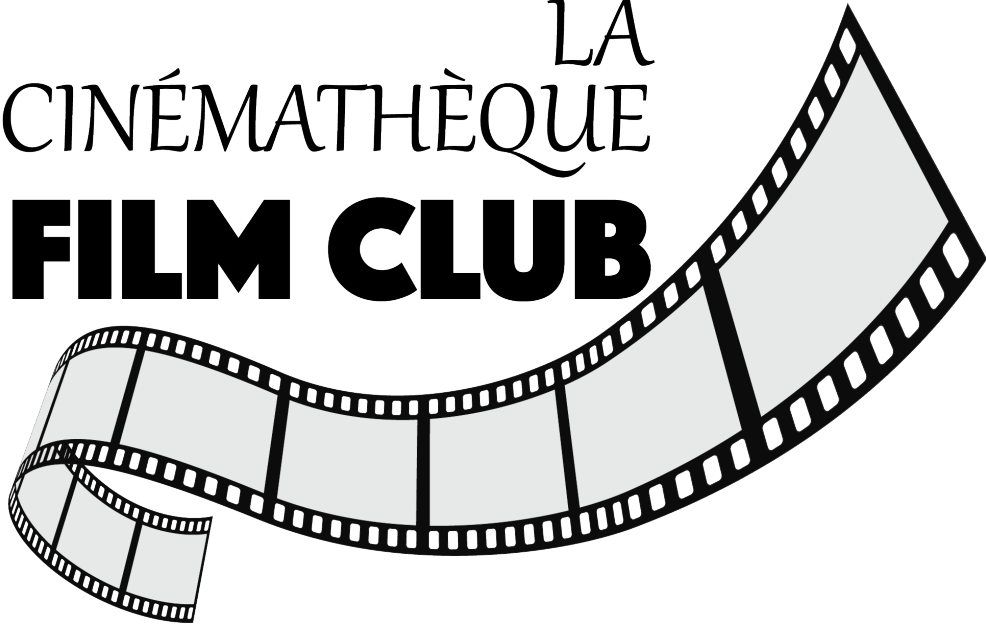


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Satyajit Ray
1921-1992

Pather Panchali
1955

The World of Satyajit Ray

John Flaus • Oct 2014

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Originally published in *Masque* vol. 1, no. 5, May-June 1968, pp. 14-17. This article appeared within a special film issue of this relatively short-lived but significant dramatic and performing arts magazine. This issue includes substantial articles by a range of figures including Ken G. Hall, Michael Thornhill and John Baxter. Reportedly, when visiting Australia for the 1968 Sydney Film Festival, Satyajit Ray indicated he thought it the best thing written on his work till than time. Republished with the permission of the author.

“Before I made my first film – Pather Panchali – I had only a superficial knowledge of what life in a Bengali village was like. Now I know a good deal about it. I know its soil, its seasons, its trees and forests and flowers. I know how the man in the field works and how the women at the well gossip; and I know the children out in the sun and the rain, behaving as children in all parts of the world do. My own city of Calcutta, too, I know much better now that I’ve made a film about it. It isn’t like any other city in the world to look at. Yet, people are born here and live and make love and earn bread as they do in London and New York and Tokyo. And, that is what amazes you most and makes you feel indebted to the cinema: this discovery that although you have roots here – in Bengal, in India – you are at the same time part of a large plan, a universal pattern. This uniqueness and universality and the co-existence of the two, is what I mainly try to convey through my films.”
– Satyajit Ray

This sort of manifesto has been heard before from playwrights, novelists and other *auteurs*. We become suspicious when we hear the expression of such sentiments; all too often they have served as a cloak for the artist’s closer personal preoccupations, or have proved too broad to focus valid responses within an artistic context.

Satyajit Ray, guest of the 1968 Sydney Film Festival and subject of a forthcoming season of the National Film Theatre, has repeatedly lived up to this manifesto. He is not deluded by stereotypes or pretensions; he sees



Pather Panchali

clearly, he feels positively, and he can make films. Why should such a man be so rare?

The unspoiled sense of affinity with all the human species, the acceptance of human limitations, the rejoicing in the human capacities – these are values which the sensibility of industrial man finds difficult to assimilate.

The four horsemen of guilt, alienation, dominance, possessiveness are visited upon us and our institutions; the wellsprings of our art have been poisoned. Only by great vigilance can we continue to

believe in ourselves, much less in others.

Our art forms reflect the idea of suffering as issuing from conflict, as being *willed*. Our literary systems incorporate the concept of evil; where there is suffering, blame and punishment are measures in the aesthetic scales.

The masters of Western cinema are compelled to examine – if not endorse – the anguish of futility (Antonioni), irresponsibility (Godard), insularity (Resnais), professionalism (Hawks), retribution (Hitchcock), aggression (Siegel, Fuller).

The position may yet be retrieved by the new filmmakers, but the condition of the established artists is not encouraging: Ford, Lang and Buñuel are now silent, Visconti, Demy and Vadim are being seduced by formalism, Fellini by narcissism; de Sica has sold out; Malle, Rosi and Losey have lost their bearings – only Truffaut and Forman can express a positive spirit without going on the defensive.

In Satyajit Ray's vision of the world compassion is not a reaction to something else, not a redress to fear, horror and cruelty: it is itself a primary, unconditioned motivation.

Ray is the great humanist of the cinema. His work should win him preference for such a claim over Renoir, for whose work a special intellectual sophistication is frequently a condition of favourable response; over Flaherty, in whom compassion and a tendency to lyricism tend to interfere with critical insight; over Ozu, whose rigorous neutrality of viewpoint generates a deep compassion but runs the risk of rendering intellectual curiosity inter. (I am not in a position to compare him with Dovzhenko, only one of whose films is in Australia; but I suspect that the great visual poet of the Ukraine has strong formalist elements.)

