

Space, Interiority and Affect in *Charulata* and *Ghare Baire*

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Our experience of the world, as Heidegger pointed out, is incontestably spatial.^[1] It is an experience of bodies, of resistance, distance, proximity. At the same time it involves the ceaseless transformation of space into mental categories, which we use to organize our relationships with others: objects are touched only to be converted into signifying forms. In *The Poetics of Space*, first published in 1957, Gaston Bachelard wrote lyrically about “the topography of our intimate being” in terms of the inhabited spaces of the house, for him a site of memories, dreams, reflections: “A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.”^[2] Bachelard’s excavation of the spatial imaginary, of what he repeatedly calls the oneiric house, organized like an intimate universe from cellar to attic, and stored with the private spaces of corners, nooks, crannies, bedrooms, chests, drawers, wardrobes, constitutes an important moment in western phenomenological discourse. His work became a late-modern classic, influencing postmodernist architecture as well as theoretical and critical studies of literary texts. Yet looking back at this book today, we cannot fail to be struck by the distance that separates the spatial experiences of our own cultural history from the European domestic spaces that form the subject of Bachelard’s rapturous phenomenological celebration. The contrast is particularly visible in texts which seek to negotiate the material content of western modernity within an indigenous idiom of affect.

In a letter written to his wife Mrinalini in 1901, the year he began publishing *Nashtanir*, as well as *Chokher Bali*, in the journal *Bharati*, Rabindranath Tagore wrote: ‘My inmost being continually craves emptiness, not just the emptiness of sky, air and light, but an emptiness within the home, an emptiness of furnishings and arrangements, an emptiness of effort, thought, fuss [*alternatively* – empty of furnishings and arrangements, empty of effort,

thought, fuss].^[3] This desire for the void, for emptiness, might be understood as the longing for absolute space, absolute simplicity or clarity against which the filled and arranged space of our ordinary lives is experienced. It is different, I would argue, from the 'intimate immensity' that Bachelard wrote of in a later chapter of his book, an immensity which corresponds in some measure to European experiences of the sublime.^[4] In an earlier essay on furniture, I have suggested that Rabindranath is above all the writer who, while configuring mental life in terms of physical and metaphorical space, is most distrustful of the restricted, narrow, domestic interiors of the bourgeois house, and that he translates this distrust into a way of understanding or representing character. In his prose fiction as well as in other kinds of writing, Rabindranath not only describes the physical spaces his characters inhabit, but employs spatial images to represent personal or affective life, so that the precise contours of a character's inner life or aspirations may be viewed against their *placing* in a material *habitus* or in the public domain. It is my contention that Ray, who was a careful and perceptive reader of Tagore, made remarkable use of this aspect of Tagore's representational technique, virtually never seeking a simple translation of Tagore's metaphors into visual forms, but substituting them with a range of cinematic frames within which space, interiority, affect and self-image receive distinct treatment.

Space in a literary or visual text may be configured in two ways: as location and as extension, that is as *place* and as *vacancy*. Unsatisfactory though this latter term is, it is the only one I can find to cover not only the notion of emptiness Rabindranath mentions, but also the extensive or expansive space viewed externally as a vista or constituted internally as infinitude, as well as the idea of a *space* as a yet-unfilled category. To take the notion of place first, Rabindranath's characters are located within the domestic or public spaces which contain and therefore *place* them. In this respect they are either bound and held fast by place, which is, we may say, a materially and culturally determined category, or they must traverse it physically. At the

same time, Rabindranath's texts repeatedly refer to a mental or metaphoric space which is accessible to thought or feeling, but which cannot be contained by it. Such space may be viewed as an ideal, like the *bahir* into which Nikhilesh seeks to release Bimala in *Ghare Baire*, or as an infinite solace briefly touched through music or meditation, as with Kumudini in *Jogajog*. In *Nashtanir*, Charu's idleness and loneliness within the inner apartments of their house, while Bhupati, busy with his newspaper, has no time to attend to her, is clearly an effect of place, or of placing. Tagore does not describe the interior of the house apart from a few references to Bhupati's wealth, which would imply opulence, and to architectural features like the verandah. One point that is clearly made, however, is the geographical separation of the inner quarters from the outer rooms of the house where Bhupati and even Amal entertain their guests or attend to their work. Later in the narrative, Bhupati specifically makes the journey into the *antahpur* at unaccustomed hours during the day to seek solace, which he does not obtain, from Charu.

