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Ghosts of the city: Utopia and the city in *Bhooter* *Bhabishyat* (2012)

ABSTRACT

This article analyses a recent iconic film of postcolonial Bengali and Indian cinema. Aneek Dutta's 2012 smash-hit Bhooter Bhabishyat is a fantasy urban comedy that hinges on the punning word 'bhoot', which means both the past and ghost in Bengali. I show how the film carries powerful charges of the utopian principle of hope as analysed by Ernst Bloch, which finds expression in Dutta's critique of neo-liberal predatory property development that dispossesses earlier denizens of the city. I analyse how in Bhooter Bhabishyat the mansion of ghosts becomes an inclusive reservoir of many aspects of Kolkata's transculturality and utopian spirit and community, articulating hope against the backdrop of a dystopian present. The article draws particular attention to how crucial women's agency is in resisting such predations of criminal real estate development. I further show how Bhooter Bhabishyat articulates the utopian principle of hope by situating itself firmly in the present of Kolkata, narrativizing elements such as Bengali rock bands and fashion shows, while also paying tribute to the past history and histories of Kolkata, including histories of classic Bengali cinema. The world of the ghosts in this film, the article argues, ties together past, present and future and reinvents them, articulating utopian hope.

KEYWORDS

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This article examines a recent iconic film from the repertoire of postcolonial Bengali and Indian cinema, the recent smash-hit *Bhooter Bhabishyat* (Dutta, 2012), whose punning title can be translated either as 'The Future of the Past' or 'The Future of Ghosts' (the word 'bhoot', meaning both 'the past' and 'ghost' in Bengali). I argue that this fantasy and ghost-themed urban comedy can be considered a utopian film in a number of ways. First, the film's protagonists, filmmaker Ayan and a number of ghosts, articulate the principle of hope synonymous with utopia, which Ernst Bloch argued manifests itself in the unfolding of the not-yet-conscious, one that allies the past with the present and future. Second, the film portrays a utopian community of ghosts, represented as marginalized figures, dispossessed earlier denizens of the city, who also bring alive the city's history and its ability to hold together diverse gender, class, racial and political identities through a shared solidarity. The article further argues that the film creates our belief in this utopian community of ghosts by means of entertainment (specifically the use of comedy) as opposed to didacticism. I show that Dutta's film situates itself firmly in the map of Kolkata's present, offering, through the ghosts' resistance to predatory real estate development, a humorous critique of the destruction of Kolkata's heritage in the name of globalized neo-liberal development. At the same time, the film creates a protagonist, Ayan, a filmmaker who believes in making entertaining films rather than overtly or stridently political ones. The utopian nature of *Bhooter Bhabishyat* is also connected intertextually to the past of Bengali cinema and its music, in particular the Bengali musical comedy *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969), directed by the Indian director Satyajit Ray. The filmmaker-protagonist Ayan in Dutta's movie admires Ray's bridging of art-house, avant-garde and more mainstream approaches to filmmaking, and aspires to do the same. In a symbolic allusion, the voice of the king of the ghosts from *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* becomes the ringtone on Ayan's mobile phone. This article thus argues that *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, using spectrality or ghostliness, sees the past of Bengali cinema as a utopia too.

In recent years, we have had many films in the mainstream Hollywood world, such as *The Maze Runner* (Ball, 2014) and *The Hunger Games* series (Ross, 2012), which are utopian or dystopian. Such films narrativize alternative worlds, depicting imagined places that offer dreams of a better life or nightmares of possible lives, and asking fundamental questions around power and pleasure in these u/eu-topia or dys-topia. This article focuses on a highly unusual recent film from the postcolonial world, specifically the city of Kolkata in Bengal in India. *Bhooter Bhabishyat* humorously and critically explores issues around neo-liberal urban development, in particular the destruction of heritage properties by speculative real estate developers to build shopping malls and apartment complexes, activities implicitly or explicitly condoned by the state. What is also remarkable is that *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, *The Maze Runner* and *The Hunger Games* films are all high in entertainment value; they belong to a commercial rather than avant-garde filmic tradition. While the Hollywood films have elements of the nail-biting thriller or the adventure story, the film that this article analyses is a comic ghost story, driven by humour.

