Rochona Majumdar’s *Art Cinema and India’s Forgotten Futures: Film and History in the Postcolony* is a history of the art cinema movement in India in the immediate aftermath of decolonization and an argument for reading Indian art cinema, particularly the work of Bengali filmmakers Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, and Satyajit Ray, as forms of historiographic thinking, which provide conceptual insights into the postcolonial present.

*Art Cinema and India’s Forgotten Futures* charts the cultural history of the art cinema movement in India, focusing on the 1950s to the 1980s, a period that saw the rise of state support for independent filmmaking fueled by an optimistic vision of the newly formed nation-state’s role in cultural life and the subsequent decline of these institutions and the disillusionment that followed the intense political upheavals of the 1970s. The book, which is divided into two parts, is structured by the historical break between the optimistic political atmosphere of the early decades following Indian independence and the political disillusionment of the 1970s and after.

Majumdar opens by connecting the rise of art cinema or “good films” with the pedagogical project of the newly formed nation-state to produce “good citizens.”1 It is worth noting here that throughout the text, Majumdar

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highlights the difficulty of limiting the boundary or unifying characteristics of art cinema as a category, precisely because of the ongoing disagreements about what constituted “good films” and “good citizens.” Across the first section of the text, she utilizes the term interchangeably with quality films (chapter 1), new cinema (chapter 2), radical cinema (chapter 3), and several other terms emerging from the archival sources, including parallel cinema and the Indian New Wave. Rather than providing art cinema with a specific aesthetic or political approach, Majumdar isolates the aspirational quality of the category. In Majumdar’s narration, art cinema emerged through the productive intersection of elite interests in advocating for cinema as a medium of art (in contrast to the commercial cinema emerging from the well-funded studios in Mumbai and Chennai, for example) and the pedagogical aim of the national bureaucracy to transcend social divisions and educate a universal Indian citizen.2

Majumdar locates the rise of the film society movement, and the investment by educated elites in fostering a popular film culture, as intellectually aligned with the broader task of educating the newly postcolonial citizen-subject, who was understood to be inexperienced in the practice of democracy. Art cinema was viewed as a pedagogical tool, one that utilized an industrial medium (which aligned it with the broader Nehruvian economic development model centered on industrialization and investment in modern technology) to foster popular sovereignty, educating the masses about their role in a secular democratic society. Between 1959 and 1964, several of the most important institutions of film education and preservation were inaugurated, including the Federation of Film Societies of India (1959), Film Finance Corporation (1960), the Film Institute of India (1960), and the National Film Archive of India (1964).3 The first section provides us with a cultural history of these institutions and examines the role of key figures such as Marie Seton, a British film critic and evangelist for independent film and art cinema. Through this section, Majumdar tracks the underlying faith that these institutions and figures cultivated in the pedagogical possibilities of art cinema as a form of aesthetic education in a country where the sheer plurality of linguistic communities and rates of illiteracy made developing a shared public sphere through written text an ongoing concern for the political elite and artists alike. Their aspiration for cinema to transcend regional and linguistic boundaries and speak in a universal humanist language was also a measure of its aesthetic value and sociological importance.

As Majumdar explains, the idealistic view of art cinema’s pedagogical function crumbles in the 1970s with the increasingly authoritarian rule of the Indian government, culminating in the declaration of Emergency rule from 1975 to 1977. This period, marked by the violent suppression of dissent and extreme state violence within the country’s borders and dramatic geopolitical shifts beyond, including the ongoing armed conflicts with Pakistan and China and the Bangladesh War of Independence, is particularly salient in the book’s second half, where Majumdar discusses the work of Bengali art

2 Majumdar, 26–27.
3 Majumdar, 3–4.
cinema directors who reflected on the political disillusionment of this period through their films. This section of the book consists of close readings of India’s three most well-known and celebrated art cinema directors: Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, and Satyajit Ray. For Majumdar, each of these filmmakers’ oeuvres is simultaneously a historiographic operation and a historical one: a history of their present as well as an aesthetic argument about cinema’s capacity to historicize the present.

