Sydney Film Festival 2001

“Art wedded to truth must, in the end, have its rewards”

The Apu Trilogy, written and directed by Satyajit Ray

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One of the more memorable screenings at this year’s Sydney Film Festival was Satyajit Ray’s Apu Trilogy—*Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apu Sansar* (1959)—which traces the life of a Bengali family and their son Apu, as he moves from childhood in a rural village, through his youth in Benares where the family later moves, to manhood and marriage in Calcutta. The three films, which have been restored by the Merchant-Ivory Foundation, include new subtitles and a digitally remixed and remastered version of Ravi Shankar’s original soundtrack.

The Apu Trilogy, which made Satyajit Ray India’s first internationally recognised director, helped to redefine cinema for the most serious Indian filmmakers at this time and influenced and encouraged many others internationally. Such was the power of Ray’s work that Japanese master director Akira Kurosawa remarked: “Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.”

Ray was born in Calcutta 1921 to a family of distinguished intellectuals and grew up surrounded by art, literature and music. His father and grandfather, who were closely associated with India’s social reformist Brahmo Samaj movement and its leading poet and dramatist Rabindranath Tagore, were printers and publishers who also wrote and illustrated children’s stories and poetry. Ray’s mother was an accomplished singer and other relatives were scientists, photographers, artists and physicians. Ray developed an early interest in western classical music and the cinema. He watched hundreds of films, mainly American, in his youth and wrote to Hollywood stars and directors, including Billy Wilder.

After graduating from the University of Calcutta where he majored in physics and economics, Ray attended Santiniketan University in Kala Bhavan, studying fine art and graphic design under renowned Bengali artists Binode Bihari and Nandala Bose. Bihari taught him Chinese and Japanese drawing and calligraphy techniques. In 1942 Ray returned to Calcutta and took a job the following year with a British advertising agency as a graphic designer and illustrator.

Increasingly passionate about movies, Ray helped establish the Calcutta Film Society in 1947, organising special showings of Hollywood, European and Russian films. He began writing film reviews and in 1948 published a short but perceptive comment entitled “What is Wrong with Indian Films”. It criticised the predominance of saccharine sweet musicals and religious mysticism in Indian cinema and declared: “The raw material of the cinema is life itself. It is incredible that a country which has inspired so much painting and music and poetry should fail to move the moviemaker. He has only to keep his eyes open, and his ears. Let him do so.”

Soon after writing this essay, Ray met French film director Jean Renoir who encouraged him to begin making his own films. In 1950 the talented 29-year-old illustrator was sent to London for six months to work in the advertising agency’s head office. Ray spent most of his spare time there watching movies—more than 90 odd films—including Vittorio de Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) and several other Italian neo-realist cinema classics.

Italian neo-realism, which had a profound impact on Ray and other filmmakers, was characterised by its naturalistic documentary style, on-location shooting, conversational speech rather than literary dialogue, and the use of mainly non-professional actors. De Sica’s film follows the heartrending efforts of a poor Italian man and his son to recover a stolen bicycle the father needs in order to get to work.

The Bicycle Thief, Ray wrote in a 1951 essay, was “a triumphant rediscovery of the fundamentals of the cinema” and the “simple universality of its theme, the effectiveness of its treatment, and the low cost of its production make it the ideal film for the Indian filmmaker to study.”

“The present blind worship of technique emphasises the poverty of genuine inspiration among our directors,” Ray continued. “For a popular medium, the best kind of inspiration should derive from life and have its roots in it. No amount of technical polish can make up for artificiality of theme and dishonesty of treatment. The filmmaker must turn to life, to reality. De Sica, and not [Cecil B.] DeMille, should be his ideal.”

Song of the Little Road

Ray had been commissioned in 1945 to illustrate a children’s edition of *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road), the popular semi-autobiographical novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandhipadhyaya. Inspired by de Sica’s film, Ray decided to make the novel the subject of his first film and spent the two-week boat trip from London back to India preparing shooting sketches and a basic plan for its production.

While work began on *Pather Panchali* in 1950, the first footage was not shot until October 1952 and continued over the next two years on weekends and holidays. The production had a miniscule budget with a mainly amateur crew and cast. In fact, Sabrata Mitra, Ray’s cinematographer, had never made a film before and the only experienced members of the production were the editor, art director and an 80-year-old retired theatre actress, Chunibala Devi. The film was finally completed, after a one-year interruption when Ray ran out of funds, with a grant from the West Bengal government. It was released in India in August 1955 and screened the following year at the Cannes Film Festival where it won the festival’s Best Human Document Award. This international recognition allowed Ray to quit the advertising agency and devote the rest of his life to filmmaking, literature and art.