Adjacent to the inner quarters is a plot of waste land, and the first extended treatment of Charu's efforts to amuse herself is through the garden plans she shares with her husband's young cousin Amal, already a resident in the house as he pursues his college studies. It is worth noting that the *antahpur* described far more negatively in *Streer Patra* (written some thirteen years later in 1914, and the first work in which Tagore saw himself as decisively taking the woman's part), lacks even a scrap of waste land, but contains, as here, a solitary tree of no particular ornamental or utilitarian value.^[5] In his 1964 film *Charulata*, Ray decisively omitted the elaborate fancy of the garden and its design, introducing Amal as a newly arrived relative who sits with Charu in a *locus amoenus* somewhere between a garden and a wilderness. But for Charu in *Nashtanir* the idea of the laid out, elaborately planned garden is itself a place of repose and peace. Even unrealized, it becomes a space shared between her and Amal; the fact that it can never be transferred from the imaginary to the real world is no barrier to its conceptualization and

the solace it provides. When the garden is finally abandoned as too ambitious and uneconomic, its place is taken by writing as the intimate, private space of communion between Charu and Amal. The fanciful plans devised for the laying out and beautification of the projected garden and its ornamental pond may remind us of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novel *Krishnakanter Will*, where both pond and garden function within an elaborate symbolic register: but Bankim is not mentioned at this point by Rabindranath, and if there is an analogy at all, it is the merest of traces producing, in the intertextual weave, the name Charu chants in Ray's film as she searches for *Kapalkundala* on the bookshelf. It is worth arguing, however, that the specular dynamics of Ray's film incorporates the serial presence of several women protagonists of Bengali fiction, as well as, of course, the figure unmistakably present in *Nashtanir*, Rabindranath's sister-in-law Kadambari. Ray himself was unequivocal in his belief (supported by memories of having seen an early manuscript) that the novella was a *roman-à-clef* based on the triangular relationship between Rabindranath, his elder brother Jyotirindranath, and his brother's wife.^[6]

In *Nashtanir* Amal is reported to have written a critique of Bankim's *Kamalakanta*, and there are references to a fictional 'modern' writer, Manmatha Datta, who is supposed to have an elaborate writing style somewhat like Amal's own. Charu is described as reading his work with absorption, making Amal jealous and contemptuous of her taste. He produces a mocking parody of Manmatha Datta's style, in effect satirizing his own. Certainly Charu is not described as reading Bankimchandra. Yet Ray makes Bankim the hero of an intricate play of literary references, rewriting the 19th century woman in terms of a later history of literary affect. Indeed he places the film's events precisely in 1879, a date we glimpse on the cover of a periodical; this was the year Bankimchandra published his treatise *Samya*, containing an essay on the old and the new woman, 'Prachina o Nobina', which had already been published earlier in his journal *Bangadarshan*. The film incorporates an extended and apparently playful

questioning of both categories through Amal's interrogation of Charu and her unlettered sister-in-law Manda. The latter belongs to a past world: by contrast, Charu is potentially a new woman, one who might 'embody the resolution of the conflict between tradition and modernity by finding her place in a re-invented patriarchy'.^[7] The film's dialogue with Bankim's essay, as Moinak Biswas has noted, also helps to place it within an historical grid where the focus is on the formation – both public and private – of the colonial subject.^[8] Bhupati, preoccupied with the 'public', male domain of political journalism in English, delegates to Amal the task of nurturing Charu's 'feminine' literary interests (in Bengali), in effect ignoring the imbrication of the personal in the political, the necessary siting of selfhood in the affective realm as much as in the intellectual discourse of nationhood.