The story of *Bhooter Bhabishyat* opens with Ayan, a young filmmaker who hires Chaudhuri Palace, an old mansion in Kolkata, to shoot some scenes for an advertising film. While staying the night at the mansion, a charismatic man called Biplab (the name means revolution) suddenly appears, and the two get talking about a feature film that the young director is planning to make. Since the latter is having problems with moving the plot forward, Biplab offers him

a story. This story, narrated by Biplab in flashback, is shown to viewers partly in vignette-like episodes and partly through Biplab's narratorial voice regularly interposing in, narrating and connecting the aforementioned episodes. The old heritage properties from the colonial and early postcolonial past of Calcutta (the Anglicized name by which the city was known during this period) are rapidly being taken over by real estate developers, who demolish the buildings to build more commercial properties such as malls and apartment complexes. The ghosts of Kolkata are therefore in deep trouble since they are dispossessed and become refugees from their old buildings. As ghosts are neither 'voters' nor 'consumers', Biplab says, no one is worried about their eviction. Biplab tells the story of how a motley crew of ghosts from different time periods and ethnicities takes refuge inside Chaudhuri Palace – one of the few buildings to have avoided demolition so far – and form a community. A real threat then appears on the scene: a criminal property developer named Bhutoria, who will stop at nothing to takeover the mansion and build a mall à la Singapore in its place. As they plot and plan a response, the ghosts discover the property developer's past history, including the ghost of a wife, Lakshmi, whom he mistreated cruelly and burnt to death because of dowry, the illegal but widespread practice in India of brides bringing, money, jewellery, appliances and various other coveted commodities from their natal family to their marital family (Banerjee 2014). The ghosts conjure up the ghost of Lakshmi, who frightens Bhutoria out of his wits when she confronts him. Biplab's story ends with Bhutoria obeying the ghosts' command to run away and never to return. Ayan then realizes that Biplab too is a ghost, a legendary Naxalite (Maoist revolutionary) from the 1970s, who is also a member of the Chaudhuri clan. Biplab gives the director money to make his feature film, and *Bhooter Bhabishyat* ends with the beginning of the shooting of a film also called 'Bhooter Bhabishyat', which Ayan is now directing based on Biplab's plotline.

Let us now consider the notion of utopia, before turning to an analysis of the film. There are many ways of understanding such a term. A neologism from the Greek coined by Thomas More in 1516 in his Latin book of the same name, 'utopia' punningly combines the notions of a good place and no place, through a pun in 'u': 'eu' is good, 'ou' is privative in Greek. Utopia imagines a place in which dreams and desires of the good are to be found, while simultaneously presenting such a place and its dreams as elusive or impossible to realize in practice. While European in origin, it is widely accepted in the scholarly community today that utopia and dystopia translate across cultures and periods. As Jacqueline Dutton has recently argued:

based on the evidence available to us regarding the diverse belief systems and world-views, cultural manifestations and socio-political movements that demonstrate fundamentally utopian visions, it seems that the desire for a better way of being in the world is indeed a universal concept.

(2010: 250)

Also widely accepted is the fact that utopian and dystopian thought and practice are highly gendered. Utopian texts and experiments inevitably involve some kind of reassessment of gender roles. My analysis of *Bhooter Bhabishyat* shows how gender, specifically the oppression and agency of women, is integral to the utopianism of the film. Further, utopia intersects in strange and surprising ways with memory and time. It is a fallacy to think that utopia is

always, primarily, or overwhelmingly future-directed in a linear way. Utopian narratives create what I would term an 'other-when'. This non-linear temporality, in which the past is often as important as the present and integral to hope for the future, is exemplified in *Bhooter Bhabishyat*. These three dimensions of utopia/dystopia – a non-Eurocentric perspective, gender and time – interweave in the film, with an emphasis on the urban.

