Not everyone can be a film critic. It is perhaps true that like literary criticism, one needs to be trained in film criticism as well. However, every work of art elicits a certain response that could be valuable for a discursive engagement, be it appreciation, disapproval, or simply indifference. When we watched Joyraj Bhattacharjee’s film *Ghya Chang Fou*, which was independently made in 2017 but never released commercially, we fell short of words. It left us shocked, mesmerized, baffled, disturbed, scared, embarrassed, aroused, happy, and angry. We simply did not know how to phrase our initial feelings. It took us some time to digest what had happened on the screen in a fully packed auditorium at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata. As we tried to recollect our experiences afterwards, we felt that what we witnessed was not only a dream narrative about the communist revolution, but also a revolution in the history of cinema itself. This is particularly true in the context of West Bengal, India, where communism had a stronghold for over thirty-four years.

The first impression one has on watching *Ghya Chang Fou* is that it is somewhat impenetrable as a narrative. It is risky to make any conclusive statement about a film which offers a dense debate about the past, present, and future of communism on a thematic level, while on a structural level it turns out to be a bold experiment with the cinematic form. But one needs to brave this risky job – not in spite of, but precisely because of, the film’s thematic and structural richness and complexity.

In order to explain the title of the film, one confronts the challenges of translation due to cultural difference. The Bengali expression “Ghya Chang Fou,” which, lexically, could be considered as just two words “Ghyachang” and “Fou,” is actually an example of onomatopoeia. Whereas “Ghyachang” is the sound of cutting something into two with a quick, single blow, “Fou” is the sound of breathing out air to do something – for instance, to extinguish a lamp. In fact, the phrase can be traced back to a song from the 1978 classic Bengali movie *Charmurti*, where “Gho Chang Fou” is chanted during the ritualistic sacrifice of a human being. Arguably, “Ghya Chang Fou” has this connotation of beheading, and thereby almost magically putting an end to something. One reviewer claims that the film is a sociological allegory about beheading Marxism (Nigam). Can one agree with this view? There is only one instance of what could be called a literal “ghyachang” – and that happens after a prolonged BDSM scene between two adult siblings in which the sister suddenly slits her brother’s throat. Further, there is another instance of a sort of murder when the leader of the communist party is shot and he apparently dies – after the director’s voice asks him to die, thus insinuating an authorial intervention as is typical of a postmodern narrative. Then, the leader comes back to life, weirdly claiming that communism, and thereby a communist, never dies. This is merely an act of shooting and not “ghyachang.” Moreover, the dead magically coming back to life could very well be interpreted as an optimistic view that Marxist communism would come back to power in Bengal. Hence, it symbolizes resurrection rather than beheading. Yet, if this instance is symbolic of beheading Marxism, it is only in a purely comic sense. Such comic threads turn Joyraj’s otherwise serious screenplay into a kind of an absurdist narrative.

Perhaps the most confusing scene in the entire film occurs at the very outset. All the characters get into an elevator in the basement of a huge housing complex. They push the button to go to the top floor (and the director ensures that a lot of things happen in the elevator). However, when they leave the elevator they are seen walking through a dark city lane. Did they go up or did they come down...
in the elevator? In the final scene of the movie, the female protagonist goes up in the elevator once again and it seems she has entered the film-editing room. Godard once said that a movie should have a beginning, a middle, and an end – but not necessarily in that order. Joyraj seems to be saying that getting into an elevator to go up might not necessarily take you to the top floor. This sequence could also be read from within a deconstructionist framework whereby the grand narrative of scientism – for instance, the laws of physics regarding motion and space – is challenged. One could also consider this scene as a surrealist moment – you go up to the top floor only to find yourself amidst the advancement of Lenin, Plekhanov, Petrakov and Vera Zasulich, whereby the grand narrative of scientism – for instance, the laws of physics regarding motion and space – is challenged. This entire discourse is, however, placed within a self-critical framework. The communist party, a character argues, cannot just be a forum for debates; organizational plans must be executed. This is Marxian insofar as Marx and later neo-Marxists like Antonio Gramsci focused on a “philosophy of praxis” – philosophers interpreted the world; the point, however, in a sense, Marx implied, don’t just think, act! Slavoj Žižek, very interestingly, turned this dictum upside down by claiming, “don’t act, just think!” (Big Think). For Žižek, who is a self-declared Marxist, communists have been in existence for over a century, but the question is twofold: how have they succeeded, and where have they failed? What explains the rise of rightists all over the world on the very face of leftist politics? Perhaps it is time to rethink Marxism and to make a proper assessment of communism. Joyraj’s film is a solid contribution to this project of reformulating Marxism in times of Donald Trump and Narendra Modi.

