



Critical Review: Kumar Shahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972)

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The objective of this critical review of Kumar Shahani's first feature *Maya Darpan* (*Mirror of Illusion*) is to present an introductory analysis of the film's formal composition as embodying the avant-garde ideal of reconciling art and life.¹ While it is not possible to account for all of *Maya Darpan*'s formal features such as sound, music, off-screen space, and poetic monologues in this review, I isolate two central aspects, namely colour, and non-diegetic shots for discussion. These two aspects, examined under the subheadings of 'Art' and 'Life' respectively, refer to the Soviet avant-garde's ideal to reconcile life and art. I use the references to suggest that *Maya Darpan* not only displays a similar aspiration, but also endows that aspiration with a philosophical significance, namely, the reconciliation of the individual and society.² Accordingly, the word 'Life' describes how non-diegetic montages act as gestures and traces from a world or society that lies outside the artistic realm of the diegesis. My analysis begins with a brief introduction on the significance of Shahani's association with Bresson for the film and concludes with an epilogue on the film's relevance for May 1968.

Introduction

Shahani's undergraduate study was in political science, but, claiming that of all the academic and aesthetic choices of that time, film appeared as the most 'reflective' art enabling him to better relate with his "environment", he chose film instead of pursuing graduate studies in the social sciences.³ Shahani's first model for such a 'reflective' practice was Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976), who showed that film could critically comment on historical events such as the partition through the discursive use of genres such as

melodrama and the epic. The second model that arguably offset the melodramatic trappings in Ghatak's works was the elliptical and somewhat enigmatic cinema of Bresson. The story of how Shahani sought an apprenticeship with Bresson after seeing *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) in Paris is well documented.⁴ But the significance of Bresson for *Maya Darpan*—produced after his return from Paris—demands some consideration given Shahani's pursuit of the study of film as art and his participation in the events of May 1968.

In Paris, Shahani had initially planned on working with Godard, but later abandoned the idea because he found that his own goal to study the formal and aesthetic traditions of film diverged from the political path of Godard and the Dziga Vertov group at that time.⁵ While he was involved, on the one hand, in the socio-political debates of May 1968 and participated in its demonstrations, when it came to film, Shahani was more committed to the practice of film as art than as a politically circumscribed instrument.⁶ In this regard, Bresson's relentless emphasis on pure cinematography and the expunging of literary and theatrical traces from film becomes a model of artistic autonomy.⁷ It demonstrates that in the artistic appearance of film form, meaning and truth are to be embedded and discovered, rather than stated and deduced, reconciling thereby both the autonomy of film as art and the need to analyze socio-political concerns. In other words, Bresson's cinema serves as a solution for those filmmakers who sought to preserve both the artistic identity and expression of social critique in a film's form without having to privilege one over the other.

This 'solution' is the construction of a formal language in which the expression of social critique is contained or deflected onto rhetorical aspects such as metonymy, aniconism, indirection and fragmented compositions. Bressonian cinema becomes, therefore, an extraordinary counter-gesture against the activist-modernism of May 1968 film groups that sought an identitarian relationship between radical film and social revolution, while equivocating or neglecting outright the discussion of film as art.⁸ In refraining from the

cine-tactics of May 1968's film-culture, Bresson's own works from the time, namely *Une femme douce* (1969), and later *Le diable probablement* (1977), invite through abstraction and indirection a reflective critique on the relationship between the individual and modern, industrial Paris. The influence of Bresson thus contributes to a film form that Shahani's cinema shares with other eminent modernist-avant-gardists like Straub-Huillet, Sergei Parajanov, and Alexander Sokurov to cite a few.⁹ Such a form, most provocatively instantiated in Straub-Huillet's claim that *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* was dedicated to Viet-Cong, reflects the paradoxical aspiration of an avant-garde or a radical artwork: the reconciliation of the aesthetic and the social within the artwork's form without reducing one to the other.¹⁰ *Maya Darpan* follows this model by inlaying its ethical and normative concern (namely, the reconciliation of the individual and society), in disparate formal elements such as colour and non-diegetic inserts.

Art and Life in *Maya Darpan*

The justification for reading *Maya Darpan* in relation to the paradoxical aspiration of the avant-garde ideal is found at a preliminary level in the way Shahani departs from Nirmal Verma's short story on which the film is based.¹¹ Verma's *Maya Darpan* is an eloquent, imagistic portrayal of the world of a lonely figure—Taran. The story, narrated in third-person subjective point-of-view, centers around Taran, who lives with her aunt and father in a feudal household in a small town that is in the process of being industrialized. The subject of the story is the estranged relationship between Taran and her father, a proud patriarch who has failed to find her a suitable matrimonial match because he stubbornly believes in marrying her to a groom who shares his socio-economic class. Given that he has not succeeded in this search, he distances himself from his daughter, whose very presence within the household becomes a bitter reminder of his unfulfilled duties and his failure as a parent. The atmosphere in the house increasingly becomes unbearable and Taran considers leaving the house to visit her older brother who lives in the green mountains of a hill station. The only other source of escape and solace for Taran is the occasional visit from a companion-figure, an engineer who is actively involved in the urbanization of the town. The short story concludes with Taran deciding

to stay in the household with her father, as she dreams of the green landscape where her brother resides.

For Shahani, Verma's narrative becomes the ground for examining the antagonism between individual and society. He recasts Taran's strained relationship with her father as the tension between the caste and class-obsessed worldview of the feudal era and a modern individual consciousness. He thus awards attention to minor characters like the domestic aids Montu and Shambhu, by accenting their relationship with Taran, and also with the larger project of industrialization, as agents of the unskilled, peasant-labour force. He further introduces details not found in the literary source, such as the engineer setting up literacy centers for the workers, and scenes of the patriarch and his friends deriding the efforts of the engineer and mourning the consequent dissolution of class distinctions. But the most distinct departure from the short story lies in how Shahani's abstract compositions and extra-diegetic references educe the presence of a social discourse and critical perspective, rather than positing them as givens. Therefore, where Verma's literary style is fully explanatory and descriptive, Shahani's asyndetonic and paratactical approach—owed to the Bressonian aesthetic—allows for an objective and normative commentary to gestate in the film's form, thereby undercutting the subjective focalization of the short story.

