Please be aware that this handout contains key plot points; you may wish to wait until after viewing the film before reading.

“Horrible Fun”: The Demonic City in Subarnarekha (The Golden Line), 1965
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Subarnarekha (1965) tells the story of Iswar and his baby sister Sita, who have been made refugees by the 1947 India/Pakistan partition. Living in the ironically titled ‘New Life’ refugee camp, they witness the abduction of a low-caste woman. Iswar takes pity on the woman’s young son, Abhiram, and takes him with them when he gets a job in provincial Bengal, by the river Subarnarekha.

Their attempts at homemaking prove to be a complete failure, however, as Sita and Abhiram fall in love, and then are forced to elope because Iswar has been unable to jettison his own caste prejudices. Sita and Abhiram move to the city, leaving Iswar in the wreckage of his own life, where he is visited by Haraprasad, an old friend from the refugee camp.

The two men stand in a Beckettian waste-land, where they finally accept the inevitability of their destitution. The camera pans across the derelict building of what was once a home, as Haraprasad says: “See, we are totally defeated. We aren’t even able to commit suicide.” Having lived a life of rectitude and continence, they decide to give in to the prospect of the ‘horrible fun’ of the city. They then journey into a world that is very different from the slums and refugee camps which are more often the site of Ghatak’s creation. They take part in all the forms of ‘fun’ that are being marked as ‘horrible’ from gambling, to drinking, dancing and prostitution. Haraprasad drunkenly quotes from a whole host of Sanskrit Vedic texts while the soundtrack is the Patricia theme from Fellini’s La Dolce Vita. As Bhaskar Sarkar has argued, this scene represents the “collision of these wildly divergent elements” as producing “a strong sense of decay and disorientation” as the “orgiastic ‘fun’ reveals itself to be a collective nightmare”.1 The sequence when they get into the taxi presents such a nightmare world as the audience is shown the bright lights of the city at night, blurred not only because the characters are drunk but also because Iswar is literally blinded, having lost his glasses.

It is no coincidence that the space of this horrible, demonic fun is Calcutta. Across many of Ghatak’s films, the urban sprawl of Calcutta is often coded as inhuman, as ultimately destructive. Whether it is the decadence or its proletarianisation that is being highlighted, Ghatak’s version of Calcutta is equally dehumanising. In the words of Shoma Chatterji, Ghatak is suggesting that “Calcutta…sustains the vicious circle of poverty and social injustice with a vengeance.”2

When Iswar, Sita and Abhiram leave the over-crowded lives of the Nabajeeban Colony in Calcutta and arrive in the country, the picture they are given of their new home is of a fairy

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land of sunshine, moonlight, singing birds, flowers, butterflies, dance and music – a world that is constantly and cruelly juxtaposed with the stifling, dehumanising world of Calcutta. Even after this dream has turned in on itself and returned all the characters to the nightmare of Calcutta, the pastoral dream has not died out completely, but survives in the figure of Binu, who is Sita and Abhiram’s now-orphaned son, and is the only company Iswar is left with. In the last, surprisingly optimistic scene, Iswar and Binu walk hand-in-hand towards the ‘new home’ of their dreams.

Most of Ghatak’s protagonists are, of course, refugees from East Bengal forced to move west due to partition and, as such, are constantly searching for their new home. They are strangers to Calcutta and, like Ghatak himself, find themselves having to make a life in this unfeeling, unfriendly city where they do not feel like they belong. Partition, enforced urbanisation, proletarianisation – all represent the multiple ruptures that have rendered all existing forms of knowledge equally obsolete, and have rendered these people homeless. As Haraprasad puts it:

Arise, awake, and behold. The boons are due to you. The way is like a sharp razor’s edge. That’s what the sages tell us. They didn’t see the Atom Bomb. Never, they haven’t seen the war, haven’t seen famine. Haven’t seen the riots, haven’t seen the country split up. The hymn for worshipping the Sun is unnecessary.

The old certainties of the religious texts – the Vedas and the Upanishads have all been made obsolete as they all prove equally useless at dealing with the traumas of the twentieth century. In the unfamiliarity of this demonic city,

The central trauma is that of homelessness. When Haraprasad collapses in the restaurant, the waiter suggests that Iswar should take him home. Iswar stands up, and screams back, in terrible pain, the word which is at once a question, a demand, and a lamentation: ‘Home?’

It would not be too much to suggest that Ghatak’s oeuvre represents a lifelong search for a satisfactory answer to this question, a search for a way to soothe the pain of this most terrible of losses.

Subarnarekha/The Golden Line (1965, India, 143 minutes)
Production company: J. J Films Corporation; Producer: Radheshyam; Director: Ritwik Ghatak; Script: Ritwik Ghatak from a story by Saktipada Rajguru; Cinematography: Dilip Ranjan Mukhopadhyay; Music: Ustad Bahadur Khan; Art Director: Rabindranath Chattopadhyay; Editing: Ramesh Joshi;

Cast:
Ishwar Abhi Bhattacharya
Sita Madhabi Mukhopadhyay
Abhiram Satindra Bhattacharya
Haraprasad Bijan Bhattacharya
Kaushalya/Abhiram’s mother Gita Dey