Deeply imbued with Bengali society in their particulars, Ray's films reach out beyond cultural differences to activate a universal sympathy. In Ray's vision, from the accidents of culture emerge the constants of humanity.

The creativity of Ray is not to be evidenced by a *style*, although he has mastered the techniques of cinematography relevant to his creative demands. Of the 14 films he has made since 1955, he has written all the scenario and the original stories of three, he has written the music for the last seven, and has been his own camera operator on the last three.

Satyajit Ray was born in Calcutta in 1921 and grew up in a condition of genteel poverty. He took a degree in Economics and studied Fine Arts for two years under that great man-of-two-worlds, Rabindranath Tagore. He worked as an illustrator and art director of an advertising agency for ten years.

Ray helped to found the Calcutta Film Society in 1947. He was – to use his own words – “always mad about theory”, and seems to have followed the *Sight and Sound* line in his preferences in films.

He was able to talk with Renoir when *The River* was being made in 1950; later he spent half a year in London where he made his first acquaintance with the works of Flaherty and the neo-realists. (He did not see all of Flaherty until 1958.) He does not seem to have seen the work of Ozu.

The idea of filming the well-known novel *Pather Panchali* (a sort of Bengali *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, one gathers) had occupied Ray since the meeting with Renoir. In 1952 he commenced shooting part-time, assisted by a small band of devoted friends. Their own lack of experience, the inadequacy of technical facilities in India, and financial demands, all hindered the project. Finally, Ray was able to obtain a government grant, while resisting pressure to ameliorate his depiction of life in rural Bengal.

Pather Panchali was completed in 1955. Receipts at the domestic box-office were fair, and finance was forthcoming for other films. The reception by Western critics was largely respectful, but superlatives of praise were withheld. It was utterly honest as far as any of them could tell, it was luminously compassionate; but it was *slow* and damn little happened, just those Indian peasants day after day.

The mildness of their reception seems to have been more from caution than insensitivity, as though they did not trust their own response to a thoroughgoing humanism when it is not tied to a crusade.

Pather Panchali has been described as “an act of sublimity”. It records the quotidian round of a Bengali household, relating principally to the young children, brother and sister. Their day is busy but not eventful. The camera shows us things the children cannot see, such as the slow path to extinction of the remarkable aged “Auntie” so reminiscent of Wordsworth’s leech-gatherer.

Yet we still have our sensations of objects invested with the wonderment of the children – we can exult in the mysterious humming of the telegraph wires, or the joyful tension of running through fields to view the daily distant train.

When death comes it takes its place in the way of things – even untimely death. There is grief at the death of a child, but there is also a resignation which is neither facile nor evasive, but preparatory for life. In the later *Apur Sansar* [*The World of Apu*] the prolonged grief of the young widower is seen as undesirable because it has impaired his capacity for living.



Pather Panchali

Pather Panchali proceeded to take out a number of international awards, and the acclaim became intensified, sweeping away the initial wariness. The critics generally had been embarrassed. As well as the clods who professed boredom, there were the aesthetes who had no jargon in their armoury to meet something so uneventful, so artistically self-effacing. The “social content” boys were uneasy about a message that took no explicit stand, yet communicated values by the very capture of the viewer’s disarmed empathy. The values themselves acclaimed a positive warmth in human relationships, but they did so without protest.

The film contained suffering in plenty, but there was no evil, no retribution – a state of affairs disconcerting to the child of European morality. In our sophistication we had learned to react to stories and situations, themes and symbols in our films; we had lost the habit of reacting to *people*. We were unprepared in our art for compassion, unspoiled and unqualified.

In 1956 *Aparajito* followed as a sequel to *Pather Panchali*; the seamless web of rural existence becomes shaped into some sort of narrative progression. Although different in form, it affirmed a simple but ingenious humanism, and looked on suffering with a level gaze. Further international honours were awarded but, significantly, no cult developed.

The following year he made *Parash Pathar* which we have not seen here. It is reported as a gentle satiric fantasy in the vein of de Sica’s *Miracolo de Milan*.

In 1958 Ray made *Jalsaghar*, perhaps the most concentrated of all his films. It is an intent study of the last stages in the anachronistic life of an old mandarin figure. A wonderful combination of patrician arrogance and sensitivity, he maintains his role as a patron of music while the order crumbles around him. Greater

restriction in emotional range and physical milieu, and greater intrication between these elements, have intensified the film's emotional yield.

Ray is unerring in maintaining a symbiotic interdependence between sympathetic engagement with the individual human quality of the old aristocrat and his theoretical value as a case history, an exemplar of attitudes in Bengali society. Ray's sure seeing of the situation ensures that neither interpretation can become figure to the other's ground. The personal engagement is seen to precede the social analysis and to draw from it in ideological feedback, but not to pre-empt it.

In 1959 *Apur Sansar* took up the thread of Ray's first two films, and completed what is known as the Apu trilogy. The child and adolescent Apu were universal, the final film traces the sorrows of the young adult. Now a well-articulated individual, Apu makes a more personal claim on our concern. His story takes on a particularity of situation and event which sheds the documentary mode of the first two. There is no longer typicality of action, but there is still typicality of character. It can no longer be claimed for adult Apu that his condition is universal, but the emotional validity of his experience is no less so than that of his unindividuated childhood.

Devi (1960) retained the same sensitivity of observation, but there was now clearly the organisation of



Aparajito

events in the exposition of issues. Ray displayed this extraordinary grasp on the relevant and the demands of personality at the core of beliefs. He appears quite immune to the traps of propaganda.

