

# 1 Catastrophe and Utopia

## Ghare Baire, or the Household Goddess

Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today's.

—LOUIS ARAGON, *Paris Peasant*

### REDEMPTIVE HISTORY/REFLEXIVE CINEMA

On July 25, 1915, the *New York Times* reviewed a biography of Rabin-dranath Tagore that quotes the poet advancing the following contrast between European and Indian women:

In Europe homes are disappearing and hotels are increasing in number. When we notice that men are happy with their horses, dogs, guns, and pipes and clubs for gambling, we feel quite safe to conclude that women's lives are being broken up. . . . Our women make our homes smile with sweetness, tenderness, and love. . . . We are quite happy with our household goddesses, and they themselves have never told us of their "miserable condition." Why, then, should the meddlers from beyond the seas feel so bad about the imagined sorrows of our women? People make mistakes in imagining too much as to what would make others happy or unhappy. If perchance the fishes were to become philanthropists their tender hearts would find satisfaction only in drowning the entire human race in the depths of water.

The reviewer notes that Tagore seems to have possessed "sparkle and depth," although nothing is said about his droll assessment that "in Europe homes are disappearing." Close to a century later, it remains unclear whether these words would meet with anything other than dismissal. For some contemporary readers a sense of humor might not be enough to overlook Tagore's paternalism toward the "household goddesses" who apparently made Indian homes "smile with sweetness." Others might find it implausible to suggest that non-Western women enjoyed any advantages over their European counterparts, then or now. Still, the fact that times have changed, or that a feminist recasting of "the woman question" has made the notion of the happy housewife somewhat risible, does not negate

the enduring resonance of Tagore's provocation: what makes women happy?

If Sigmund Freud's preference was to shift this question onto the unconscious territory of "what a woman wants," then we would have to say that the sexualized subjectivity at the heart of his approach retains only minimal contact with the philosophical problem that occupied Tagore: to wit, the thinking that civilizational discontent does not foreclose on the possibility of utopia, no matter how limited the terms of conceptualizing the search for a happier place. For Freud the answer to happiness was rooted in the unconscious and its directional imperatives—where happiness is a contingency of subjective being whose ends are only achieved negatively, with "civilization" or the "super-ego" performing the break between desire and social satisfaction. It is this notion of civilization with which Tagore takes issue; indeed, this is the import of his provocation. On his satirical take, if the European subject-as-fish wants to "drown" Indians in a sea of universalizing pretensions, it is in part because schemas about happiness and its objects are mutually unintelligible across cultures, Freud's assertions notwithstanding. But despite their dissimilar views about what makes people happy, Tagore and Freud agreed about the power of storytelling to contribute to it. In both their accounts stories are seen to exert a real force on consciousness, including on the experience of happiness. From this convergence of otherwise divergent worldviews we may glean that insofar as stories everywhere provide insight into incommensurable contingencies of desire and meaning, their incommensurability nonetheless touches on something that can be said to represent a universal form of experience. Moreover, we can only begin to take account of this generality if we get past binarisms such as East/West or primitive self/modern society, which have become, to borrow a phrase from a now-unfashionable Marxist lexicon, bad abstractions.

To shift the discussion of happiness from the terrain of the unconscious onto the site of sociality, then, we may propose that stories are not just the expression of sublimated desires in life (à la Freud) but experiential confrontations with death—taken as the denial of futurity. As such, they are inversely related to the possibility of happiness, and these confrontations recur in consoling, compensating, or conceptualizing guises within narrative at large. Death, as the terminus of life, is the ultimate contingency that storytelling seeks to keep at bay and in doing so relates to a collective vision of utopia disconnected from the individualized Freudian opposition of the life instinct/death drive [*Lebenstriebe/Todestriebe*].<sup>1</sup> Put in different terms, aesthetic experience universally pertains to imagining

the experience of death in life as a necessary aspect of imagining a better, happier life itself. From this chiasmic perspective the opening “once upon a time” or concluding “lived happily ever after” of stories is not merely the fabulation of a mythic past or fantastical future but also a spatiotemporal animation of ideals of happiness, emergence, and freedom and their reverse coin: misery, unfreedom, or death. Together, these circumscribe the present and place limits on the possibility of conceiving happiness. Consequently, the utopian imagination—in every location in which it finds expression—has to contend with both privileged and negative registers of experience and emotion not only in order to distinguish between them but also to show their interdependence in configuring what is yet to come.

That the future is imagined through the past and present is, obviously, a familiar proposition, though perhaps it is fair to say that we are more accustomed to literary representations of this turn in hopeful terms that render the future as an ideal or perfected time. But a negative and dialectical (though not dystopic) possibility of conceiving the utopian as *catastrophic* is also available, even if it is a road less traveled in conventional assimilations of this genre.<sup>2</sup> In addition, then, to positive conceptions of utopia, we also find examples of shifts in temporality in story and history that stem from incident or “turn” (*strophe*), disruption or counterturn (*antistrophe*), and a denouement or final turn that includes disaster (*catastrophe*). Persisting from classical Greek times, this latter configuration has, in various traditions and cross-cultural manifestations, come to represent the core of a critical conception of utopic possibilities—a utopia against the grain, so to speak. In *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), written in 1915 and translated into English in 1919 by his nephew, with assistance from himself, Tagore attempted to give form to the darker side of utopia, centering his exploration of happiness, life, and death, as well as envy, resentment, and betrayal, on the formulaic vehicle of a domestic triangle but with critical reversals in place about its meaning.

The standard reading of Tagore’s novel has largely, if not to say exclusively, rested on seeing it as a meditation on nationalism and womanhood, with critics jostling to endorse or rebuke his deployment of the figure of woman as allegory of the nation. In this vein critics have either praised *Ghare Baire* as a reflexive palimpsest of nationhood and womanhood or regarded it as symptomatic of the patriarchal fixation on women as bearers of tradition.<sup>3</sup> In either case, what has largely been missed is the text’s contrary imagining of historical emergence via a reflexive if conventional plot. Part of the reason for this elision has to do with difficulties in the

mode of translation, whereby Tagore's elaborately layered views are flattened out into a simple correspondence between woman and nation. A more fundamental problem stems from the author's resort to the device of the *atmakatha* (autobiography or personal story), the literary expression of nineteenth-century bourgeois individualism par excellence, which lends itself too easily to quick analogies between voice, idea, and objectivity. And, although a broader contemplation of the novel is the subject of a different discussion, I would contend that in its constellated, allegorical form Tagore conveys a more radical set of meanings about the contradictions of nationalist consciousness than later interpretations, usually offered on the hackneyed terms of the personal and/as the political, women and/as the nation, and so on, have suggested.

Although it may not seem to be borne out yet, the focus of this chapter is on Satyajit Ray's 1984 cinematic translation of *Ghare Baire* rather than on the novel. But I have begun by alluding to the literary precedent because I want to flag the notion that the full complexity of Ray's revision can only be comprehended once it is set off against Tagore's earlier foray into the problem of catastrophe and utopia. The discussion that follows is structured largely as a series of contrapuntal readings of the novel and the film, although my goal is not to argue about appropriation or adaptation as such. Rather, I want to pursue a line of thought about dialectical reversal, and from this perspective, the fact that Tagore's novel serves as the filmic text's literary-historical precedent is a way to understand the film's own actuality. I submit that the specificities of cinematic form and meaning make it possible to examine what the film can do that the novel cannot, so the reason to read the two versions against each other has to do with wanting to resituate the novel by the retrospective light shed on it in Ray's film—as opposed to the other way around.

To say this, however, is to insist that the film's reality is discontinuous from the moment of Tagore's writing—which is an obvious enough statement, though it seems to require belaboring given the conventional assumption that Ray simply adapted Tagore's novel for the screen and, in effect, dealt with the same material. It is also to propose that the reality of the film does not pertain to its narration of the past (that is, the film is not a document of or about history) but to a conjunctural way of thinking about the past. In other words, the film is a contemporary statement, suggesting that, as an utterance in the world, it shares more with us as readers than it does with Tagore's context. In this sense it reflects a shift in the historical frame of reference that separates what came before India's independence in 1947 from its emergence thereafter. Recognizing this

shift is, for reasons that I elaborate below, only made possible in the act of interpretive retrospection.