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Pather Panchali, which is set in the early 1900s, has a relatively simple plot. In fact, the film largely consists of a series of short, loosely-connected vignettes tracing out the life and times of a poor Brahmin family in rural Bengal and the birth and childhood of their only son Apu. Head of the family, Harihar (Kanu Banerji), who dreams of being a poet, has brought Sarbajaya (Karuna Banerji), his pregnant wife, and Durga (Uma Das Gupta), his daughter, from Benares back to the ancestral rural home. The young family also takes care of an aged aunt, Indir Thakrun (Chunibala Devi).

The home is in serious disrepair with part of the land having been sold to settle debts. Harihar, who obtains occasional bookkeeping work for a local landlord, is forced to spend long periods away from the family in search of full-time employment. The mischievous Durga steals fruit from orchards, which she gives to Indir, thus creating conflicts with the neighbours and between Sarbajaya and Indir. Blamed for encouraging the young girl, Indir leaves the family but returns following Apu's birth.

Pather Panchali follows the trials and tribulations of this poor family: the first conscious experiences of Apu (Subir Banerji), his early school years and close bond with his sister Durga, and their adventures in the nearby forest and fields. The underlying strength of the film is Ray's unsentimental but intensely artistic exploration of many universal themes. He carefully examines the interaction of life and death, the aged and the young, and makes subtle references to the tensions between rural and city life and how it is being changed by new technology—in this case electricity and the railway.

In one memorable sequence, which also cuts to the last difficult moments of Indir's life, the children, who have been quarrelling, are playing in fields far from home and come across some high tension electricity pylons. Fascinated by the humming sound of the wires they walk on through long grass, see the smoke of a distant train and then run to the railway tracks. The train, which has previously been an occasional background sound in their lives, is seen in all its power, the hope of a better life beyond their immediate environment. Their quarrels are forgotten in their fascination with the train but on the way back home they stumble across Indir who has collapsed and is dying in the woods.

Pather Panchali has some extraordinarily joyous moments combined with periods of deep sadness, including the death of Indir, and then the tragic loss of Durga, who catches a fever after a dancing in the monsoon rains and dies just before her father's long-awaited return.

The success of *Pather Panchali* allowed Ray to begin work immediately on *Aparajito* (The Unvanquished), also based on a Bandhipadhyaya novel, which was completed in 1956 and won the Golden Lion award at the 1957 Venice Film Festival. This film is more complex in terms of plot and characterisation compared to *Pather Panchali* and set new standards for Indian cinema actors.

Set in the 1920s, *Aparajito* begins in the holy city of Benares on the Ganges where the family, still in shock over Durga's death, had moved. Harihar is attempting to maintain Sarbajaya, his wife, and the 10-year-old Apu (Smaran Ghosal) by reciting Hindu scriptures and selling religious trinkets to pilgrims visiting the holy river. While the family is still poor and Harihar's health is declining, he is happy to be reunited with his wife and son, who is animated and excited about city life. Tragedy strikes, however, when Harihar catches a fever and collapses one day after climbing the steps from the river and dies soon after.

Having lost her husband and only daughter, Sarbajaya decides to relocate to her uncle's village in Bengal where Apu resumes his education at the local school. The central focus of *Aparajito* is the changing relationship between Apu (now played by Santi Gupta) and his mother. The years go by and Apu wins a scholarship to a Calcutta college and leaves the village. Sarbajaya is proud of her son but concerned about who will care for her in his absence.

The final part of the film alternates between Apu's life with his school friends in Calcutta and what he considers to be boring vacations in the quiet village with his mother. Apu is unconscious of his mother's loneliness and disdainful of village life. Sarbajaya, who scolds him for not writing to her enough, is torn by her isolation and the recognition that the young man must make his own way in the world. As in *Pather Panchali*, the train is a potent symbol in the film: for Apu it is his lifeline to the outside world; for Sarbajaya it is a vehicle of hope that carries Apu back to the village for his brief vacations.

Ray produced two films—*Paras Pathar* (The Philosopher's Stone) and *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room) between 1957 and 1959—before deciding to make *Apu Sansur* (The World Apu) the last of the trilogy in 1959. In this film Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee), now in his mid-20s, has given up studying and, although unemployed, harbours hopes of becoming a writer. Living in a small room near the Calcutta railway tracks he is persuaded by an old school friend, Pulu (Swapan Mukherjee), to attend a wedding in the country. The arranged marriage of Aparna, the young bride, however, is cancelled at the last moment after her family discovers that the suitor is mentally retarded. A new groom must be found immediately or, according to tradition, Aparna (Sharmila Tagore) will be cursed for the rest of her life. Apu is asked to be the groom and agrees, despite some initial resistance. The newly married young couple fall in love and move back to Calcutta. Aparna falls pregnant but tragedy strikes when she dies giving birth to the child—a baby boy.

