

The Epic Film in World Culture

Edited by
Robert Burgoyne

THE EPIC FILM IN WORLD CULTURE
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AFI Film Readers



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The Epic Film in World Culture

From Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* to John Woo's *Red Cliff*, from Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, the epic has reemerged as a major form in contemporary cinema. *The Epic Film in World Culture* explores new critical approaches to contemporary as well as older epic films, drawing on ideas from cultural studies, historiography, classics, and film studies. Many of the fifteen original essays in the volume are animated by the central paradox of the epic genre, the contradiction between the traditional messages embedded within epic form—the birth of a nation, the emergence of a people, the fulfillment of a heroic destiny—and the long history of the epic film as an international, global narrative apparatus not bound by nation or ethnicity. Truly international in scope, the contributors focus on issues including spectacle, imagined community, national identity, family melodrama, and masculinity that are central to epics from Hong Kong to Hollywood and beyond.

Robert Burgoyne is Professor and Chair of Film Studies at the University of St Andrews. His recent publications include *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*, revised and expanded edition (2010) and *The Hollywood Historical Film* (2008).

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father-in-law, Eli Shaban;
geographer, historian, and friend

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epic melodrama, or
cine-maps of the
global south

t w e l v e

b h a s k a r s a r k a r

Sometime in the mid-1990s, I “caught” two films from Mexico within a few days: *Miracle Alley* (1995), directed by Jorge Fons; and *Principio y Fin* (*The Beginning and the End*) (1993) directed by Arturo Ripstein. I was living in Los Angeles those days, so getting to watch two Mexican films in quick succession was not that remarkable an experience. *Miracle Alley*, touted at the time as “the most awarded film in Mexican history” (some forty-nine national and international accolades), and starring a young Salma Hayek, was released in theaters across the USA. Ripstein’s film was screened at the University of Southern California’s famed School of Cinema-Television, where the director and his partner Paz Alicia Garciadiego were teaching classes as visiting faculty. What was extraordinary, though, was that both films were based on the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz’s novels, *Midaq Alley* (1947) and *The Beginning and the End* (1950). This odd coincidence made me wonder: what was it about the Nobel Laureate’s works that inspired these transcultural adaptations, transposing Cairo to Mexico City and converting an Islamic milieu into a Catholic one?

Some years later, I was to learn that the link was largely serendipitous: Alfredo Ripstein, the producer of the two films (and Arturo Ripstein's father), had obtained the film rights to the two novels simultaneously.¹ This piece of information, instructive as it is about the contingencies of film-producing, does not render superfluous my queries about the translation of the teeming Cairene world of the 1930s and 1940s to lower-middle-class life in Mexico City or about the strategies—and, perhaps, equivalences—that make such translation possible. This essay is an attempt to think through such questions of transcultural linkage and exchange in the face of seemingly insurmountable gaps. What resonances in material structures and phenomenological experiences might allow for congruent historical consciousnesses and aesthetic forms, in spite of all the differences of lifeworlds and habitus? What kind of translocal “reading strategy” might help us recognize, even consolidate, not an idealized register of “universal humanism” but the actually existing public intimacies and creative coalitions?

This line of enquiry leads me to a mode of cultural production, the *epic melodrama*, discernible in various cinemas across the world, but which seems to arise most regularly from the experiential maelstroms widely referred to as “transitional societies” of the global South. Here the epic form is conjoined to a melodramatic mode to produce a genre of representation that raises all the large-scale, transcendental questions of world-historical significance—social emancipation, human civilization, universal History—mainly to complicate these questions by staging their intrinsic contradictions. The epic melodrama counterpoises to the grandiose concerns the palpable messiness of local, quotidian struggles, thereby interrogating all those fictions that are offered as resolutions at both local and global levels—including the modernist teleologies of national development and progress. Marked by its sweeping preoccupations and its recurrence in various parts of the world, this aesthetic form invites a broad interpretive schema, a global reading perspective that is cognizant of its commonality-in-difference. In contrast to earlier elaborations of the epic melodrama—for instance, Ashish Rajadhyaksha's insightful analysis of the form's negotiation of modernity and nationhood in early and mid-twentieth-century Indian films associated first with studios such as Prabhat and New Theatres, and then with auteurs like Raj Kapoor and Mehboob Khan—I will focus on the translocal optic it affords us in its recursivity across multiple national sites (say, Egypt, India and Mexico).² A figuration with the capacity for simultaneous description, reflexion, and interrogation, the epic melodrama maps an entire material and intimate geography that allows us to divine otherwise opaque translocal structures, connections and processes.

In this chapter, I focus on two films: Bengali director Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*) (1960) and Ripstein's *The Beginning and*

the End, films that, in spite of substantial disjunctions of time and space, reveal striking similarities in thematics and structure. Both films feature impoverished families with aspirations of social mobility; both focus on relations between parents and offsprings, brothers and sisters—relations that produce the most diabolical forms of sacrifice and abuse, until the family mutates beyond recognition into an exploitative apparatus. These narratives show up the emancipatory promises of Indian and Mexican nationalisms, and of global modernization, as largely structuring myths, constituting a prison house of ideology and ambitions.

One might productively add to this discussion Italian director Luchino Visconti's classic work, *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), made just about the same time as the Ghatak film. While I do not draw on Visconti's film here, referencing *Rocco and His Brothers* in relation to *The Cloud-Capped Star* and *The Beginning and the End* (and Mahfouz's novel) helps explicate what I understand to be the global South: a geophysical configuration that is not beholden to archaic hemispheric cartographies but that derives from embodied experiences of comparable material conditions in far-flung locations such as Egypt, Italy, India, and Mexico. Needless to say, implicit in this mapping is a geopolitical extension of Antonio Gramsci's "south," a metaphysical space that animates the epic melodrama of *Rocco* in terms of its piquant regional traces, calling attention to the underlying relations of power.

A similar piquancy is at work in the Ghatak and Ripstein films, now realized by way of an exaggerated, highly politicized melodramatic mode. As I hope to demonstrate here, these films achieve their remarkable political acuity in terms of a virtuoso formalism whose address is at once deeply affective and incisively intellectual. Each film conjures up a cinematic sensorium that blurs the archaic mind/body polarity, engaging audiences in its complex, synesthetic modalities. The chapter ends with a critical interrogation of what remains one of the most interesting and useful cognitive-aesthetic articulations of a global consciousness informing cultural production: Fredric Jameson's identification of a "geopolitical aesthetic" in contemporary cinema as something of universal structure becoming legible in multiple locations—in effect, a modern epic imagination.

defining epic melodrama

What might constitute a modern epic consciousness, at best a paradoxical category? The *agon* of contemporary life, which points to fracture, dispersion, and drift as its constitutive conditions, makes an epic register appear precarious and outmoded. In our rational, post-sacral world, divine intervention and uncompromising heroes seem equally implausible. And yet, fundamental and pervasive concerns about the human condition and collective destiny persist: they present themselves in new guises, as questions

of globality, ecology, history. Epic melodrama is being posited here as a form that enables contemporary cultural negotiations of persistent metaphysical questions, without shoring up the foundationalist fictions that pretend to be definitive answers. Neither of the two terms—epic, melodrama—is a mere qualification for the other, nor are they simply additive: their interaction produces a new aesthetic category. A comparison with the historical epic, and with melodrama, might help establish its formal and functional contours.

Cinema's historical epics are prereflective and transparent engagements with human experience: they work in terms of a broad, sweeping address to produce an ostentatious and reified sense of history that transcends the concreteness of experience—paradoxically, via the concreteness of cinematic form. As Vivian Sobchak has observed with respect to Hollywood historical epics, this type of “*conceptual mimesis*—that is, the representation or imitation of a general idea rather than a specific person, event or thing” usually “takes the most *literal* and *material* form of imitation,” achieved in terms of a formal strategy that she calls “cinematic *onomatopoeia*.”³ This strategy of producing the epicness of History involves, among other things, sumptuous quantity and scale (“a cast of thousands”), big stars (Charlton Heston, Elizabeth Taylor), movement (chariot race, naval assembly on rough seas), expanded formats (70 millimeter, CinemaScope), extended duration (about twice the length of the average Hollywood film), excessive music, and spectacle. A kind of cinematic alchemy is operative here: in effect, the industry’s “‘production’ of History” comes to coincide with “a stable and coherent narrative: History.”⁴

This model of the historical epic is not exclusive to Hollywood; it is broadly applicable to other commercial cinemas, including Italian (*Cabiria* [1914]), Egyptian (*Saladin* [1963]) and Indian (*Mughal-e-Azam*, a.k.a. *The Emperor of the Mughals* [1960]). Local conventions shape the particular texts: thus, the legendary song-and-dance numbers of *The Emperor of the Mughals* (rendered in color in an otherwise black-and-white film) comprise a signature mark of Bombay cinema. Vernacular cosmologies inform the films, and they are driven by local ideological imperatives: for instance, the pan-Arab sense of pride that courses through *Saladin*. Nevertheless, what these films have in common is the fact that each proffers a particular cosmic vision marked by opulence and an intended unity. This is achieved in each case, as Sobchak suggests, through “the multileveled and isomorphic repetition” that produces a “sense of excess temporality and temporal significance”—in short, through an orchestrated production of History.⁵

A melodramatic mode already courses through historical epics. However, “epic melodrama” concedes a constitutive centrality to melodrama, recasting the very idea of the epic. The classical epic is in truck *not* with melodrama, but with tragedy: both the epic and the tragedy share a heroic horizon.⁶ The individualist hero, who overreaches in terms of his

aspirations, operates largely outside of social collectivities; it is only when his actions bring his downfall that he becomes aware of his hubris, but then it is already too late. Melodrama, for which this logic of the “too late” becomes even more fundamental, is a degenerate form of tragedy: it lacks the heroic scope of the latter; its protagonists are crucially structured by the social; and, in the end, it settles for decidedly unheroic compromises. The irruption of the melodramatic at the heart of the epic grounds the epic in contemporary networks of social interaction and conciliation: the focus shifts from the determinate to the performative, from preordained resolutions to the disorderly process of negotiation. In short, the epic melodrama updates the epic form, dragging it from its Olympian heights into the flux of contemporaneity.