In both novella and film, it would be right to speak of a 'space' of the literary, through which the nature of individual sensibilities can, as it were, be encoded: and in both, we must note that this space is as much one of *reading* as it is of *writing*. Moreover, we are also alerted to the presence of an oral culture of conversation, reminiscence, story-telling or fable, which it is the task of the writer, striving for authenticity in a new bourgeois idiom, to record. Thus Amal, with the enthusiasm of an anthropologist, spends time asking Charu's sister-in-law Manda to relate to him the beliefs and stories of her village past, attempting to reconstitute in the culture of memory the authenticity of a preliterate female sensibility. It is partly out of jealousy, an unwillingness to be outdone by Manda, that Charu ultimately matches this authenticity by recalling her own village girlhood, in terms of a specific place, a location, 'Kalitola'. This is in keeping with the structure of strict parallels in *Nashtanir*, which Ray does not attempt to reproduce, just as there is no parallel in the novella for the densely allusive literary conversation between Amal and Charu in Ray's film, turning on Bankim's distinction between the traditional and contemporary woman, the *prachina* and the *nobina*. The issues at stake in the cinematic adaptation of a literary text were famously explored by Ray himself with respect to *Charulata* in an article in the journal

Parichay, responding to Ashok Rudra's criticisms.^[9] It is unnecessary to rehearse the lessons Ray sought to teach an audience as yet unaccustomed to cinematic language, but it is important to note, as Moinak Biswas does, that adaptation itself becomes the subject of the film's engagement with the space of the literary. Not only does Ray's film enter into a dialogue with Bankimchandra, Tagore's text

finds itself embedded in a tapestry of literary signs. Writers people the world - Taraknath Gangopadhyay, Rammohun Roy, Shakespeare, Byron, Addison, Steele, Emerson. The image of writing, the written word, forms a major visual motif - we closely watch Amal writing, Charu writing, Bhupati getting intoxicated with the printed word. The alphabet shining on the embroidery over the titles signals a process which will lead us to the very last image of the film: the hands of Charu and Bhupati freeze before they could meet, the title of Tagore's story appears on the screen in calligraphic design. This would appear as merely explanatory and redundant (to say 'Broken Nest' here is to be literal) unless we follow the logic of appearance of the written word in the film. It is a final gesture of receding from the original story, of turning the work itself into an object of the film's gaze.^[10]

In Rabindranath's novella, writing functions as the marker of a possibly realized interiority, but in a complex and even ambiguous way. Amal prefers a rhetorically ornate and impersonal diction through which he seeks to attract public attention to his compositions, while Charu writes in an intimate, even rustic style about a specific place (Kalitola) in the village of her birth. For Charu, writing does indeed make room for the expression of a private sensibility, and in the naiveté of her love, she believes she can guard it from external intrusions as the space she shares with Amal, in a handwritten periodical meant for the two of them alone. But this is not a retelling of Rabindranath's short story 'Khata', about a young girl's attempt to commit a self to writing, nor an account of the making of a writer like Rassundari Debi, the author of the first autobiography of a Bengali woman, where writing

constitutes a threatened but struggling personhood. For this reason, if we read *Nashtanir* carefully, we note that writing is only instrumental for Charu: it is used, like the other imagined spaces in the novella, as a vehicle of Charu's unreflecting *Bovarysme*. In the novella, therefore, writing can never serve as an adequate symbolic marker for Charu's selfhood. Yet *because* Charu chooses to write, she is to some extent represented by the simplicity and strength of her written style, and through her desire to make writing itself a personal space, to be shared with Amal and concealed from the rest of the world. At a later point she tries to please Amal by attempting a composition absurdly called 'Amabashyar Alo' ['The Light of a Moonless Night'] in his rhetorically elaborate style. In Ray's film, the authorship of this piece is transferred to Amal, and utilized in a scene where Bhupati, on hearing the title, becomes convinced that Amal should get married rather than persist with this literary nonsense. In the novella, however, a different link is drawn between text and author. Despite the relative artificiality of the effort, there is a symbolic aptness, the narrator tells us, even in the theme Charu has chosen: she herself is like the moonless night, holding all its light within itself, not flaunting it like the full moon. But her writing goes unregarded, Amal leaves, Charu ceases to write herself and pays no attention to Bhupati's writings, and communication with Amal, now married and in England, dwindles to a terse message received by telegraph: *I am well*.

