



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Middleman

Over the years, there has been a delicate but perceptible shift in Satyajit Ray's attitudes to his subjects. The characteristic Ray protagonist remains a young man, educated to higher expectations and gentler and more idealistic standards than modern India can accommodate, affronting his destiny – usually some variation on the decay of hope. But Ray, unlike so many western directors, never seems to be trying to rediscover his own youth in sentimental identification. The sense of distance, a certain detachment in the storyteller's relation to his subject, is one of the keys to the refinement of his narrative style; and if Apu could be seen as, let's say, the director's younger brother, a more mature Ray now takes an almost paternal attitude to young Somnath Bannerjee (Pradip Mukherjee), anti-hero of *The Middleman*.

Somnath, as it happens, arouses fatherly feelings in almost everyone: puppyish, optimistic, inexperienced and unhappy, he is seen at the outset as a victim of the sheer size of India, of the tangles of its baffled bureaucracy and the unmanageable chaos of its economy. The bright student only gets a pass degree – the man marking the exams, a harried, overworked pen-pusher, can't that evening borrow his neighbour's spectacles and takes out his frustration on Somnath's paper. There's no point in trying to challenge the academic verdict: Somnath must make the best of it, which in practice means typing endless job applications (or failing to type them: 'Dear Sir?' he manages laboriously, before going destructively to work with an indiarubber). Ten job vacancies produce *one million* applications; and whether this is an actual statistic or a justifiable exaggeration, it conveys the scale of the problem even more forcefully than the crowded job interviews of *The Adversary*.

Here Ray disposes of similar interviews, with their astonishing irrelevancies ('Tell me, what is the weight of the moon?') by way of some brisk, old-fashioned montage. Then Somnath slips, literally, on a banana skin, and into an encounter with an old friend who can actually offer him a job – a corner of an office, the use of a telephone, some pretentiously inapposite letterheads, and the precarious status of middleman between buyer and seller. Sometimes through montage, more often via brief vignettes of life in the dilapidated Dickensian office, Ray assembles a great deal of sheer narrative information. In a famous essay, Mary McCarthy commented on the tribulations for the novelist, now that readers no longer look to fiction for information about the running of a printing works or the structure of the whaling industry. Ray's delightful 19th century thoroughness leaves one fascinated by the detail of what Somnath actually does, by the rickety office community, the wiles and stratagems of 'order/supply', the proud consummation of trifling deals in duplicating paper.

Somnath's father is a rather staid and lugubrious old man, who is liable to be shocked and upset by almost any discovery he might make about the world he lives in. For practical help, Somnath finds substitute fathers in the assortment of bookkeepers, brokers and publicity men clinging by their fingernails to their own shabby corner of a corrupt economy. They may live on the small change of commercial bribery, but they are very kindly to the novice, who fairly quickly finds himself on the edge of the big make or break deal. That this deal involves engaging a call girl for the man who can make the contract is broken to Somnath by the PR man, played by Robi Ghosh with wonderful, matter-of-fact

energy and the glittering eye of a fanatical hustler. After some moderately ludicrous failures to collect and deliver the merchandise, the girl eventually procured turns out to be the sister of Somnath's old college friend; and the screw of moral decision is tightened towards betrayal.

The dilemma of the boy from the Brahmin family fallen on hard times is essentially personal: he simply hadn't thought he was the kind of man who did things like this. It is left to the girl, already more of a realist about the world of supply and demand, to go ahead with the assignment she's been hired for, while Somnath is shilly-shallying with his conscience. Somnath is blooded in the career he would never have chosen; the puppy has joined the pack. And another small defeat – in the context of the film's scheme of things, it is essential that it should be a defeat in a minor key – is chalked on the scoreboard.

The Middleman is urbane, genial, so observantly funny in its detail and so sympathetically engaged with all its characters that the fundamental pessimism of its attitudes becomes the more melancholy and impressive. Ray never raises his voice in a tirade. He shows, through the swift devices of ironic comedy, a society which accepts corruption because it sees no other way, in which the old can only sit out their retirement, mourning the past and protected by their children against the present, while the young have the choice of hooliganism, revolution or of finding their own precarious route into a system fuelled by waste and inefficiency, the middleman providing his clients only with what they are getting already from other sources and by other means.

Ray, of course, develops the pessimism through the people, the assortment of individualists (few of his films have offered so wide a range of quick, exact characterisation) betrayed by the human comedy. At the outset, Somnath is let down by a girl who settles for a marriage arranged by her family. She borrows his handkerchief to sniffle into, rather as though she feels such a gesture is expected of her, and when she hands it back the puppy-hero shows some teeth: 'Keep it; you might want to cry again on the bus going home.' At the end of the sequence, out of the dark, comes that most characteristic sound of a Ray film: a train in the night. But this is a film in which there is nowhere to go; as the Indian paper *The Statesman* pointed out in its review, they are all 'partners in the total corruption of the social order'. That everyone involved is also a victim, though not necessarily an innocent one, is the pre-condition of Ray's essential, unfashionable humanism. The woman who has sold her daughters into prostitution is bright and brisk and houseproud; the business man drives a sorry little car whose glove compartment flies open at every bump in the road; the underside of the system is rather kindlier, and certainly less pompous, than its official face.