What is at stake in inserting the epic back into the quotidian, in clipping its metaphysical wings? What is gained, and what is lost in such a move? I want to approach the experiential moorings of epic melodrama in terms of two distinct but related genealogies of materialist thinking: (1) twentieth-century Marxist theories that seek figurations of totality even as they foreground modernity’s ruptures and shocks, and (2) phenomenological elaborations of materialism that cast embodied experience and consciousness not as transcendental essentialisms but as grounded in cultural and historical foment.

Marxist cultural theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Bertolt Brecht, and György Lukács, who have been particularly attentive to the relationship between historical experience and aesthetic form, help us think through what might constitute the modern epic. But they focus more on a form’s proximity and relevance to everyday struggles, its efficacy in figuring the totality of experience, and its transformative promises; in general, they remain suspicious of melodrama’s emotional excess. Bakhtin, in theorizing the novel, sought to establish its connectedness to life by comparing it to the classical epic. If the novel was attuned to everyday textures and rhythms, its protagonists constantly evolving through their experiences, the epic remained lofty, remote, and beyond evaluation, with fully realized heroes. Stressing the novel’s articulation of multiple perspectives and potentialities, its extra-linguistic intimations, and its adaptability—in short, its dialogism and its heteroglossic dimensions—Bakhtin privileged the novel over the epic because of the former’s capacity for engagement and promise of transformation.⁷ I will propose two elaborations that will be significant to this essay. First, Bakhtin’s own insight that the novel is capable of transforming all other genres in the modern era opens up the possibility that the modern epic will get “novelized”—that it will take on some of the plastic attributes of the novel. Second, Bakhtin’s presumed distance between the epic and quotidian life does not hold universally: for instance, in India, epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* remain living cultural resources that provide people with cognitive frameworks and moral compasses to make sense of their daily lives.

Describing the novel as the epic for a godless world, Lukács championed works that represented an organic historical consciousness belonging to the progressive bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. Therefore, as late as the 1930s and at a different stage of capitalism, he could still nostalgically hold onto the kind of seamless totality that was afforded by nineteenth-century realist authors such as Balzac and Tolstoy, to criticize forms of modernism that trained a more fragmented and, for him, alienating perspective on reality.⁸ This stance prompted Lukács' detractors to claim that he had lost touch with the vanguard cultural impulses of his lifetime, initiatives that responded to a different phase of class antagonism and approached an increasingly complex and illegible totality in terms of a fractured optic. Primary among these critics was Bertolt Brecht, who countered Lukács' claims of modernist reification with the charge that it was Lukács who had held onto antiquated and reified forms that were no longer adequate in representing twentieth-century structures and experiences.

Brecht offers the most sustained elaboration of a modern epic form in his reflections on an "epic theater." Downplaying mimetic realism and entertainment, Brecht stresses a pedagogical motivation behind his dramaturgy: his primary aim is to engage audiences discursively, to inspire critical reflection, to mobilize consciousness.⁹ The epic, for him, affords a detached and rational approach to the social-historical register, a portal to totality—however elusive or opaque. Central to his formulation is the category of the *gestus*, an articulation of "physical gesture" and the "gist" or "attitude" of a character: "The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of the *gest*."¹⁰ It indexes a technique of acting that reveals a character's social embeddedness, relating all actions and emotions not to psychological motivations but to the social relations in which he or she is enmeshed. This technique also enables a capacious—*epic*—form of acting: while a character's mindset is projected from a particular political perspective that the actor chooses to adopt, he or she should not settle for the easy and obvious characterization but should "consider various other conceivable pronouncements" and "build into the character that element of 'Not-But'"—*not* simply content with the reproduction of things as they are *but* also allowing for the possibility of critical contemplation and even active transformation.¹¹ Brecht further states that the "expressions of a *gest* are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex."¹²

This insistence on projecting "the entire complex," i.e. a social totality, points to a Marxist variant of an epic consciousness, closer to Walter Benjamin's allegorical mapping of an elusive totality from its fragments than to Lukács' idealized totality. This preoccupation is at the core of

Brecht's model of epic or dialectical theater, whose realism derives not from a timeless aesthetic mode but from a political and philosophical vision of the world that takes cognizance of its historical specificities and seeks to improve it.

But what of the decidedly more carnal materiality afforded by embodied modes of engagement, such as melodrama? Denouncing identificatory immersion in the narrative for its shaping of passive spectatorship, Brecht took melodrama to task for its manipulative modalities and bourgeois values, its consecration of the status quo as social inevitability. In spite of such polemics, many of his favored techniques, aimed at jolting spectators out of their habits of cultural consumption, worked in ways not that different from melodrama. His deliberate accent on specificities, including his citations of social and behavioral details and his staging of moments of great emotional intensity, was, for him, commensurate with his other presentational tactics (breaking the fourth wall, direct address and choral commentary, one actor playing multiple roles), all meant to engineer audience engagement through estrangement (what has come to be known as Brechtian alienation effect). Like Sergei Eisenstein, with whom he shared many theoretical and practical predilections, Brecht ultimately made a clear distinction between authentic and fake emotions, between progressive mobilization and tendentious manipulation—polarizations whose usefulness, not to mention validity, have been put to question in recent decades, with the focus of scholarship shifting to the overall apperceptions of reality and its representation.¹³ As Thomas Elsaesser points out, Brechtian anti-illusionism, no longer tenable in the light of contemporary understandings of mediation, has now given way to a hyper-realism; we might even say that it now routinely inspires, and is folded into, a synesthetic spectacularism.¹⁴

Following the early work of Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on cinema as a modernist medium, scholars such as Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, and Giuliana Bruno have stressed the sensate and immersive aspects of filmic representation.¹⁵ In their view, cinema presents a sensorium in which various kinds of thrills and sensations, desires and emotions collide and intersect to produce an overall experience of knowing-feeling-understanding for its publics. At the heart of popular commercial cinema's enthralling and entertaining aspects, which raise charges of escapism in more orthodox circles, these scholars discern a deep engagement with contemporary structures of experience—an engagement that Hansen seeks to capture in her recognition of mainstream cinema's "vernacular" modernism.¹⁶ Ben Singer extends this insight to argue that early cinematic melodrama comprises a novel form of cultural expression that mediates modernity's rapid social transformations and spectacular reworldings.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Vivian Sobchak—who, in her attempt to come to grips with the carnal dimensions of our apprehension of films, adopts a

phenomenological approach associated with Merleau-Ponty—surmises that much of current “scholarly interest” in the bodily and sensate aspects of cinema

has been focused less on *the capacity of films to physically arouse us to meaning* than on what such sensory cinematic appeal reveals about the rise and fall of classical narrative, or the contemporary transmedia structure of the entertainment industry, or the desires of our culture for the distractions of immediate sensory immersion in an age of pervasive mediation.¹⁸

In other words, even when film scholarship addresses popular film genres, it shies away from a headlong interrogation of “how cinematic intelligibility, meaning and value emerge carnally through our senses”—i.e. an embodied, incarnated understanding of cinema—instead deflecting attention to seemingly more serious-minded, reflective, and therefore “proper” topics such as narratology, convergence cultures and industrial organization, even pop-cultural amusements.¹⁹ Indeed, as Linda Williams points out, the “excessive” elements of what she calls the “body genres”—pornography, horror, and, yes, melodrama—produce pleasures that are too readily described and dismissed as “gratuitous,” even when these gratifications remain central to film viewing not necessarily limited to these genres.²⁰ Even feminist film theory, with its keen interest in gender construction and gendered address, sexuality, and the body, has all too often reduced the pleasures of film viewing to so many “perversions” (“fetishism, voyeurism, sadism and masochism”).²¹ Williams finds in much feminist scholarship on melodrama, including her own early work, a curious embarrassment: an “unwillingness to recognize the importance of melodramatic pathos—of being moved by a moving picture,” as if to acknowledge it would be somehow to compromise one’s critical acuity.²² What was being overlooked in marking a properly critical feminist position was the complex nature of embodied engagement, which included a compelling, politically potent identification with “victimhood.”

Sobchak cites Williams’s work on the body genres as one of the few exceptional instances of film scholarship that does not simply objectify the body but recognizes it as a “sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialized capacities and agency,” according incarnated aspects of spectatorship the serious attention they deserve.²³ Instead of being stymied by the sense of being manipulated (“jerked around”) by melodramatic weepies, horror films, and pornography (widely referred to as, respectively, “tear-jerkers” and “fear-jerkers,” or thought to induce an inclination to “jerk off”), or by the “apparent lack of proper esthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion,” Williams seeks to understand the precise “success” of these lowly genres—“often measured by the

degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen”—in terms of “form, function, and system of seemingly gratuitous excesses.”²⁴ Interestingly, Williams suggests that it may even be reasonable “to consider all three of these genres under the extended rubric of melodrama,” understood here “as a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to the more ‘dominant’ modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative.”²⁵

Which brings us back to my point: recent scholarship on melodrama, in attending to carnal apprehension alongside critical reflection, embraces the multifarious, *actually operative* mechanisms of cinematic meaning-making. It is this complexity, this simultaneous attention to all aspects of consciousness across the archaic mind–body divide, which I want to emphasize in my elaboration of the epic melodrama. Amidst the oscillations between seemingly polarized positions—embodied response and deliberative reflection, enchantment and criticality, escapism and engagement, social reproduction and transformation, fractal consciousness and totality—the epic melodrama stakes out an aesthetic-analytical position that transcends these very polarities.