Majumdar begins chapter 1 with the Indian government’s 1951 Film Enquiry Committee, which noted the key role of cinema in public life and called for public funding of independent filmmaking and the production of films that balanced the need for mass entertainment with artistic quality. The rest of the chapter provides an overview of how the state fostered quality cinema and the key role played by British film critic Marie Seton through her close association with political figures, including Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi and leading art cinema directors such as Satyajit Ray. Seton’s lectures on film criticism and writings on Indian cinema are an important source of evidence in this chapter for Majumdar’s argument about the pedagogical function of art cinema as aesthetic education.

The next two chapters survey the vehement debates about the aesthetics of art cinema and its political ends published in prominent film journals that sprung up in cities with active film societies, including Calcutta, Mumbai, and Delhi. Majumdar highlights the intense arguments about the relationship between realist narratives and formal experimentation, the expectations of profitability, the value of authenticity, and the ethical responsibility of the filmmaker to mass audiences that were flashpoints in these discussions. The urgency of these debates was felt as much by bureaucrats as by film critics and filmmakers since government institutions were central to the production and distribution of art cinema in this period. For a brief period (1969–1976), the bureaucrat in charge of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) was a film critic—B. K. Karanjia—and it was during his tenure that the FFC funded many of the films now associated with the art cinema of the Indian New Wave. While the FFC supported the production of these films, it was the film societies that fostered a domestic audience for them, since such art cinema was rarely screened in theaters around the country and was likely to find more viewers internationally than at home.

Majumdar narrates the history of these societies in two phases: 1947–1965 and 1965–1980. In the first phase, Majumdar argues that film societies assigned themselves the pedagogical task of cultivating an aesthetic appreciation for world cinema. They worked with government officials and foreign embassies to source prints and navigated legislative hurdles, including the strict censorship laws and heavy taxes on importing films. In the second phase, which Majumdar links to the political upheaval of the late 1960s and the disillusionment that followed in the 1970s, film societies could no longer hold the aesthetics of art cinema separate from the political revolutions they were living through. Majumdar’s attention to the debates within film society journals, as well as her research into the spread of film societies and

4 Majumdar, 60–67.
film festivals beyond the urban milieu in which they began, yields generative insights and questions about what film and media production and criticism would look like today if this movement had continued to spread with the same momentum that it had in the 1970s. For example, she mentions a film festival held in the village of Heggodu in Karnataka in 1977 with over a thousand attendees and screenings of 16mm films by Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Robert Flaherty, and Satyajit Ray. Such an event appears almost apocryphal in the current moment when film distribution in India is largely dominated by multiplex theater chains screening the latest blockbuster films. What if art cinema and its politics were debated by workers across the country irrespective of class or educational background? How would the cultivation of such film audiences shape the media-saturated Indian public sphere today? Majumdar’s discussion of the democratizing force of film societies raises the specter of an alternative future for Indian cinema’s role in radical politics, though her own research concludes at this high-water mark of the movement and doesn’t track their decline in great detail.

The second half of the book shifts focus from institutions to specific filmmakers, beginning with Ritwik Ghatak. Majumdar attends to Ghatak’s melodramatic idiom and his portrayals of a timeless Bengali culture fractured by the violence of Partition. In her reading, Ghatak’s work displays a marked obsession with the violence and horrors of Partition and its effects on the Bengali psyche. Yet she also locates a “utopian affect” in his work, particularly through his use of Bengali folk songs and poetry, which evoke the heterotemporality of the present and give cinematic form to the dreams of a unified nation.

Majumdar contrasts Ghatak’s mythical approach to Bengali history with Mrinal Sen’s politically engaged, modernist critique of ideology and the capitalist logic of the present. Majumdar’s chapter on Sen focuses on his Calcutta trilogy: Interview (1970), Calcutta 71 (1972), and Padatik (The Guerilla Fighter, 1973). Sen’s Calcutta films weave together documentary footage from protests and marches around the world with vignettes about poor and disenfranchised members of urban Leftist political organizations; characters often break the fourth wall to directly address the audience, interpellating them as political actors. Majumdar’s reading centers on the figure of the angry young man who populates all three films and bears witness to the political upheaval of war and famine. She highlights the work of anger as a political emotion in these films, clearly diagnosing the systemic injustices and violent suppression of dissent that marked the 1960s and 1970s in India.