The film articulates hope specifically in a context of postcolonial modernity (India, like most other countries in the region of South Asia, was under British colonial rule from the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century and is thus a postcolonial country) and urbanity. One of the markers of modernity is the concept of utopia. In times of felt and experienced historical change and transition from an 'old' age to a 'new' one, as Lisa Lowe notes (2001: 11), humanity imagines utopian possible worlds. These tend to be poised between hope and fear, reality and imagination, aspiration and irony. It is now widely accepted that European modernity is not the only one possible: the notion of multiple modernities sees many modernities emerging in different periods in different parts of the globe (Eisenstadt 2000). Elsewhere I have argued that Indian and South Asian utopia is fruitfully analysed in the frame of such multiple modernities (Bagchi 2016). In such different modernities, including in postcolonial India, where 32.7 per cent of the population lives in urban settlements (World Bank 2016), cities and towns are particularly important markers of modernity, with such settlements often seen as places of dynamism, change, hope and desire for the many people migrating there each year from villages in search of work and a better standard of living. Indeed, urbanization is a growing trend in India: the urban population of South Asia, of which India is the largest constituent country, grew by 130 million between 2001 and 2011 and is poised to rise by almost 250 million by 2030 (Ellis and Roberts 2016: 1). The city in India is a locus of utopian hopes, dreams and desires; yet it can also mutate into a disillusioning, dystopian nightmare. Such utopian and dystopian impulses are captured in many Indian films, including many about megacities such as Mumbai (see Mazumdar [2010] for an analysis of dystopian films about Mumbai).

Bhooter Bhabishyat shows the utopian principle of hope as analysed by Ernst Bloch. Hope, according to Bloch, manifests itself as a phase in the unfolding of the not-yet-conscious, one that allies the past (the ghosts) with the present and future (Ayan and his filmmaking plans). Bloch, an unorthodox Marxist thinker, saw dreams, daydreams and even apparently escapist dream-like entertainment as containing seeds of hope in the face of the alienation and exploitative nature of society; hope for Bloch was the key to human and political regeneration. As he wrote of his work *The Principle of Hope*, 'The theme of the five parts of this work [...] is the dreams of a better life' (Bloch 1986: 11). In such dreams, Bloch found traces of utopia and anticipatory consciousness, or forward dreaming, often rooted in the past. Such utopian impulses are in Bloch's analysis to be found in an astonishing range of phenomena, such as fashion, architecture, literature, film, theatre, opera, tourism, jokes and games. These utopian impulses and such anticipatory consciousness articulate the principle of hope, about which Bloch writes:

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot

know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. It will not tolerate a dog's life which feels itself only passively thrown into What Is, which is not seen through, even wretchedly recognized. The work against anxiety about life and the machinations of fear is that against its creators, who are for the most part easy to identify, and it looks in the world itself for what can help the world; this can be found. How richly people have always dreamed of this, dreamed of the better life that might be possible. Everybody's life is pervaded by daydreams: one part of this is just stale, even enervating escapism, even booty for swindlers, but another part is provocative, is not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation. This other part has hoping at its core, and is teachable.

(1986: 3)

Bloch thus also thinks that dreams of a better life are not always positive; they can also be 'stale, even enervating'. Elsewhere in *The Principle of Hope* he wrote that some dreams of humanity turn into 'grotesque masks and hoods' worn notably by 'Lynchers, Ku Kluxers, hooded avengers' and the 'fascist charlatan' (Bloch 1986: 47). Bloch saw in such horrific phenomena the coming true of wishes made by 'the petit bourgeois' at 'Carnival time' (Bloch 1986: 47). Unsurprisingly, he saw phenomena such as entertainment films from Hollywood also in somewhat mixed terms, as ideologically manipulable and harnessable by the bourgeoisie. As Bloch writes in the introduction to *The Principle of Hope*, he delineates in his work phenomena such as:

wishful images in the mirror, in a beautifying mirror which often only reflects how the ruling class wishes the wishes of the weak to be. But the picture clears completely as soon as the mirror comes from the people, as occurs quite visibly and wonderfully in fairytales [...] The appeal of dressing-up, illuminated *display* belong here, but then the *world of fairytale*, brightened distance in *travel*, the *dance*, the dream-factory of *film*, the example of *theatre*. Such things either present a better life, as in the entertainment industry, or sketch out in real terms a life shown to be essential.

(Bloch 1986: 13, original emphasis)

Bhooter Bhabishyat, to use Bloch's terms, is very much a set of utopian wishful images in a mirror, expressed through an entertaining film. While Bloch's remarks about the ideological orientation of such films in the interest of the ruling class are also partly applicable to *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, the film undoubtedly also has much in it that stands up in a robust (and funny) manner for the marginalized ghosts who bring alive the city's history, and its ability to hold together clashing gender, class, racial and political overtones through a shared solidarity.