Angry and confused, Apu blames the baby for his wife's death and refuses to take any responsibility for the child and wanders the countryside in a state of deep despair. Five years later he decides to visit his son. Although his in-laws are bitter and the child rejects him at first, father and son form a bond and Apu resolves to take full care and responsibility of the young boy.

It is difficult to exaggerate the artistic beauty of the Apu Trilogy, which has some astonishingly poetic and haunting imagery that resonates long after specific details of the films' plots have faded from the one's more immediate memory. Apu and Durga's discovery of the train outside their village or Durga's joyous dance in the first monsoon rains in *Pather Panchali*; Sarbajaya's emotional pain as she tries to come to terms with her son's longer absences from home in *Aparajito*; and the extraordinary intimacy of the newly-married Apu and Aparna in *Apu Sansar*.

Another one of the many indelible moments in *Apu Sansar* is Apu's interview with the manager of a small factory. The job? Handwriting labels for food jars. The interview concludes and Apu is taken to the workroom and looks into the dark and dirty hellhole. Nothing is said and the camera barely moves. The blank gaze of a worker says more than a thousand words of dialogue, not just about this soul-destroying job, but the system that produces this misery.

The greatness of these films, however, lie not just in the lyrical cinematography, honesty of the actors' performances and the intense music of Ravi Shankar, but in the universal themes Ray deals with and his underlying optimism. Despite the extraordinarily tragic moments in the trilogy, and there are many, Ray always provides a sense of hope that no matter how great the difficulties confronting his characters the struggle for genuinely caring human relations can overcome all adversity. Commenting on the initial success of *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, Ray declared in 1958: "Personally I have been lucky with my first two films, but what is really important and exciting is not the immediate gain, but the ultimate vindication of the belief that I hold dearest as an artist: art wedded to truth must, in the end, have its rewards."

Ray's artistic legacy under attack

It is not possible here to provide a detailed overview of this director's cinematic work—the Apu Trilogy was, in fact, the first of a number of truly great films by Ray on a diverse range of subjects. Suffice to say, this thoroughly independent director, who refused to be swayed by commercial considerations, was a multi-talented artist. He wrote his own

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scripts, composed most of the musical soundtracks and was the cinematographer in a number of his films. He also wrote and illustrated scores of children's books, novels, detective stories and science fiction works and was writing up until his death.

Before he died in 1992, soon after receiving a Lifetime Achievement Oscar, he had made 29 features and several documentaries chronicling different phases of Bengali social life and history—stories about the rural poor, the urban middle classes and the wealthy. These include: *The Goddess* (1960), *Three Daughters* (1961), *The Lonely Wife* (1964), *The Hero* (1966), *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1969), *Distant Thunder* (1973), *The Chess Players* (1977), *The Home and the World* (1984), *An Enemy of the People* (1989), *Branches of the Tree* (1991) and *The Stranger* (1991).

Rightly regarded as one of the century's leading film directors by international critics, Ray encountered many detractors in his own country. In 1980, former film star and MP Nargis Dutt denounced him in the Indian parliament for "exporting images of India's poverty for foreign audiences". Ray earned the wrath of Hindu chauvinists who claimed he was an "Orientalist," or Westernised Indian, who had renounced Indian culture.

These crude criticisms coincided with the rise of Hindu fundamentalists who blame all of India's social ills on foreign influences and other religions, and insist that India must become an exclusivist Hindu state. Today these extremists hold power through the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has repeatedly sought to suppress the works of artists, film directors and historians that in any way cut across or are critical of their right-wing, communalist view of Indian society.

Such "critics" did not sway Satyajit Ray in the slightest. Educated by a family who were leading figures in what has been described as the Bengali renaissance and who campaigned for an end to the caste system, child marriages, Sati (widow burning) and other backward practices, Ray had no time for those calling for a Hindu or nationalist approach to artistic creation.

Ray drew on the highest achievements in human science and culture for artistic inspiration—from the European enlightenment, Asian calligraphy, western classical music and the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. This progressive and thoroughly inclusive outlook infused all his work and gave it an unmatched honesty and integrity. He once commented that great cinema had the ability to "leave its regional moorings and rise to a plane of universal gestures and universal emotions". This is the essential achievement of the Apu Trilogy and indicates why it is anathema to the Hindu fundamentalists today.

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