We can begin to think about the matter by first accepting that as an utterance the film belongs to our own historical moment. This, too, is less a chronological point than an epistemological given, even if almost three decades have elapsed since its release in 1984. But since historical temporality is a semantically driven field (that is to say, it depends for its meaning on organizing concepts that shape time), one can see that the film belongs to our time by juxtaposing it to the novel, which by the same token, reveals itself as the product of a different spatiotemporal regime. One might even go so far as to suggest that the novel now needs the filmic mediation to be understood, not in the sense of being comprehended as such but in the more restricted sense of offering a historical standpoint. All of this turns on our use of the term *conjuncture*, for if the conjunctural is taken as an episodic emphasis on history (characterized by what the *Annales* historians call “medium-term” developments such as the French Revolution or romanticism or post-Independence India), Ray’s text, as well as any current discussion of it, must be seen as contained within a discursive framework that is distinct from the one Tagore both occupied and fictionalized. The former conjuncture—Ray’s and ours—has been determined by the historical fallout of decolonization and the crisis of postcolonial life in ways that Tagore did not live to witness.<sup>4</sup> Thus only in this specific sense is it possible to take the full measure of the film’s retroactive sensibility, a mode of seeing that it correspondingly urges on viewers. From this vantage point the complications of Tagore’s utopianism are only legible *après coup*, although they help to refocus on the vicissitudes of post-Independence Indian history elaborated by Ray in an altogether different parsing of the meaning of utopia.

Part of Ray’s experimentalism lies in the ways that his revision expresses a utopianism that is not only different from Tagore’s but that can *only* be described as catastrophic, since this is the sole vantage point left from which to articulate anything resembling a critical conception of emergence, both cinematic and historical. Tagore, in his novelistic rendering of the dilemmas of nationalism, could not foresee how the future—our present—would unfold. Nevertheless, his vision of possibilities and impossibilities exemplifies a certain kind of gamble on historical futures, however unrealized. This is because the present is not only given by what came before; it also enables any prospect of what is to come. Thus the past and future have something in common: the bond of the present, in turn revealing that conceptions of history depend on a temporal orientation to

the future and, crucially, vice versa. Such a consciousness of the recursive structure, as well as the conceptual organization of historical time, is what the intellectual historian Reinhart Koselleck amalgamated into the phrase “futures past” (*vergangene Zukunft*), reflecting that any given present is at the same time a “former future.” According to Koselleck all conceptions of modernity, revolution, emergence, and so forth depend on a temporal orientation, whether that is brought up to the surface or not. To the degree that a “future past” is self-consciously articulated within or by a particular account of history, it exposes the tacit normativity of temporal understanding and expresses what he argues is a truly novel, modern attitude toward time (*Neuzeit*) that only took shape in the past two hundred years.<sup>5</sup>

As much as we have learned to value the idea of an order of things in which, as Michel Foucault has popularized, all history is a history of the present, Koselleck’s more radical contention is that from the standpoint of the past two centuries, all history is a history of the future. That is to say, historical intelligibility is only given by a *predictive* sense about a course taken or, for that matter, not taken. I find his argument quite compelling (even if it has not acquired the authority of Foucault’s notions) because it rearticulates synchrony and diachrony without collapsing the two—a move that, despite the rhetoric about attention to historicity within forms of poststructuralist criticism, has rendered the task of interpretation presentist in essence. Koselleck, on the other hand, makes it possible to suggest that if modernity is thought of as underwritten by a temporal sensibility in which conceptions of the future dissimulate their reliance on a present and a past, we can then consider representations, including cinematic ones, in terms of the extent to which this relationship is made legible in the present. Such an epistemological framework lends a specifically diachronic perspective to interpretive activity, one that in the context of film theory and criticism opens up an entirely new way of looking at a “slice of life” in the cuts of celluloid. In contrast with much of what is standard reading practice in ciné-semiotics—with its all-too-convenient “bracketing” of the temporality of interpretation, as well as the cinematic text’s existence within history—this way of interrogating the frame or the shot recontextualizes what is the otherwise decontextualized moment of analysis by reinserting *the text into history* (instead of the well-rehearsed notion of putting history into the text informing much of what goes in the name of conventional literary, cultural, or film history).<sup>6</sup>

If the past, present, and future have always to be considered in terms of each other, and, moreover, if they constitute a perspective on the pas-

sage of time itself, the key is to distinguish the anticipatory formulations in a given account or a given text from those that are retrospective or those that remain bound to their own time. Such a form of reflexive consciousness about temporality is, precisely, the token by which it can be proposed that Tagore's novel and Ray's film are *projections* into the future (as opposed to representations of the past) inasmuch as they articulate unfolding landscapes of cognition and recognition. Each text attains its relative reflexivity to the degree that self-understanding about historical emergence is marked in various ways by them. Particularly in Ray's case, this involves doubling back to account for historical desiderata, as well as their negation in the post-Independence era. Accordingly, one of the considerations for this discussion is to distinguish between Tagore's and Ray's respective visions of the future in order to determine how the conceptual category of a "catastrophic utopia" is revised in the shift from Tagore's worldview to Ray's critical negation of it.

To the extent that the novel is at issue here, the most obvious point to make is that the past casts its shadow on the present in the film's reprise of its plot. But the differences between the two have less to do with merely this nominal issue of a change in medium than with understanding that the very nature of historical consciousness has been transformed in the interregnum. This requires a different take on such notions as tradition and modernity (which have served as buzzwords in much of the criticism that sees these texts as analogs or simply adaptations). Also, along the lines I have begun to sketch, it requires specifying what it means to depict a redemptive understanding of pessimism through the vehicle of cinema—a medium and an institution that has a long and specific history itself, especially when it comes to reflections about temporality and consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

By way of beginning to untie the knot that has conventionally bound the film to the novel, one must note that the demarcation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century from the post-Independence era—that is to say, the shift from Tagore's milieu to Ray's—designates, as I have already suggested, not merely a chronological change but a fairly radical overhaul of material and social conditions. Tagore's romantic view of the place of women in tradition or modernity is perforce a world apart from Ray's disenchanted outlook on the present, and it follows that our conjuncture—the one that we as readers and viewers share with Ray—bears witness only to commodified social relations disanchored from a traditional understanding of community, kinship, or society. The filmic text's return to Tagore's themes and to the familiar tale of Bengal's partition by the British demands to be seen less as an adaptation of older narratives

than as a wholesale rewriting of them; it is the product not of fidelity to the original but of cinema's explosive capacity to express sociohistorical contradictions of the present. In this particular respect one may say that the film represents the problems of *its* time by reactivating the past, as well as anticipating the future (just as Tagore's novel remains emblematic of a different temporal configuration and the contradictions peculiar to it).

As I hope this line of thinking makes clear, one of my purposes in this chapter is to shift the ground on which issues such as the representation of female subjectivity, the status of women in nationalist discourse, or the question of gendered history have been debated with respect to this film—as if they merely required adjudication in terms of already established notions of correspondence with the real. This variety of criticism, centering on whether “Third World” narratives adequately represent “Third World” social realities, seems inadequate not only because Ray's cinema expresses a futural orientation to the world as a whole but also because the very notion of “representing” history in film is shot through with the contradiction that the medium of discussion has fundamentally transformed past events into present spectacles, mutating the object under scrutiny in the process. This is not merely a formalist quibble so much as an unavoidable fact that must be contended with if one is not to be guilty of naive representationalism. Not only does it have to be granted that film is its own medium, with its own rules and conventions, but also that it produces very different kinds of evidence about history that may indeed be more worthy of our consideration than whether a certain historical event has been faithfully retold. Given this preference, I take the diegetic aspects of *Ghare Baire*, its representation of a fairly traditional story of personal betrayal amid the well-documented political and social upheavals of the day, to be of interest only insofar as they open out onto deeper, conceptual problems having to do with the presentness of the past, the meaning of historical (im)possibility, and the price of selfhood in modernity overall.