In *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, the ghosts' wish to remain in their derelict mansion is fulfilled, and this wish fulfilment is achieved by an entertaining plotline in which the ghosts band together to defeat the stratagems of the property developer who wants to demolish the house. The not-yet-conscious that the film articulates consists of a fusion of the energies of contemporary youth, such as the filmmaker Ayan (sympathetic to the past but also in search of

innovations and hope for the future), with the subversive energy of the ghosts (who embody colourful, energetic parts of the past and simultaneously affirm their ability to survive into the future). Lest we romanticize the ghosts' politics too much, however, it is important to note that class hierarchies and the desires and selfish pleasures of the ruling upper classes contribute to who gets to live in the ghosts' mansion. The Muslim chef-soldier is allowed to stay because he would cook tasty meals for Ramsay or Darpanarayan; the rickshawpuller is allowed to stay because he would be able to transport the ghosts across short distances. The fact that the rickshawpuller is from Bihar, a state neighbouring West Bengal, which brings many poor migrants to West Bengal, makes him especially subaltern. Ramsay and Darpanarayan make the decisions about who will get to stay in the mansion, and the fact that they are servants of British colonialism is something that film-viewers have to swallow. Nevertheless, even when we adopt this more critical perspective towards the community of ghosts, we have to recognize that the character Biplab, part of the Maoist movement in India, busy even in his ghostly avatar in travelling to parts of the country swept by Maoist insurrection, provides a counterpoint to the ideologies represented by the comprador to colonialism, Darpanarayan, and the colonial official Ramsay. Pablo, the young 'Bangla band' musician, who is against orthodox religion, capitalism and traditional mores, also offers a dissenting view to Darpanarayan. Viewers and scholars who wish to critique *Bhooter Bhabishyat* might still argue that the film claims to harmonize too many contradictory political elements, and they may well be correct. Yet the whole point of the film, I would argue, is to deliver a layered story in which the viewer can enjoy the many political allusions with a laugh, and take up his or her own position without being corralled by the film director into a monolithic ideology or viewpoint.

Ayan the contemporary filmmaker, who represents the present of art and the shape of future art in Kolkata, and who also does not believe in art with a strident monolithic ideological or political message, is inspired by the spectres of the past: he needs the past (the ghosts) and their resistance to contemporary neo-liberal property development to go forward and renew urban art. As the mansion full of ghosts (who are figures from the history of Bengal and India from the eighteenth century onwards) becomes a site of resistance against a predatory property developer who wants to demolish this mansion to build a shopping-mall, the viewer of the film feels that an espousal of the past of Kolkata is necessary for the city to have a positive future. The story about the ghosts is told in the film by a ghost to a contemporary Bengali filmmaker seeking a good storyline for his feature film.

What kind of film does Ayan wish to make? He believes in making entertaining films. He does not believe in stridently political films, with too much of what he calls a 'message'. He says, tongue-in-cheek, that he would send an sms or a text message from his mobile phone if he really wanted to send a message. He loves 'layered' narratives, that is, narratives with many layers of signification in them. Biplab reassures him that there are many layers to be found in the story about the ghosts. Ayan also believes that film is a realm that can bridge art and commercialism. This is arguably another utopian vision in the film, hovering on the edge of the impossible, which it imaginatively makes concrete. Dutta, the director of *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, himself works in advertising, while Ayan also readily admits, without shame, that he makes advertisement films. Ayan says that his guru is the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray, a director who had worked in advertising and commercial art before coming to

filmmaking. Ray bridged art films, avant-garde films and a more mainstream approach to filmmaking: Ayan believes he too can do the same.

Richard Dyer has argued that entertaining films, notably musicals, have a component of utopianism that is found in non-representational elements, in the affect that those films represent and evoke in viewers. Entertaining film

presents [...] what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production.

(Dyer 1992: 18)

Bhooter Bhabishyat creates our belief in the utopian community of ghosts by use of spectacle and comedy, connected to the past and present of Bengali film and music in particular. The film has a number of songs and musical interludes that occur, for example, during a fashion show with songs that the ghosts perform.