In sum, a modern epic imagination cannot aspire to a unified and omniscient perspective, nor can it claim a totalizing access to reality. It can no longer pretend to be transcendental: instead, it is implicated in the froth of daily life, rooted in incarnated subjectivities. This is where melodrama comes in: it recalibrates and transforms the epic form in terms of its emotions and bodily sensations, its hyperboles and coincidences, its overt repetitions and irrational excesses. Meanwhile, an epic sensibility expands melodrama beyond its narrow concerns, teleporting it onto broader horizons of signification. If the grand sweep of the epic is inflected with melodramatic qualifications, its heroic teleology interrupted by traces of subterranean contradictions, then the psychosexual dynamics of the melodramatic are now exteriorized and expanded into larger philosophical questions. The epic melodrama unfolds as a narrative that is at once timeless in its concerns and provisional in its solutions, universal in its scope and grounded in its insights. In other words, the epic melodrama is the aesthetic analog of a world-historical consciousness that is fractured, tentative, and situated. It is precisely such a tenuous global consciousness and a strained aesthetic that are in evidence in the work of Ritwik Ghatak or Arturo Ripstein.

two “southern” auteurs

Both Ghatak, who died in 1976 from chronic alcoholism, mental illness, and tuberculosis, and Ripstein, who continues to be a prolific filmmaker after four decades in the business, remain controversial figures. Ghatak was a Marxist intellectual expelled by the Communist Party of India for his

renegade views and intemperate lifestyle; his trenchant films about the post-Partition sociocultural milieu (especially the so-called Partition trilogy: *The Cloud-Capped Star* [1960], *Komal Gandhar* [1961] and *Subarnarekha* [1962]) caused such a furor in the Bengali cultural establishment that he was unable to work in the Calcutta industry for the next decade. If Ripstein, the son of a prominent film producer, hails from an affluent family and has had the opportunity to collaborate from the very beginning with various cultural luminaries (including the director Luis Buñuel and the writers Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez), he remains somewhat of an outsider: a Jewish artist in an inescapably Catholic society, he also does not fit easily into any of the contemporaneous film movements of Latin America. While both enjoy cult followings among sections of the global cine-cognoscenti, they also have their fair share of detractors. Even their avowed fans have, at times, been baffled by their extreme stylistics and unrelenting pessimism. Critic J. Hoberman calls Ripstein the “maestro of the feel-bad” film; Jorge Fons, director of the other Mexican film-adaptation of Mahfouz, *Miracle Alley*, differentiates his own work from the “pure acid that is Arturo’s cinema.”²⁶ George Sadoul, a champion of Ghatak’s trail-blazing ecological work *Ajantrik* (1958), found the subsequent melodramatic excess of *Subarnarekha* so overbearing that he apparently urged the filmmaker to rethink certain sequences in the interest of making the film acceptable to the European festival circuit.²⁷

The unease about Ghatak’s melodramatic proclivities was not limited to his European audiences. At a time when Satyajit Ray’s measured and modernist film language, inflected with the humanist objectivity of Italian neo-realism, sought a deliberate break with the maudlin sentimentalism of 1930s–1940s Bengali cinema associated with the New Theatres Studio, many considered Ghatak’s passionate sensibility to constitute an anachronistic regression. With characteristic aplomb, Ghatak declared that “Melodrama is a birthright,” defiantly defending it as “a form” that allowed him to bring out social contradictions.²⁸ In his films, this widely dismissed mode took on a remarkable critical charge: as self-conscious exaggerations revealed the narrative functions of clichéd melodramatic conventions, these components seemed to subvert their expected ideological operations. This reflexive dimension, far from attenuating the emotional, indeed haptic, intensity of these films, added to their potency and urgency.

Such deliberate politicization of the melodramatic characterizes the oeuvres of a select group of filmmakers, a group that includes Douglas Sirk, Rainer Warner Fassbinder, Pedro Almodóvar, and Ripstein. For Ripstein, the paradigm of Mexican melodrama established during the industry’s “golden age” (mid-1930s to mid-1950s), provided a set of thematic concerns, formal conventions, and moral codes to draw on *and* to unsettle. These included the heroic perspectives and volumes of the films of Emilio “El Indio” Fernández and his cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa (films that

were inspired simultaneously by the plot structures of classical Hollywood and Eisenstein's incorporation of Mexican folkloric idioms in *Que Viva Mexico* [1932]); the mythology of the innocent countryside and the duplicitous city; typical settings such as the family, the hacienda, chapels, dancehalls, and brothels; the hegemony of traditional moral values, temporarily threatened by adultery and excessive female sexuality, only to be reinstated in the final resolution.²⁹ In contrast, Ripstein refuses such reassuring resolution or redemption, reveling instead in the tortured and deeply troubling shenanigans of sinners, fools, and losers, and restricting his settings mainly to cramped, cluttered, and tawdry spaces. As Sergio de la Mora observes, Ripstein "runs a bulldozer right through" the "familiar territory of Mexican melodrama," exposing the "dark and disturbing underside of sacred icons, institutions, and sensibilities that are part of Mexican national identity."³⁰ Thus, in *La Mujer del Puerto* (1991), a remake of the 1933 classic, the incestuous sister does not succeed in her suicide attempt (as she does in the original) but goes on shockingly to live "happily ever after" married to her own brother. The audience is evicted from its moral comfort zone and forced to confront the "possibilities of life differently."³¹

Unraveling families, incestuous longings, and suicide also appear as core themes in Ghatak, enabling him to negotiate modernity's epic questions and imaginations—including national belonging and a community's place in the world. Where Ghatak differs from Ripstein is in his consistent and liberal invocation of ancient mythologies and the two great epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—narratives that remain at the center of India's living traditions and continue to inflect the conduct of everyday life.³²

As Ghatak asserted:

We are an epic people. We like to sprawl, we are not much involved in story-intrigues, we like to be re-told the same myths and legends again and again. We, as a people, are not much sold on the "what" of the thing, but the "why" and "how" of it. This is the epic attitude.³³

There are no comparable "civilizational" texts in mainstream Mexican culture: an epic imagination reaches back mainly to the nationalist novels of the nineteenth century, which consolidated the notion of a productive citizenry by articulating patriotism within the ambit of the heteropatriarchal family.³⁴ As Carlos Monsiváis points out, films of the "golden age" of Mexican cinema purveyed a similar dimension of normativity: "the public plagiarised the cinema" in "its way of speaking and gesturing, humour, respect of institutions and its typical perception of duties and pleasures," trusting its cinematic "idols" to "explain how to survive in a bewildering age of modernisation."³⁵

The two films which this essay focuses on belong to different eras in world history: the late 1950s–early 1960s, the moment of high nationalism

and rapid decolonization; and the early 1990s, when the expansion and acceleration of the processes of globalization appeared to put the nation form under erasure.³⁶ But the historicity of each film still matters in this anachronistic mapping. Ghatak produced his partition trilogy at a time when there was something like a willed cultural amnesia about India's political bifurcation and its attendant social upheaval.³⁷ While mainstream cinema participated in what Octavio Paz called India's "project of nationhood"—the enthusiastic building of an independent nation-state—Ghatak's melancholic investment in the ideal of a unified Bengal (one of the two provinces to be actually truncated, the eastern part becoming East Pakistan and the western part remaining in India) forced him to engage the trepidations of the post-Partition milieu.³⁸ Time and again, a deep sense of loss and longing irrupted in his films. In particular, the Partition trilogy marked an absolute refusal to overlook the laceration, to ignore its festering social traces, and to get on with the hegemonic program of capitalist development initiated by Jawaharlal Nehru's government. The epic melodrama form allowed Ghatak to trouble the certainties of nationalist fictions, to register the deep anxieties of the time, and to protest what he saw as social injustice. His artistic practice thus constituted a form of cultural mourning work—mourning both a lost nationalist unity and the emerging disillusionments of the postcolonial era with a remarkable critical potency.

In the early 1990s, in the wake of the NAFTA, Ripstein's long-term thematic and formal preoccupations coalesce into an authorial signature that serves him in terms of securing foreign coproduction and distribution, not to mention film-festival audiences.³⁹ As Marvin D'Lugo points out, Ripstein's films in the 1990s become "dialogical" in articulating national and global concerns: he focuses on a "critical debunking of the idols and icons of Mexican patriarchal society and cultural stereotypes, specifically those of motherhood and machismo, themes calculated to appeal to the transnational markets of auteur cinema."⁴⁰ In that respect, Ripstein emerges "as a deterritorialized *auteur* whose films" present "ever increasing critiques of Mexican film culture and society."⁴¹ One might argue that Ghatak too was a "deterritorialized *auteur*," in the sense that his obsessive investment in a lost subnational ideal, a united Bengal, led him to launch a critique of the disavowal of heterogeneity and the illicit desires that motored a totalizing postcolonial nationalism. As he stated explicitly, "The engulfing uncertainty, the fracture that I see—the roots are in the splintering of Bengal."⁴² Refusing to overlook the material and psychic traces of the partition, he focused on the social decay unleashed by it: the displacement of refugees, poverty and hunger, mounting unemployment, corruption, and indifference and cynicism. His melancholic introspection became the mark of his cultural-political dislocation, his troubled integrity.⁴³

the mutant family

The Cloud-Capped Star focuses on a middle-class family displaced from East Bengal by the Partition of 1947 and now struggling in a refugee colony shack in the outskirts of Calcutta. As the traumatized father gradually loses his bearings, and the elder brother Shankar pursues a career in music, the onus of the entire family—including an embittered mother and two younger siblings, Geeta and Montu—falls on Neeta, the eldest daughter. As soon as Montu finds a factory job, he leaves home to lead his own life. Within the year, he loses a leg in a workplace accident and returns to the family fold as an invalid. As Neeta is consumed by work, Sanat, her beau, begins to wonder if she will ever be able to part with her family. Sensing his impatience, Geeta makes the moves on Sanat and marries him with her mother's blessing. Shankar, Neeta's main confidant, leaves in disgust at this turn of events. By the time he returns home, having achieved success as a singer, Neeta has succumbed to her exertions and contracted tuberculosis. While the mother excitedly plans a double-storey brick house, Shankar makes arrangements to transfer Neeta to a sanatorium in the mountains, the same mountains that she has always longed to visit, so she receives proper medical care during her last days.