The Indian commissioned Ray in 1961 to make a documentary on the life of that remarkable man, Rabindranath Tagore, who had been an eminence in the literature, drama and politics of Bengal. He profoundly influenced a generation of young men, many of whose characteristics are reflected in Ray's films – charming but not durable, charitable but

disillusioned by hardship, progressive in spirit but shrinking from active reform, exhibiting “the very Indian predilection for avoiding conflict and drama”.

Teen Kanya (1961) was an adaptation of three Tagore stories, two of which have been shown here. Minor works in the Ray canon, they put to shame the “masterpieces” of some European directors.

Kanchenjunga (1962) was from Ray's first original script (other than the documentary) and was shot in colour. Reports tell us that it has stirred the most controversy in his own country. Subtle interplay of mood and motive are again present, but there is also photography of consistently striking beauty.

With *Abhijan* the same year Ray enjoyed his first commercial success. It is reported to be melodramatic and fast-paced and I suspect it may be the least penetrating of his films, although it is not regarded as a bad lapse.

Ray wrote the original story for *Mahanagar* in 1963. Surprisingly, the Great City is not shown in its externals but in the pressures on an impoverished genteel family when the young wife makes the extraordinary

step of taking a commercial job. Despite sequences of great charm and penetration, this film was considered a falling-off for its author when shown in Australia.

Charulata (1964) was based on a famous Tagore novel. An intense piquancy emerges from this delineation of a 19th century triangle relationship in the Bengal aristocracy. The concentration of mood stops short of oppressiveness, and there is a hint of waste, almost despair, which is not typical of Ray. The outer world takes on the form of the husband's preoccupation with "Home" (Britain) politics and his weekly newspaper; while the actual physical environs of that ornate Victorian mansion become the correlates of the themes of frustration, abuse of trust, and sacrifice – all under great restraint.



Charulata

It is possible for the representation of life by the cinema to be experienced along roughly the same range of response as we bring to the experience of our own lives. It is Satyajit Ray's great achievement that he has succeeded in something like this in most of his films.

This seems to mark a crucial departure from all precedent of the traditional arts of representation. Traditionally, the object (which may be any phenomenon – physical, psychological, sociological, etc.) is represented by schemata, reduced and usually stylised cues of perception which vary from one art form to another.

The various arts have each developed a very wide vocabulary of conventions into which we learn to discharge appropriate cognitive and emotional responses. In so far as it offers fewer and less "natural" cues for its recognition, the representation may be regarded as less complete, less open to interpretation, than the object it represents – whether it be anything from a background fixture to a state of mind or an entire dramatic situation.

But the artists' incompleteness will be suggestive, stimulating the viewer into imaginative participation. The conventions call upon us to supplement the artist's cues from our own personal storehouse of impressions. The more schematic the representation, the greater will be the need for discharge from our own imagination.

[Ernst] Gombrich, in his authoritative *Art and Illusion*, regards the process of inferring from schemata as universally underlying the representative arts. It would seem, then, that the closer a work draws to the illusion of reality, the fewer will be the conventions intervening, the less will be the involvement of the imagination. (I trust that here "conventions" are understood to be not clichés but a basic heritage of interpretation and formal prescription.)

Charulata was the last work to be shown in this country. Since then he has made *Kapurush* and *Mahbapurush* (both 1965), two comically bitter stories on moral cowardice and religious credulity, and *Nayak* (1966), perhaps the closest Ray has come to a "well-made" film.

The peculiar technology of the cinema has created the conditions for an aesthetic innovation which, as yet, few filmmakers have attempted to put into practice.

Should there no longer be conventions to mediate between a work and our response to it, I would not regard this as necessarily an artistic disqualification, perhaps not even a loss. But it would be a remarkable deviation from tradition.

In drama we accept that the conventions (whichever they may be, so long as they stimulate the imaginative supplement from the audience) mediate between the work and our response. We evaluate the character – an artistic product – not “that person”; the role, not “the sum of that person’s experience and feeling”.

We collaborate in the illusion, the “willing suspension of disbelief”. Our awareness of “how it was done”, of how the conventions have been organised, constitutes our admiration of the artist (author, producer, actors, etc.) and influences our evaluation of the work as a whole.

No one in the theatre is seeking the wholesale deceit of an illusion of verisimilitude. Even in terms of what was strictly perceptible, the “fourth wall” dramas never approached the reality they were seeking to represent. But the resources of the cinema are capable of bringing us close to that area of no definition where, for the purpose of moral, psychological, aesthetic etc. judgements, the division between responses to life and responses to the artistic representation of life is no longer detectable.

When we see the insects spindling across the water’s surface in *Pather Panchali*, we respond to a summation of all the sensuous aspects of sight, not merely symbolic indication of the seasons, not merely token illustration of “life in the countryside”. Some stage effect might be devised which could achieve an identical amount of *information* as the shots in the movie, but it would be lacking in the evocative qualities of the movie image, an inclusive apperceptive richness.

While we are watching *Pather Panchali* the awareness that this is a representation of life with actors, etc., tends to be lost; no allowances for convention intervene between us and our experience of the people depicted; the hand of the director vanishes.

To a great extent *Pather Panchali* is able to immerse us in the flux of experience without the mediation of aesthetic conventions. The things we respond to in the film – nature, people, their feelings, their relationships – are encountered and evaluated along lines of inference operative in life rather than in art.

In what can the beauty of such an artifact lie? It has no conventional form, no conditioning structure of aesthetic sensibility. There are no schemata to call our imagination into play; there is no dream-work. But there is still contemplation; for no matter how far the depiction may become indistinguishable from the event, the viewer is always exempt from the need to *act*. Art removes us to the plane of contemplation, as distinct from the plane of decision and execution.