The normative concern is made explicit in one of the concluding sequences in which a casual conversation between Taran and the engineer clinches the true content of the film. The laconic exchange begins with the engineer describing the impending, inevitable, change, or 'progress' in the town. He claims that the hills will be levelled, the hovels of the labourers replaced with houses, and that factories will be built beyond the canal. He explains rather tersely to Taran how he overcame his initial doubts regarding his involvement in the industrialization project by quoting Engels' description of the Hegelian dialectic: "freedom is the recognition of necessity".¹² When Taran asks the engineer what a person's own necessity is, he claims that it is not merely passion but

the ability "to look outside of oneself" and be in "wide open spaces". Taran responds approvingly with a smile, as though the engineer's words have confirmed a truth that she has silently sought. Following this breakthrough moment of didacticism, the film launches—in a series of metaphoric sequences—an unexpected reinterpretation of the engineer's words as one involving not the passive, Hegelian reconciliation of Taran to the situation in her home, but as the freedom to love and participate in class struggles. Like the short story's ending, Shahani portrays Taran as deciding to stay with her father, but he also shows her and the engineer as lovers who participate in a figuratively rendered class conflict. As lovers, they discuss the precarious project of urbanization and industrialization of modern India with Taran affirming that they have to expend "black blood" in an implied class conflict.¹³ The conflict, portrayed as a dance, is filmed on a soundstage. At the beginning of the sequence, we see the dancers invite Taran into the stylized performance of a battle between two groups. Thus, by the end of the film, Taran—representing 'the individual'—appears to be antagonistically reconciled with society. She is shown to fight the forces of feudalism and capitalism both for herself and on behalf of the labouring class. The critical trajectory of the film can be summed up, therefore, as the attempt to address the philosophical dilemma of reconciling the individual with society without the subsumption of the individual under society. But this critical project, rather than unfolding in a linear and realistic manner, acquires its expression, as we shall see in the following sections, through the intersection of colour and montage.

1. Art: Colour and painting

Even at the first viewing of *Maya Darpan*, it is conspicuous that an artistic approach overrides a psychological and realistic description of characters and their world. Shots foreground the mansion's architecture and colour arrangements, to mediate in an aniconic rather than reflexive manner, the representation of Taran and her environment. The unusual establishing sequence of the film remarkably exemplifies this strategy of indirectly composing what we assume, by convention, to be a diegetic space. Following the title sequence, which is presented as a scroll of washed-out yellow surface with

brown and orange stains, the film places us in the middle of an ongoing camera movement. There is no establishing perspective here, only a series of lateral and forward tracking shots that expose in close-up and medium close-up, panels of desaturated yellow with traces of orange, grayish blue and black. The colour panels are not strictly abstract, but defined and contained in the architectural aspects, namely, walls, windows, doors, ceiling, and corridors of the house. As if refusing a perspective of the outside world, windowpanes bearing traces of bleached white paint exhibit discolouration and brushwork, and ochre walls with blotches of black appear as segments from a stain painting.

The lambent yellow of the walls and the pastel interiors hold more of a transcendent appeal than serving mood or diegetic information. The tracking camera also accentuates the thickness of colours; imitating the actions of brushwork, it brings out an impasto effect through its steady focus on the textures of the walls. Within the rooms, sharply highlighted clothes, kitchenware, stacked trunks, and electrical wire boxes exude a subdued beauty as though they are relics in a still-life painting. The still-life impression continues in the spread of dark indigos, blue and white, burgundy and white in the geometrically arranged 'clothes' drying on the line. All of these varied details that demonstrate the painterly character of the *mise-en-scène* introduce, right from the establishing sequence, the degree of independence colour and camera movement maintain from obligations of establishing realism or dramatic set-design.

Unlike the conventional rationales for colour design—such as the parading of garish colours for spectacle and design, staging depth, and establishing mood—the functions of colour in the film are somewhat less self-evident. First, as in most painterly uses of desaturated backgrounds, the desaturated yellows of the mansion and the pervasive browns in the décor, serve contrast. They bring out the sharpness of the saturated red, metallic orange, and purple in Taran's saris and her bronze skin tone.¹⁴ For instance, in the scene where the aunt asks Taran to leave the mansion and visit Taran's brother in

the hills, we see the aunt hang clothes on a line. The colours of the clothes, kept uniformly white and brown, serve to sharpen the brightness of Taran's red sari. In the following shot, when Taran dons a purple sari and runs toward the train, the brown shade of the train again enhances the luminous purple.¹⁵ These kinds of contrasts do not draw immediate attention to themselves, but they are iterated enough to compel the recognition of a pattern. More curiously, they are often the sole indicators of transitions or changes in the narrative. For instance, a significant portion of the film—after the Aunt's report of the angry episode with her brother—unfolds in presenting Taran's decision-making process through colours alone. We see Taran in combinations of white, red, yellow, and purple as she grapples with the decision to stay or leave. In these shots, given the absence of information through either dialogue or monologue, the veritable signs of expression and progression are inferred, in retrospect, through the aniconic display of sari colours.

The second, more innovative outcome is that the desaturated palette proposes a relationship with the world outside the mansion. Once we learn that the town will soon become an industrial zone, the framing of the old mansion as a site of fading beauty acquires a poignant character. The desaturated browns, yellows, and creams of its walls index the imprint of inevitable change and erosion. For instance, when we see black smoke from factories against a discoloured yellow-sky in the background of an exterior shot showing the engineer walking across the railway tracks, we recognize the black and yellow as echoing the colour scheme of the walls of the mansion. The long-take of this shot indeed makes it hard to ignore the smoke rising from the factories in the distance. Similarly, the desaturation acquires a social implication when we notice Shambhu, in his dust, cement and chalk smeared skin and clothes, merge with the ashen browns and discoloured walls of the kitchen. The desaturated patina of the mansion thus bolsters not only the perception of Taran's skin-tone as Shahani states, but also becomes in its evocation of the consequences of industrialization within the mansion, an objective counterpoint to the introspective space of Taran. As a result, even if one is inclined to read the mansion strictly as a form of feudal enclosure for

Taran, the cross-referencing of colours renders it as a space that is as vulnerable as its inhabitants are to the inexorable changes of the outside world.