A unique critique of communism that the film evokes from the beginning to the end is the relationship between sexuality and revolution. The real trick of capitalism, a character argues by way of alluding to Engels, rests in how family and state, through the ownership of property, control sexual relationships. If revolution means changing everything from the roots, then shouldn’t communism revolutionize sexuality and thereby resist bourgeois repression of sexuality? What should be the approach to sexuality from a communist perspective? Or, does one completely dismiss the question of sexuality and promote, as another character enjoins, a spiritual path as a new way of life? However, what stands out in this context is an extreme form of sexual liberation that is portrayed in detail in the movie. The debates on the relationship between sexuality and revolution eventually lead to one of the most elaborate orgies in cinematic history. While partners are shared as common property, the detailed scene about sexual intercourse between a brother and sister deals a huge blow to conventional bourgeois attempts to control sexuality through various means, including the prohibition of polygamy and incest and the promotion of repressive religious morality. The movie itself becomes an artistic rebellion against the bourgeois.
And then there is the major concern of communism’s relation to violence. One of the characters argues that a revolutionary must soak his hands in the blood of his class-enemy in order to earn that designation. In fact, at the end of the film, this character is killed, his throat slit by his own sister at the climax of a BDSM sequence. The murder of the brother is justified metaphorically by evoking the idea that a revolution sustains only through sacrifice. However, the film also articulates the disturbing thought that communism has cost so much in terms of blood. If we extend this discourse of violence vis-à-vis communism, then those of us who are acquainted with what happened in the infamous incident of Gulag in Russia would feel disturbed.

It is not entirely possible to do a literal reading of Joyraj’s film because it speaks in symbolic and metaphorical terms as well. The big fat candle put at the middle of the dinner table – the venue where all debates take place in the middle of the night – functions as a phallic symbol, indicative of the sexual overtones and undertones which pervade the whole movie. While observing silence for the dead, the characters debate the exact duration of one minute, and all of their watches seem to have stopped. The symbolism of the dysfunctional watch and the collapse of time – from Dali’s Persistence of Memory to Bergman’s Wild Strawberries – has been explored in a number of great works of art in the twentieth century. By linking the temporal symbolism to “Marxist prediction” (the failure of the Communist Party of India [Marxist] to foresee its own decline in West Bengal, for instance), Joyraj adds a new dimension to this coveted artistic motif. And then there is the symbolism of the severed human hands preserved in the refrigerator, which, supposedly, are to be served with butter at the dinner. Can this frozen flesh be explained in terms of cannibalism? Or, by extension, is that how communism has progressed – surviving on the sacrifice of its revolutionaries? Throughout the film, there is also the repeated presence of street dogs. In some shots, the camera deliberately focuses on them for a considerable amount of time. Could one say that the canine world is accommodated within a communist discourse which has traditionally represented the downtrodden from among the humans alone? If yes, then Ghya Chang Fou offers a new form of inclusivist communism.

One could go on and on unpacking the rich thematic complexities of Joyraj’s narrative. However, one needs also to talk about Joyraj’s masterful use of the cinematic form. The most striking aspect of Ghya Chang Fou is its exhaustive use of sound and camera. Žižek once made a very poignant remark about the cinema of David Lynch. “In Lynch’s films,” Žižek stated, “darkness is really dark. Light is really unbearable, blinding light. Fire really hurts, it’s so hot.” (Žižek). The cinema of Joyraj offers an intense experience of events happening not only onscreen, but also as if right in front of our eyes. When the musical scores are played it appears that the audience is witnessing a live musical performance – the sound almost overflows the screen. When the sexual encounters and other scenes are shown, it appears that every sound, every act, every image is performed by flesh and blood humans, right then and there, and not projected on a screen. The scenes are intense, authentic, immediate, and even tactile.

And then there are those wonderfully crafted meta-cinematic moments. The director’s voice intervenes in the narrative on crucial occasions, demanding that the characters perform certain actions as required (as seen in Fig. 1). In addition, when one sees the real-life academician Ben Zacharia and the actor-director Q featured as themselves, one realizes the extent to which the film employs the postmodern techniques of narration by way of breaking the ontological frames of reality and fiction. Further, the film employs a playful use of parody and pastiche – evoking themes ranging from Bollywood movies to videogames – which adds to the effect. One could also mention the element of voyeurism – almost in the way in which Hitchcock uses the technique – as the audience is made to feel that they are peeping into and eavesdropping on events which are being recorded by someone else.

Ghya Chang Fou is an independently made film, funded by some friends and well-wishers. Despite being screened in various international film festivals, the film was never officially released in the commercial theatres. There could be two reasons behind this. One, Joyraj deliberately does not want the film to become a money-minting product. Those who are acquainted with Joyraj’s works know that he consistently promotes an anti-capitalist approach to the dissemination of art. But two, and more significantly, the film demands bold spectatorship. The film can play a trick on the audience by exposing their prejudices which are too easily hidden in the garb of fake progressivism. There is a high chance the audience might feel scandalized by scenes of female masturbation and BDSM shown unabashedly on the screen. The debates on communism might appear very serious, sometimes obscure as well as funny – but a nuanced reading would unfold that Joyraj is opening up possibilities for the regeneration of leftist politics. Furthermore, unlike
an avant-garde work of European high modernism, Joyraj’s work does not insist on alienating the audience by way of demanding the highest level of hermeneutic efficiency. By keeping the audience glued to the screen, by making them experience moments of laughter, embarrassment, blankness, shock, and insight, and with its perfect balance of the serio-comic, the film ultimately becomes a postmodern work of art. *Ghya Chang Fou* is not a regular alternative cinema (a paradoxical term, to be sure) from Bengal. It is ready to set a milestone in cinematic history.

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