The Ripstein–Garciadiego adaptation of Mahfouz's novel strikes an even bleaker note. The sudden death of the father leaves the low-income Botero family in economic disarray. Banking all her hopes of upward mobility on Gabriel, the smartest of her four offspring, the matriarch Ignacia throws out her first-born, the "bad-seed" Guama, leaving him to fend for himself. Following the mother's wishes, Mireya, the daughter, leaves school and becomes a seamstress; Nicolás, the other son, also abandons hopes of higher studies and takes on a job as school inspector in Veracruz. Gabi soon comes to believe that "his time is *now*," and that his siblings are making sacrifices in the hope that he will help them out once he becomes successful. Once in college, he needs more and more to keep up the pretense that he is from a "respectable" background (first good clothes, then a car); he assiduously keeps his college friends away from his downbeat family. When he gets Natalia—the daughter of a family friend, and once his cherished sweetheart—pregnant, he refuses to marry her, as she no longer fits into his grand ambitions; Ignacia convinces Nico to marry Natalia in the name of family honor. Guama becomes a pimp and bouncer in a local club and seems happy with his hooker-girlfriend; but he comes to a bad end when Ignacia, in a fit of moral rage, discards the stash of cocaine he had left in her safekeeping. César, the frisky local baker, seduces Mireya with false promises, and then casts her aside to marry a woman with resources. After a local mechanic takes advantage of her despondence and rapes her, an abject Mireya secretly turns to prostitution. When arrested by the police, she panics and gets Gabriel involved. Worried that the scandal

would be disastrous for him and his powerful patron, the industrialist Luján, Gabi asks Mireya to end her miserable life. They go to the bathhouse where Mireya usually serves her clients, armed with razor blades; after she commits suicide, a shell-shocked Gabi slits his own wrists.

In both films, the family—the quintessential melodramatic *topos*, a microcosm of larger social formations—has mutated into a ruthless machine that wrings the life out of protagonists. Most of the characters are overwhelmed by the vagaries of modern life: the heartbroken father loses himself to dementia; the two careworn mothers turn harsh and manipulative; Nico, Mireya, and Neeta become martyrs, sacrificing their dreams in quiet desperation or giving in to compulsive desire. If Neeta incorporates the trace of a social wound in her consumptive lungs, Mireya and Gabi succumb under the crushing demands of bourgeois mobility. In an interview, Arturo Ripstein explicitly states that while families can “be a source of protection and serenity,” these benefits come at “a very high price.” For him, families are often “very demanding and very castrating,” the “nucleus” of society-wide “destruction” and “horror.” In his films, therefore, he has attempted to “demolish the basic values of certain bourgeoisie who believe that religion, family, and country are the most important factors one has.” So he seeks “to tread on them and open up other possibilities,” denormalizing the power of these normative institutions.⁴⁴ Likewise, for Ghatak, the family is the site from which he launches his critique of an unjust society, an indifferent nationalism. Speaking about a sequence in *Subarnarekha* (made two years after *The Cloud-Capped Star*) that his detractors describe as embarrassingly gratuitous melodrama—a drunk brother turning up as the very first client of his estranged sister, newly recruited into “entertaining” men—Ghatak places the forced coincidental structure in a social context: “If we keep in mind the narrative’s thematic thrust, we realize that *any* prostitute the guy visited would *still* turn out to be his sister. Here that point has been expounded mechanically: the aim is to allude to the general through the particular.”⁴⁵ Earlier in the same film, the siblings Ishwar and Seeta bicker affectionately as if they were a couple; Seeta finally elopes with their foster brother, Abhiram, upsetting her blood brother Ishwar.⁴⁶ The parents, missing from this narrative, possibly perished in the Partition riots; familial structures are on the verge of breakdown, and usually taboo desires threaten to take over—not unlike the illicit passions in a discordant, riot-ravaged society.⁴⁷

Two related points deserve further explication. The first pertains to a certain “queering” of family ties that, in these films, become conduits for the expression of nonnormative desires. A distinctly Oedipal angle comes into play in certain exchanges between Ignacia and Guama (her first-born), or between Ignacia and Gabriel (her favorite). When Gabi convinces his mother that he and not Nico should pursue higher education, the scene unfolds like a seduction, mainly in medium close-up. As Ignacia steps out

of the shower, Gabi hands her a bathrobe, rubs her neck and shoulders, and finally massages her legs with lotion. Ignacia tries to resist (“It is difficult to choose between one’s children”), but in that fogged-up bathroom, Gabi’s sensual overtures and persuasive rhetoric about the “best strategy” for the family cloud her reason (see Figure 12.1).

The entire family seems to be under the spell of Gabi’s charm and promise. Mireya eagerly quizzes him about his classmates (how do they dress, act, and speak?), intent on living vicariously through Gabi’s experiences. When she realizes that her arrest might jeopardize Gabi’s prospects, she readily agrees to take her own life to establish her mental instability. Nicolás accepts his lot without remonstrance, and keeps sending most of his salary for Gabi’s education, prompting Julia—his landlady-turned-lover in Veracruz—to observe that there is something “queer” about his unquestioning love for his brother. When Nico agrees to marry Natalia, Gabi’s pregnant fiancée, the latter becomes furious at his endless generosity. Confronting his brother in a haircutting salon, Gabi argues that Nico has it easy, for he does not have to live with the burden of everyone else’s dreams. In a bid to rile Nico, he hisses in his face: “I have broken in and trained her for you.” The proximity of the two brothers—caught here in a tight two-shot, their faces practically touching—accentuates a carnal intimacy between them, to be concretized through their imminent sharing of the same woman. Incensed by this dig at his masculinity, his prerogative as husband, Nico hits out at Gabi. But the insinuation plays out less as an affront than as a charged, homoerotic assertion of the close bond between the brothers, an impression that is reinforced when the scuffle ends in a tender embrace. Gabi says to him with quiet intensity: “See, it is



Figure 12.1

The Beginning and the End: Ignacia and Gabriel.

easier being a martyr: you get off easy. Me, I've made myself crazy with your dreams." As they lean against a mirrored wall, Nico kisses his brother's cheeks with febrile passion (see Figure 12.2). In consecrating Gabi as something of a super-ego, Nico has placed his own self under erasure: his brother is now the locus of his libidinal investments—indeed, of all his aspirations. In Ripstein's imploding scenario, bourgeois expectations appear to unsettle the bourgeois family. Or, perhaps more to the point, the tenuousness of bourgeois structures is the measure of an incomplete individuation: incomplete because a fixation on individualism has to contend with local, "southern" values that continue to privilege the family over the self. Hence Gabriel, the singular embodiment of bourgeois aspirations, feels trapped by the familial investments; his siblings, in placing all their hope in him, cease to be individualized subjects.

If Neeta, the female protagonist of *The Cloud-Capped Star*, also endures a similar attenuation of subjectivity, Ghatak deflects attention away from the psychosexual dimensions of the narrative to elicit—and mourn—an increasingly precarious sensuousness. For Ghatak, the tender and caring potentialities of the family have faded under the atomizing, alienating pressures of modern life. Neeta is undoubtedly closer to Shankar, her elder



Figure 12.2

The Beginning and the End: The passion of the Botero brothers.

brother, than to her beau, Sanat: here, this bond between siblings points to a fundamental human intimacy increasingly superceded by modern notions of romantic love between a conjugal couple.⁴⁸ When Shankar tells his bread-earning sister that he is ashamed of his (and the family's) continuing dependence on her, Neeta tells him: "I love you all madly." If this unconditional love seems pure and disinterested, it also indexes a sensuous, all-embracing abandon that appears thoroughly out of date and that pushes against modern social norms and kinship configurations. Within contemporary society's calculating ambit, this is an untenable form of love—a bit out of joint, a bit queer, even a bit disconcerting. To underscore the untimely nature of her affections, Ghatak places Neeta in a timeless, epic register drawn from Hindu mythology: she represents the archetype of the nurturing mother (we learn that she shares her birthday with Jagadhhatri, the avatar of the mother goddess that "holds" or preserves the universe). Her mother's cruel, embittered, and conniving disposition, as her sister's self-centered opportunism, brings out Neeta's tender benevolence.

Which leads us to the second point. While the "partition trilogy" abounds in epic and mythological allusions as shared horizons of sense-making and knowing, Ghatak also mobilizes a Brechtian epic frame, extending private emotions and dramas into an ever-widening intimation of the social. When Shankar announces to the family that Neeta is gravely sick, their senile father shouts out: "I accuse!" The camera frames him in the foreground, from the back of his head, his arm outstretched and fingers pointing ahead toward the rest of the family. Shankar, standing in the background of the frame with his face toward the father and the camera, anxiously asks, "Whom?" In response, the old man, now in frontal medium shot, manages only a feeble, "Nobody," as his face quivers and his arm comes trembling down. Neeta's suffering points beyond her exploitive family to an entire social system of indifference and injustice. Working under the sign of globalization, Ripstein connects the mutant family fold to even wider networks and hierarchies. With his excellent grades in college, Gabriel hopes to secure a Ford Foundation scholarship to study in the USA. But as his professor brusquely tells him, academic performance does not ensure an automatic passage to a transnational elite class: grades must be backed by recommendations from influential quarters. There are palpable structural constraints to the capacity to aspire and to succeed, marking the limits of modernity's egalitarian promises in the global South. His dreams dashed to the ground, Gabriel takes out his frustration on Natalia, his fiancée, at a party thrown by her parents to celebrate his expected scholarship. Following her into a bathroom, he forces himself on her, taking her virginity with his fingers in a grotesque play on her desire to remain "hand-holding sweethearts" until their marriage. Not only does Ripstein subject us to the visceral aspect of the violation in one long

take—blood trickles down Gabi’s arm as Natalia sobs in pain and mortification—but he also pushes his audience into a situation at once upsetting and iconically arousing: the shot ends with a close-up of an abject and simpering Natalia kneeling before Gabi’s crotch as he opens his fly. Even as one recoils from the abusive situation, one is made to feel eerily complicit—not unlike Nicolás who, in the end, will have to assume responsibility for Gabi’s transgressions.