Conceptually speaking, Ray's portrayal of reality in *Ghare Baire* provides us with some terms of a dialectical experiment. On one level the film is pitched as a testament to the possibilities of the catastrophic to tell us something about the future through the cancellation of a present determined by capitalist social relations. By this token neither an understanding of historical imagination nor the question of female agency or utopian emergence can be addressed as if these existed outside the “baleful systematicity” of the capitalist world system—a phrase Fredric Jameson uses in the context of examining what he calls the “geopolitical aesthetic,” which he sees as defining postwar cinema around the globe. Although Jameson's



arguments have influenced my thinking greatly, I differ from him in the weight I place on how to discern the “grammar,” the specific logic of an aesthetic mode at odds with the system that necessarily underwrites it.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, that is where a dialectical emphasis must be placed: on variations from the rule, on contingent attempts to go beyond merely reflecting the system, to expressing “structures of feeling” (to use Raymond Williams’s coinage) that resist or otherwise disturb it. This is by no means to declare that Ray’s cinema subverts the system of capitalist social relations; rather, it is to discern the self-conscious and often compelling ways that any form of political art—bearing witness to its own degraded existence—must find to express a negative, critical relation to conditions at large.

On another level much of Ray’s emphasis is on elaborating how the visual image and sound function as portents of the decay of experience in modernity. But he attempts neither to evade nor escape recognition of this decayed predicament; instead, he reinforces it at every level of filmic intervention—a practice of aesthetic *détournement* that is in equal part protest and the demarcation of possibilities. Before turning to these aspects, it may be worth pondering, briefly, the framework of intelligibility and the circuit of reception into which any contemporary encounter with Ray (or, for that matter, Tagore) is likely to occur. We would have to grant that the intertext constituted by the film and novelistic versions of *Ghare Baire* is among the better-known examples of “serious” cultural expression from India that circulates in the West. For example, Tagore’s novel is routinely assigned in introductory “world civilization” courses (scores of Columbia University freshmen have been known to walk around Manhattan’s Upper West Side with the Penguin Classics edition); this text serves on many other campuses as well to initiate the young and the restless into “cultural sensitivity” in anticipation of their becoming acceptably cosmopolitan by graduation. Likewise, film curricula throughout the North American academy often include Ray’s text in the (usually condensed) “Third World cinema” section, in part because it is one of his later, easily available, works but also because impatient young minds are more easily coaxed into an encounter with otherness if it can be served up in color.

The relative familiarity of the film and novel makes a plot summary strictly unnecessary, though it may still be useful for readers to recall that both versions are set in Bengal circa 1905, the time of its partition by the British. The struggle between *ghar* (home) and *bahir* (the outside world) is staged as an ill-fated interpersonal drama featuring Nikhil, a wealthy landowner, or *zamindar*, who wishes his wife to emancipate herself by learning English and by emerging from the segregated quarters of an

aristocratic household; Bimala, his wife, who reluctantly enters the process of becoming modern by leaving the confines of her comfortable but unenlightened domestic life, only to have her entire existence shattered by the betrayal of her innocence; and Sandip, Nikhil's boyhood friend, whose arrival as the demagogic leader of the *swadeshi* (home rule or nationalist movement) also provides the occasion for Bimala's betrayal at home, for Nikhil's disillusionment with his friend's manipulations that lead indirectly to his death, and, above all, for the disarray of the economic and political struggle against the British. Home and world are set apart less as antinomies than as complements whereby interior dissolution parallels exterior disintegration.

#### FETISH AND FUTURE

I propose that *Ghare Baire* provides a chronicle of the disruptions of modernity and, simultaneously, an intimation of a transformed future. As such, it exemplifies a catastrophic utopianism, a proposition best approximated as resembling a Möbius strip—suggesting the interdependence and inextricability of the catastrophic and the utopian. In considering this dual mode, the element of the catastrophic has first claim, so let me specify its dimensions by turning to the treatment of the central figure of Bimala. If Ray's portrayal hinges less on depicting her as a flesh-and-blood personality whose interiority can be plumbed for its revelation of psychological conflicts, it is only because this enables him to draw out the implications of the withering of subjectivity in a commodified world. While the point about Bimala being a flat rather than rounded character has often been made, that she emblemizes a critique of reified forms has never been noted. This is not, however, just another way to say that she is "objectified" but to contend with such objectification—such thingliness—on the specific terms of reification (*Verdinglichung*). If we know that reification is the fundamental subjective and objective reality of our collective existence in modernity, it is at the same time difficult to reckon with in the medium of daily life. The paradox at the heart of reality is that its truth-content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*, as Adorno put it) must now be rendered in a defamiliarized mode: as a problem of representation rather than in itself. At the crux of other modernist explorations as well, Ray's resolution to this problem of representability results in his treatment of Bimala as a construct for the abstraction of reification, as well as the marker of a more local historical narrative about the struggle over *swadeshi* (and the movement's failure to take up the issue of women's agency in the emergent Indian nation).

In Ray's telling, Bimala is both disposable and indispensable—disposable in the sense that she represents the relation of exchange at the heart of the commodity and indispensable in the sense that this relation now defines the very possibility of being. Consequently, her placement in the narrative is his attempt to work out the conceptual dilemma of how to encode an objective crisis through subjective means. Reiterating the opposition between outward appearance and experiential depth (or *Schein* versus *Wirklichkeit* as these terms were debated in nineteenth-century German Idealism, the source of many of the debates about representation we have inherited), Bimala intimates the utopian entailments of catastrophe, discerned in and through the very depthlessness of a flat character who bespeaks the essential contradiction of our own age, namely, the problem of exchange.

I will have occasion to elaborate further on the cinematic aspects of Ray's emphasis on Bimala-as-objectivity, but for now let me note that by effecting this turn in how we think about the content of forms, Ray redirects the binarism of appearance and reality to the Marxian orbit of commodity fetishism. The literal appearance of Bimala as a celluloid exposure overlaps with her display as a metaphoric expression of the misrecognition that underlies a social form of fetishism; according to Marx, this disguises a relationship between humans as a relationship among things. Contemporary sensitivities notwithstanding, to refer to commodity fetishism in this context is not to impose a "vulgar" reading from without since my argument is that the film itself invites us to read Bimala as such an allegory of modern fetishism. As I have already mentioned, that she is presented as an objectified figure to whose subjectivity we have little access has been acknowledged, and on this reading she has been seen as one in a series of "types" in Ray's explorations of the *nabeena* (new woman) in films ranging from *Devi* (1960) and *Charulata* (1964) to *Mahanagar* (1963). Indeed, the point is that Bimala *also* functions as an emblem of the nation, femininity, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. But to say this is to read only off the surface of the text and miss the larger import of Ray's highly stylized choices in framing her figure onscreen. Here, particularly, the liability of thinking of the novel and film as analogs and, moreover, as realist documents of the nationalist struggle is evident, resulting in the penchant of critics to regard Bimala as the overvalored symbol of woman-as-nation. Reading her exclusively as an emblem of womanhood, purity, or emancipation, critics have indicted what they take to be Tagore's and, equally, Ray's patriarchal vision. Both men are seen as offering essentialized representations of women in their role as domestic or

national icons.<sup>9</sup> But an epistemological distinction must be made between a representational mode that *believes* a problem and one that *critiques* it; that is, between betraying and exposing ideologies at work. I would submit that, in fact, Ray is critical of idealized notions of womanhood and his elaboration of femininity proceeds as an exposition of the problem of fetishism rather than as an essentialist or fetishistic representation on its own.<sup>10</sup>

Continuing along these lines, perhaps the first thing to say is that the argument about film fetishism has been around for decades, the bulk of it resting on asserted similarities between theories of female sexuality (in which the female body, seen as the source of castration anxiety, is subjected to fragmentation) and the discourse of narrative cinema. Within this perspective the fetishistic nature of the medium has been regarded as constitutive of the cinematic apparatus itself, premised as it is on the “cuts” of editing and a dialectic of presence-absence—or what psychoanalytic critics have sometimes referred to as the *fort/da* of the flickering image. Quite apart from this stress on the parallels between mechanisms of desire and imperatives of film editing or projection, however, there is a more primary aspect to fetishism that concerns the formation of *all* forms of consciousness under the sign of the commodity. On this more materialist reading, if one accepts Marx’s basic insights into the commodity form, the particularity of cinema (regardless of notions of “suture” or “scopophilia”) must, by definition, be subsumed under the universality of commodity fetishism as such. That is to say, since fetishism is constitutive of modern sociality in toto, it is less an aspect of representation per se than the totality subtending capitalist exchange.<sup>11</sup> It is on these terms that I would defend Ray’s deployment of the logic of the fetish as a diagnosis rather than a symptom of the world of appearances, be it femininity, cinema, or the nation. What is more, even as he exposes the impossibility of the “true” portrayal of these false unities, he explores what a different configuration of aesthetic and social possibilities might look like in an alternative world, thereby embedding a utopian or futural element in his experiment.