Bharucha (1992), taking a different analytical path to Dyer, argues that in utopian performances we do not need better maps of the future. Rather, we need more adequate maps of the present, which can stimulate the desire for a more humane world. Dutta's film certainly situates itself firmly in the map of Kolkata's present, offering, through the ghosts' resistance to predatory real estate development, a critique of the destruction of Kolkata's heritage in the name of globalized neo-liberal development. Specifically, there are many allusions made in the film to the politics of land-grab, civil society activism and political polarization from the recent past of West Bengal: after 34 years of rule, the Left Front government of West Bengal lost provincial government elections in 2011, following protests between 2006 and 2009 against the government's plans to acquire land from populated terrain, dispossessing existing inhabitants, to help private corporations create large-scale industrial projects; Singur (where land was sought to be acquired to build a Tata automobile plant) and Nandigram (where land was sought to be acquired for a chemical project) became centres of opposition, with artists, actresses and theatre personalities among those opposing land acquisition and the dispossession of poor people. *Bhooter Bhabishyat* cheekily alludes to these developments, referring to 'sushil samaj' (civil society) and 'era – ora' (us and them, referring to polarized politics) in the context of the ghosts: civil society and they (as opposed to us) do not care about the plight of ghosts, the film's title song tells us. The film seems to take the position that the story of the ghosts is one of far greater marginalization than the story of the dispossessed in the realm of the politics of living humans. As the dwelling place of the ultimate dispossessed and disenfranchised figures (the ghosts), the ghosts' mansion is also the ultimate no-place; its inhabitants are the ultimate non-persons, who are nonetheless conferred the status of colourful persons with agency by the film. The mansion of the ghosts becomes a eu/ou-topia, an inclusive, positive space; this space also has an inhabited community visible only to the ghosts or to those living humans whom they choose to appear before. This utopia, representing many aspects of Kolkata's history, hybridity and sense of community (see Chaudhuri 1990), with ghosts from different races, genders, religions, classes and ideologies cooperating, articulates hope against the backdrop of a dystopian predatory present, embodied in real estate development, mired in a combination of

corruption, violence and neo-liberal greed (Banerjee-Guha 2016; Dey et al. 2016) that destroys heritage (Chaudhuri 2015).

Living in and out of 'real' time, haunting nooks and crannies of a mansion that is a relic of days gone by, mingling sympathetically with the angst and desires of young artists, travelling across India to aid contemporary revolutionaries, Biplab the revolutionary also represents a utopian spirit. Killed for being part of a 1970s leftist movement repressed brutally by the state, Biplab views ghosts politically: he sees them as existing outside of a damaging cycle of consumption and commodification, and outside the mainstream system of electoral democracy. Ghosts are critical and relatively uncontaminated, Biplab thinks, by the predatory real estate development of contemporary Kolkata.

Ghosts had also been powerful, eerie, entertaining and sympathetic figures in Satyajit Ray's film *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969). This highly influential intertext for *Bhooter Bhabishyat* is signalled in the first instance by the fact that the title sequence and song in *Bhooter Bhabishyat* are very similar to the visual and musical elements to be found in the dance of the ghosts in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. This earlier film, based on a story written by Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri (itself based on a folk tale), is also pacifist and utopian. Village singer Goopy and drummer Bagha, who have been ostracized by upper-caste people, come together in comradeship and are granted three boons by the King of Ghosts. These boons allow Goopy and Bagha to become really good musicians, to go where they want and to get the food they want. They use their music to overturn a jingoistic, militaristic state, where the peace-loving king has been drugged and turned into a warmongering maniac by high officials and a wizard. Ray's duo of musicians and the film as a whole promote pacifism and art, while not purveying these through overt, strident polemics. Symbolically, but also in a highly material, sonic way, the voice of the king of the ghosts in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (itself a remixed version of Satyajit Ray's voice) becomes the ringtone on the mobile phone of Ayan the young filmmaker in *Bhooter Bhabishyat*. Thus Dutta's contemporary, globalized, highly technologized Bengali film also finds utopia through its affective relation with the past of Bengali cinema.