The depiction of characters as painterly 'figures' becomes pronounced when we first see Taran's aunt seated with her back towards us. The camera frames her in medium shot, with an emphasis on the chromatic properties of the negative space: white sari against a yellow wall with the red and black highlights of her blanket. Free of iconic attributes (the face), the curved posture, and the accent on colour and contour define her less as a dramatic character than as an abstract figure in a painting. The camera tracks into another room, where we glimpse a woman sleeping on a bed. The woman is again presented primarily as a chromatic phenomenon; a figure draped in red sari against yellow negative space. When the camera pauses on her face, she slowly turns away, denying like the figure in the previous sequence, a facial rapport. It appears as though she turns to deliberately foreground the colour red and assert her dual presence as character and figure.

In another scene, when the Aunt asks Taran about her decision to visit her brother, the medium shot shows Taran in a red and yellowish-gold sari stretched in her bed, with her aunt in white standing at the corner of the bed. The framing gently underlines the spatial arrangement of the horizontal and the vertical figures and the simple but elegant contrast between the shining colours of the sari and the neutral décor. Similarly, in a shot that depicts Taran standing in the terrace and looking at her father and his visitors, the frame is fully devoted to the discoloured yellow walls of the terrace with Taran in her red sari positioned as a small figure in a flat, abstract panel. In yet another scene showing her fall on the bed after the first monologue, Shahani interjects an overhead shot of her sprawled as a red figure against the white bed. Throughout the film, we see this contrastive emphasis of the red sari against white and yellow configure Taran as a character and 'figure' poised simultaneously within the diegetic and painterly worlds.

The restrained juxtapositions of desaturated negative space and saturated saris, and the precise positioning of the figures are not unambiguously symbolic as one would notice in the bold colour references to the French and American flags in Godard's films, but suggest that a contradictory interpretation is provoked in relation to the diegetic world. That is, the painterly touches imbue a sensuousness that transcends our perception of the diegetic space as a realistic reflector of loneliness or desolation.¹⁶ Taran, as a painterly-figure, appears ambiguous in that the bright red of her sari is neither reflective of her emotions nor her actions. She is languid and passive compared to the distracting vibrancy of the red she dons. The red refutes the impression of loneliness that is conveyed more overtly in her poetic monologues, and denies a symbolic association of her with courage, anger, and power. Inadequate as a symbol,¹⁷ the red then appears to accent a potential, a 'not-yet', or a transformation in the future that is indeed revealed by the end of the film, when we notice the dancers attired in red. Thus, the political association of red with communism as the implied resolution of the film is not altogether invalid because the film concludes with a gesture that expresses revolution and conflict.

The painterly tendencies signal the contribution of Akbar Padamsee to the film. Akbar Padamsee—a prominent abstract modernist painter—conducted a workshop entitled 'Vision Exchange' during the years 1969-1972. Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul, and their cinematographer K. K. Mahajan were participants in the workshop that led to Kaul's production of *Duvidha* (1973). Shahani has stated that the film's chromatic movement from red-yellow-orange to green was based on Padamsee's instructions.¹⁸ But the most telling affinity between Padamsee's paintings of the fifties and *Maya Darpan* arises for me in Shahani's curious introduction of Taran and the engineer as nude lovers at the end of the film. In one of the key concluding sequences of the film, we see Taran in the engineer's living quarters. She takes the engineer's hand, places it on her breast, and describes to him that very action: "I put your hand on my breast". That particular gesture of the man's hand on his lover's breast, and their positioning in the following shot as nudes facing each other, recalls one of Padamsee's 'Lovers' (1952) shown at the

Jehangir Art Gallery in 1954. The painting—now remembered for the obscenity charge brought against Padamsee and his victorious acquittal—shows a nude woman holding a leafy stalk on her right hand and facing her lover on her left who has placed his left hand on her right breast.

The painting is not exactly reproduced in the film, but there is a strong similarity between the gestures and positions of the lovers, Taran's description of that act, and indeed the apt conjunction of the title of the painting with the pairing of Taran and the engineer as lovers. The reference to Padamsee's work, intentional or not, shows that perhaps Taran and the engineer have now entered a space where the contradiction between the diegesis and the sensuousness of the painterly inflections no longer holds. The key difference between Padamsee's painting and the film, nonetheless, is that Shahani marks an optimistic move in the narrative, whereas in Padamsee's portrait, the withdrawn figures are rigid in posture and carry a somber countenance. The cinematic lovers even appear to comment subtly on Padamsee's restrained and ironic interpretation of love by reclaiming it as a joyous act of freedom. Unlike Padamsee's stoic figures, Taran and the engineer are youthful, innocent and even appear playful as they prepare for the impending 'class- conflict'.

All of the painterly strategies in the film introduce a certain degree of abstraction in our perception of the characters and the diegesis. That is, they stage a dualism that is indeed exemplary of Eisenstein's prescription for colour composition in film:

Just as the creaking of a boot had to be separated from the boot before it became an element of expressiveness, so must the notion of "orange colour" be separated from the contouring of an orange, before colour becomes part of a system of consciously controlled means of expression and impression. Before we can learn to distinguish three oranges on a patch of lawn both as three objects in the grass and as the three orange patches against a green background, we dare not think of colour composition.¹⁹

True to Eisenstein's prescription, at no point in the film does Shahani sacrifice his penchant for chromatic beauty and painterly laconicism, for the psychological delineation of his characters, or a dramatic treatment of the conflict between Taran and her father. His painterly inflections do not function to expose the illusionism of film, but bring out the expressive capabilities that assert the kind of artistic autonomy that Eisenstein preserves in his theory of colour. Furthermore, given that the underlying aim of *Maya Darpan* is normative²⁰ rather than cathartic, the painterly construct of Taran aids in her somewhat 'anonymous' appearance as a 'figure' with whom the viewer is not meant to completely "identify". The strategy of presenting characters as 'figures' and colours as an abstract, autonomous counterpoint, reins in an automatic involvement with the cinematic space as an exclusively diegetic and dramatic space.