Therefore, in opposition to theories of film fetishism that rely on the metaphoric or metonymic similarities between the fetish (be it sexual or anthropological) and the cinematic image, I see Ray as proposing that it is in the nature of mystified society to block the possibility both of genuine social relations and genuine subjective experience. Not only does his critique of fetishism underscore this mystification, but it also, and by this very token, takes cognizance of its own structural limit at representing the mutual reinforcement of what is possible to enunciate and what is beyond visibility—precisely because it has been reified. This antinomy is

collocated at different levels: first in the vexed world of the film's diegesis, which is revealed as teetering on the brink of anticolonial yet reactionary religious violence, and next in the film's formalistic insistence on highlighting rather than eliding the impossibility of representing an unbroken self in the time of commodity fetishism.

If the fetish depends for its meaning on the condensation of imaginative possibilities, Ray's depiction of Bimala is a tour de force construction exactly to the extent that he does not represent her as merely a "stand-in" for certain static notions—such as the future, the new woman, the commodity, or the tragic. Rather, she becomes a dynamic conjugation of emergent ways of being, coalescing as a form of subjective possibility not yet conceivable in the world except as catastrophic, disastrous, or monstrous. Seen in this aspect, Bimala embodies a revelation: a projection into the future even though she is nominally cast as a figure from the past. Referred to at the end of the film (by her sister-in-law) as a *rakshasi* (demoness), her uncanniness bespeaks the future and the fear engendered by the unknown. As such a *rakshasi*—with its allied sense of the wild, the disagreeable, and the brazen—Bimala is thrust out of the "natural" space of wifehood and womanhood into the unnatural topos of the phantasmagoric. Her incapacity either to be the *grihalakshmi* (domestic goddess) or to step into the role of the *memsahib* (European woman) and, at a different level, to overcome the opposition of *pracheena/nabeena* (traditional woman/new woman) becomes the measure of her "dummy" character, gesturing toward the possible rather than the existent—what might *be* as opposed to what *is*.

Not belonging to either home or world, we might consider Bimala's resemblance to Walter Benjamin's construct of the "threshold goddess," guardian of the potentially transformative frontier that wavers between visible and invisible, real and unreal, and representing the vanishing point of the horizon between tradition and modernity. Within the space of the film this quality of *dis*-appearance is often rendered literally—with Bimala's onscreen image fragmented or doubled, whether in a photograph, a reflection in the mirror, or, as in the final scene of the film, in the liquified, literally dissolving, figure of the woman-becoming-widow. In these ways Ray repeatedly remarks Bimala's unreality not just in the nominal sense that she is a character and not a personality but also to the extent that her history has no correlate in "facts" since she is an untimely conception intended to signal the future.

Let me further this argument by referring to a scene that fully realizes Ray's method of presenting Bimala as the sign of an all-encompassing



FIGURE 1. Bimala at her toilette. Used by permission from Satyajit Ray Film and Study Center.

fetishism and ineluctable estrangement. In it she is pitted against her widowed sister-in-law, Bouthan (or “elder sister,” as she is addressed in the diegesis), their dual presentation emblemizing the catastrophe that attends the past as much as the present. Occurring early on in the film, this episode reveals Bimala in medium shot, the dark lighting throwing her figure into relief as she is caught reflected in the Victorian mirror, arranging her toilette (Figure 1). The sequence of shots inaugurating this scene has a deliberately incandescent quality, as it opens on a cut to a candle burning on Bimala’s dressing table and shows her (as she often is throughout the film) trying on her new manners, new clothes, new self, all brought on by Nikhil’s exhorting her to become a modern woman and wife.

This highly charged moment in which viewers get their very first look at Bimala’s emergence as a woman of the world is almost immediately disturbed by another presence as Ray, almost imperceptibly, shifts the frame to include Bouthan in the reflection in the mirror. Along with Bimala, she—who, given her secluded and discarded existence, can fulfill the role neither of modern woman nor of companionate spouse—becomes part of the picture. The shift in attention from Bimala to Bouthan is abrupt yet somehow seamless, the camera repositioned to admit the latter into view,

in the process alienating both narrative and spectatorial focus. Subtly, as the shot tightens, the figure of Bimala is entirely replaced by her sister-in-law, who moves from being reflected in the mirror to being presented in a reverse shot in full view. The substitution of one figure (Bimala) by another (Bouthan) suggests the ways that those who are left by the wayside on the road to modernity also deserve our attention. It is as if the duration of a few seconds in which Bimala and Bouthan are both exhibited as reflections captures their dual presence and, notably, their dual absence. Each is a spectral figure albeit along different lines. Bimala represents a figure who is *not yet* possible, Bouthan a figure who is *no longer* so. With his etiolated focus on issues of temporality, this scene perfectly highlights Ray's preoccupation with the retroactivity of the past—its influence on the present, to be sure, but also its recalcitrance as a “former future,” to invoke a distinction from Koselleck I alluded to earlier in this chapter.

So, if Bimala embodies the uncanniness of the future, Bouthan represents the intractability of remaindered time. This is brought out most poignantly in the dialogue (or, to be precise, in Bouthan's dramatic monologue addressed more to the viewer than to Bimala). As the camera lingers on her, Bouthan recounts her sad tale in her own voice. Trapped within the confines of a hypertraditionalism characterizing Bengali social mores in the nineteenth century, her destiny is presented as one that is no longer recognizable as a force on the present, though it returns as the repressed sign of a disavowed difference. Ray makes this point with care, endowing Bouthan with the power of speech and bringing her in from the margins of the plot to appear front-and-center. Diegetically, on the other hand, Bimala is indifferent to this plight, absorbed as she is in admiring her new self in the mirror. As distinct from the novel, where she is only rendered as apostrophe, the subject of an indirect address, Bouthan here recollects her fate in the first person; nevertheless, unlike Bimala, whose *bildungsroman* claims most of our attention, she signifies only the remains of the day.

The scene in question is imbued, like many others in the film, with an attendant sense of stillness and stagnation that deepens the sense of what the audience already knows to be a setting for imminent disruptions in the world abroad. Catastrophe is the mode du jour, not only in the home and the world but also in the narrative's delineation of time as the final contingency of disaster toward which it indicates a propensity to turn. Standing by the four-poster bed in Bimala and Nikhil's bedroom (another intimation, along with all of Bimala's toiletries and fashionable clothes, of a sexuality to which she has no access), Bouthan recalls the night of her husband's death. Her words express not just the tragedy of the past

but also that of her irrelevance in the present. Ray uses the deliberately reflexive strategy of having her face the camera as she recounts her dying, dissolute husband's blank look and his last, devastating, query: "Tumi ke?" (Who are you?). The intensity of the scene is reinforced as the camera slowly closes in on the figure of Bouthan framed by the bed frame against which she leans. As she utters the words *tumi ke*, Ray shoots her looking out of the screen, though not directly at the audience, as if to chide the spectator no less than her dead husband for not recognizing her.