There is a debilitating critical notion that humanist cinema is dominated by content – that it is somehow creatively a soft way out. Anyone who thinks this should look closely at *The Middleman*, at the way the film uses its settings to extend the field of its action, at the sheer narrative adroitness of its transitions, at the control of nuance which suggests that all choices are moral, but that in present-day India they are all too often predetermined. Ray's is not the cinema of the soft option.

Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1977

THE MIDDLEMAN (JANA ARANYA)

Director: Satyajit Ray

Production Company: Indus Films

Producer: Subir Guha

Production Managers: Anil Chowdhury, Bhanu Ghosh

Production Assistants: Ramesh Sen, Santi K. Chatterji, Suhasini Mulay,

Purnendu Bose, Anil Ghosh, Kanai Das, Siddhinath Nag, Nitai Jana,

Kashinath Bose, Samir Ganguli, Surath Das, Bolai Addy, Troilokya Das

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

From the novel by: Sankar

Director of Photography: Soumendu Roy

Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art Director: Asok Bose

Music: Satyajit Ray

Sound: J.D. Irani, Anil Talukdar, Adinath Nag, Sujit Ghosh

Sound Re-recording: Mangesh Desai

Restored by the Satyajit Ray Preservation Project through a collaboration of the Academy Film Archive, the Merchant-Ivory Foundation and the Film Foundation. Print courtesy of the Academy Film Archive

Cast

Pradip Mukherjee (*Somnath Banerjee*)

Satya Banerjee (*Somnath's father*)

Dipankar Dey (*Bhombol*)

Lily Chakravarti (*Kamala, Bhombol's wife*)

Aparna Sen (*Somnath's girlfriend*)

Gautam Chakravarti (*Sukumar, Somnath's friend*)

Sudesna Das (*Kauna, 'Juthika'*)

Utpal Dutta (*Bisuda, a broker*)

Rabi Ghosh (*Natabar Mitter*)

Bimal Chatterjee (*Adok, a book-keeper*)

Arati Bhattacharya (*Mrs Ganguli, a call-girl*)

Padma Devi (*Mrs Biswas*)

Soven Lahiri (*Goenka, chief officer, Kejriwall Mills*)

Santosh Dutta (*Hiralal*)

Bimal Deb (*Jagabandhu, MLA/MP*)

Ajeya Mukherjee (*pimp*)

Kalyan Sen (*Mr Bakshi*)

Alokendu Dey (*Fakirchand, officer bearer*)

India 1975

131 mins

SATYAJIT RAY

THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Philosopher's Stone (Parash Pathar)

Fri 1 Jul 20:35; Sun 10 Jul 18:20

The Zoo Chiriyakhana

Sat 2 Jul 12:00; Sun 10 Jul 12:20

The Adversary (Pratidwandi)

Sat 2 Jul 15:10; Sun 10 Jul 15:30

Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)

Sun 3 Jul 18:20; Sat 9 Jul 12:00; Sat 30 Jul 14:30

The Film Language of Satyajit Ray

Wed 6 Jul 18:00

The Middleman (Jana Aranya)

Wed 6 Jul 20:20; Sun 24 Jul 18:10

Two Daughters: The Postmaster and Samapti (The Conclusion)

+ intro by Aparna Sen

Thu 7 Jul 17:50

The Unvanquished (Aparajito)

Sat 9 Jul 15:00; Thu 14 Jul 18:15; Sat 30 Jul 17:40

The World of Apu (Apu Sansar)

Sat 9 Jul 17:50; Sat 16 Jul 20:45; Sat 30 Jul 20:30

+ pre-recorded intro

Raahgir (The Wayfarers)

Mon 11 Jul 18:00

Company Limited (Seemabaddha)

Wed 13 Jul 18:20; Tue 26 Jul 20:45

Satyajit Ray: His Home and the World

Sat 16 Jul 12:00-17:00

Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 1: Rabindranath Tagore

+ The Inner Eye + Sukumar Ray

Sat 16 Jul 18:30; Sun 31 Jul 12:00

The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha Goopy (Gyne ar Bagha Byne)

Sun 17 Jul 13:00; Sat 23 Jul 12:10

The Golden Fortress (Sonar Kella)

Sun 17 Jul 15:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:00

Branches of the Tree (Shakha Proshakha)

Sun 17 Jul 18:10; Sat 30 Jul 12:20

The Kingdom of Diamonds (Hirak Rajar Deshe)

Mon 18 Jul 18:10; Sat 23 Jul 14:50

Joi Baba Felunath (The Elephant God)

Tue 19 Jul 18:10; Mon 25 Jul 20:40

The Stranger (Agantuk)

Thu 21 Jul 20:40; Sun 31 Jul 18:20

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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