Majumdar’s final chapter turns to Satyajit Ray’s Calcutta trilogy: Pratidwandi (The Adversary, 1970), Seemabaddha (Company Limited, 1971), and Jana Aranya (The Middleman, 1975). Majumdar argues that the key emotional register of Ray’s films is confusion, as they reflect on the dissolution of historical teleology and the uncertainty of the future. This confusion exists in direct contrast to Ghatak’s melodramatic myths, Sen’s utilization of anger,
and Ray’s own Apu trilogy, which, as Majumdar argues, narrativized the national transition from colony into a developing nation through the aspirations of the Bengali middle class. Majumdar interprets Ray’s trajectory from the Apu trilogy to the Calcutta trilogy as a shift in his mode of address from historian to ethnographer. While Sen’s response to the violence and chaos of the early 1970s was an explicitly political cinema, Ray’s approach was criticized as apolitical, seemingly distant from the pipe bombs and police batons that littered the streets of Calcutta in the late 1960s. Ray’s Calcutta films were his attempt at grappling with the political questions that his critics accused him of ignoring. Yet, as Majumdar notes, these films express a fundamental disaffection with politics. Whereas Sen’s characters react to their social conditions with anger, Ray’s characters express doubt, questioning the institutions they continue to function within and refusing to offer totalizing political solutions to the impasse of their present.

Majumdar’s conclusion charts the decline of art cinema production in India and raises broader questions about the legacy of these films in the contemporary moment. Majumdar points to two related shifts that changed the trajectory of art cinema in India. The first shift is the dismantling of government institutions that funded art cinema, including the FFC, and the decline of the Films Division of India. The second is the economic liberalization measures of the 1990s, which brought a huge influx of private media companies, over-the-top (OTT) streaming services, and multiplex theaters. In the aftermath of these changes, Indian art cinema appears to be remembered only as a cost-effective model of filmmaking, with Ray upheld as an efficient director working with a low budget to churn out regional fare that was successful at the box office. Against this view of art cinema’s legacy, Majumdar argues for the continuing relevance of the archive of art cinema first as a vernacular history of a period of dramatic political change in India and second as an aesthetic experiment in theorizing the disorientation of living through political uncertainty. These conclusions, while provocative and engaging, are not always central to the book’s progression. Art Cinema and India’s Forgotten Futures’ real strengths are its archival research into the cultural history of the film societies and institutions that fostered debate on art cinema’s aesthetics and politics and its ambitious methodological claim for reading film as historiography.

One enduring methodological question that Art Cinema and India’s Forgotten Futures provokes, particularly in its second half, yet doesn’t always address, is the relationship between part and whole: between region and nation, filmmaking styles and implied audiences. This is a particularly fraught question in India where the extreme ethno-linguistic, caste, and class differences render any claims to speaking for or about a national culture into a site of political contestation. As such, Majumdar’s close attention to the Bengali cultural milieu within which these films and filmmakers emerged reads as an invitation to disambiguate the category of Indian art cinema itself. For example, Majumdar engages with Sen and Ray as Indian art cinema directors in conversation with European avant-garde film or Latin American

8 Majumdar, 226–227.
Third Cinema, yet we remain largely in the dark about their relationships to contemporaries within India who were working in other languages and regions during the same period (e.g., the work of John Abraham in Tamil and Malayalam). Similar problems arise about the relationship between art cinema and the history of documentary in India given their shared emergence from state institutions such as the Films Division, the radical break and critiques of the state by filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, and the blurry aesthetic boundaries between realism in art cinema and documentary (e.g., in the early films of the Yugantar feminist film collective). This question isn’t only about expanding Majumdar’s archive to include films from other ethno-linguistic milieus or genres into the history of art cinema; it is also a conceptual one based on Majumdar’s own understanding of art cinema as an aspirational category that attempts to address a national audience. Put simply, whose aspirations are we fulfilling in narrating Indian art cinema’s histories? It is precisely because this book raises such generative problems for the practice of writing film history, and for understanding cinema as a site of political critique, that it constitutes a necessary intervention into the field.

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