After Amal's departure, Bhupati tries to woo Charu by reading her his translations of Tennyson (she is utterly bored) and by trying to write independently in Bengali. There is an implication here, interesting for cultural history, that colonial men learn to write in Bengali either from women or for women, in a process that we might call the gendering or engendering of the mother tongue. Despite Rabindranath's own reservations regarding women writers such as his gifted older sister Swarnakumari, about whom he wrote so dismissively to Rothenstein,^[11] his own cultivation of Bengali prose owes much to his canny negotiations of gendered experience and its appropriate

means of expression, finally coming to the colloquial (*chalit*) bhasa, though *Nashtanir* is written in the formal style. In *Charulata* Ray retains the polarity of English and Bengali as a gendered division of experience by introducing the detail of Bhupati and Charu's plan, conceived during their seaside holiday after Amal's departure, of starting a bilingual newspaper where he will look after the English section, dealing with public affairs, and she the Bengali, focusing on the personal and literary. As viewers of the film will recall, this plan brings them back to Calcutta, there is a letter from Amal, and the denouement inexorably follows.

In terms of the treatment of actual physical space there are no descriptions in the novel that really match the detail of Ray's opening sequence. But there is an affective link to the long verandah at one side of the house, and a classically inflected image of Charu sitting by the window in a state of deep withdrawal and melancholy. The house itself, apart from these images, is never used by Rabindranath to figure in physical terms the interior spaces of Charu's heart. Rather, the journey into the physical interior of the house, undertaken at untimely moments by Bhupati who hopes to gain solace from communion with his wife, becomes an agonizing trajectory of frustration and disappointment: Charu does not respond, he sits by her side in silence, he cannot draw her out or win a consolatory word from her. Meanwhile, the unhappy Charu, who has in a terrible moment left her bedroom and gone outside to cry for Amal's departure, is described as finally reconciling herself to her loss by constructing a wholly private, inner, mental space like a dungeon or a tunnel or a cell, where she can yield herself entirely to her grief and love. The metaphor is one that Rabindranath returns to, with a different accent, in his late novel *Jogajog* [*Relationships*]: but its spatial configuration is most fully developed here.

In this way, Charu dug a tunnel under the entire structure of her domestic tasks and duties, and in that unlighted silent darkness she built a temple of secret grief, adorned with the garlands of her tears. Neither her husband nor anyone else in the world had any claim there.

That place was as secret as it was deep, as it was beloved. At its entrance she would abandon all the disguises of her household and enter in her unadorned true form, and when she left it, she would put on the mask again and present herself in the theatre of the world's work, laughter and conversation.^[12]

I need scarcely point out that what we have here is metaphor rather than the metonymy (or synecdoche) of realist object-description, and indeed one problem Ray must have encountered in the text of *Nashtanir* is that all the action takes place in the minds of the characters, at the level of assumption, inference, and aversion. Apart from the sending of the telegram, Charu never betrays herself: when she weeps for Amal at night on the verandah, Bhupati is actually pleased at this evidence of a tender heart. It is when he intercepts the servant with the telegram that Bhupati realizes the truth, and is wholly alienated from her. He demands his writings back and throws them into the kitchen fire: when she asks him, 'what are you doing? ('*e ki korle?*'), he says roughly, '*thak*'. It's worth pointing out that Charu's final words in the novella, '*na thak*', are clearly constructed as an echo of this earlier response, and this is only appropriate in a work that divides narrative attention more or less equally between Charu and Bhupati, and makes Bhupati's need, his hunger for his wife's love and company, as crucial to the movement of affect as Charu's love and loss. It is in this closing sequence that furniture, marking out the domestic space of the house, is used with masterly symbolic weight. When Bhupati refuses to take Charu with him to Mysore, she turns white and grips the bedrail; Bhupati relents and asks her to come, and she says, no, let be (*na thak*).

In a recent essay, Ravi Vasudevan has illuminatingly analysed the cinematic treatment of space, interiority and affect in Ray's *Charulata*, and I would like both to acknowledge his insights and place them somewhat differently. It must have been immediately obvious to Ray, and I do not need to labour this point, that the mental landscapes of *Nashtanir* were unrealizable in cinematic terms. Film, to use Peirce's term, is an iconic medium which offers the

illusion of real space, of a world of objects disposed and arranged in a physically verifiable order. That this world would require precise and detailed spatial configuration in his film was only to be expected: what is unexpected and, I would suggest, quite new in Ray's art is a kind of spatial tracking of affect, as though the camera were setting out to produce character as an effect of space. I will quote Vasudevan here:

In the justly famous opening sequence, we are alert to a highly self-conscious deployment of the camera, with Ray taking recourse to elaborate travelling shots, zooms and an assertion of the symbolic functions of the frame and the scene as spatial orders. The verandah running along the house's first floor is recurrently used to define relations between people, and to provide the spectator with a perspective, across the landing, other than that of the characters.^[13]

Those seven-and-a-half minutes of cinema, unforgettable as a real-time experience where our perspective is forced to coincide with that of a shifting viewer *within* the setting but *outside* the frame, establish the interior of Bhupati's house, not constructed as a *montage* but tracked by the camera as it follows Charu's movements through the rooms and the verandah. Since real time here perfectly coincides with viewing time, spectatorship is divided between our viewing of Charu and her playful, idle viewing of the street scene below, and of her unmindful husband, with the opera-glasses. The glasses distance and frame the spectacle of the street for Charu, emphasizing her separation from the ordinary life that passes below her windows, a process culminating at the point where Charu, as Vasudevan says "subjects her husband to the ironic, exteriorizing gaze of the opera glasses."^[14] For Vasudevan, the thematics of externality and interiority commence from the earlier invocation of Bankim's name, which "invites the spectator to share with the character a common interiority shaped by the literary domain. This is about reaching into oneself, into a register of the interior that the film elevates into a domain of substantive meaning, where

subjectivities which are deeper, more valid, than the world of the political public are reawakened.”^[15]

Looking at the sequence again, I would like to draw a number of other inferences. The camera’s gaze establishes Charu herself as the beautiful object of our loving connoisseurship and concern, while her own gaze is turned away to the life of the street which, like her husband, does not see her. But what overwhelms the scene and constructs itself as a site of alienation, I would suggest, is the elaborately furnished set of rooms through which she moves, and towards which the camera is also turned. The detail and richness of the wallpaper, the small statues lining the verandah, the room’s furnishings, the book bindings, the shutters, constitute the physical register of an interior which is not, and can never coincide with, an interiority. Ray’s deliberate and sumptuous use of space and furniture here to encode the bourgeois way of life in the mid-nineteenth century, constructing the house, like Charu herself, as something that Bhupati owns but does not care for, implicitly produces the domestic interior as a rich, substantial, but alienating setting for a subjectivity not yet fully understood. The scene’s irony lies in Charu’s *dis-identification* from the furniture (by the production of her own alert, inquisitive, ironic gaze) at the very same time as she is caught in the same frame with it. It is evident from her casual, idle fingering of objects in the room, her detached drifting from point to point within it, that this is not Charu’s own set of rooms. By contrast to its magnificence, Charu’s own sari is of the common handloom variety; unlike Bimala in *Ghare Baire*, she is not routinely clad in fine clothes.

Ray was a careful and attentive reader of Tagore, and while there is very little by way of physical description in *Nashtanir*, he cannot have been unaware of Rabindranath’s dislike of the lavishly furnished bourgeois interior, even of furniture *per se*. (There is a story about his getting rid of all the European furniture in the Jorasanko house after returning from a lecture by Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. It was brought back by Debendranath who, of course, had in a similar fit of asceticism given all Dwarakanath’s furnishings

away after his death.)^[16] For the cinematographer, by contrast, the material excess of a setting invites the camera's scrupulous – not necessarily sympathetic – gaze. In an interview recorded by Shyam Benegal, Ray spoke of his fascination with “the visual aspect of opulence” and specifically mentioned both *Charulata* and ‘Monihara’ (*Teen Kanya*), with *Jalsaghar*, in this context. In many respects the camera's treatment of the rich, substantial, furnished domestic interior in ‘Monihara’ matches that in *Charulata*, and in both, the central female character is represented, early in the film text, looking out of the window. In ‘Monihara’, however, that early framing is instrumental in a different narrative of desire: Moni desires, not so much the bourgeois luxury of domestic interiors, but what she can hold or grasp to herself, jewellery. When her husband Phanibhushan is threatened with financial ruin, she escapes into that river-dominated landscape with her jewels, as fetishized objects of a yearning that neither the house nor its contents can contain. The tone of ‘Monihara’, a skilful domestication of the gothic, differs considerably from that of *Charulata*; yet there are resemblances in the camera-work as in the employment of ‘the visual aspect of opulence’ to define character (in both films, that of lonely and childless wives). In *Charulata*, the useless luxury of the domestic setting that frames and *places* Charu almost seduces the gaze into regarding Charu herself as the same kind of commodity: the camera threatens or invites this conclusion, then dispels it by elaborating Charu's own spectatorship within the scene.