With his extraordinary understanding that the most profound cinematic moments are ones that pass us by, Ray has the minor character of Bouthan deliver the film's most important criticism against the contemporary world for its fatal neglect of the old. But although this is the film's cardinal lesson, it is rendered without any disruption of cinematic illusion or any overtly estranging gesture of breaking the fourth wall. A universe of misrecognition is intimated in the repetition of the question "Who are you?" and conveys the past's accusation to a present that has revealed itself to be inadequate to the claims of history on the real. And with this turn Bouthan, rather than Bimala, becomes the eccentric subject of history within the filmic space of *Ghare Baire*. In realizing Bouthan's widowed self as a developed character (albeit by no means the main focus of the narrative), Ray offers us a glimpse of the loss that she symbolizes in a modernity that has no use for her, underscoring the distance between such a melancholic figure and Bimala, who serves as Ray's take on the rather different historical problem of emergence.

It is reasonable to argue that Ray's strategy of dealing with the character of Bouthan acquires its salience precisely in its difference from Tagore's rendition. For film critics accustomed to paying attention to the import of details, it is inescapably significant that she appears on the screen almost from the beginning and remains a shadowy presence throughout, always signifying a deprecated traditionalism. In representing her as a subordinate member of the extended household who is deprived of her status as the "Bara Rani" (senior lady) on account of being widowed, Bouthan serves as a recalcitrant token of the past. A child bride first, and now a widow who must stand by and watch Bimala enjoy the pleasures of the present, she is the unhappy strain of the ditty that Bimala learns to sing from her English tutor, Miss Gilby, of the tale from "long, long ago." As an aside, we should note that the film's early scenes are entirely original in conception, since there is no counterpart in Tagore's novel to Ray's deliberate layering of time within diegetic space. The original story is set forth as a series of juxtapositions from the diaries of the primary characters, and



Bimala, Nikhilesh, and Sandip each speaks in his or her own voice. But the Bara Rani, as I have already mentioned, is only adduced, her existence implied by the other characters. In the film, by contrast, Bimala's remembrances (given in voice-over narration) provide the exclusive coordinates for the audience's introduction to the text's recursive temporal structure. Everything that unfolds is presented only in flashback and from Bimala's point of view even if, and especially because, she is not depicted in terms of a depth-psychological model of an interiorized subjectivity. But by assigning considerable screen time to Bouthan, Ray draws her out from behind the folds of Bimala's memory, as well as the curtains of time, thus refracting both temporal and subjective continuity.

If the notion of an unbroken self functions as a false totality that mystifies both subjecthood and nationhood, this falsity is most acutely brought out in the scene in which Bimala and Nikhil have their first, and most pointed, conversation about the changes wrought in their lifeworld by the disruptions of the world market. Not wishing to shelter his wife from either the pleasures of embourgeoisement or their costs, nor indeed to deny himself the enjoyment of being the agent of her worldly emancipation, Nikhil represents the means by which Ray ventriloquizes his own stance on the way that commodification thoroughly penetrates the existent, within the terms of the diegesis, as well as in reality. We can discern this in the scene immediately following Bouthan's lament about her fate, in which Bimala continues to ponder her new sense of self, consolidated by her emergent bourgeois tastes and, simultaneously, by her emergent interest in *swadeshi*. Here Bimala learns about the nationalist movement's attempt to challenge the stranglehold of the world market on India's domestic consumption from her husband, Nikhil, but this struggle is only made salient for her a little later on—by the subsequent, dramatic appearance of Sandip into her hitherto placid existence as a cloistered woman in the *andarmahal* (private quarters).

The transition to this scene occurs with Bouthan referring to Bimala as Nikhil's *mem putul* (foreign doll), viewing her transformation not only as mimicry but also as ill-advised. That she turns out to be correct when Nikhil is killed is not the end of the story but the beginning of a meditation by Ray on fissures within the discourse of nationalist consciousness on the question of self-rule and how to accomplish it. He also continues his critique of fetishism, attempting to work through the contradictions thrown into relief by the standoff between subjective desires and the object world. Bouthan has no place in this worldly scenario, and she leaves it with the telling phrase, "I have no tolerance for these foreign aromas" (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2. Bouthan (the Elder Rani) and the aromas of the foreign. Used by permission from Satyajit Ray Film and Study Center.

The aroma she abjures is the redolent air of the commodity world, an emergent horizon literalized by the sights and smells of foreign objects placed all over the baroque household in the diegesis. In this setting, even as Nikhil gives Bimala a lesson on Lord Curzon's divisive policy of partitioning Bengal and the goal of *swadeshi* to boycott foreign goods, Ray's camera work emphasizes the nature of objects and invokes the tales that *they* might tell, not because they are real but because of their fetishistic hold over existence.

As Bimala readies herself, she is again reflected in medium long shot in the mirror, doubly configured as depthless: as a projected image throughout and now as a reflection of the projection itself, her ephemerality reinforced by the camera, which is, of course, the instrument of Ray's propositional and even didactic intentions. If the idea of *le caméra-stylo* (camera pen) advanced by Alexandre Astruc in the mid-twentieth century was immensely influential on the consolidation of a theory of the film auteur, its operation here is as good an example as any of the argument that directors, very much in the manner of writers, express their direc-

torial signature through thematic elements, as well as the movement of actors and objects within the space and time of the shot.<sup>12</sup> Surrounded by her newly tailored jackets, Victorian mirror, tortoiseshell comb and hair-pins, French perfumes, and English dressing table—objects whose foreign provenance is commented on by Nikhil—Bimala is herself transformed into another object, not only of Nikhil's desire to be the instigator of her worldly emergence but also in terms of her self-display. In showing her as this objectified figure, Ray draws out the analogy between Bimala and the other objects around her and between her body as another decorative object and her self in relation to other commodities. She is a "thing among things"—to echo a phrase that Miriam Hansen attributes to Kracauer to describe how film reveals the functioning of commodities in modern life.<sup>13</sup> In this way Bimala serves as a cipher of the social, and her presence on the screen exists in tension less with other people than with other objects, exhibiting the luminosity of the still life rather than the roundedness of real historical personalities.

By reading along these lines I have attempted to bolster my general argument that Bimala defies resolution in terms of her adequacy or inadequacy as a political subject, that of "new woman." In opposition to realist constructions of self and identity, Ray's depiction refuses the framework of interiority and subjectivity (which from Lukács to Kracauer is seen to represent the bourgeois ideal of art); moreover, it calls our attention to the filmic medium itself. Going beyond this, I want to suggest that if the talk about fetishism is to hold, it must at all times take into account the nature of the cinematic image as its embodiment, an embodied materiality that perforce refuses subjectivist reductions. Like the fetish, cinema is a form premised not on depth but exchangeability. In fact, of course, both the technology of film and its spectatorship are defined by depthlessness—at a literal level by the projection of a flat image on a screen but also temporally, by the gap between image and spectator. So if the medium itself depends on the dynamic of the fetish—which hides as well as reveals in that it requires absent presences and present absences to produce meaning—this constitutive fact has to be referred back to what happens onscreen, as well as to the recursive turns between narrative concerns and the possibilities of form.<sup>14</sup>

#### CATASTROPHE AND EMERGENCE

My discussion of fetishism leads to a second, overarching, contention I want to advance in this chapter. This has to do with looking more closely

at the means by which a transformed future is intimated by Ray's cinematic choices. A first viewing might suggest that it is fanciful to derive the notion of a utopianism, however catastrophic, from a story about the failures of *swadeshi*, especially given that the personal destiny of Bimala is revealed to be no less doomed. It is certainly the case that at the denotative level, the story world Ray recreates from his source material is tragic, even melodramatic, and centers on themes of betrayal, disappointment, and, ultimately, death. The narrative's tragic impulses, however, serve less to foreclose on emergent possibilities than to enable them, and it is in articulating such a vision that Ray marks both his distance from his literary predecessor and his own directorial signature on the discourse of cinematic modernism. As I have already indicated, the charge of representing the past becomes, in Ray's hands, a way to signal its claims on the present; consequently, tragic disruption provides if not a different actuality then at least a turn toward it.