A second interpretation is that the artistic concentration reveals a beauty which is not necessarily available to Taran's (inward) gaze and slumbering consciousness. After all, isn't the injunction placed on Taran to look outside herself? Thus the colour compositions, in contradicting the sense of loneliness and suffering hinted in the plot, represent a sensuousness that is first denied, but then experienced by the protagonist as her freedom to "look outside herself". The colours function proleptically to imply 'freedom' from the enclosing reality that the 'individual' so desires. Therefore, the didactic appeal to 'look outside of oneself' also translates for the spectator as a directive to 'look beyond' a character-driven hermeneutics and experience the aesthetic autonomy of the work. The attention to the artistic facture of a character and her world becomes an object lesson that impels the spectator to regard the film not as a linear, transparent, instrument of communication but as a complex ornament that buries its critical substance within its form.

Critics have observed Shahani's use of colour in *Maya Darpan* and have hyperbolically claimed that colour is the main innovation in the film and the "only successful colour experiment of New Indian cinema".²¹ But the modest yet far-reaching implications of

colour emerge, as I have shown, only when we consider colour not as a stand-alone element, but in its relation to the ambivalent meanings it provokes and the unraveling of the cinematic content as a whole. These varied and enigmatic uses of colour and painting constitute, nonetheless, only one facet of the film's form. They are challenged by the less-ordered force of non-diegetic images that Shahani, departing from the environs of Verma's text, introduces as essential for construing the film's trajectory.

2. Life: Non-Diegetic inserts

The non-diegetic interruptions discussed in this section introduce a second layer to the film's diegetic movement. These interruptions or 'suspensions' sharply stand apart from the artistic enclave marked by the painterly aspects outlined in the previous section, and their significance to the diegesis is not patently provided. The first montage occurs after Taran's monologue, at the end of which, she falls sobbing on her bed. Perhaps as a way of obviating personal identification with the emotional overtones of Taran's poetic monologue, Shahani cuts from the shot of a weeping Taran to a compilation of documentary footage. The footage comprises of World War II air raids, images of devastation possibly from Hiroshima, scenes of Indian Independence activists beaten by police, and flicker-effects of what appears to be the negative of a painting. As an ambiguous interjection, the collage surprises because of its complete disjunction with the diegetic world and suspension of its painterly order. Mentioned in the title credits as "images of violence", the sequence, while appearing at first as a gesture in cinematic self-reflexivity, introduces a specific, historical content. As a rupturing presence of society and life external to Taran, the montage exposes the dark side of history almost as an act of instruction that attempts to awaken Taran from her inertia. Given that the collage depicts violence and suffering of historic proportion, one could surmise that it undermines the subjective content (Taran's loneliness) in the previous shot. If it articulates a criticism or a counter-argument, then it does so by interpreting the 'wide open space' as a space claimed by history, specifically by those who struggle(d) and sacrifice(d) for freedom.

A second suspension occurs in the sequence of Taran reading a letter from her brother in Assam. The letter, recited in a voice-over by her brother is edited in an audio-loop over images of Taran walking in a green landscape and a long-take of her seated aboard a steamer. The first inclination is to perceive the sequence as Taran's fantasy or mental image. But we transcend that diegetic foundation once the audio-loop repeats the following lines four times:

*The long lone cries of the birds
Those cries... remember....
The mellow light,
a web of leaves
There are no memories here....*

*Only the wind and footfalls
Thin rain, frayed darkness
And then stillness... Trees, veils of fragrance
Forests rustling boundless...*

The audio-loop, long-take of Taran on the steamer, and the montage showing her walking in the forest are consistent with the formal strategy of surpassing the diegetic context (Taran's fantasy). The iteration of the lines shifts the focalization from Taran and her brother to an impersonal, almost didactic instruction to the spectator to perceive nature as the sanctuary from the past ('there are no memories here'). Nature is indeed the conventional association of 'wide open space', but as emphasized in the line "there are no memories here", it is also implied as an antidote to not only Taran's suffering, but also to the remembrance of suffering and violence, as shown in the collage sequence. Furthermore, the sequence bears a proleptic significance in that the film concludes, rather ambiguously, with the shot of a steamer moving towards the landscape.²²

In the short story, a Kali temple is mentioned as the place where the engineer lives. This minor descriptive detail from the short story is transformed into an occasion for expressing transgression in the film. In one of the key sequences in the film, we see Taran ask her aunt to narrate an anecdote of her father's interaction with the British.

The aunt describes her brother's proud, feudal demeanour towards the British and the sense of intimidation he wielded in the household. This diegetic sequence is interrupted by a cut to an extreme long shot of a woman/figure with flowing black hair seated by a river with her back facing us. The camera's pause allows us to grasp the striking chromatic contrast between the capacious spread of desaturated browns and reds in the landscape against the diminished but curious presence of the figure in blue. The following shot reverses the previous composition's emphasis on the negative space (landscape), by foregrounding a frontal view of the figure. Poised on the left side of the frame, the woman appears in medium close-up as a nude, smeared in blue paint with white lips and black flowing hair. Framed from her bust up, she is staring off-screen and her face expresses defiance. We recognize this woman as Taran and the figure she impersonates as Goddess Kali.