Pather Panchali has no form by literary and theatrical standards. If we approach from these points of reference it will pass through the filters of our sensibility. But if we are patient, if we are humble before life, if we can bear its depiction without the stylistic tensors to which we have become accustomed, then we will be rewarded by a massive release of sympathy. For many of us *Pather Panchali* is the occasion of a hitherto unattainable sense of contemplation of the human condition.

Its beauty is the beauty of life being lived, for what that may be worth to each of us.

It is my contention that the cinema of Satyajit Ray, especially in *Pather Panchali* and in varying lesser degrees in later films, exemplifies an aesthetic innovation – the contemplation of the emotive properties of life represented without the mediation of formal beauty.

I realise this claim overreaches: formal properties are never entirely dispensed with. However the extent to which reliance on them can be reduced in the cinema is unique.

None of the films after *Pather Panchali* approach as closely to the ideal claim for Ray. They have tended to be organised around an appreciable narrative scheme, and some have pronounced dramatic elements. He has made two fantasies – one satirical, one macabre, neither shown here – and a documentary biography.

There are numerous things of beauty in Ray's films. Many of them are intrinsic properties of the objects depicted, such as the ineffable countenance of Smaran Ghosal, who plays the adolescent Apu, or the serenity of every movement of Karuna Bannerjee (Apu's mother). And humour which suffuses Ray's observation of the little vanities and idiosyncrasies of his fellow man is less likely to be an attitude intervening between audience and material, but rather an intrinsic quality perceived to reside in the material.

Nevertheless there are myriad examples of formal contrivance in Ray's film (though we may not be aware of them at the time of viewing): choice of angle, emphasis of attention influenced by the composition of a shot, a less-than-natural camera orientation in the positioning of some two-shots, even lighting. Ray is careful to

avoid lighting which does not simulate light sources in the frame, but he is not averse to placing faces in shadow.



Apu Sansar

It must also be conceded that the use of music by Ray is extraordinarily beautiful and effective – and that one is frequently conscious of it. However it is never an intrusion. It is probable that European audiences, having no first-hand experience of the sound of India, would be to assimilate the music into the overall naturalistic impression than Indian audiences, who would be aware of its special qualities.

Ray's practice of "editing in the camera" is beautifully demonstrated in the sequence in *Teen Kanya* where the luckless man in his best dress is faced with the perilous prospect of a muddy road. His plight is observed in a close-up of his fine-shod feet and gaiters picking in the mud, then a high long shot in front of him showing the mud spread before him, then a high long shot from behind showing the extent of the mud away up the road.

Ray's formal devices are not showy (though I do recall the dismay of local filmniks when the camera took a "subjective" fall downstairs in *Mahanagar*). It is probably true that most of them are not consciously apprehended by an audience. To this extent – the nature of audience response – my claim might still hold substantially that there is no mediation of formal beauty between the viewer and the object represented at the time of viewing.

We can talk about Ray's "fineness of touch" and so on, because we know he couldn't have achieved many of the things we see without such a gift. But we are not describing such a quality, or where it is specifically evidenced; we are merely deducing its existence.

Essentially, the art of Satyajit Ray lies not in the formal properties and technical assurance of his work. Others can surpass him in that. His pre-eminence lies in having an unerring eye to simulate behaviour (he is not deluded into transplanting stereotypes of behaviour and character into his scenes, as so many film and stage directors are) and an exquisitely refined sense of the relevant in his selection of what to simulate.

And he is motivated by the last great challenge to the artist: to make the commonplaces of existence yield up their meaning.

Filmography as Director

- **The Stranger** (1991)
- **Branches of the Tree** (1990)
- **An Enemy of the People** (1989)
- **Sukumar Ray** (1987) short documentary
- **The Home and the World** (1984)
- **Deliverance** (1981) TV movie
- **Pikoor Diary** (1981) TV short
- **Heerak Rajar Deshe** (1980)
- **Joi Baba Felunath: The Elephant God** (1979)
- **The Chess Players** (1977)
- **Bala** (1976) documentary short
- **The Middleman** (1975)
- **The Golden Fortress** (1974)
- **Distant Thunder** (1973)
- **The Inner Eye** (1972) documentary short
- **Sikkim** (1971) documentary
- **Company Limited** (1971)
- **The Adversary** (1970)
- **Days and Nights in the Forest** (1970)
- **The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha** (1969)
- **The Zoo** (1967)
- **Nayak: The Hero** (1966)
- **Two** (1965) TV short
- **The Coward** (1965)
- **The Holy Man** (1965)
- **Charulata** (1964)
- **The Big City** (1963)
- **Abhijaan** (1962)
- **Kanchenjunga** (1962)
- **Rabindranath Tagore** (1961) documentary
- **Teen Kanya** (1961)
- **The Goddess** (1960)
- **The World of Apu** (1959)
- **The Music Room** (1958)
- **Paras-Pathar** (1958)
- **Aparajito** (1956)
- **Pather Panchali** (1955)

Neo Realism Of Pather Panchali Film Studies Essay

5/12/2016

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The Bengali feature film Pather Panchali or Song of The Road in English was directed by Satyajit Ray and released in 1955. It was considered a landmark in the field of Indian as well as world cinema. Although it was director Ray's debut effort it went on to win critical and popular acclaim from all around the world. The path breaking movie was also instrumental in winning the 'Best Human Document' award at the Cannes Film Festival of 1956.

Satyajit Ray had his first truck with neo-realism as far back as 1949, when Jean Renoir the famous director from France came to Calcutta to make the film 'The River'. The neo-realistic influence that is apparent in most of his movies came from this association with the famed movie maker as also from the neo-realistic propensities of the then prevailing Italian cinema (Ruberto. L, Wilson. E & Kristi. M 2007). Ray happened to take the famous director to various potential locations in the Bengal countryside. Later he went to London on official business. During the short time he was in London, Ray saw myriads of movies and seeing the film 'Bicycle Thieves' made so profound an impression on him that he decided to be a movie maker, then and there (Robinson, 2003).