If the interior does not stand for interiority, what does? Having de-legitimized the bourgeois interior, even before it is robbed of its material substance by Umapati/ Umapada (to the strains of Rammohan Roy's stirring Bengali version of *Dies irae* – ‘mone koro, sheshero shei din bhoyonkor’) and of its moral self-assurance by Charu, Ray needs to provide us with a cinematic staging of interiority that might compensate for the hollowness of the house. Such interiority can only be located in the exterior, in the open, empty world, in mental space rather than physical place, in a free ranging or movement of affect. Ray therefore constructs the remarkable sequence of images that

passes through Charu's mind as she sits on the swing, culminating in her beginning her first literary composition, *My Village (Amar Gram)*. As Vasudevan notes perceptively, both in the street-scene gleefully viewed by Charu, and in the memories of her village childhood, there is an element of the popular, of a world and a life left behind in the trilogy, that cannot be mobilized in the narrative here except through the sensibility of the woman protagonist, standing always at a slightly oblique angle to the wealth and power of the bourgeois household she inhabits. Here, as in the scene with the opera glasses, we have a 'modernist framing of a history through devices of spatial staging and distantiation'.^[17] Charu's memories, passing over the screen as images that flicker and slide into each other, construct a different history of the nation from that which is being debated by Bhupati in his study. And this repository of images, from the mother spinning cotton to the entertainers at the fair, is finally the source, the film claims (like the novella) of a more authentic literary consciousness, not only gaining critical acclaim but putting Charu's male mentors to shame.

What the film cannot and will not do, though, is to stage or create a separate space for desire, precisely because desire is everywhere, it has no precise location, and in this respect it is like space. Charu's desire – for solace, for company, for Amal – fills the film from the beginning, and what we trace through its movement is not so much a trajectory of transgression as an unqualified longing that at some point has become confused with a particular person. The discovery-scene is placed indoors, and the end of the film returns us, even more oppressively and painfully, to those heavily over-furnished interiors and enclosed spaces with which we had started. Bhupati comes home in a hackney carriage, trapped in his thoughts as he is shown confined in the coach's dark interior, and Charu, again seen in the bedroom and the verandah, listening for the sounds of her husband's return, is framed with him, trapped in the freeze-shot, in the vista of the long passage. I have no wish to debate the excellence or otherwise of this ending and its adequacy to the literary text. *Nashtanir* and *Charulata* are different works, not linked in

the relation of original and copy. It would be useless to attempt to recover, at this remove of time, the notion itself of an original. Ray, who builds his film on his understanding of *Nashtanir* as of other texts, attempts to stage, with the material at his disposal, a spatial disposition of affect and interiority that can be referred to Tagore but is not determined by his example.

I shall say much less about *Ghare Baire*, a pair of texts echoing but differing radically from *Charulata* and *Nashtanir*. I have written on the novel,^[18] though not on the physical contours of its domestic interiors, and do not wish to retrace that analysis. There is one principal point I would like to make. *Ghare Baire* is a spatially-configured narrative (or three-fold narrative) built on a socially-ordered contrast of places, of being at home (*ghare*) or outside (*baire*); of the *inner* and the *outer* realms; or even of the *bhitarbari* and the *bahirbari*, the private and the public sections of Nikhilesh's house. At the same time, the novel presents a curious contradiction. Tagore's representation of personal and affective life, in his prose fiction as in other kinds of writing, is often very strongly marked by his use of space, whether real or imaginary. The restricted, narrow spaces of private or domestic life are repeatedly contrasted with the openness of a viewed or imagined natural setting, and this becomes an increasingly subtle instrument through which the precise contours of a character's inner life or aspirations can be constructed. Against this double configuration of the personal, the space of public interaction or self-representation is another possible setting within which personhood may be placed and understood. Yet in *Ghare Baire*, despite the obvious contrast of *ghar* and *bahir* which defines the opposition between the enclosed women's world and the open men's world, space is always more metaphysical than real. No character other than Nikhilesh appears to feel the pain of confinement, the desire to be at one with the universe: and in him this is an idealized perception which he projects on to his wife Bimala. In the novel, the interiority of inner life, of aspiration and desire, is chiefly represented in the texture of the individual narratives, which are first-person reflections on past experience: that is, whether recalled through memory or

refracted through event, it floats in the space of the narration itself, in the act of narrating.