melodrama: epic apertures

The unnervingly implicating address of Ripstein’s and Ghatak’s films arises from their overt melodramatic components. Primary among these is the figure of the tormented woman: Neeta, Mireya, and Natalia in the films that are the focus of this chapter, but also Seeta of *Subarnarekha* and La Manuela, the transvestite prostitute of *Place Without Limits* (1978). One might add to this list the conflicted and beleaguered mothers from *The Cloud-Capped Star* and *The Beginning and the End*. Together, they hold up the characterization of melodrama as the mise-en-scène of female suffering: the sheer performativity producing an embodied awareness of the social oppression of women, raising the possibility of the subversion of hetero-patriarchal structures. The patriarchs are either absent (Papa Botero dies at the beginning of the film, leaving the family penniless), or falling apart (Neeta’s father breaks his leg and begins to lose his senses, leaving him unable to support his family); Shankar, Sanat, Montu, Guama, Nico, and Gabi are all men in crisis who depend on, or are regulated by, the women in their lives. More importantly, to track Mireya’s gradual abjection or Neeta’s slide toward a fatal disease is to become politicized through a kind of voyeuristic experiencing and enduring. Even if the resolution does not dislodge the status quo at the level of the narrative, one is left with a searing sense of loss, distress, even rage. It is not insignificant that Mireya, Seeta, and Manuela are prostitutes, women (or transvestites) forced by circumstance to sell their sexual services, thereby becoming commodities within a phallogocentric exchange economy. (One might add to this list Guama’s “woman,” and Nadia from Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers*.) While Neeta does not take to prostitution literally, she too sells her labor to support the family she loves so “madly,” and comes to bear the mark of her toil on her consumptive body. Eventually Mireya and Seeta kill themselves, while La Manuela’s macho lover murders her to “prove” his own masculinity. And yet, Ripstein and Ghatak’s women do not fit the part of the silent victim. After César abandons her, Mireya does not wallow in her despondence; instead, she becomes a desiring subject without many internalized inhibitions. She figures out a way to assuage her carnal needs while earning a living: a remarkably practical “solution” to her situation. Toward the end of *The Cloud-Capped Star*, when Shankar visits Neeta at the sanatorium in the mountains and attempts to regale her

with chitchat about the family's new-found affluence and their infant nephew's exploits, she suddenly cries out: "But I did want to live!" This sudden outburst from his soft-spoken sister takes Shankar by surprise. As the camera swirls around them, capturing the mountains in a 360-degree pan, Neeta's heart-rending cry reverberates in all directions. It is possible to read this defiant and melodramatic expression of her desire to live as Ghatak's protest against the national partition: just as tuberculosis has ravaged Neeta's body, communal rancor has eaten into the ideal of a unified nation-state. Filmmaker Kumar Shahani takes it even further, locating in this scene a critical impulse that engages not only the history that the truncation of 1947 launches, but targets all of Indian modernity for its capitulation to indigenous and Western structures of domination:

In an atmosphere where our cultural attitudes and artifacts have been identified with the objectification of effete feudal Brahminism and European humanism inflicted on us by the colonials, Ritwikda's work is the *violent assertion of our identity*. It is the cry of the dying girl in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* [*The Cloud-Capped Star*] that echoes through the hills, our right to live.⁴⁹

Here, in a decidedly "un-Brechtian" Brechtian move, melodrama is articulated with an epic lens, telescopically opening out a critical perspective from a rather contained family drama.

The Beginning and the End ends with a close-up freeze-frame of Mireya's high-heeled red shoes, a cinematic icon that has come to connote female sexuality and often an excess of it, with prostitution as its limit-case. Here Ripstein situates his work in relation to a common cinematic convention, inviting reflection on its global recurrence. He wants to focus beyond the image itself, to the transcultural reification of underlying circuits of exchange and power. The semantic charge of the red shoes derives from its status as the material trace of sexualized and commoditized social relations. Interestingly, in the last scene of *The Cloud-Capped Star*, Shankar looks on as a young woman tries to fix her torn sandal and then walks away with a self-conscious smile. She is a lower-middle-class woman, not unlike Neeta in her bearings, possibly forced to work long hours because of post-Partition economic deprivation. "Prostitution" hovers mainly as a figurative frame for the gendered overdetermination of labor (Ghatak himself renders the implicit connection explicit in *Subarnarekha*). We are reminded of a similar moment at the beginning of the film, when Neeta's sandal strap breaks and she drags her feet to work; and yet, instead of getting herself a new pair, she spends her hard-earned money on a sari for Geeta and a pair of soccer boots for Montu. Again, this recursive structure points to the many young women who work selflessly to support their families and then have to face moral injunctions from the very social structures that exploit

them.⁵⁰ The shoe/sandal icon emerges as something of a Lacanian *point de capiton*: that which arrests the endless slide of signifiers and stops the narrative flow from conjuring up just yet another naturalized, seemingly inevitable “slice of real life” scenario. It is one of those hooks with which Ghatak and Ripstein compel their viewers to acknowledge the sociocultural production of anchoring values and institutions that trap and crush individuals with contradictory demands (Mireya and Natalia’s chastity, prospects of Neeta’s marriage and her mother’s fears of losing the family bread-winner, Geeta’s predatory moves on her sister’s beau). And in one brief but piercing moment, when a distraught Gabriel begins to put on his dead sister’s red shoes, any promise of immunity a gendered subjectivity might hold falls irrevocably apart: women and men alike are entangled in this epic psychosis.

Both filmmakers make the social contradictions palpable in terms of imaginative formalist *mise-en-scènes*, their bravura stylistic flourishes congealing into identifiable authorial signatures. Ghatak’s refugee family lives in a squatter settlement known as Nabajiban (New Life) Colony: their rudimentary dwelling is made out of mud, bamboo, and straw. Depth of field photography, high- and low-angle shots, and use of wide-angle lens are complemented by ingenious perspective, framing, and editing to achieve an electrifying expressivity. Conflicts and tensions are innate to the individual shots: tensions between bodies caught in strange and continually shifting proxemic relations; between empty space and voluminous bodies; between crowded bodies and the space around them caught in deep focus; between what is visible and what is blocked from view; between shadow and light. In most indoor scenes, light falls directly on odd corners, surfaces and objects, leaving the more significant parts of the frame in a hallucinatory haze traversed by chiaroscuro lattices. This intense *mise-en-scène* marks a penumbra between the standard poles of objective reality and subjective interiority, mind and body, inviting a more sensuous awareness on the part of the spectators. The shots are then put together eschewing the typical master shot and dismissing any naturalized sense of spatial relation; juxtaposing deep focus, wide-angle shots, and crowded medium shots with extreme close-ups, producing disorientation and an unsettling sense of doom; music not only acting as a sound bridge across shots but carrying the shots on its melodic and rhythmic arc.⁵¹

To take a concrete example: when Shankar returns home having achieved success in Bombay, he enters Neeta’s room to catch her concealing something under her pillow. Since she had tried to hide a love letter from him in an earlier scene, Shankar excitedly tussles with her to find out her secret: a bloodied handkerchief, the trace of her consumptive lungs, falls to the ground. As a male voice breaks into a plaintive melody on the soundtrack (since the nondiegetic music is quite like Shankar’s own singing, it becomes a subjective cue to his state of mind), we see a close-up of the

handkerchief on the floor; then a low-angle medium shot of Shankar, looking down (his face is in the shadow, while light falls on the thatched wall and roof behind him); then a remarkable close-up of Neeta's face in profile, taken from behind her, as she rises from the bed—her body moving across the frame from the lower left corner to the upper right corner (breaking the 180-degree rule in relation to the previous shot); another close-up of Neeta, this one also in profile but from the front, her face traversing the frame from lower right to upper left (clearly, the 180-degree rule has been broken again); finally, a close-up of Shankar's perturbed and sorrowful face looking down at her, as the singing gives way to contemplative strains on the *sarod* (the 180-degree rule having been broken yet again) (see Figure 12.3). Conventions of classical continuity editing are flouted repeatedly to produce an “impossible” location for the spectators in between the two characters, emplacing and embedding them corporeally in the unfolding drama. As the mobilization of conflict within and between shots would suggest, Ghatak counts Eisenstein as his main cinematic influence, invoking the greatest classical Sanskrit *litterateur* Kalidasa to salute the Russian filmmaker/theorist as “the Kalidasa of cinema.”⁵² In an essay titled “Dialectics in Film,” Ghatak expresses his keen interest in the dialectical approach to reality and its representation.⁵³ He also aligns himself with the cultural politics of Brecht, two of whose plays—*Caucasian Chalk Circle* and



Figure 12.3

The Cloud-Capped Star: Shankar discovers Neeta's secret.

Galileo—he translated into Bengali. The Brechtian–Eisensteinian influences transform the loaded melodramatic moments in Ghatak’s films: these moments mark his absolute refusal to resolve spatially, and thus to contain and domesticate, contradictions that have no easy solutions.