Pather Panchali is considered to be neo-realist in its implications. The main reason for describing the movie as neo-realistic was the fact that it was filmed not long after the II World War when neo-realism held sway in most of Europe. What made the critics tack the label of neo-realism to Ray's movie?

Ray chose mostly natural locations while shooting Pather Panchali. He wanted the backdrop of each shot to speak for itself. Also, he totally refrained from the artificially exaggerated practices and gestures of the popular cinema prevailing in India. The movie is said to have amply demonstrated some affiliations with the traditions narration, representation as well as musical address prevailing in earlier times in an effort to articulate in an Indian identity of the day following independence" (Vasudevan, 2000). In an attempt to dissociate himself and his creations from the commercial movies emanating from Bollywood, Satyajit Ray stated, "The differences appear to emerge from evaluating the status of the narrative form through which the real would be articulated, through what means of representation, styles of acting, aesthetic strategies the real would be invoked. Here the popular compendium – studio shooting, melodramatic, externalized forms for the representation of character psychology, non- or intermittently continuous forms of cutting, diversionary story lines, performance sequences

– was not acceptable within the emergent artistic canon, for they undermined plausibility and a desirable regime of verisimilitude (Ray, 1976).

Pather Panchali possessed all the essential characteristics of neo-realism as proposed by the great Italian movie maker Zabattini. The neo-realistic theory lays down the dictum that the filmmaker should not ever impose his own individual interpretation on the movie that he is making and should always remain a passive observer of the reality that he happens to be creating. It does not matter whether he is depicting misery or prosperity, the movie maker should always uphold the utmost objectivity, by subordinating logic to action at all times. Although, even the staunchest of the neo-realists were utterly unable to attain such total objectivity for the simple reason that the subjective element always had a tendency to creep into any artistic creation, they never stopped from trying to achieve it.

The same thing holds true for Satyajit Ray when he made his debut film Pather Panchali. In fact Ray was virtually unable to keep the subjective element out of his movie. But he never made comments on his actions, characters or situations. He never pitches hints at his audience and never tells them just what to think and feel. At the same time he was not at all apprehensive about taking the appropriate stances. This is because he was predisposed not to his characters but to the drama of life itself. He had his own ways to suffuse life on to the screen in order to impart a shimmer of hope to all his characters.

Pather Panchali and Bollywood movies : A contrast

Bollywood movies are a far cry from the realism and objectivity of Ray's movies. When comparing and contrasting a Satyajit Ray movie to any Bollywood movie, there is nothing much to compare but there is a lot to contrast. The only factor a movie like Pather Panchali has in common with a Bollywood movie is that both are shot in India and is about life in India. The similarity ends there. While Ray's movies are predominantly realistic, there is nothing even remotely realistic about Bollywood films.

To make matters worse, Satyajit Ray's art films received their due recognition from the cognoscenti and welcomed with open hands within the ambit of world cinema. Evidently, Ray's movies were in stark contrast to the populist fare dished out to the masses. This further discouraged any scholarly discussion of Bollywood movies within cinematic and media study circles. Madhava Prasad (2003) a film scholar wonders about the significance of the term Bollywood (2003). It might be that being imitative Bollywood cinema needs to be rechristened to emphasize this derivativeness.

In another context, Gokulsingh et al states that “whereas Hollywood filmmakers strove to conceal the constructed nature of their work so that the realistic narrative was wholly dominant, Indian filmmakers made no attempt to conceal the fact that what was shown on the screen was a creation, an illusion, a fiction.

Genre

While movies like *Pather Panchali* comes under the genre of art cinema or parallel cinema, Bollywood movies come under the genre of Masala meaning a mixture of hot spices. The main characteristic of the Masala genre is the song and dance sequences, a critical factor in defining the particular genre. But audiences that invest social realism into cinema find it difficult to accept the genre as they are ‘extraneous constructions of the ‘real’ (Dudrah, 2002). It might be interesting to note that the term ‘Bollywood’ does not signify Indian cinema as a whole but is confined to those movies emanating from Mumbai, the erstwhile Bombay (Corliss, 1996).

Budget

Any film begins with a budget which in turn necessitates financial backing. Another factor that delineates *Pather Panchali* and Bollywood movies is the matter of budgeting. *Pather Panchali* was shot with the meager budget of \$3000 while Bollywood spends incredible amounts to make musical extravaganzas. Even a single dance scene from a Bollywood movie costs tens of thousands of dollars. Satyajit Ray could not afford even what to a Bollywood producer is an insignificant sum. The government of Ray’s home state contributed the lion’s share of the production costs of *Pather Panchali*. This never happens with Bollywood films. Film distributors around India are standing ready to advance princely amounts of cash to a masala movie emanating from Bollywood. Monroe Wheeler, the then head of the prestigious Museum of Modern Art was greatly impressed with high levels of quality prevalent in *Pather Panchali* although what he saw at the time of his visit to Calcutta in 1954 was an incomplete footage. Later Wheeler asked John Huston, the American movie director who was on a visit to Calcutta to look into the progress Ray’s debut movie. At Huston’s favorable feedback, the Museum of Modern Art provided Ray with additional funds. Still three years had elapsed before the movie went into post-production (Mehta, 1998).