The physical opposition of inner quarters and public rooms, however, (and we may recall at this point that this opposition, also present in the text of *Nashtanir* and implicit in Charu's qualified emancipation through writing, is not employed as a visual image in *Charulata*, where in the very first sequence Charu is shown going to the outer quarters to find a book) might provide a set of images calculated to spatialize the film body. And indeed Ray seems to be attempting this in the first long travelling shot, zooming on to the feet of the protagonists, as Nikhilesh takes Bimala out to the sitting-room to meet Sandip. The verandah through which they walk, not wholly unlike that in *Charulata*, but here symbolically connecting the inner and outer quarters, rather than flanking the *antahpur* as well as the *bahirbari*, as in the earlier film, appears several times in the film, becoming in the end something of a cliché. The eye of the camera faces first the door, then Nikhilesh and Bimala directly as they walk towards it, no angles are used, and a narrative voiceover informs us of the momentous nature of this event. Ray must have grasped, none better, the irony of this coming-out to find not a world, but a Sandip waiting in the front room. And he was conscious also of the nature of Sandip's presence, as the disruptive entry of outer into inner, in a text where Nikhilesh's plan of bringing Bimala into the world remains profoundly incomplete. It was he who told Andrew Robinson Jnanadanandini's story of her meeting, seated within the intimate space of the mosquito-net in her bedroom, with her husband Satyendranath's friend Manomohan Ghose, whom her husband had escorted there so that he might meet his wife.^[19]

This is a text of place, and the film dwells on places, focusing the camera to view the intimacy of domestic space in Bimala's dressing-room (Nikhilesh's sudden entry as she is dressing would agree neither with the novel nor with contemporary custom, when men did not visit their wives during the day), in public rooms where Sandip speaks or addresses his followers, the courtyard, the country outside. But it also devalues places, allowing them neither the

oppressive weight nor the lyrical openness they acquire in *Charulata*, and separating space from interiority or affect. Bimala appears well-contented with her clothes and jewels, the rich furnishings and splendid interiors of her marital home: she is, to use an anachronistic phrase from Baudrillard, surrounded by the gaze of obedient objects, not imprisoned by them as Charu seemed to be. Her passion for Sandip imbues her surroundings with an aura of desire, but it does not impel her to leave them. Nikhilesh, who in the novel makes a significant statement about his weariness and distaste for the expensive furniture of his house, and says he would be happier visiting the unfurnished, bare home of his poor cousin Munu,^[20] is, I think viewed by us in the film as resigned to his wealth. The pair sit uncomfortably on the richly upholstered chairs in the outer room, conversing with Sandip as though it were a strange marital duty or trial, and indeed the novel might prompt such a conclusion. It is my suggestion that Ray deliberately devalues the suggestive potency of place in *Ghare Baire*, locating affect in the narrative rather than in spatial configurations, visual frames or sequences, and this represents a fairly acute reading of the novel, but one that may have limited the film he made.

Finally, I would like to say something about our experience of viewing *Charulata* above all, and to some extent *Ghare Baire* as well. In a lecture given in March 1967 and published in October 1984 by the journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, Michel Foucault invoked Bachelard's phenomenological celebration of spaces to construct his own extended meditation on what he called 'other spaces', or heterotopias. Perhaps significantly, the text is not part of the official corpus of his work, and was not reviewed by him for publication, though it was made public for an exhibition in Berlin months before his death. Near the beginning of the lecture, Foucault says:

Bachelard's monumental work and the descriptions of phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space but on the contrary in a space

thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well. The space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem intrinsic: there is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below of mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal. Yet these analyses, while fundamental for reflection in our time, primarily concern internal space. I should like to speak now of external space.