The comparison of characters with a religious icon is found in Ghatak's films where the female protagonist is often attired as Goddess Durga or symbolically addressed as "our mother". Such comparisons in Ghatak's cinema are strongly supported and flanked by dramatic content, such as tragic occurrences and emotional circumstances.²³ However, the meaning of the comparison in *Maya Darpan* remains unclear. We can propose a relationship of identity and call the montage a 'figurative' reaction-shot that describes Taran's anger towards her father and the fear he imposed on his sister and wife. But this reading delimits and flattens the content of the shot to a simile or metaphor and contradicts the film's consistent avoidance of psychological characterizations. A more complex meaning emerges if we ask; why the comparison to Kali? Kali, signified by her nudity, long and unruly dark hair, and bluish²⁴ black skin is the desublimated version of the more decorated and deified Goddess Parvati. If we include this materialist reading of Kali as 'Kalubai' or 'the Dark Lady' in Ancient India, where prior to her elevation by the higher castes as Goddess Parvati, she was worshipped by several tribes and cults, then the comparison evoked, is one of transgression, not merely against Taran's father, but the feudal class and caste to which he clings.²⁵ The anecdote narrated by the aunt exposes the patriarch's pride in his class and that pride is undermined through the

association of Taran with the subversive force of Kali. The montage, therefore, is not simply a metaphor or simile for Taran's emotion, but a form of hypocatastasis²⁶, or implied, indirect reference—as embodied in the form of Kali—to the criticism against feudal and caste pride.

A colour-montage that occurs within the diegetic space shows Taran following Montu to an area that we infer is Montu's home—the labourers' quarters. In an earlier scene, the engineer mentions that Montu has missed Taran's visits and this sequence shows her fulfilling that demand. As the camera forward tracks Montu and Taran, we see an inverted colour chord; instead of Taran, the tribal women are dressed in bright colours. Taran's white sari highlights the pink, green, black, and red in the clothes of the peasant-labourers. Given that Shahani has Taran draped in red throughout the film, it is noteworthy that as Taran enters Montu's living space, the same colour is seen draped on another woman. The woman, who might possibly be Montu's mother, gives Taran a glass of water. Taran drinks the water and leaves the quarters with Montu.

Except for a percussive soundtrack, the sequence is silent, and indeed speech becomes immaterial, because an inter-derivable arrangement of colours and the action of her drinking water in the home of a lower caste person have articulated the transgressive content of the sequence. It is the deliberate traversal of colour, between a known (Taran) and an unknown character (Montu's mother) that indirectly intimates the film's privileging of the tie between Taran and the labourers. The association of red with labourers is indeed reprised in the red attire of the dancers in the film's coda. The colour unites Taran with the varied worlds and lives that remain exterior to her slumbering consciousness, namely, the materialist cultures of pre-feudal Ancient India (red as sacrificial blood), the peasant labourers (attire of Montu's mother) and the revolution (attire of the dancers). The coalescence initiated by the colour suggests that the desired antidote of 'wide open space' includes a stance against oppressive social hierarchies by aligning oneself with the forgotten and the marginalized.²⁷

The concluding montage is the dance that follows the last diegetic shot of Taran and the engineer. Choreographed for the film by Chandralekha—one of India's foremost avant-garde dancers—we see Taran being led into a dance group.²⁸ The colours of the dance recall the association of red with Montu's mother and confirm that the colour behaves as a proleptic sign of Taran's participation in the struggle. The camera tilts from the dancers on stage to the darkened bottom of the frame, and back up to the dancers.²⁹ The Mayurbhanj Chhau style of dance performed here is well known for its provenance in tribal and folk cultures, and the performers of this dance style are conventionally labourers. A distinct quality of the Mayurbhanj style is its incorporation of martial movements and drills, ritual imitation of bird and animal movements, and enactments of stories and episodes often taken from Indian epics.³⁰ The dance in the film preserves these conventions and enacts the climactic war of Kurukshetra from the epic Mahabharata. For instance, the two, warring, groups of dancers gesture the crossfire of bows and arrows, chariots, and replicate the distinct war formations and strategies (vyuhas) that are enumerated in the epic's description of the battle. The disc-like grouping of dancers (chakra vyuha) resemble the particular tactics and military designs described in the epic.³¹ In terms of meaning, the choice of this particular folk-tribal dance style is consistent with the film's underlying interest in tribal cultures and their importance for Taran's anagnorisis. Furthermore, the conflict itself is a redefinition of 'freedom' and 'necessity' as rebellion against society rather than acquiescence to mechanistic progress.³²

All of the above-mentioned 'ruptures' that comprise a second discourse function as an expression of 'life' that is not only external to the world of Taran, but as a specific kind of life and world, namely, nature (the audio-loop sequence), the world of victims ("images of violence"), and tribal groups and folk communities that have borne the violent brunt of both modernization and caste and class hierarchies. These non-diegetic expressions, however ephemeral and fleeting as they might appear, display that several autonomous discourses such as history, living traditions, and nature are central for construing the

freedom that Taran achieves. In terms of form, the painterly austerity of one segment of the film serves to augment the expressive force of the counter-discourse offered in these non-diegetic montage shots. For the more we are accustomed to the relentless rhythms of Taran's world, the greater our experience of shock and surprise when the disruptive sequences expose the fissure between the withdrawn world of Taran, the feudal patriarch, and a society that is changing and inexorably determining their lives. Consequently, when seen from the perspective of the montage sequences, the diegetic world itself, while representing the reality of isolation and alienation, tends to acquire an illusory quality that Shahani rightly cautions against by emphasizing, somewhat didactically, the idea of 'wide open spaces' and the need to 'look outside of oneself'.