Folded into this way of conceptualizing emergence is the generatively modernist supposition, very much akin to Marcel Proust's meditations on things past, that art signifies for us as a form of perception that, as Jameson has also averred, our "normal" ways of reckoning with the meaning of this or that reality are unable to comprehend the first time around. In this mode film has the potential to reckon with the real or the possible retroactively, as it enters through the corner of the eye.<sup>15</sup> In the space of the narrative Bimala's tragedy is already exhibited for us in the opening frames of the film in the long shots of a fire that is recognizable only at the end as a scene of conflagration. Moreover, the opening soundtrack is a musical composition in Raga Darbari, the grandest of Hindustani classical musical *ragas*, or "moods," that Ray uses here to set the stage for what is to follow. Both in the ways that as viewers we expect the beginning of any narrative to indicate the unfolding of time rather than its arrest, and in the fact that Darbari is a *raga* associated with the fourth phase of the day, which is to say its denouement, the spectator's senses are tricked into *not* noticing that the action does not unfold at all, just as the day does not begin. For the film actually begins at the end, proceeding only in flashback. These details in the setting of the film's spatiotemporal coordinates are, remarkably, only cognizable after the fact, once we have learned to recognize the retroactive force of events as remembrances of things past.

This retroactive sensibility is exemplified above all by Ray's presentation of Bimala, who, as we have seen, symbolizes the congealment of past, present, and future in her very appearance as fetish. To think more specifically about her as this kind of "retro-futural" configuration (an idea

that returns us to his conception of a “threshold goddess”), we may be helped by Benjamin’s somewhat underappreciated deployment of the fable of Scheherazade in his essay “The Storyteller.”<sup>16</sup> Picking up the thread of an idea first broached in his discussion of baroque drama, Benjamin settles briefly on *The Arabian Nights*, itself an interesting if exotic choice in an explication of the loss of experience in modernity. Benjamin, we may recall, proposes that Scheherazade functions as a figure of distancing between then and now (and, we must note, between Europe and its Other, though this aspect is left unremarked). Remaining within his point of view for a moment, Benjamin allows us to understand that the past Scheherazade signifies is one from which we moderns have become estranged, for she belongs to a “time past in which time did not matter” (93). As we have learned from Benjamin himself, as well as influential later critics such as Benedict Anderson, the “abbreviation” of time in the present is a ubiquitous theme in the experience of modernity, seen as constantly imposing the regulative demands of the clock and calendar on the conduct of everyday life.<sup>17</sup> This regulation and even overregulation has correspondingly been thematized in the literature of modernity (from Dickens’s or Proust’s writings to Buñuel’s and Dali’s surrealist cinematic manifesto *Un chien andalou* to Chaplin’s *Modern Times*).<sup>18</sup> Here, Benjamin’s point about temporality is to mark the dialectical relationship between the disappearance of a world in which the full experience of life, including that of death, was comprehensible and its return in modernity as a mere trace. We now exist in a regime that, as he puts it, valorizes only “information” and has no use for the expansive sense of experience Scheherazade represents. It is in this connection that Benjamin also advances his idea about the different qualities of experience embedded in the distinction between *Erlebnis* (transient experience) and *Erfahrung* (historical experience). The consequence of temporal disjunction is that our very understanding of the real has been de-realized, though this loss keeps returning in the form of paratactic or uncanny objects and figures, frustrating the instrumental effort to shuck off the past.

For Benjamin Scheherazade serves as a dialectical image of the impoverishment of experience under capitalism. By embodying the variety of storytelling unavailable in modern times, she signals what modernity is not, conveying by this means what it can be.<sup>19</sup> My recourse to Benjamin’s ideas about storytelling may seem tangential in the context of discussing *Ghare Baire*, but I think their applicability is more than accidental even if one only considers the preoccupation in modernist thought, be it aesthetic (as in Ray’s case) or conceptual (as with Benjamin or other examples from

critical theory), with the visibility of the female body and its many meanings. In their hyperbolic deployment as the object of reverence or celebration, figurations of femininity have been seen to undermine appearances and destroy false totalities such as tradition, nation, freedom, or even love, their visibility the very mark of the superficial. In this dialectical capacity it is not that the “woman question,” as Marx characterized it, takes second place in the consideration of social equality but that it comes to stand in for its constitutive impossibility under capitalism.

Following Marx, Benjamin too relied in his writings on references to certain social types (such as the prostitute, who represents, par excellence, the substitutability of love and money) that encapsulate the essence of capitalist modernity. Illuminating the fundamental reification that life has undergone, these types elucidate the negation of the real as a result of which nothing remains other than the “reality” of exchange. Like the prostitute who must dissimulate intimacy in the context of a transaction—thereby summoning up the perversion at the core of the commodity form—Scheherazade is exemplary as one who must constantly (re)invent her attraction in order to stay alive, telling stories that will hold her lord’s attention and keep him from ordering her death. In this allegorical mode she exposes not only the impossibilities of real love through her own abjection but also, and more abstractly, the limitations of modern temporality with its linear, punctual, and homogeneous logic—in which, after all, time and tide wait for none.

But it is not just that the figure of Scheherazade exposes the false appearance of love and the distemper of modernity. For, even as her own location in bygone times and a faraway place betokens complete otherness, she also obliquely signifies the catastrophe of our own moment, given that the threat of annihilation is now present everywhere, all the time, rendering storytelling and life equally tenuous as well as hollow. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the hollowing out of contemporary existence is also the means by which Benjamin formulates what Max Pensky has called a “melancholy dialectics.”<sup>20</sup> That is, the meaning of melancholia must itself be dialecticized—to include not only the sense of mourning for a lost object and a now-disappeared zone of possibility (as Freud might suggest) but, in a crucial difference from the Freudian scheme of mourning and melancholia, also the sense of a search for redeeming those possibilities. In Benjamin’s own works (from his *Trauerspiel* book to the posthumous *Passagen-Werk*, from baroque allegory to modern allegory, so to speak) the conjoining of catastrophe and utopia represents a persistent theme and is most easily evoked by the figure of the angel of history in his classic

“Theses on History.” And it has now become quite common to recall that the angel’s face is depicted as turned toward the past, his back to the future, but irresistibly drawn to it by the “storm blowing from Paradise.”

Condensing the idea of history, ruin, and the future, Benjamin returned again and again to figures and objects that embody both the violence of the modern and, through their very disruptiveness, the possibility for remaking the future. Such an ideal also accords with the etymological derivation of catastrophe as a sudden and widespread disaster, a final event or conclusion—usually a disastrous one. Of greater interest to me is that, in Benjamin’s dialecticization of this figure, a transformative power is attached to the catastrophic, a heterogeneous element that he (along with others of his ilk, such as Ernst Bloch) variously posited in terms of the concepts of trauma, spleen, shock, melancholy, distancing, and, ultimately, death.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, only through a total negation of the already existent can we look forward to the not yet and not now, and it is in his specific inflection of the fatal and the futural that we rejoin the discussion of the catastrophic and the redemptive with the treatment of Bimala as a configurational form.

Once again, the most effective way to illustrate Ray’s mobilization of his heroine as an emblem of futurity lies in the contrast between her and Bouthan. Ray’s prismatic rendition of the contrast between these two versions of womanhood gains greater significance if we also keep in mind the radical shift of emphasis between the novel and the film in terms of the vexed relationship of their characters. In Tagore’s original Bimala’s sister-in-law is always alluded to formally as the “Bara Rani,” and, as I have already mentioned, she never makes an unmediated appearance in the pages of the novel. In fact, nowhere does Tagore directly render any character other than Bimala, Nikhilesh (a more formalized rendering of Nikhil), or Sandip, with the effect that the novel is entirely constructed through the convergences and divergences of perspective among the principals. Given as a tripartite series of entries into a journal or diary, Tagore’s literary experimentation lay in adapting into Bengali the emergent form of autobiography in order to provide a chronicle of private confession and public utterance.