A second way in which *Bhooter Bhabishyat* is connected to the past of Bengali cinema is through the character of the actress Kadalibala. Given that 'kadali' means banana, her name evokes the great actress from the 1920s and the 1930s, Angurbala ('angur' meaning grape). The humorous polysemy of this name is made still more potent when Biplab tells Ayan, again with tongue firmly in cheek, that her name hides the word 'Kala', which also means 'the arts'. Like Angurbala, Kadalibala sings in nasal tones, and conjures up an era of glamorous, black-and-white films. Kadalibala, the industrialist's daughter Koel, and Bhutoria's dead and abused wife Lakshmi bond together in a spirit of female solidarity. Indeed, all three women's stories critique the oppression of women by patriarchy. Kadalibala had wished for a happy married life with the younger scion of the Chaudhuri family; instead, he set her up as his mistress and married someone else. Koel was not allowed to love and have a relationship with the man of her choice by her father. Lakshmi, trained by Kadalibala to perform a titillating 'item number' for Bhutoria with her face covered, was horribly mistreated by her husband. This is the most powerful level at which gender can be analysed in the film. There is a crucial agency that the female ghosts take on, and by doing so they also resist and banish Bhutoria, the patriarchal and criminal epitome of the corrupt entrepreneurial capitalist. Without the women, Bhutoria could not have been defeated.

Furthermore, *Bhooter Bhabishyat* paradoxically situates itself in the cultural now of globalized Kolkata, narrativizing elements such as Bengali rock bands and fashion shows, while at the same time paying tribute to history and histories, including histories of classic vintage cinema. The ghosts who have died very recently, such as Koel, have to explain to the other ghosts from much earlier times how pop culture is changing contemporary language in Bengal: for example, the words 'hot' and 'cool' (in English) are frequently used in Kolkata, and Koel has to explain to a bewildered Kadalibala, the actress from an early part of the twentieth century, that such words now refer to something prized, something seen as positive and trendy. The past and the globalized present are thus wittily brought together, and one of the messages of the film is that hybridizing past and present in an inclusive way would allow hope for the future to emerge. Some of the ghosts are very much connected to the digital world of the present: they have a social networking site called SpookBook, which they use to find the ghost of a notorious killer from the underclass, who then helps the Chaudhuri Palace ghosts in their plan to scare and defeat Bhutoria.

The story of the ghosts also brings together key snapshots from the history of India. Khaja Khan, the ghostly Muslim soldier and chef, had fought at the Battle of Plassey (1757), at which the East India Company defeated the Muslim ruler of Bengal because of the treachery of a general who allied with the British. The landlord Darpanarayan is connected to the period round the Indian Mutiny or Revolt (1857). Biplab was committed to the Naxalite Movement (1967–70s). Bhootnath, the refugee from East Bengal, experienced twentieth-century communal riots in East Pakistan (around 1942). Judhajit Sarkar, the military official, fought in the Kargil War between India and Pakistan (1999). The spectral utopia of Chaudhuri Palace thus brings together disparate elements in India's history and shows that, in their zany ways, supporters of the British Raj, postcolonial rebel musicians, vintage film stars, oppressed rickshawpullers, Muslim feudal retainers and nationalist military officials can also coexist harmoniously. In addition, the ghosts' party and fashion show also exemplify a certain rapprochement with the globalized now of Kolkata and India. This rapprochement is again part of the film's inclusive spirit: the film shows, I would argue, that one can be accepting of elements such as fashion shows from contemporary marketized, globalized culture, while still being critical of the predations of contemporary real estate development and destruction of heritage, as *Bhooter Bhabishyat* successfully does. Whether such a happy synthesis is partly a fantasy that actually buys into market forces, of the sort that fuel the film industry and its market that *Bhooter Bhabishyat* is very much part of, is a question that critical viewers might still be left with.