Ripstein works with similar formal strategies at the level of the mise-en-scène, but not at the level of editing: the main difference of his films from Ghatak’s is the preponderance of very long takes. As Ripstein himself states in a 1999 interview: “I have found lately that my voice is clearer with very long takes. By breaking from the tradition of montage and eliminating point-of-view shots, long takes help develop my characters and create the atmosphere I want to convey.”⁵⁴ The real-time denouement of these prolonged takes makes an entire sensorial universe accessible to the spectators: they are literally compelled to endure the action. The emplacement of spectators is now a function of their chronotopic immersion in a carefully orchestrated *plan séquence* or sequence shot, whose sheer durational and experiential integrity promotes such immersion. The haptic materiality of various spaces—the tawdry clutter of the Botero family’s low-ceiling basement apartment (the crammed beds and couch; Mireya’s sewing machine and work table covered with fabric; kitsch illuminated by the light coming through the small window: a jug, a crucifix, an old television), or the shabby ambience of the night club where Guama works (the gaudy carousel and lights, the cheap tables and chairs, the hard-boiled regulars and the overly made-up hookers)—are vivified in these long takes. Consider an extreme example: the nine-plus minutes shot at the end of *The Beginning and the End*, in the course of which both Mireya and Gabriel succumb to the confounding pressures of their déclassé lives and commit suicide. Much of the sequence takes place inside a bathhouse, where Mireya takes her clients. As the guy at the desk offers her the “usual” room, Gabi begins to fathom the extent of her involvement in prostitution. He follows his sister in bewilderment up two flights of stairs and a corridor to a tiny cubicle of a room with a narrow bed—one of many such rooms lining the corridor. The use of Steadicam keeps us close to the characters and lends a freewheeling mobility to the shot that becomes increasingly gestural as it progresses toward its cathartic end. Gabi sits down on the bed; Mireya begins to pull down her panties out of habit but stops as she catches her brother’s shocked face. Next she starts slashing her wrist as he gets up and stands at the door, clutching onto her red shoes; she waves him goodbye; their labored breathing on the soundtrack; Gabi closes the door behind him, walks backwards into the closed door of another room, then walks away from the camera as it follows him down the corridor, glancing back with mounting terror on his face; walks back toward Mireya’s room but then turns abruptly onto another corridor. He saunters into a large bathroom with adjoining sauna; a few men in towels lounge around in the steamed-up space and watch him in silence as he sits down on a bench;

in his state of panic, he takes off one of his boots and begins to put on Mireya's high heels; a man sits close to him, leaning forward in a not-so-veiled gesture of sexual solicitation. At this point, a percussive music begins, accompanied by a male chorus uttering a chant that sounds more like a syncopated collective exhalation: in the intensely homosocial space of the bathhouse, male desire transcends heteronormativity to find more primal expressions.⁵⁵ Gabi gets up, walks away from the guy and out of the bathroom; sees a custodian discover Mireya's body and run to get help; stands for a few seconds at the door, taking in his sister's dead body, a pool of blood on the floor. Closing the door obsessively, as if to shut out the horror, Gabi keeps walking around disconsolately, goes up to the next floor, stumbles around gasping and sobbing, then climbs another set of stairs to what looks like the roof of the building. He walks past brightly colored glass panes and corrugated walls into a laundry room with large water tanks and pipes; sits down, takes out a blade as camera closes in on him, then slashes his wrist—once, twice, as the camera pans down on Mireya's shoes on the floor. Cut to a blank screen, then a still close-up of the shoes.

The striking music during the last five minutes of this long take, which builds up to an inexorable crescendo underscoring Gabi's psychotic unraveling—his failure to hold onto his individualism in complete disregard of the catastrophic consequences of his ambitions—is a piece titled *La Valse des muls* by the French industrial music group Tambours du Bronx. The genre of industrial music, at least in its original form, is inspired by the “found” ambient clang and drone of modern industrial centers: it seeks to capture a wider social atmospherics, the rhythms and textures of contemporary industrial life. Here, in the final sequence of *The Beginning and the End*, in the bare and labyrinthine bathhouse, it strikes a rather different tone from the mellifluous operatic music heard earlier, such as the excerpt from Delibes' *Lakmé* that the Botero patriarch used to play for his children. Gabriel's ability to identify the Delibes piece convinces the industrialist Luján of the former's cultured upbringing, his elite pedigree, prompting the latter to induct the young man into his *grupo clandestino* of opera aficionados and to become his benefactor. This conflation between cultural capital and economic class indexes one of the many ironies one might face in climbing the social ladder: ultimately, the refinement of opera cannot deliver Gabi from his petty-prole quagmire. Now, in the final moments of the film, the “dance of the deadbeats” provides the sonic matrix—hollow, eerie, and engulfing—in which our protagonist drowns along with all his aspirations.

In Ghatak, we encounter some of the most inspired instances of the use of acoustic elements for melodramatic accentuation. The famous Eisenstein–Pudovkin–Alexandrov manifesto on sound–image relations—“Only the contrapuntal use of sound vis-à-vis the visual fragment of montage will open up new possibilities for the development and perfection of

montage”—gets elaborated to stunning effect.⁵⁶ In a scene much derided for its overt theatricality, Neeta senses the presence of another woman in Sanat’s apartment, and walks out in quiet dismay. As she slowly comes down the stairs in medium close-up, we hear sounds of whiplash on the soundtrack. This acoustic emphasis is repeated twice—each time to convey a burgeoning sense of betrayal and disillusionment that engulfs the entire post-Partition milieu. Earlier, when Sanat visits Neeta’s family, her mother comes out of the kitchen to greet him; we hear a crackling noise—ostensibly oil splattering in the wok, or water boiling over—energizing the off-screen space. Later, when Sanat and Neeta go for a walk, the mother anxiously looks on, worried that her breadwinning daughter is about to marry and to abandon the family: the same crackling noise is reproduced, now dissociated from the kitchen. Repeated yet again with the mother’s face in close-up as Sanat chats with Neeta in her room, this recurring acoustic embellishment unifies the disparate scenes into one unfolding anxiety. The kitchen sound not only captures the ambience of a Bengali household but also serves as the acoustic approximation of an idiomatic vernacular expression that describes a soul ravaged by life’s hardships as one “burnt to cinders” (here, the mother’s self-interested acerbity).

The father, as played by Bijon Bhattacharya, is unmistakably a East Bengali refugee: his accented melodeclamatory enunciation and his bearing, while often dismissed as overacting, communicate not only regional speech patterns but also a world of suffering. Dislocated, disoriented, and increasingly helpless, his incantatory recitations of the romantic poets are his desperate attempts to hold onto a fast-receding sentience and life. Bhattacharya, who, like Ghatak, came from the Bengali stage associated with the Indian People’s Theatre Association (the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India), developed an acting style that channels Brechtian *gestus*. In many ways, he incarnates the emotional core of Ghatak’s Partition trilogy, essaying memorable refugee roles in all three films. In spite of the dementia, his character is allowed the most articulate position in *The Cloud-Capped Star*—evident in the sequence of Geeta’s wedding to Sanat. As Neeta presides over the arrangements for her sister’s wedding to her ex-beau, the father appears devastated by the underlying duplicity. With self-lacerating prescience, he observes that in the old days, young girls were married off to much older men; now that we have become “civilized” and “modern,” we educate our daughters and then exploit them endlessly, wringing the life out of them.

This charged critical introspection about a putatively reformulated hetero-patriarchy follows another loaded scene between Neeta and her mother, a nondiegetic folk song providing the bridge and situating the father’s reflection. The mother, who tacitly supports the nuptials in complete disregard of Neeta’s desires, can barely look at her; all the same, she talks Neeta into giving up her share of the meager family jewels for her

sister's benefit. An instrumental tune starts in the thick of this awkward transaction: a melancholy melody sung at weddings, when the young bride is about to leave her parents for her in-laws' house. Here, it becomes a searing comment on Neeta's unwed status and on the opportunistic abrogation of socially reinforced heteronormative expectations constitutive of her subjectivity. Later, the melody returns: a female chorus is heard on the soundtrack as the consumptive Neeta coughs up blood, and again when she is about to leave home in pouring rain. Ghatak's trilogy abounds in such quotations of folk songs and phrases connected to the material practices of Bengali life: much like the allusion to the Vedas, the two epics and the mythologies, these culturally specific citations set up an epic relay of exchanges, with the various fragments and levels commenting back on, and amplifying, each other. Ripstein, too, sets up a similar critical frame in *The Beginning and the End*, taking on local cultural institutions and obsessions. Parents keep telling their daughters that they must "marry in white," i.e. as virgins, but circumstances often thwart this dream. Mireya makes wedding dresses for others but has to give up her own hope of marriage. At one point, she puts on a white bridal veil and keeps looking at herself in the mirror. When she learns about Cesar's fiancée, Mireya angrily dips the white dress she has tailored for the fiancée in fish blood. Natalia marries Nico, but not before she loses her virginity to Gabi.

Both Ghatak and Ripstein take melodrama's logic of the "not yet" or the "too late" to an extreme. Neeta finally sees Shankar achieve success; as their father observes, she has enabled her family members to "stand on their feet." However, she can no longer enjoy the security and comfort that affluence brings. Just as Gabriel wins the support of an important industrialist, the kind of backing necessary for success in life, Mireya gets arrested for prostitution, compromising his and the family's prospects. These films offer no simple resolutions, no convenient closing off of social contradictions: the constitutive deferrals and delays of melodrama are now stretched out ad infinitum. In both films the melodramatic becomes an epic aperture, opening onto an entire social field beyond narrative peripeteia, beyond the characters' fortunes and despairs. The social here is a bit like off-screen space: a sensorium that is tangible even when not explicitly visible within the frame. Mobilizing critical acuity, haptic, and affective apprehension, the films intimate—make us sense and feel—their material and historical contexts. As Raymond Bellour observes of *The Cloud-Capped Star* (an observation that I think holds also for *The Beginning and the End*), it is a film that we have to "accompany."⁵⁷

translocal intimations, historical difference

My central argument in this essay, that the epic melodrama is a figural form that, in its broad concerns and its recurrence across the global South,

plots a translocal geography of material-sensate experiences, bears a certain resonance with Fredric Jameson's detection of a geopolitical aesthetic in post-1960s cinema. Jameson's 1992 book, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, begins with the sentence: "The films discussed here have been selected with a view towards an unsystematic mapping or scanning of the world system itself."⁵⁸ He moves from Hollywood conspiracy films to post-Nouvelle Vague Godard, from Soviet magical realism (Alexander Sokurov) to the Taiwanese New Cinema (Edward Yang) and the categorically reflexive work of Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik: the objective is to produce an "unsystematic"—fragmentary, imaginative, allegorical—plotting of "the underlying systemic reality" that remains largely opaque to cognition because of its scale, complexity, and dispersion.⁵⁹ Here, Jameson follows a Lukácsian–Brechtian–Benjaminian genealogy to develop an epic notion of allegory for the contemporary conjuncture, an allegorical approach he calls "cognitive mapping." What inspires such a move is the recognition of a "geopolitical unconscious" at the heart of cultural production in various parts of the globe. In a characteristically totalizing gesture, Jameson claims: "all thinking today is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such."⁶⁰

