



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The World of Apu (Apur Sansar)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In general, Satyajit Ray's films embarrass the critics. Admirers go impressionistic, talk airily of Human Values, and look offended when asked to be more precise. Detractors are no less vague. Some of them call his work charming, in a tone which could hardly carry more weight of suspicion and distrust, or say they are not interested in the problems of the Indian peasantry. Only M. Truffaut, in describing *Pather Panchali* as Europeanised and insipid, has firmly placed himself in the opposition. This mustn't have taken him much trouble, since he apparently walked out of the film after the first two reels. Those who stayed on to the end, however, had every reason to be more hesitant; for the supposed simplicity of this work – and indeed of all Ray's films – disarms the critic. Only after close scrutiny do most of them turn out to be artefacts of the most subtle sort. It is a case of art concealing art, brought about by Ray's precise construction of plot – so that craftsmanship seldom shows – and by his ability while shooting to improvise against this structure in a way which gives his work a continual spontaneity.

I have heard some of Ray's admirers say that analysis of any kind can only destroy this spontaneity, and therefore distort one of the most important qualities of these films. But to believe this surely is to fall into an old trap. The myth of the Natural Genius, piping his native wood-notes wild, dies hard in certain quarters; and Ray it seems is to be the latest victim sacrificed upon its altars. He can only be made to play this part, however, if one ignores his robust plots and the density of his symbolism. Not that his best work is mannered, as this might suggest. His symbolism is not like that of Bergman and Pabst (say), who are usually considered symbolist directors. All art in a sense is symbolic, and the success of symbolism lies in it being unobtrusive. This is not so with Bergman and Pabst, who, in trying to conceal the thinness of their material, let symbols sprout out of their feeble plots like straw out of a scarecrow. They fail because they are unable to construct suitable plots, which in turn is a failure properly to explore their material. In the best of Ray's films, on the other hand, the integration of symbol and action is so assured that we are hardly aware of the technical problems involved in such a feat. Yet Ray's continuing success has not been bought cheaply. After shooting *Pather Panchali* he went through a period – at about the time he was filming *Aparajito* and *Parash Pathar* (*The Philosopher's Stone*) – when he had great difficulty in making plots. It is part of his talent's strength that he managed to break through this sterile passage into the lucid and rich world of *Apur Sansar*.

At this point, Ray conquered his self-consciousness by finding a way in which he could develop the themes of *Pather Panchali* into a new unity. By making Apu give up his study of science in order to become a writer, Ray puts him into a position which also tells us much about his own preoccupations with art at that time. Apu's failure as a novelist reflects on Ray's most serious problem: that of transforming the dialectic of his themes into a direct sensation of life. 'He doesn't make it,' says Apu to his friend Pulu, speaking of

a character in his novel but referring unknowingly to himself. 'He doesn't make it, but he doesn't turn away from life. He faces up to reality.' Ray wants to do better than this. He wants both to face up to reality and to make a work of art that conveys such an apprehension. In showing why Apu fails as a novelist and how he comes to terms with life, Ray has I believe succeeded in doing this.

Apu fails because his art is wilful. In trying to control the world he has gone too far, and so cut himself off from the sources of life. Ray brings this out vividly. From a shot of Pulu inviting Apu to a wedding and telling him in an affectionately mocking tone of the Olde World village where it is to take place, Ray cuts immediately to a panning shot of Apu walking along an embankment, chanting a poem which ironically reflects on his own predicament. 'Let me return to thy lap, O Earth! ... Free me from the prison of my mind ...' This is in fact what has happened to Apu: he is caught in the prison of his mind. Inevitably divorced from the industrial society around him, Apu is locked away in his garret room with his onanistic flute-playing and with his (of all things) autobiographical novel. People enter his room as if they had come from some foreign land.

But this deadening sense of control is jolted by his unexpected marriage – by quite extraordinary circumstances he is forced into this and so initiated into the happiest period of his life – before being finally destroyed by his wife's death. What the universe giveth it taketh away... or so at first it seems to Apu. Reality becomes incomprehensible to him, uncontrollable in a way he had never envisaged. He thought he had achieved some sort of order – in one of his books he kept a dead fern leaf – and that he had somehow categorised the world. But now, as he moves grief-stricken through a forest, he comes across a bunch of ferns growing by a tree and is shocked by their mysterious otherness. His novel, he sees, is inadequate: he has misunderstood everything. Unable to carry on as a creative being, he withdraws from life. It is only later in his first encounter with his five-year-old son, that he realises how wrong he has been. The boy, by his very presence, acts as a criticism of Apu and makes him aware of how he has failed to face up to life. (Life here is understood to relate inextricably to a sense of duty and obligation.) It is through the boy, in his uniqueness and his unselfconscious vitality, that Apu begins to return to sanity.