Epilogue

The events of May 1968 represented for Shahani a potential for the dissolution of ideological differences and an opportunity for intellectuals, workers, and students to dialogue freely without entanglement in identity politics.³³ Unlike discussants in journals like *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinéthique* who explicitly conceived the 'cinematographic apparatus' as an 'ideological apparatus', Shahani, following the tradition of Bresson and Ghatak, treats the cinematographic apparatus essentially as art.³⁴ Upon his return from France, Shahani encountered India's own parallel to the events of May 1968 in the uprisings of Maoist rebels, labourers, and peasants in areas of Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. The revolutions occurring in India at the time were volatile and uneven in producing their desired socio-political changes. Nonetheless, Shahani has described the situation as prompting his first feature to exude a political *tendency* rather than be identified as a 'political' film or a 'politically made' film.³⁵ In Indian cinema, the equivalents of a 'Third cinema' or 'political film' practice were filmmakers like Mrinal Sen and regional New Wave filmmakers like K.Hariharan, Govind Nihalani, and later on Shyam Benegal. By contrast, *Maya Darpan* brings neither a thematic solidarity nor symbolic affiliation with the political rhetoric evinced in the films of the Indian New Wave.

Shahani's interpretation of May 1968 indicates an aspirational and even philosophical appreciation of social change as an open-ended practice rather than one driven by party politics or institutional agendas. One could argue that a similar perspective colours his conception of film, and particularly the structure of *Maya Darpan*, where elliptical form rather than 'content' guarantees the expression of truth and concepts as embodied 'in', rather than 'through', art.³⁶ If we juxtapose a post-May 1968 film such as Godard and Gorin's *Tout va bien* (1972) with *Maya Darpan* (both films were released the same year), we notice how the latter anchors its utopian ideals enigmatically throughout its artistic inflections instead of positing those ideals as givens. Where Godard and Gorin state in a voice-over by the end of the film that their main characters have to see themselves as historically contextualized, Shahani weaves this as a process or a movement concretized and internalized in film form. The film's daedal structure elicits an engagement akin to Ariadne's thread, compelling the spectator to discover ways of revising and redrawing the critical content from the subtle interactions of montage and colour among other elements. Moreover, he specifies the contents of the historical discourse (the suffering of workers, peasants) as pivotal for achieving individual freedom. Unlike *Maya Darpan*'s incremental expression of ethical and utopian content, the reflexive and Brechtian approach of *Tout va bien* leaves the spectator (at least this spectator) at an impasse in terms of connecting the excesses of its comic-theatrical-collage structure with its political discourse. In other words, *Tout va bien* leaves some room for the suspicion that the radical modernist film's assumed correlation between self-reflexivity, tracking shots, and socio-political commentary could involve as much of a leap of faith as the enchanted spectator of 'bourgeois cinema'.³⁷ While *Tout va bien* is exemplary of Godard's contribution to modernist film experimentation, its success in sustaining, as Sylvia Harvey states, "a productive tension between means of representation and that social reality which the means of representation strive to analyse and account for"³⁸ remains debatable to some degree.

Maya Darpan speaks to the vexed attempts of the Dziga Vertov Group and other Third Cinema films that sought a radical film form for radical politics, by showing that film as an austere and enigmatic art form can express and even specify the contours for social transformation. It is an unusual work in that it focuses on the conditions for a 'revolutionary' consciousness that is eventually lead to revolutionary action, rather than presupposing both the individual as a revolutionary and the revolutionary act. This is why the revolution appears figuratively as a desired and even conceptual conclusion rather than a real occurrence. And perhaps the film even implicitly claims that any kind of social change or affirmation of individual autonomy begins with acknowledging the autonomy of art. It is in showing that film could articulate the ideals and objectives motivating social change without having to forego its artistic appearance or surrender its enigmatic capabilities that *Maya Darpan* figures as a mature contributor to the discourse on the cinema of May 1968.

¹ The phrase 'art into life' is attributed to Tatlin. There are obvious differences between Russian Constructivism and my use of the phrase apropos the works of Shahani. For instance, unlike the Constructivist context of collective revolutionary idealism, manifestoes and organized artist groups, there is no connotation of the "collective" or "movement" in ascribing the phrase "avant-garde" to Shahani and his contemporary Mani Kaul. Secondly, unlike Constructivism's interest in uniting art and life through industrial materials and technology, Kaul and Shahani are removed from a simplistic celebration of industry and technology that had indeed denuded and threatened pre-industrial modes of culture, economics and aesthetics. As Jaroslav Anel points out in his essay "The Constructivist Entanglement: Art into Politics, Politics into Art", Russian Constructivism was also a response to modern alienation. It is in this respect that the films of Kaul and Shahani, assuming the role of an avant-garde, respond to urban alienation resulting from Indian modernization. Jaroslav Anel, "The Constructivist Entanglement: Art into Politics, Politics into Art" in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*, Introduction by Richard Andrews and Milena Kalinovska (Seattle: Henry Gallery Association, 1990): 223-240.

² I use the words 'art' and 'life' also in reference to Theodor Adorno's description of radical works as those exhibiting a tension between 'construction' and 'expression'. See Theodor Adorno, "Semblance and Expression" in *Aesthetic Theory*, Translated, edited and introduced by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: The Athlone Press, 1997) In a larger project, these references, in particular the work of Adorno and Adorno scholar Lydia Goehr, are fleshed out in the discussion of Shahani as an avant-garde filmmaker.

³ He states: "Theatre is very extroverted. It tries to project all the time and I think cinema is more reflective. It could do that, so the choice was for something which could be reflective because of my own temperament possibly." Kumar Shahani, "Interview with

Kumar Shahani", in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 270-72.

⁴ Shahani's apprenticeship under Bresson is well-known and mentioned in several interviews. See Kumar Shahani, "Interview with Kumar Shahani", in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 275. Shahani was Bresson's 'apprentice' during the production of *Une femme douce* (1969), and he can be spotted in the cinémathèque sequence seated behind Luc (Guy Frangin).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Shahani has described May 1968 in romantic terms as a time of 'love' and 'sharing'. He also mentions that Bresson participated in activities concerning the liberation of immigrants. Shahani, "Interview with Kumar Shahani", 276.

⁷ For an elucidation by Bresson of his conception of pure cinema see his renowned work, Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, Trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1975).

⁸ Sylvia Harvey writes that the film collectives of May 1968 felt "that art was to be regarded as a neutral or a universal language, that it could not be directly related to class struggle or to the development of a particular programme." See Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film culture* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980) 32.