Screenplay

The screenplay for *Pather Panchali* was based on the Bengali novel of the same title by the popular novelist Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. The novel was about the simple lives of people inhabiting the Bengal countryside of the period. Such a theme is generally anathema to Bollywood directors. Again, the scripts of Bollywood movies tend to be involved, complicated and resemble the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that somehow come together at the very end. In contrast *Pather Panchali* did not have even a whole script (Robinson, 2003) as it was solely based on Ray's notes and drawings. His theme was simple enough with seemingly random sequences of trivial as well as significant sequences pieced together, a practice that is foreign to the mindset of Bollywood movie directors. Rather than dishing out a fare to assist the moviegoers to escape from the harsh realities of life even it is for a few hours as is the case with Bollywood movies, Ray wanted the script to retain some of the rambling quality of the novel because that in itself contained a clue to the feel of authenticity: life in a poor Bengali village does ramble (Ray, 1976).

Quite unlike a Satyajit Ray movie, a Bollywood film is replete with a plot that is extremely melodramatic in its connotations. Most of such movies follow a regular formula with ingredients that is often mindboggling to a serious moviegoer. Such formulae is replete with love triangles, family ties, irate parents, corrupt politicians, conniving villains, kidnappers, golden hearted prostitutes, siblings long lost, sudden reversals of fortune, impossible coincidences and what not.

Musical score

The musical score consisting of *Pather Panchali* was prepared by the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar who at that time was at the initial stage of his musical development (Lavezzoli 2006). The background score, in the best tradition of Indian classical music, was something that was truly plaintive and exhilarating (Hoberman, 1995). A sound track that was based on the ragas of classical music and did not contain any songs to portray dance sequences was singularly at variance with the inane capers of Bollywood and something that was happening for the first time in the annals of Indian cinema.

A Bollywood movie is an epitome of mediocrity with nothing to relate it with life as lived in India. The main emphasis is on musicals consisting of catchy tunes and words accompanied by a series of song-and-dance sequences. Even the theatrical trailers made to promote a movie have their emphasis on song and dance scenes. The standard of a movie is based on mainly on the quality of the songs it features. In fact one major factor of

movie promotion with Indian 'commercial' movies in general is to release the songs that a movie contains far ahead of its release.

A Satyajit Ray movie appeals to the filmgoer for the aesthetic sense it imparts. To see *Pather Panchali* was to have what MSN Encarta defined as a 'cerebral experience' (MSN Encarta). To understand such films the audience should have a sound notion of what a true movie should be as also expect them to be of a high standard. But it is not at all so in the case of Bollywood movies.

Plagiarism in Bollywood Movies

Bollywood script writers and music composers have a tendency to plagiarize from western sources and from Bengali and Malayalam movies of India which are of a comparatively high standard. Plot lines, ideas, tunes as well as riffs are fair game for Bollywood (Ayres & Oldenburg, 2005). In the past Bollywood could get away with impunity as the movies were largely unknown to non-Indian viewers with the result that none had the faintest notion that one's materials was being plagiarized (Dudrah, 2002). Well known Bollywood Director Vikram Bhatt put it succinctly when he remarked "Financially, I would be more secure knowing that a particular piece of work has already done well at the box office. Copying is endemic everywhere in India. Our TV shows are adaptations of American programmes. We want their films, their cars, their planes, their diet cokes and also their attitude. The American way of life is creeping into our culture." and also "If you hide the source, you're a genius. There's no such thing as originality in the creative sphere".

However some copyright violations were indeed resulted in litigation. For instance the Bollywood movies *Zinda* in 2005 and *Partner* in 2007 were taken to court for having plagiarized from the Hollywood movies *Oldboy* and *Hitch* respectively.

Accolades

Another point to note is that Ray's films remains an important part of world cinema and he has received more accolade than any other Indian moviemaker. Noted critic Basil Wright made this comment after viewing *Pather Panchali* for the first time: "I have never forgotten the private projection room at the British Film Institute during which I experienced the shock of recognition and excitement when, unexpectedly, one is suddenly exposed to a new and incontrovertible work of art" (Chapman, 2003). For instance the noted film critic Constantine Santas opined that Ray 'developed a distinctive style of film-making' (Santas, 2002). Moti Gokulsing

and Wimal Dissanayake stated that the basis of Ray's works is comprised of strong humanism and visual lyricism (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Roy had the singular honor of 'establishing himself as an auteur of cinema' with his very first movie (Santas 2002).

In contrast no Bollywood film has ever won an international award, won any critical claim or even special mention from anywhere in the world except in those pulp magazines singing paeans to the movie moguls of Bollywood and their mediocre creations; this in spite of the fact that Bollywood churns out more movies per annum than any other country in the world.

Although Bollywood movies are immensely popular with India and Indians living abroad, many South Asians eye them with derision labeling them as maudlin and unrealistic. To quote Edward Johnson's aside as he was commenting on the film posters of Bollywood movies, "Indian cinema has a reputation in the West founded more on myth than reality. 'Art' directors such as Satyajit Ray are given fulsome praise whilst the majority of 'commercial' cinema receives nothing but ridicule and the entire industry is pilloried as specious dross (Johnson, 1987:2).

"Even scholarship in India which, at times, was dismissive of popular films as Technicolor fantasies catering to the masses." To them Bollywood movies were characterized by dance and music, melodramatic content, lavish production procedures and over emphasis on spectacles and stars. And this is why Bollywood films have attained box-office success and raving audiences within India as also globally and not because of aesthetic excellence or on any grounds of merit.

The evolution of Bollywood Cinema with its constant interruptions of dance and song sequences is cited as a critical feature distinguishing it from other cinemas (Gopalan 2002); it is often also cited as an impediment to serious cinema as well.

Bollywood apologists complain that their movies are evaluated in the glum shadow of European cinematic forms, epistemologies and aesthetics and that in the confines of these rubrics Bollywood movies become poor imitations of art, exhibiting a total lack of realism of any sort and so remain shallow spectacles of fantastic settings and music.