As a result, the idea of *ghar* and *bahir* or home and the world is represented by Tagore in the *mise-en-abyme* of the overlapping points of view of the three characters exclusively, each with its turns into and out of homely confession and worldly declaration, private thought and public testament. Through the artifice of molding what we know to be a very modern form (the autobiography) for expressing newly emergent

sensibilities about the public and private—as these demarcations come to distinguish modern life in Bengal—Tagore emphasizes a hitherto unavailable conception of interiority and point of view belonging to the main characters. Neither the home nor the world is represented, in the sense of being designated or brought into being, by anyone else. In this fashion the tensions of the world are not only played out in the home, they are utterly encircled by it.

Given his fundamentally romantic view of the universe in a mote of dust, Tagore's stress is thus on the capacity of key relationships to conjure up the world. So, whereas Nikhilesh, Bimala, and Sandip are depicted as caught in the struggle to represent themselves along the profoundly modern lines of private subject/public citizen, the Bara Rani remains an altogether imputed presence within the space of the novel. Readers gain access to her only from another character's point of view—as, for example, in the following entry in Bimala's diary:

My sister-in-law, the Bara Rani, was still young and had no pretensions to saintliness. Rather, her talk and jest and laugh inclined to be forward. The young maids with whom she surrounded herself were also impudent to a degree. But there was none to gainsay her—for was not this the custom of the house? It seemed to me that my good fortune in having a stainless husband was a special eyesore to her. He, however, felt more the sorrow of her lot than the defects of her character.<sup>22</sup>

A little later in the novel Bimala records a different encounter with her sister-in-law in her diary, one where her own feelings are really at issue:

One day my sister-in-law remarked to my husband: "Up to now the women of this house have been kept weeping. Here comes the men's turn.

"We must see that they do not miss it," she continued, turning to me. "I see that you are out for the fray, Chota Rani! Hurl your shafts straight at their hearts."

Her keen eyes looked me up and down. Not one of the colours into which my toilet, my dress, my manners, my speech, had blossomed out had escaped her. I am ashamed to speak of it today, but I felt no shame then.<sup>23</sup>

In both instances Bimala is the narrative agent as well as the center of the problematic. The Bara Rani signifies only as a trace—whose function is to underscore the tensions of home and serve as an implicit moral contrast to her younger sister-in-law's desires, born of radically separate contingencies of desire. Nikhilesh, whose autobiographical entries also refer to the Bara Rani, provides the only counterpoint to Bimala's account of



the other woman in her life, though exclusively to his companionate (as opposed to sexual) intimacy with his sister-in-law. The point is that the Bara Rani never expresses any sentiments and desires. Yet as Anita Desai has suggested in her introduction to the Penguin translation of the novel, the character of the Bara Rani was drawn on the model of Kadambari Devi, Tagore's own sister-in-law (to whom he was very close and whose suicide at a young age has been the subject of intense speculation and comment in Indian *belles-lettristic* circles). Regardless of the import of this authorial secret, the Bara Rani's shadowy and mediated existence in the novel places her in the margins of its concerns, a minor key in the overall movement of the piece. By turning away from the model of tradition, femininity, constancy, and love that might have been illuminated by representing her more fully, Tagore's formulation may well have emblemized, as Desai suggests, his unconscious desire to repress the horizon of feelings only she has the potential to symbolize. But my preference is to read her in less psychobiographical terms—as a narrative marker of the marginality of an older model of subjective existence within the novel's politics of representation.

In the lines from Bimala's diary quoted above, Tagore relays his own take on the Bara Rani from Bimala's point of view—portraying the former as petty, jealous of Bimala's privileges, and, we are told, untoward in her manners. Seen through Bimala's eyes, she embodies only *ressentiment*, historical as well as personal. Put differently, she is in the (story) world but not of it. This is because Tagore looks out onto the twentieth century from the vantage point of the nineteenth, and the Bara Rani allows him to designate a sign of the residual. If she represents a form of being no longer of interest to modern subjects, in an early twentieth-century context she is, paradoxically, even more eccentric to the dilemmas Tagore wished to explore and that were central to his pedagogic desire to bring his readers into an awareness of their incipient though alienated modernity.

By contrast, Ray's treatment emphasizes the fraughtness of the relationship between Bimala and Bouthan, departing from his source material and providing an entirely different angle on the old that is afforded, I have argued, only retroactively. Their continual and contrapuntal placement in the film marks the shift from melancholy to catastrophe, permitting us to think about a vision of the future that places its weight on the political and epistemological value on the past as ruin as well as harbinger of the new. In fact, we should recall that this is the vision underlying the aesthetic and philosophical imperatives of the historical avant-garde in Europe that Ray attempts to reactivate with his latter-day cinematic practice. One of the confusions often attending contemporary accounts of the avant-garde

has to do with the (erroneous) notion that artists and writers variously associated with its movements were all equally invested in the new and the “avant.”<sup>24</sup> Part of the reason for the prevalence of this error has to do with the well-documented desire of the avant-garde to disrupt and reject older modes of representation in order to break out of the pall over aesthetic practice imposed by traditional ideas about art. But what was key for the radical avant-garde, and what has been missed in many contemporary revaluations, is the degree to which the break with the past had far less to do with a commitment to novelty as such than with reimagining the future.

Accordingly, the avant-garde’s turn to means of aesthetic *dégonflage* (deflation or hijacking) served for them to register both the alienation of experience under capitalism and the extent to which art had become deranged from the social totality in its recusal from the everyday world. Strategies of shock or chance, key devices for disrupting the ideal of the organic work of art, can thus be understood as intended to critique given conditions of society rather than as aesthetic or stylistic devices staged for the purposes of originality or novelty alone. The aesthetics of shock, perhaps exemplifying the avant-garde’s most fundamental operating principle, must by this light be read alongside the politics of protest—an equally valuable motivation in the radical imperative of the avant-gardes even if it has received less notoriety in the wake of their epochal failure to lead art back into society. But this particular emphasis allows us once more to recognize that the avant-garde represents neither a set of known artists nor a historically delimited experiment in aesthetic practice that is supposed to have begun in Europe and ended predictably, if hypostatically, in the United States in the 1960s.

Those prompted by the dialectical commitment to discern and rescue the past from the ruins of the present must proceed differently and from different leads. Here we may find embodied in the paradoxical ideals of the avant-garde the catastrophic utopianism of a project guided less by celebrating the new, the singular, or the unprecedented than by reckoning with their opposites—the old and the outmoded—particularly as these bespeak the repudiation of capitalist modernity. As I argue in other chapters as well, Ray consistently displays this attitude toward reactivating the energies of the past. And although he artfully exposes the petrification of social relations within modernity, his effort is not to hold on to tradition for its own sake but to make available some terms for a critical cancellation of pieties, old and new. *Ghare Baire* returns to this preoccupation with the social contradictions of the modern era, and our understanding is consid-

erably helped by situating Ray's cinematic experiment alongside earlier aesthetic and analytic emphases in the overall discourse of modernism—ranging from Louis Aragon's 1926 surrealist novel *Le paysan de Paris* and various Dada manifestations to, as I tried to establish earlier with reference to Benjamin's work, the philosophical investments of critical theory.

Placed in this context, Ray's deliberate staging of the predicament of the old in its confrontation with the modern also impels us to recognize the historiographic work the film does in signaling its distance from realities that were merely contemporary facts for Tagore. Their reactivation makes it possible for Ray—and, more important, for us—to reevaluate a mode of existence that has passed from view but whose aesthetic and political valences are part and parcel of the dialectic of history.