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.^[21]

Against this double recognition of space, internal and external, Foucault constructs his notion of the heterotopia as a site of contradiction, an actual place (unlike an utopia, which has no real place) which runs counter to the places where we normally live and work, and is therefore socially construed as other, like the cemetery or the prison. One such heterotopia, Foucault says, is the cinema theatre, precisely because it is constructed out of a set of superimpositions, and also because it is in some sense a heterochronia, admitting us into another time just as it is sited as another place:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it

is that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space, but perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias that take the form of contradictory sites is the garden. We must not forget that in the Orient the garden, an astonishing creation that is now a thousand years old, had very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings.^[22]

The imagined, formal garden of *Nashtanir* never appears in Ray's film, but *Charulata* is a film made to be viewed in the cinema theatre, where the darkness of the hall, the dominant and magnetic attraction of the screen, the relative absence of ambient noise, allow us to steep ourselves in the magnificently recessive visual depths of the frame, and to listen attentively to the sparse dialogue, the hummed melodies, the songs the characters sing, the movement of the opera glasses, the movement of the swing. It is for this site, this space, which is the space of *our* interiority and *our* affect, that the gaze of the camera is manipulated. In our postmodern experience of viewing such films on DVD through a television screen in a sitting room or a computer monitor in the study, the gaze is replaced by the more casual proliferation of looks, subject to interruption, to conversation, to noise. The iconic nature of *Charulata* as a film text preserves against the odds some of that earlier experience of viewing, though it is worth asking whether it does so in memory, through nostalgia, or in actuality. If it continues to engage the viewer, it does so by creating a space of intimate cinema, by projecting an aura within which we share in that interior space and interior time – another space and another time – constituted by the cinema as the prime agent of our cultural modernity.

References:

¹ Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. T. Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) p. 223.

² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, with foreword by J. R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994): Introduction, p. xxxvi; Chapter 2, 'House and Universe', p.47.

[3](#) Cited from Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhitipatra*, vol. 1, p. 58, letter 29, by Prashantakumar Pal in *Rabijibani*, vol. 5: 1308-1314 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1990), p. 19. My translation.

[4](#) *The Poetics of Space*, Chapter 8, pp. 183-210.

[5](#) In *Nashtanir*, the tree is a *bilati amra*; in *Streer Patra*, a *gab*.

[6](#) See the discussion in Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 159.

[7](#) See Moinak Biswas, 'Writing on the Screen: Satyajit Ray's Adaptation of Tagore', at <<http://www.ipv.pt/forumedia/5/9.htm>>

[8](#) Ibid.

[9](#) See Satyajit Ray, *Bishay Chalachchitra* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1982), and Ashok Rudra, 'Shilpir Svadhinata', in Subrata Rudra ed. *Satyajit: Jiban ar Shilpa* (Kolkata: Pratibhash, 1996).

[10](#) See Moinak Biswas, art. cit.

[11](#) Letter to Rothenstein, c. Feb. 1914, cited by Prashantakumar Pal, *Rabijibani*, vol. 6, 1315-1320 (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1993), p. 355.

[12](#) *Nashtanir*, chapter 15: in Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 22 (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 1957), p. 254. My translation.

[13](#) 'Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism in Indian Cinema: The Double-Take of Modernism in Ray', in Moinak Biswas ed. *Apu and After: Revisiting Ray's Cinema*, (London: Seagull, 2006) p. 101.

[14](#) Ibid. p. 102.

[15](#) Ibid. p. 101.

[16](#) See Prashantakumar Pal, *Rabijibani*, vol. 5, ed. cit. p. 19; Debendranath Tagore, *Svarachita-jibancharit*, in Naresh Jana et al ed. *Atmakatha* (Kolkata: Ananya Prakashan, 1981), p. 8 [of the 4th text in the volume].

[17](#) Vasudevan, art. cit., p. 102.

[18](#) Supriya Chaudhuri, 'A Sentimental Education: Love and Marriage in *The Home and the World*', in P. K. Datta ed. *Rabindranath Tagore's The Home and the World: A Critical Companion* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 45-65.

[19](#) See Indira Debi Chaudhurani ed. *Puratani* (Kolkata: Indian Associated Publishing Company, 1957); Robinson, *The Inner Eye*, ed. cit. p. 268.

[20](#) *Ghare Baire*, in Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 8 (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 1941), p. 169.

[21](#) Michel Foucault, 'Des Espaces Autres', translated by Jay Miskowiec: electronic text at <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

[22](#) Ibid.