Conclusion

In the latter half of the 20th century filmmakers as well as screen writers of a serious mien became frustrated with the then prevailing musical movies. They wanted to reverse this trend and take the Indian movie to a higher

and saner realm. They wanted to develop an altogether new genre of movies that portrayed reality from an aesthetic perspective (Roy, 2008) and not mediocre escapist fare. The pioneering efforts of Satyajit Roy gave birth to a number of highly aesthetic and unforgettable movies from avant garde directors like Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal and Girish Kasaravalli. And while it lasted – no good thing lasts for long – it was a real relief from the artifice universally distributed from the gaudy sets of Bollywood.

10 Things You Should Know about Indian Cinema

Danny Bowes • July 10, 2013

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Although Indian cinema is one of the oldest world cinemas, and the largest in terms of output, its evolution in parallel to the West with little crossover until very recently leaves a lot of Western moviegoers with the impression that it's daunting and inscrutable. But with a few simple guidelines, any American movie buff should be able to explore Indian cinema, particularly when it comes to the massive Hindi-language industry based in Mumbai commonly known as "Bollywood."

Bollywood movies have been cracking the top 10 on U.S. box office charts a lot lately (the most recent one, "Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani," peaked at #9 in June). That means now's a perfect time for a brief primer on Indian cinema in general. To get an idea of the basics, read on.

There's More To Indian Cinema Than "Bollywood"

The term "Bollywood," though often inaccurately conflated with Indian cinema as a whole, refers just to the Hindi-language industry in the city of Mumbai. There are several different regional film industries throughout the country, each in a different language; the most prominent ones are Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, and Kannada languages. The regional cinemas share a variety of common tropes (music, dancing, fabulous costumes, high melodrama, et cetera, ad infinitum), with noticeable differences; in a general sense, the south cinemas, Telugu and Tamil in particular, are more floridly rowdy than the comparatively restrained Bollywood industry. The highest paid star in Asia after Jackie Chan is the Tamil-language star Rajinikanth, also known as "Superstar Rajinikanth" — who, when such things were in vogue, featured in the Indian version of Chuck Norris jokes, owing to Rajinikanth's similarly titanic dominance over all forms of cinematic villainy.

2013 Marks the Centennial of Indian Cinema (Or Close Enough)

The centennial of Indian cinema is being observed this year because of the 1913 feature-length "Raja Harishchandra," an adaptation of Sanskrit epics. From there a rich cinematic tradition emerged, with Indian films being recognized for their global commercial appeal as early as the twenties, and through on to the present day.

Political influences (see the next point) led the Indian film industry — which is not to say filmmakers themselves — to evolve in direct but discrete parallel to their Western counterparts: The Golden Age of production was roughly concurrent with the various New Waves in Europe, the rise of blockbusters in the 1970s coincided with the time they took off in America, and so on. Increasingly in the 21st century, there's been a tendency, particularly in Bollywood, to emulate American and European films (shortening running times, cutting musical numbers, etc.), though this has yet to carry over to the regional cinemas, which still proudly flaunt their idiosyncrasies.



Know Your Indian History

A great deal of the creative isolation of early Indian cinema, and the development of its own set of rules largely separate from those of the other world cinemas, dates back to regulations the British government established to promote British films over American ones (in the days when Britain ruled India). After winning political independence from Great Britain in 1947, the national film industries, already aesthetically independent, remained that way.

Beyond the aesthetic impact of politics, the thematic content of many Indian films naturally reflects Indian history and politics. Countless films deal with rebellions against the British, or remember rebellion against the British fondly. The partition between India and Pakistan is a frequent subject as well, with political tensions between the two countries providing stories for everything from Cold War-style espionage between the two countries to doomed romances between an Indian boy and a Pakistani girl, to — this being India — both at the same time.

Even a cursory, surface-level understanding of events like this can help greatly in understanding the context of Indian films — not because they'd be incomprehensible without it, but because they are made, for the

most part, for Indian audiences familiar with all these events, so occasionally details are elided to avoid over-explaining. It's not that one can't "get" Indian films without that, it just helps one get them in a different way.

Masala: What Is It and Why Is It So Awesome?

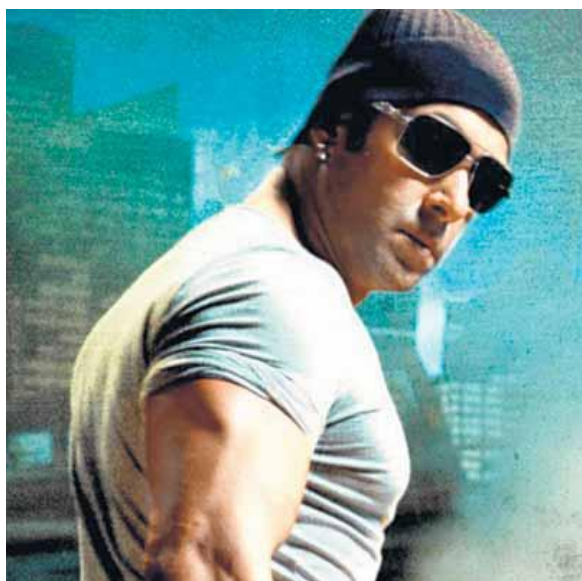
Not all Indian films are masala films, but masala films are uniquely Indian. Masala films are the cinematic equivalent of the melange of spices used in Indian cooking that provide the name. Every conceivable genre is thrown into the pot — meaning the screenplay — and cooked up by the director. It makes perfect sense: In making a movie for the whole family to see, what Hollywood calls a four-quadrant blockbuster, why not throw every existing film genre into the mix?