#### CONCLUSION: DETAIL AND OTHERNESS

In focusing on the inorganic nature of subjective relations in *Ghare Baire*, I hope to have established that the confrontation between old and new modes of existence staged in this film is by no means restricted to the ways that characters are depicted. In keeping with the general proposition with which I have been working—namely, that the withering of subjectivity under capitalism means that the reification of the world extends into all spheres of life—it follows that the object world is as much the domain to which the question of value must be put as any consideration of subjective enunciation. The signifying potential of objects has, as we know, provided the impetus for thinking across a number of influential approaches in cinema studies (from Sergei Eisenstein's or Lev Kuleshov's experiments with montage to Roland Barthes' explications of the "Italianicity" of Panzani pasta advertisements and Kracauer's explorations of cinema's "critical realism"). Indeed, Benjamin took his own cue from Soviet cinema, emphasizing not the agents of the destruction of the present but the "scene" of the crime, as it were, in this way calling attention to the inanimate and objective aspects of life that not only serve as its *mise-en-scène* but also as the ground of subjective understanding. This objectivist inflection can be found in a number of Benjamin's writings, including in the "Artwork" essay, where he draws a parallel between crime-scene photography and the emptiness of the present. Reminding us of the turn-of-the-century photographs of Eugène Atget, he points to the "evidentiary" status of the photographic image in recording what is now past—as if it were now a deserted scene where a crime had been committed, leaving behind trace evidence in the objects photographed. Similarly, in the quintessentially dialectical

spin derived from Bertolt Brecht in "A Small History of Photography," he quotes Brecht: "the situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the A. E. G. factory tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations—the factory, say—means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed."<sup>25</sup>

Cinema is the means for this new construction inasmuch as it alone betokens the technological and expressive capacity to resemble writing—what Astruc, in his turn, regarded as the camera's singularity in "relat[ing] objects to objects and characters to objects" in his theory of a new *avant-garde*. Less the biographical stamp of an author than "a certain tendency" (*une certaine tendance*), to use François Truffaut's distinction, objectivism in art, including the art of cinema, has always been internal to a tradition of political critique. By this light we might reformulate Astruc's contentions about the *caméra-stylo* to say that the camera does not so much permit writing (which always depends on imaginative connections between representation and reality) so much as replaces it. This, we may recall, is very much Kracauer's emphasis on "camera reality," which, while invoking "physical reality" or the indexical dimension of film, has less to do with a metaphysical conception of the real than with immanent contingencies that bring together the filmic medium and the world of objects. As Miriam Hansen argues in her introduction to the reissue of Kracauer's book, film's medium-specific affinity with physical reality is seen as emerging *out of* the very difference between discourse and the realm of material contingency, "between," as she glosses it, "the implied horizon of our 'habits of seeing,' structured by language, narrative, identification, and intentionality, and that which perpetually eludes and confounds such structuring."<sup>26</sup>

To follow these insights into the filmic space of *Ghare Baire*, one cannot but be struck by the vibrancy of things, by the luminosity that they, rather than the characters, possess. As I have tried to demonstrate, if it is in the nature of commodities to seem magical in their ability to appear themselves and, at the same time, to appear otherwise, this quality is refracted on the screen in a multiplicity of ways. And, as I have also suggested, these ways depart so radically from the novel that the horizons of possibility of the source text are fundamentally altered. Nevertheless, it is worth lingering one last time over the difference between Tagore's novelistic preoccupations and Ray's cinematic strategies to clinch the argument about the aesthetics of form, particularly as it takes us into the narration of histori-

cal contradiction. The novel mounts its representational argument with words and pages that can be—and are—devoted to the slow elaboration of internal conflicts. For example, in a key segment we find Nikhil debating with himself about his uncertainty over what his appropriate moral and enlightened reaction should be to his wife's newly emergent sensibility of worldliness and its distancing effect on their relationship: "I longed to find Bimala blossoming fully in all her truth and power. But the thing I forgot to calculate was, that one must give up all claims on conventional rights, if one would find a person freely revealed in truth."<sup>27</sup> A little later he expresses the same dilemma, an utterly modern one about the nature of claims on another person, in the following way: "'My wife'—Does that amount to an argument, much less the truth? Can one imprison a whole personality within that name? . . . Bimala is what she is. It is preposterous to expect that she should assume the role of an angel for my pleasure. The Creator is under no obligation to supply me with angels, just because I have an avidity for imaginary perfection."<sup>28</sup>

These complex moral and emotional quandaries are at the heart of Tagore's worldview and expressible as such in the overwrought language of romanticism—with its fraught imagery of angels and imagination, as well as its emphasis on individual consciousness. All of this is stripped away from Ray's treatment of the same emotional predicament pared down to a single, concrete principle: the attenuation of action on the screen expressed via the image track and, equally important, the soundtrack. In this fashion the conflicts internal to the characters are miniaturized—by which I do not mean to say that are downgraded or minimized but, rather, that they are rendered as needing to be read, stretched, and even rescued from the details that signify quiddity or an objective recalcitrance. It is to this insistence on unfolding the meaning of the detail that I would attribute much of the slow pacing of shots in Ray's cinema, their lyricism but also their lingering quality. Beyond establishing a different tempo and conjuring a different pace of life, the temporality of shots, as well as what they capture, is, I suggest, less a technical preference than a dialectical commitment to the possibilities that only the detail can summon forth—much in the manner of the "spark" of the "dialectical image" that represented the bedrock of Benjamin's thinking on similar matters.

A scene that occurs about two-thirds of the way through the film, to which I turn by way of closing this chapter, will I hope substantiate my case. We come upon Nikhil, who has had his moment of self-scrutiny, melancholic though the outcome has been. The passage into this reckoning with himself is, as with other key transitions in the text, depicted with

Nikhil crossing the hallway that has by now become the bridge, as well as impasse, between home and world. The camera cuts to Nikhil as he enters the threshold of the private quarters, his hesitant footsteps muffling what the spectator is allowed to hear of the song that begins the sequence. He pauses at the doorway, and the next shot reveals a transition to the interior of his apartment, where a servant is shown hastily arranging the pillows on the bed. She pulls her veil close and averts her gaze, although he is too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice all of the silent women who inhabit his household along with his wife and sister-in-law. The camera slowly pans left, moving across the bedpost, toward the many illuminated objects in the room: first, the crystal lamp stand (before which Nikhil and the camera both pause), the candle stand and perfume bottle, and gradually, in a slow point-of-view shot of Nikhil as his gaze comes to rest on his wife's *sindurdani* (a silver box for keeping vermilion, the traditional red mark on a married woman's forehead) displayed on her dressing-table.

The eye of the camera, settling as it does on the *sindurdani*, is only retroactively understood as having functioned as an evil eye, insofar as Bimala will not be a *sadhaba* (or married woman entitled to mark her conjugal status with *sindoor* or vermilion) much longer. The *sindurdani* foreshadows that, like her other prized possessions, it will shortly be rendered useless—once Bimala becomes a widow. The portentousness of the vermilion box thus has both a denotative and connotative function: it denotes Bimala's present status even as it connotes her sterile future; all of this is evoked while allowing us (and Nikhil) to take in the scene. Another transition—this time from the brightly lit objects in the foreground to a pulled-back shot of the darkened recesses of the room, the camera panning and tracking back to recapture the stillness of the apartment with Nikhil's somber presence in it—serves to end this scene. As it comes to a close, the soundtrack punctuates the visual with the shrill whistle of a train that is heard passing by in the imputed offscreen space of the outside world, once more conjuring up other places and times, not to mention the disruptions of modernity. What we gather not only pertains to the *ghar* and *bahir* (or home and world) but present and future as well, since events unfolding in the inner quarters will have their consequences in the time that is yet to come.

This penultimate episode illustrates so much of what is also at stake in the rest of the film, filled as it is with minor presences, objects, figures, and arrangements that Ray went to great lengths to stage. It is important to see these as providing the backdrop of Bimala's destiny and Nikhil's choices, though their significance extends beyond issues of setting or

mise-en-scène since they are the substance of Ray's critique of social relations as commodity relations. This, I submit, is the transformative twist he applies to Tagore's story: a new mapping of the tensions between home and world, tradition and modernity. If by dint of the disciplinary fetish of "literature," it is Tagore's rather than Ray's terms that have come to reign in interpretive contests over the meaning of the conflict between tradition and modernity in India, it is still the case that Ray offers us a filmic treatment that enables a different field of vision, one that more adequately speaks to the predicament of social and aesthetic contradictions in the present.