Jameson's argument is convincing to a point. His insight that a geopolitical dimension now infiltrates and informs local consciousness, so that "national allegory" now gets "refashion[ed] . . . into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-world," is particularly illuminating (perhaps with the proviso that for the medium of cinema, a global sensibility was at work from its inception).⁶¹ His methodology is provocative: articulating local, seemingly unrelated cultural impulses into a tentative mapping, thereby "allow[ing] the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery."⁶² What distinguishes each of these "landscapes" from the earlier moment of national allegories is the remarkable "fluidity" with which "questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall": in other words, these local cultural "landscapes" now become epic apertures onto global constellations.⁶³

However, Jameson's investment in mapping a totality, signaled here in his repeated invocations of "the world system," leads to a bracketing of historical difference. I want to get to this point via an exegetical detour, a consideration of the curious position that melodrama occupies in his work. While the category is not listed in the index to *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, it appears at least six times in the book. Each of these references makes sense in the context of the specific analysis; taken together, a certain pattern emerges, for each occurrence has to do with some kind of reinvention, diminution, or even overcoming of melodrama. For instance, "the recourse to the stock languages of older melodrama is an immediately identifiable sign of failure or of the admission of defeat."⁶⁴ Or, "the spectacle of a kind of chamber music in the realm of melodrama, a remarkable *Kammerspiel*

from which a whole range of brassy instruments is excluded,” producing “a remarkable diminution of effect, which dialectically transforms such limits into a whole new positive rather than privative type of representation.”⁶⁵ Or, “the stuff of melodrama which can here exceptionally be reinvented, in a non-melodramatic way, on the occasion of multi-levelled textual reflexivity.”⁶⁶ The epic optic that Jameson conjures up in his “geopolitical aesthetic” is predicated on the “sublimation” of “all the grossness of content” entailed in “garden variety melodrama” into a pure formalism of “sheer syntax.”⁶⁷

In Ghatak, as in Ripstein, “the stuff of melodrama” is what engenders reflexivity, “grossness of content” is married to form: one cannot be separated from the other. This inseparability is central to the epic melodrama. Jameson is able to unhinge one from the other since, for him, contemporary world history unfolds as a singular modernity.⁶⁸ Historical difference marks a temporary stage on the road to an eventually globalized consciousness: melodrama is the index of this transitional contingency, to be overcome in time by a modernist, reflexive formalism. Thus the “variety of forms and form-problems” that he sees from 1970s Hollywood to 1980s Taiwan or Philippines “is not a random variety” but, rather, a measure of uneven development.⁶⁹ This “developmental” or “uneven-developmental” rhetoric remains central to Jameson’s understanding of a geopolitical aesthetic: he thus sees Edward Yang’s film *Terrorizer* (1986) as a mark of the “belated emergence of a kind of modernism in the modernizing Third World, at a moment when the so-called advanced countries are themselves sinking into full postmodernity.”⁷⁰ Postmodern Hollywood and at-long-last-modern Taiwanese “New” Cinema thus appear concurrently in this spatial schema. Notwithstanding his considered qualifications as in “so-called advanced countries,” Jameson subjects his spatial mapping to a neo-Marxist periodizing imperative, reproducing an archaic distortion. As Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, have pointed out, such cognitive acrobatics rehash a paradigm of world history in which “Third World” countries are forever consigned to “the waiting room of History.”⁷¹ I have argued elsewhere that this understanding of history is inherently melodramatic, since it turns certain populations into underdogs, who are always delayed on the road to advancement, always forced to play catch-up. Melodrama is thus structural to the narrative of world history, its constitutive condition.⁷²

Jameson refers to the First World–Third World polarization, the “Cold War division,” and the new “triumvirate of superstates (the US, Europe and Japan)” as the archaic categories that cannot capture the new world system. Even allowing for the passage of time (he missed out on the emergence of China, the so-called BRIC countries [Brazil, Russia, India, China], or the global Islamic alliance), his categories remain of “northern” origin and salience: he does not consider South–South collaborations or the Non-Aligned Movement (of which the Bandung Conference of 1955 remains

only one, if iconic, moment). He thus overlooks the possibility of translocal imaginaries and cultural-political coalitions emerging from the global South: Yang and Tahimik matter only as far as they instantiate the penetration of the South by an already antiquated modernism. In contrast, the works of Ghatak and Ripstein (and Mahfouz and Visconti) constitute a geography of affinities and intimacies arising from certain experiential commonalities across decades. My point is not to disavow the historicity of their films but to complicate the “singular modernity” thesis in terms of their embodied *and* reflexive engagements with the differential, overlapping, even parallel experiences of modernity. They remind us that in spite of the universalized promises and aspirational horizons of modernity, the production and continuation of global inequities is necessary to global capital. The disjunctive spaces of modernity, such as the global South, index not so much the stages of a unitary process of capitalist development as concurrent and co-dependent spaces of capital. The epic melodrama is that contemporary figural form which purveys a cine-map of these spatialized historical differences.

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notes

1. Conversation with Arturo Ripstein, Santa Barbara, 2002.
2. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, “The Epic Melodrama,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 25–26 (December 1993): 55–70.
3. Vivian Sobchak, “‘Surge and Splendor’: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic,” *Representations*, 29 (winter, 1990): 24–49; p. 36; emphases in original.
4. Sobchak, “Surge and Splendor,” p. 41.
5. Sobchak, “Surge and Splendor,” p. 44.
6. See Louise Cowan, “The Epic as Cosmopoesis,” in Larry Allums and Louise Cowan (eds.), *The Epic Cosmos* (Dallas, Tex.: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture Publications, 2000), pp. 1–25.
7. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3–40.
8. György Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and Gyorg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 28–59.
9. See the various essays in *Screen*, 15 (2) (summer 1974), especially Colin MacCabe, “Realism and Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses” (pp. 7–27) and Stephen Heath, “Lessons from Brecht” (pp. 103–128).
10. Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (1949), in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (eds.), *Marxist Literary Theory* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell), pp. 107–135; p. 128.

11. Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," pp. 126–127.
12. Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," p. 128.
13. To take just one example of Eisenstein's invocations of "genuine emotions" and "real compositions": "This is the secret of the genuinely emotional affect of real composition." Here, writing about the famous "Battle on the Ice" episode of *Alexander Nevsky*, Eisenstein goes on to stress the precise temporal correspondence between the "tangle of passions which originally designed the compositional scheme of the work" and the emotion of the spectator induced by the unfolding of the sequence: "Employing for source the structure of human emotion, it unmistakably appeals to emotion, unmistakably arouses the complex of those feelings that gave birth to the composition." Sergei Eisenstein, "The Structure of the Film," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leda (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1949), pp. 150–178; p. 153, emphases in original. In contrast, Eisenstein is critical of the falsity of German Expressionism ("this combination of silent hysteria, parti-colored canvases, daubed flats, painted faces, and the unnatural broken gestures and actions of monstrous chimaeras"), which never appealed to a Soviet revolutionary consciousness: "our spirit urged us towards life, amidst the people—into the surging actuality of a regenerating country." Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leda (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1949), pp. 195–255; p. 203. Eisenstein's position on embodied responses to cinema remained, at best, conflicted. Deleuze is correct in claiming that for the filmmaker-theorist, "'intellectual cinema' has as correlate 'sensory thought' or 'emotional intelligence,' and is worthless without it." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 159. However, ultimately for Eisenstein, while the sensory priming achieved through Griffith's judicious parallel editing (say, switching between "the terror of the besieged" and the "ride of the rescuers") multiplied the emotional charge of a scene of dramatic rescue, the effect remained primarily a psychosomatic matter of "quantitative accumulation." In contrast, "we sought for and found in juxtapositions more than that—a qualitative leap" that was, no doubt, achieved in the mind. Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," p. 239, emphases in original.
14. Thomas Elsaesser, "From Anti-illusionism to Hyper-realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film," in Pia Kleber and Colin Visser (eds), *Re-interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 170–185.
15. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In] Credulous Spectator," *Art & Text*, 34 (spring 1989): 31–45; Miriam Hansen, "America, Paris and the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity," in Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (eds.), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 362–402; Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London: Verso, 2007).
16. Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity*, 6 (2) (April 1999): 59–77.
17. Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
18. Sobchak, "What My Fingers Knew," *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 53–84;

p. 57, emphasis added. The phenomenology that Sobchak espouses is not the transcendental and idealist phenomenology of universal, “fixed essences” but Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology, a materialist paradigm that approaches experience and its meaning as “spatially and temporally embodied, lived, and valued by an objective subject” and, therefore, “always already qualified by the mutable specificities and constraints of history and culture.” Vivian Sobchak, “Introduction,” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 1–10; p. 2. For Sobchak, then, embodiment is “a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble*. Thus we matter and we mean through processes and logics of sense-making that owe as much to our carnal existence as they do to our conscious thought” (*Carnal Thoughts*, p. 4).

