-diegetic sound of gunfire and a 'Hey Ram' lament, and with this sound the space changes magically with a sudden pan. The image of Haraprasad reading a newspaper in Nabajiban Colony fills the screen. Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay talked about this 'Hey Ram' lament as a 'supernatural, extra-diegetic dialogue, which is a signature of history like the oracle of Delphi'<sup>23</sup>. Here, another sound is superimposed with the lament with this complex sound texture – some Sanskrit chant from the episode of Mahabharata where Krishna's family, *Yadubangsha*, was destroyed. Taking the clue from Mukhopadhyay we can argue that here the acousmatic voice directly represent both the voice of myth (i.e. Mahabharata) and history (Gandhi's death lament). The voice which chants sections from Mahabharata gets a body much later, therefore, for this specific moment the voice remains autonomous. The magic and power of acousmetre creates a hypnotic effect and contain the image within itself.



17 Ibid P 24

18 Williams, Linda; *Melodrama Revised*

19 Sengupta, Anindya (2004) *The face of the mother: Woman as image and bearer of the look in Ritwik Ghatak's films* JMI 2004

20 Biswas, Moinak (2004) *Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak* Published in Rough 2004. <http://www.rouge.com.au/3/ghatak.html> accessed on 06.06.2020

21 ibid

22 Ghatak, Ritwik *Chalachitra, Manush ebong*

*Aro Kichu* (Cinema, People and Something More), Edited by Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay. Dey's Publications, 2005 p 154.

23 Mukhopadhyay, Sanjoy (2004) *Bharatcharit-manas: Subarnarekha* Ritwik Tantra p 68

The acousmatic voice, in case of our third case study, is a more direct voice of myth and history. Earlier, I've described the scene where the manager is talking Sita home after she suddenly confronts the *bohurupee* in a desolate aerodrome. The manager rescues Sita from this horrible fear, asks basic questions about her place and belongings. Then, it appears that he asks Sita if she has read the Ramayana. We are watching a favourite high-angle composition of Ghatak, where almost in a mid-shot, the manager is facing his head on us. Then in the long shot, again it appears that he starts telling Sita the story of the Ramayana (it is impossible to overlook the namesake of *Subarnarekha's* Sita in the Ramayana), interestingly, as 'It's a story of Sita', not Rama. We cannot discuss the question of this role reversal here that would require another explanations. For the time being, a close textual analysis again reveals that in a mid-long shot, we can fairly decipher that the characters are not speaking at all. We watch the manager in profile, his lips are clearly not moving. The whole shot takes almost 50 seconds to complete, and throughout, we sense this disembodied voice telling us the story of the Ramayana.

Perhaps, more than previous instances, this can appear as the clear case of mistake where Ghatak actually dubbed the dialogue later without the actors spoken at the time of shooting. He did, however, that is not the point here. In order to appreciate the essence of this rupture we need to think beyond the realm of mere technical mistake, because, as spoken earlier, this moment represents the real enactments of history in the guise of the narrative. Mukhopadhyay argued that, like Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Ghatak actually told the Ramayana in a new way<sup>24</sup>. So this moment acted as a meta-narrative, almost in Brechtian way, (Let us not forget that Ghatak was an ardent admirer of Brecht) this makes the viewer aware about the source of the story. Therefore, we can argue that it was necessary for Ghatak to disassociate the manager's voice from his body as the dialogue acts here doubly – in a diegetic level it tells Sita about a

story with has a character named after her, and in a non-diegetic level, story of this very film we are watching as well as the story of the myth and history of people who are both his characters and his audience. If we extend Chion's definition a little bit, as Biswas did in his analysis of *Pratidwandi*<sup>25</sup>, we have to accept the fact that here this acousmatic voice is not completely without body – the source is there in the image. But here comes the uncanny, like the sudden change of gaze in *Ajantrik*, Ghatak disassociates the voice from the manager's body. Manager's physical presence is there in the image, but his voice becomes the voice of history, telling the story of Ramayana to the viewers. Chion writes, 'The acousmetre is everywhere, its voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it'<sup>26</sup>. In order to function the voice beyond the level of diegetic, mundane, pro-filmic world, in order to be a voice of history this voice was needed to be disembodied, an acousmetre.



I do not want to claim that Ghatak never made a mistake during his entire career of filmmaking, or his films are the instances of supreme technical perfection. As a matter of fact, we all know that very few films are cent percent flawless in that mechanical sense, and more of that, this type of mechanical perfection adds little to the quality of the film. To conclude, one can say that a crude technical dissonance

25 Biswas, Moinak (2007) *Speaking Through Troubled Times* JMI 2007.

26 Chion, Michel (1999) *The Voice in Cinema*, Edited and Translated by Claudia Gorbman. Columbia University Press pp. 24

in Ghatak's films that might look like a mistake at a casual glance, sometimes holds a greater depth that can be read differently. A different theoretical avenue may enlighten us to read a particular device in a film which is not decipherable at a casual viewing. This paper is a humble gesture of attempting such a path.

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