It is not difficult to see behind this final scene the kind of criticism Ray must have been making of his own past work: how art without life leads to a kind of death, and how the artist should neither have a total control over his material nor be entirely controlled by it, but must in some way transcend this situation. One of the reasons why I think *Apur Sansar* is the best film of the trilogy is that in it Ray has managed to see how this can be done. He has brought it off, I believe, by raising his subject to a mythopoetic level without at any point destroying its realism.

As he sails, with Pulu down a river to the Olde World village, Apu sings: 'Where are you taking us, O Fair One?' The boatman, thinking he is being referred to, smiles. But this humour masks a profound irony, for Apu is unaware that the fair river is leading him directly to his yet unknown wife. The river in fact is the central symbol, linking together both the realistic and the mythopoetic levels of the work. It represents both the arbitrariness of nature and the regenerating power of water. It is by a river that Apu theatrically decides to marry; It is by a river – now shrunken to a stream – that Pulu tries

to pull him back to life after four years of mourning; and it is by a river finally that he and his son are reconciled.

On a mythopoetic level the film tells of a god's death and resurrection. The point is stressed that Apu is an avatar of Krishna, the flute-playing god. Krishna, you will remember, was allowed for a brief time to love a milkmaid named Radha; and so for a brief time is Apu allowed to love Aparna, his wife. But only for a brief time. After Aparna's death Apu descends into the underworld, where he is imprisoned with his own echo in a landscape of salt. (Though he is like some holy man, going with mat and shawl into the wilderness his sacredness is sick. Ray – and this is an unexpected belief for an Indian – shows little sympathy for those who seek spiritual contemplation at the expense of duty.) Apu's resurrection into the world through his son is a clearer, more enacted statement of the theme of regeneration which we found in *Pather Panchali* (see the grandmother rocking Apu in his cradle). Ray's touch, however, is here more sure; and the two characters, without losing their definition as human beings, take on the firm lines of allegory. The feeling of eternal recurrence in this scene – Apu in a symbolical sense returns to the village where he was born and confronts his childhood self – gives the whole trilogy the cyclic form proper to myth.

Quite a number of people have criticised the way Ray idealises his characters; and certainly to see Apu as an avatar of Krishna may be thought presumptuous. Ray reassures us however, through his use of Pulu, Apu's friend, who laughs at Apu for his self-regard and yet admires him to the point of idealisation. On this point the myth works for us, because we are conditioned by Pulu's critical approach. Where it does falter perhaps is during the wedding scene. As one of the guests says that the curse has become a blessing, the music on the sound track implies that Ray takes such a magical suggestion seriously. This is never made clear. Again, symbolism is forced when Apu throws his novel away and the sheets fall gently over the forest. But these are minor points. In general the myth works beautifully. It ties together themes, illuminates details, and brings an immediate sense of life to the machinery of plot.

Eric Rhode, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1961

THE WORLD OF APU (APUR SANSAR)

Director: Satyajit Ray

Production Company: Satyajit Ray Productions

Producer: Satyajit Ray *

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

Based on the novel Aparajita by: Bibhutibhusan Banerjee

Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra

Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta

Music: Ravi Shankar

Sound: Durgadas Mitra

New 4K restoration made by the Criterion Collection in collaboration with the Academy Film Archive at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Cast

Soumitra Chatterjee (*Apu*)

Sarmila Tagore (*Aparna*)

Alok Chakravarti (*Kajal*)

Swapan Mukherjee (*Pulu*)

Dhiresh Majumdar (*Sasinarayan*)

Sefalika Devi (*Sasinarayan's wife*)

Dhiren Ghosh (*landlord*)

India 1959

106 mins

* Uncredited

The screening on Sat 30 Jul will feature a pre-recorded intro

SATYAJIT RAY

THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Philosopher's Stone (Parash Pathar)

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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

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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

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The World of Apu (Apu Sansar)

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

+ pre-recorded intro

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

Joi Baba Felunath (The Elephant God)

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