⁹ The comparison of Shahani with Straub-Huillet is mentioned in passing by Aruna Vasudev. See Aruna Vasudev, "Form and Function" in *The New Indian Cinema* (Delhi: MacMillan India Ltd, 1986) 105.

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion on the political implications of *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, see, Kailan R. Rubinoff, "Authenticity as a Political Act: Straub-Huillet's Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach and the Post-War Bach Revival", *Music & Politics* 5, Number 1 (Winter 2011) pp.1-24.

¹¹ Verma was one of the key exponents of the Nai Kahani movement (New Literature movement) in Hindi literature during the 1950s-1960s. According to literary critic Ravinder Sher Singh, the Nai Kahani group represented a non-utopian approach that went against both the regional style of the socialist realist writers and a deep psychological trend in earlier writers. Known for a lyrical style that indirectly addressed themes and issues concerning the problems of Indian modernity through the focalization of introspective protagonists, Verma was accused of importing a modernist style that seemed inauthentic in comparison to regional realism. Ravinder Sher Singh, 'Introduction', in *Journey to another world in the works of Nirmal Verma*, (PhD dissertation., University of Washington, 2001),39, 1-78, 122. Nirmal Verma, "Maya Darpan" Translated by Geeta Kapur in *Maya Darpan and Other Stories* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹² This is an exact quote from Engels. While Engels is the author of the quote, he discusses it as a concept introduced by Hegel: "Hegel was the first man to make a proper explanation of the relations of freedom and necessity. In his eyes, freedom is the recognition of necessity." Friedrich Engels, "Freedom and Necessity" in *Landmarks of Scientific Socialism: Anti-Dühring*, Translated and edited by Austin Lewis (Chicago: Charles H Kerr company 1907),147. In some translations, the word "insight" substitutes "recognition". The concept as mentioned in Hegel's *The Philosophy of Right* is as

follows: "Thus freedom, the absolute will, the objective, and the circle of necessity, are all one principle, whose elements are the ethical forces. They rule the lives of individuals and in individuals as their modes have their shape, manifestation and actuality." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Third Part: The Ethical System, Section 145" in Hegel's *The Philosophy of Right*, Translated by S.W.Dyde (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 156.

¹³ "Black blood" refers to the necessary expenditure of menstrual blood.

¹⁴ In his essay, 'Interrogating Internationalism' Shahani confirms that the desaturation of the negative space was done to "strengthen the warmth of the human skin". Kumar Shahani, "Interrogating Internationalism", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 19/20, May (1990): 8-9.

¹⁵ We infer that the train was a fantasy because the engineer claims that there was a transportation strike.

¹⁶ Shahani's description of his ideal cinematic images as 'sensuous' can be conceived as the basis for his cinematography. He states "... One would have thought that that (sensuous) is the beginning of all experience and philosophy and whatever, of science, the basic sensuous experience. At any rate, that is most valid in art." Kumar Shahani, "Interview with Kumar Shahani", in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), 280.

¹⁷ Film critic Aruna Vasudev reads the film's colour trajectory from red and yellow to green in a linear symbolism, namely a progression from anger to nature. As valid as this interpretation might be, it is too simplistic and does not account for the ambivalence of the colour red as it is used in the film and its contradiction to the portrait of Taran as a withdrawn individual. See Aruna Vasudev, "Form and Function" in Aruna Vasudev, *The New Indian Cinema* (Delhi: MacMillan India Ltd, 1986), 102-103. Similarly, Arun Khopkar, in his essay "Works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani", identifies the color red in the bricks of the construction site and links it to the dance. He is also the only critic, as far as I know, to have observed how color is not used for expressing emotions or symbols. However, he makes a formalist claim for color as a stylistic element serving the establishment of a 'pattern' in the film, whereas I relate the value of color to the broader conceptual issues in the film. See Arun Khopkar, "Works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani", *70 years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)*, Ed. T.M.Ramachandran (Cinema India-International, 1985), 193-194.

¹⁸ Shahani states: "lorsque je faisais mon premier film, je me souviens avoir dit à Akbar que je voulais du jaune ici, du vert à la fin et une touche de rouge au début. Et Akbar m'avait dit: 'Tu devrais avoir un axe sur lequel tu te déplacerais et à partir duquel tu pourrais travailler sur des équivalences émotionnelles'." See Meher Pestonji, Kumar Shahani and Akbar Padamsee, "Comprendre l'image: Meher Pestonji s'entretient avec Akbar Padamsee et Kumar Shahani du processus créatif en peinture et au cinéma" in *Indomania: Le cinéma Indien des origines à nos jours*, (Cinémathèque française, 1996), 165. Padamsee: "A red line then becomes yellow and yellow line would become red-red/orange and yellow/orange- sense of incandescence". Bhanumati Padamsee and Annapurna Garimella (editors), "Akbar Padamsee in conversation with Homi Bhabha" in *Akbar Padamsee: A Work in Language* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2010), 21.

Padamsee's own paintings during 1956-58 used a colour trajectory of red-yellow-red/orange- yellow/orange that is repeated in the first hour of *Maya Darpan*.

¹⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, "Colour Film" in *Notes of a film director*, Trans. by X. Danko (Moscow: Foreign languages publishing house, 1959), 127.

²⁰ I use the word "normative" in the philosophical sense of Shahani's concern with outlining, somewhat didactically, what an ethical course of action would be for his protagonist and the spectator than providing a 'cathartic' solution in relation to the personal story of Taran alone.

²¹ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, "Maya Darpan", in *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 414.

²² The sequence also reminds us of Ghatak's landscape and nature shots, but unlike Ghatak, it is devoid of mythological and patriotic texture and remains a somewhat independent meditation on nature.

²³ Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960)*, *Komal Gandhar (The Gandhar Sublime or E-Flat, 1961)* and *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Named Titus, 1973)* all make analogies between characters and Goddess Durga.