19. Sobchak, “Introduction,” p. 8.
20. Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, 44 (4) (summer 1991): 2–13.
21. Williams, “Film Bodies,” p. 6.
22. Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in Nick Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 42–88; p. 47.
23. Sobchak, “Introduction,” p. 2.
24. Williams, “Film Bodies,” pp. 5, 4, 2.
25. Williams, “Film Bodies,” p. 2.
26. See, for instance, J. Hoberman, “Mexico’s Maestro of the Feel-Bad Pities His Monsters,” *The Village Voice*, March 29, 2005, available online at <http://radio.villagevoice.com/2005-03-29/screens/mexico-s-maestro-of-the-feel-bad-pities-his-monsters> (accessed January 12, 2009). Jorge Fons quoted in Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896–2004* (London: McFarland & Company, 2005), p. 227.
27. Sadoul’s letter from February 1965 is quoted in Bengali translation in Parthapratiim Bandyopadhyay, “Filmey Melodrama: Ritwik Kumar Ghatak,” in *Ritwik o Tar Chhobi*, edited by Rajat Roy (Calcutta: Annapurna Pustak Mandir, 1983), p. 81.
28. Quoted in Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar (eds.), *Ritwik Ghatak: Arguments/Stories* (Bombay: Screen Unit, 1987), p. 103.
29. See the discussion of the Fernández-Figueroa style (comprising deep focus photography, high-contrast lighting, oblique perspective, low-angle shots and “Figueroa skies”) in Charles Ramirez Berg, “The Cinematic Invention of Mexico: The Poetics and Politics of the Fernández-Figueroa Style,” in Chon Noriega and Steven Ricci (eds.), *The Mexican Cinema Project* (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1994), pp. 13–24. Carlos Monsiváis, “Mythologies,” in Paulo Antonio Paranagua (ed.), *Mexican Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), pp. 117–127.
30. Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2006), p. 107.
31. Sergio de la Mora, “A Career in Perspective: An Interview with Arturo Ripstein,” *Film Quarterly*, 52 (4) (summer, 1999): 2–11; p. 11. The filmmaker continues, “This is the most atrocious happy family ever depicted on film. [. . .] This is a perfect family and the ending is a comment on life, on my country, on reality, and on movies. My standpoint in this film is to destroy

- our tradition and build another which can be seen from a different end and form a different perspective” (de la Mora, “A Career in Perspective,” p. 11). See also the discussion of the 1933 original and Ripstein’s remediation in Chapter 1 of Andrea Noble, *Mexican National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 32–47.
32. Many Indians settle their dilemmas by asking, what would Seeta or Arjuna do in a similar situation? Perhaps the most salient instance of the epics being a part of contemporary lifeworlds is the way in which the *Bhagavadgita*, a segment of the *Mahabharata*, shape contemporary notions of duty and karma in India and beyond.
 33. Ritwik Ghatak, “Music in Indian Cinema and the Epic Approach,” in *Rows and Rows of Fences* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2000), p. 21. Originally published in *Artist*, 1 (1) (1963).
 34. This “absence” is, no doubt, tied to the destructive nature of Spanish colonialism in Latin America. See Doris Somner’s notion of an “erotics of politics” in her monograph, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993).
 35. Monsiváis, “Mythologies,” p. 117.
 36. Notwithstanding the shift from a primarily production-oriented, Fordist international economic system to a predominantly service-oriented paradigm of flexible accumulation, and the passage from a Cold War-era bipolar world order to a more unipolar geopolitical regime, the aspirations of both national publics remain circumscribed by the broad contours of a global bourgeois modernity. For our purposes, the main distinctions between India in 1960 and Mexico in 1993—besides obvious local cultural inflections—pertain to the expanded access of “Third World” populations to universalized lifestyles and expectations, and to the transformed nature of the national-global interpenetrations. Nevertheless, both changes are often exaggerated. In spite of strong transnational linkages and flows, the world is not rendered “flat”: opportunities and even the “capacity to aspire” remain wildly incommensurate across the globe. As Néstor García Canclini has argued, “questions about identity and the national, the defense of sovereignty, and the unequal appropriation of knowledge and art do not disappear” with globalization; rather, they get “placed in a different register” where their mutual “autonomy” and interactions are “rethought.” Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher Chiappari and Silvia López (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 240–241. My point is that Mexico of the 1990s and India of the 1960s evince enough material and felt similarities to be placed within a continually mutating global South. As we shall see presently, the intent of this topological tethering is not so much to discount historical shifts as to complicate a linear model of world history.
 37. Over a million perished in the communal riots, at least 50,000 women were abducted and raped, and some 12 million people rendered homeless.
 38. Octavio Paz, *In Light of India*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Harvest Books, 1998), pp. 73–75. In fact, mainstream cinema participated in such a project of nation-building with much ambivalence; even commercial films expressed displaced anxieties about the partition in allegorical form (indexical traces of partition, such as documentary footage of refugees; narrative sublimations of the division, such as family feuds; two siblings getting

separated in their infancy, illegitimate pregnancy, disfigured or amnesiac protagonists). Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

39. *The Beginning and the End* appeared around the time that Canada, Mexico, and the USA signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signaling an economic openness to trade and foreign investment that was about to become normative across the planet. Global interest in Mexican culture peaked around this time: Paz won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990; an exhibition of pre-Columbian art opened at the Metropolitan Museum of New York; the international art market was in thrall with Diego Riviera and Frida Kahlo; and the Centre George Pompidou in Paris organized the largest ever retrospective of Mexican cinema. Alfonso Arau's film *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) became the biggest foreign hit in the lucrative US market. In 1993, responding in part to this global prominence of national culture, the Mexican Government awarded lifelong stipends to some sixty eminent intellectuals and artists: the group included Paz, Monsiváis, Fuentes, Márquez, and Ripstein. At the same time, the state under President Salinas inaugurated a period of rapid privatization, which saw the sale of state-owned film studios and production companies and the end of national public television. While this broad context is not explicitly thematized in *The Beginning and the End*, there are intimations of a world-view structured by US-centric global capital: the main protagonist longs for a Ford Foundation grant to go study in the USA; a powerful industrialist encourages his protégé to enter student politics to further the former's class interests; and an individualist calculus gradually supplants all considerations of family and community life.
40. Marvin D'Lugo, "Authorship, Globalization, and the New Identity of Latin American Cinema," in Anthony Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (eds.), *Rethinking Third Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 103–125; p. 111.
41. D'Lugo, "Authorship, Globalization, and New Identity," p. 111.
42. Ritwik Ghatak, "Manabsamaj, Amder Aitihya, Chhabi-kora o Amar Pracheshta," in *Chalachchitra, Manush Ebang Aro Kichhu* (Calcutta: Sandhan Cooperative Publishing, 1975), pp. 3–10; p. 9 (my translation from the Bengali original).
43. See Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, Chapter 5, "Ghatak, Melodrama, and the Restitution of Experience," pp. 200–229.
44. De la Mora, "A Career in Perspective," p. 9.
45. Ritwik Ghatak, "Subarnarekha: Parichalaker Baktabya," in *Chalachchitra, Manush Ebang Aro Kichhu* (Calcutta: Sandhan Cooperative Publishing, 1975), pp. 38–43; p. 41 (my translation from Bengali, emphases added).
46. The incestuous underpinnings remain implicit in Ghatak, unlike in the films of Ripstein—especially his version of *La mujer del Puerto*. This dissimilarity has to do with cultural differences between Mexico and Bengal: one would be hard-pressed to find Bengali film that allude to—let alone explicitly represent—brother–sister incest.
47. See Moinak Biswas, "Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak," *Rouge*, 3, available online at www.rouge.com.au/3/index.html accessed August 8, 2008).
48. This conjugality becomes the locus of a capitalist-consumerist transformation of the national citizenry in mainstream Bengali cinema of the 1950s and 1960s—for instance, in the immensely popular films starring Uttam

- Kumar and Suchitra Sen. See Bhaskar Sarkar, "Bengali Cinema: A Spectral Subnationality," in *Mourning the Nation*, pp. 125–165.
49. Kumar Shahani, "Violence and Responsibility," in Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar (eds), *Ritwik Ghatak: Arguments/Stories* (Bombay: Screen Unit, 1987), p. 59. Emphasis in original.
 50. This gendered duplicity of social structures is subjected to scrutiny in several Bengali films in the 1960s and 1970s: most notably in Satyajit Ray's *The Big City* (1963) and *The Middleman* (1976), and in Mrinal Sen's *And Quiet Rolls the Dawn* (1979).
 51. For a discussion of the linkages between women, landscape, and the sound-track in Ghatak, see Erin O'Donnell, "'Woman' and 'Homeland' in Ritwik Ghatak's Films: Constructing Post-independence Bengali Cultural Identity," *Jump Cut*, available online at www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/ghatak/index.html (accessed February 1, 2009).
 52. Interview in *Film Miscellany* (1976), reprinted in Shampa Banerjee (ed.), *Ritwik Ghatak* (New Delhi: Directorate of Film Festivals, National Film Development Corporation, 1982), p. 100.
 53. Ritwik Ghatak, "Chhabitey Dialectics," in *Chalachchitra, Manush Ebang Aro Kichhu* (Calcutta: Sandhan Cooperative Publishing, 1975), pp. 43–47.
 54. De la Mora, "A Career in Perspective," p. 7.
 55. This point is developed with respect to the homosocial environment of the brothel in *El lugar sin límites* by David William Foster, "Arturo Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* and the Hell of Heteronormativity," in Arturo J. Aldama and Alfred Arteaga (eds), *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender and the State* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 375–387.
 56. Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov, "Statement on Sound," in *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works, Volume 1: Writings, 1922–1934*, edited and translated by Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 113–114.
 57. Raymond Bellour, "The Film We Accompany," *Rouge*, 3 (2004), available online at www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html (accessed August 8, 2008).
 58. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 1.
 59. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 2.
 60. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 4.
 61. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 3.
 62. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 5.
 63. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 5.
 64. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 64.
 65. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 68.
 66. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 133.
 67. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 69.
 68. It is this theme that is developed in his later work, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).
 69. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 1.
 70. Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 1.
 71. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
 72. Bhaskar Sarkar, "The Melodramas of Globalization," *Cultural Dynamics*, 20 (1) (March 2008): 31–51.