Bhooter Bhabishyat is both vernacular and transcultural or hybrid; it is also steeped in Kolkata and its urbanness. This imparts a particularly dynamic, lively quality to the utopia of ghosts that it represents. It is vernacular in that it is in Bengali, and steeped in Bengali customs, songs and films. But it highlights the many elements in Bengali culture that cross cultures, and that are hybrid mixtures of many disparate elements. We find an interplay between recent 'Bangla band' songs, written in Bengali in a westernized musical style, with older Bengali lyrics pastiching songs from the black-and-white filmic era of the 1930s and the 1940s. The young male Bangla Band singer Pablo Patranobis intersperses his speech liberally with English, admires Che Guevara and draws much inspiration from a westernized rebellious popular culture. But Biplab too, from his 1970s vantage point, uses Marxist vocabulary in English, with words such as commodification, comprador and consumerism

playing key roles in his speeches. Ramsay the British colonial official uses English liberally, while Khaja Khan the chef-soldier from the eighteenth century uses an elevated, grandiloquent Persianized idiom. The sharpest counterpoint to this elevated register is Bhootnath, the East Bengali refugee with his comic accent (a standard trope of affectionate humour in West Bengal). Bengal thus brings together and crosses cultures in this film.

Bhooter Bhabishyat creates a humorous utopia based in this urban world, in which different layers of humour, from farcical to slapstick to sophisticated linguistic wordplay, are woven into the film. By avoiding an earnest didacticism, the comic elements in *Bhooter Bhabishyat* strengthen the critique of neo-liberal destruction of urban heritage through predatory property development. Ananya Roy, an expert in urban studies, has written about *Bhooter Bhabishyat* as follows:

In closing, I return to the Bengali film, 'The Future of Ghosts'. I am struck by its immense popularity among urban middleclass audiences in Kolkata. That popularity, I would argue, speaks to a structure of feeling that I can only describe as middleclass anxiety about urban development and its displacements. [...] [S]uch anxiety can be seen as pastoral nostalgia in the modern city. However, what is being mourned is not only a lost agrarian past but also a lost urban heritage. The mini Singapore mall which will replace the heritage mansion is at once a dream image for the Indian middle classes and a symbol of the city that is rapidly disappearing. This is the ghostliness lodged in the event of the world-class city. The film itself gestures at a politics of solidarity. The ghostly 'others' residing in the abandoned mansion join together to put up a fierce fight against the developer's plan. Drawn from different historical epochs and from different social classes, their coalition speaks to the absurdity and necessity of that impossible 'us'. [...] It is at best a momentary, agonistic and spectral politics of the social whole. However, it haunts and interrupts the entrepreneurial future that is the world-class city.

(2013: 496)

Bhooter Bhabishyat achieves far more than what Roy claims, this article has argued. The utopian world of the ghosts ties together past, present and future and reinvents them in a new form of cultural memory that the fictional young filmmaker is inspired by. The utopia of the ghosts also creates powerful critiques of the oppression of women within patriarchal structures, cutting across temporalities. The utopia of the ghosts is likewise firmly postcolonial: the film makes teasing allusion to the politics around land acquisition in a highly globalized Indian megacity where real estate development is a powerful presence. By making humour central to the film, the director also creates a utopia of laughter, salvaged from a dystopia of dispossession and the threat of urban worlds losing their rich connection to the past and to heritage.

Kolkata seems to be haunted by the spectres or ghosts of its past in *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, and the film resonates powerfully with the notion of hauntology. Hauntology is a term coined by Jacques Derrida (1994) that has proved highly generative for scholarship. Derrida uses this word to trace the continued spectral presence of Marxism in a supposedly post-Marxist world. In this context, it is surely of note that Biplab, the key narrator in the story, is a ghost who haunts the present day and a Marxist; he is a vocal critic of capitalism everywhere, but most particularly in the context of the polity of India. It is

also symptomatic of the film that the hauntings of the present by the ghosts from the recent or remote past are presented as so benign. Ghosts in this film feel like they could be our friends. They also offer hopes of a better life; they keep alive the principle of hope and show that the not-yet of the future is achievable – very much in line with Ernst Bloch's notion of utopia – by creative and robust use of resources from the past. At the same time, such utopian hope is nuanced by the hierarchies and instrumentalities to be found in the community of the ghosts, and the question of whether critiques of neo-liberal destruction of heritage and celebrations of globalized hybridities in spectacles such as fashion shows can fit together so seamlessly: perhaps *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, even as it posits a utopian ghost story, espousing the past as necessary for building the future of Kolkata, panders partly too to ideologies of the ruling classes and market forces at work in contemporary urban India, including in its films.

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