²⁴ Arun Khopkar speculates that the colour blue could also be a reference to Matisse. Arun Khopkar, "The works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani" in *70 years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)*, Ed. T.M.Ramachandran (Cinema India-International, 1985), 194.

²⁵ This materialist connotation of Kali would have appealed to Shahani through the works of his mentor, the Marxist anthropologist D.D. Kosambi. D.D. Kosambi "Goddesses as well as Demonesses" and "Cults to deified Women" in *Myth and Reality: Studies in the formation of Indian culture* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962) 85-88.

²⁶ In rhetoric, hypocatastasis differs from metaphor and simile in that it avoids defining the subject of comparison. David Nevins Lord offers the following definition of hypocatastasis: "The hypocatastasis is a substitution, without a formal notice, of an act of one kind, with its object or conditions, for another, in order, by a resemblance, to exemplify that for which the substitute is used;" and further, "the figure is thus employed in expressing resemblances between the difficulties, the dispositions, the sensations, the results, or other characteristics that mark acts of different kinds ; not, like the simile and metaphor, in exhibiting likenesses of nature that subsist between agents or things themselves, that are the agents or objects of acts". See David Nivens Lord, *The Characteristics and Laws of Figurative Language*, (New York: Franklin Knight, 1857) 10-11; 67-8. One could argue that in Ghatak's cinema, the reference to a Goddess is more of a metaphor and simile, than hypocatastasis in that it is associated with the description of a character's emotion.

²⁷ This interpretation is also motivated by Adorno's lectures on history and freedom and is discussed in detail in my dissertation. The quote from Adorno that instantiates his thought on the interdependence of individual and social freedom is as follows: " an action is free if it is related transparently to the freedom of society as a whole." Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom Lectures: 1964-65*, Trans. by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 266

²⁸ Bharathanatyam exponent and fusion dance choreographer Chandralekha's (1928-2006) involvement in the film, similar to Akbar Padamsee's, represents the context of an experimental culture during the time of the film's making. As a reputed modern dance

choreographer, she transformed classical dance (the Bharathanatyam) into a "living" contemporary form through the inclusion of martial arts and folk dances.

²⁹ Chandralekha writes that she introduced Shahani to the image of Kali in the Kalighat Temple in Calcutta and had proceeded with the colour scheme of red, black and white based on that image. She states, "What I saw was a jet-black stone image of Kali, white eyes, white sari, red border, white skulls, and red hibiscus flowers. ... In between the movement of the people, I saw the movement of colours. And for me that was Kali- the movement of colour." Chandralekha as quoted in Rustom Barucha, *Chandralekha: woman, dance, resistance* (India: Harper Collins, 1999) 97.

³⁰ Preceding this dance in the film, Shahani shows Taran and the engineer allude to the dice game in the Mahabharata epic. Mayurbhanj Chhau is one of the three kinds of 'Chhau' or 'Chho' dance from the states of Orissa and West Bengal respectively. Unlike the two other kinds of Chhau dance, Purulia and Seraikella, in which the dancers wear masks, in the Mayurbhanj style, the dancers use their face as a mask. My descriptions of Chhau and Mayurbhanj Chhau are drawn from the entry under 'India' in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theater*, Vol.5 by Ranbir Singh, Ravi Chaturvedi and Jasmine Jaywant, Edited by Don Rubin, Chua Soo Pong, Ravi Chaturvedi, Ramendu Majumdar, Minoru Tanokura and Katharine Brisbane (London: Routledge, 1998), 134-136.

³¹ I have not found any discussion by Chandralekha or Kumar Shahani on the imitation of vyuhas for the dance sequence, but the analogy is worth pursuing when one compares the gestures of the dancers with the geometric formation of the vyuhas. Ashish Lahiri describes the vyuha as an "intricate, labyrinthine, snare-like formation of troops which the enemy could not penetrate, and if they could, would not know how to extricate out of." Some of the vyuhas he lists are suchi-vyuha (needle formation), ardha-chandra-vyuha (crescent-shaped), krouncha-vyuha (crane shaped), mandala vyuha (circle) etc. Ashish Lahiri, "Technology and War" in *Science, Technology, Imperialism and War (Volume XV Part 1)*, Jyoti Bhushan Das Gupta (Ed) (New Delhi: First Impression, 2007), 294-5.

³² This conception of freedom and necessity is further discussed in relation to Adorno's negative dialectics in my dissertation.

³³ 'Interview with Kumar Shahani' in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, 276-7.

³⁴ Marcelin Pleyenet states: "The cinematographic apparatus is a strictly ideological apparatus; it disseminates bourgeois ideology before anything else." Marcelin Pleyenet, "Economic-Ideological-Formal", Trans. from *Cinéthique*, no. 3, 1969, pp7-14 in Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (BFI Publishing, 1980) 155.

³⁵ Shahani states: "And also there was another question of not making an explicitly political film, because by the time I came back here, political cinema had become almost pornographic....I wanted to make a film which would have all the politics implicit, rather than a kind of stupid populist stuff!" 'Interview with Kumar Shahani' in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, 278.

³⁶ This is a reference to Adorno's preference for 'form' oriented art as opposed to content-based art. Adorno preferred phrases such as 'autonomous form' to describe the uncompromising individuality of radical artworks in *Aesthetic Theory*. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Trans., ed. and introduced by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London:

The Athlone Press, 1997): 49, 83. Also see Lydia Goehr's essay, "Dissonant Works and the listening public" on this topic in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, Ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge University Press, 2004 pp: 222-247),243.

³⁷ My argument is similar to one made by Allen S. Weiss in his criticism of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's call for "passionate detachment". Of the "invisible spectator", he states: "The guest might be invisible, but this does not mean naïve: the call for "passionate detachment" is perhaps not so different from that "willing suspension of disbelief" posited by Coleridge as a key feature of the aesthetic experience." See Allen S. Weiss, "Introduction", in *Perverse Desire and the Ambiguous Icon* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994) 7-8.

³⁸ Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film culture* (London: BFI Publishing, 1980) 66.