With multiple genres happening simultaneously — let's say, a romance subplot, a comedy subplot, and a melodrama subplot all alternating under the auspices of an action adventure main plot — there are, invariably, tonal shifts that can take some getting used to. Everything is heightened: the hero's heroism, the heroine's beauty, the villain's evil.

Another, simpler way to look at masala is as you would approach Shakespeare, or any classical dramatic literature: sudden thunderstruck true love next to low comedy next to high drama next to history. And, when necessary, sword fights.

Songs!

In 2009's "Wanted," hero Salman Khan saunters into a warehouse full of bad guys and proceeds to very thoroughly beat the crap out of every last one of them, single-handedly. He then saunters back out of the



warehouse and lip-syncs a song about what a badass he is, with dozens of backup dancers, bright colors, and a drop-in by fellow movie star Anil Kapoor (who doesn't appear at all in the rest of the movie, he's just coming by to say hi). At the end of the song, Salman Khan is successfully established as The Star.

Songs in Indian cinema don't necessarily have anything to do with the story, though they can, but they're usually just there because...well, who doesn't like music

and want to see stars dancing? A special subset of this is the item number, a showcase for a particularly attractive female performer who may — but more often may not — appear in the rest of the movie. These are mainly for marketing coups for certain music labels, but when done well can be works of art in themselves.

Singers!

Contrary to the trend in Western musicals, where great care is taken to have the actors themselves sing — regardless of whether they actually can — Indian films have not only never made any effort to hide the fact that nearly all of their songs are lip-synced (with rare exceptions made for stars who actually can sing, or are famous enough that their desire to is indulged).

The artists, called playback singers, who provide the stars' singing voices — like Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar, or Sukwinder Singh (to name but a tiny fraction) — are as legendary as the faces on the screen. There is no question of “settling” for a career as a playback singer, but it can be every bit as prestigious as acting.

What Makes A Bollywood Star A Star?

One of the ways in which the Indian film industries, and in particular Bollywood, resemble classic Hollywood is in their systemic manufacture and cultivation of movie stars. Like Hollywood, the history of Bollywood is rife with failed star launches.

On the other hand, when it works, it really works. This is partly because of the heightened nature of so many Indian movies, but also in part due to the institutional support they receive in maintaining their glamor and larger-than-life image. Indian movie stars really feel like movie stars. Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Shammi Kapoor,



Dharmendra, Rajesh Khanna, Dev Anand, Amitabh Bachchan, Rishi Kapoor, The Three Khans (Aamir, Salman, Shahrukh). Madhubala, Waheeda Rehman, Asha Parekh, Shamila Tagore, Parveen Babi, Zeenat Aman, Hema Malini, Rekha, Sridevi, Kajol, Madhuri Dixit, Aishwarya Rai, Rani Mukerji, Kareena Kapoor.

Stars, even more so than in the West, essentially play themselves; heroes will be introduced in dramatic low-angle shots to make them look thirty feet tall, heroines lit glowingly as divine visions. Some films lay it on thicker than others, but there's never any question about who the stars are.

The Release Schedule Has, Let's Say, Some Quirks

Some aspects of the release calendar may look familiar to American audiences: Big holiday blockbusters come out on Eid (the holiday commemorating the end of Ramadan), sort of like the way they do during U.S. holidays. Less familiar is the way Bollywood in particular basically shuts down during cricket season. While the Indian Premier League is on, very few releases of any consequence hit theaters, a dry period comparable to January in the American film industry.

The Hindi industry's version of the Oscars, the Filmfare Awards, skew slightly more populist (which would delight all the authors of "the Oscars are out of touch with popular taste" thinkpieces that raise everyone's blood pressure each year). More importantly, the Filmfares give out an award for "Best Action," which is just wonderful.

Parallel Cinema: Indies and Arthouse Cachet

Ironically, a lot of Western film lovers have an easier time with Indian arthouse and indie fare, both of which are known as "parallel cinema" in India. (That's an ironic title given the parallel evolution of the American and Indian film industries.) These titles favor naturalistic/realistic approaches. Some filmmakers known as parallel cinema filmmakers will employ elements of pop cinema, like songs and movie stars. One such example is Mani Ratnam's 1998 film "Dil Se," which starred Shahrukh Khan, and blended serious political commentary with a lyrical romantic tragedy.



The most famous name in this movement is the great Bengali auteur Satyajit Ray, one of the most celebrated filmmakers in the world, let alone south Asia. The height of Ray's career coincides, by no accident, with the Golden Age of Indian cinema, stretching roughly from independence until the 1960s. Indian art cinema today often recalls American

“Indiewood” films of the late 1990s and early-to-mid-2000s: a hybrid of arthouse and pop, backed by the industry itself but maintaining distance from mass-market blockbusters. Like their American counterparts, some are better than others, with the best quite good and the worst not very.

It All Comes Down to Family

In too many mainstream Hindi films to count, the big tough hero who can throw cars with his mustache and is master of all that he surveys comes home to find his mother yelling at him about his lack of responsibility, his need to get married and other pedestrian concerns. It’s not just something that’s played for laughs, either.

Generally (in mainstream films at least), in a choice between an individual and either a literal family or a group standing in for one, the moral point of view expressed is that the family/group should come first and nearly always does. For Americans, maybe the most individualistic people in history, this is occasionally a tough pill to swallow — but more than any of the other items on this list, it’s essential that one understands the source of this ingredient before approaching these films.

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For American audiences, Indian films offer a cultural challenge unlike others posed by different foreign cinemas. Because of the relative isolation of the Indian film industries with regard to the West, since it took almost a century before any broad tendency to emulate other film cultures arose, India occupies a unique place in film culture, one every cinephile should explore. With the right mindset, immersion in these waters can be a wonderful experience indeed.

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