



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Stranger (Agantuk)

After the heart attack that interrupted filming on *The Home and the World*, Satyajit Ray completed only three more films before his death. His Ibsen adaptation, *An Enemy of the People*, was disappointingly cramped and stiff, and *Branches of the Tree*, though more fluid in execution, felt weighed down by its sombre musings on the corruption poisoning Indian society. But fears of an irreversible creative decline are gratifyingly dispelled by his final film. *Agantuk* is a wise, witty and benevolent work, a worthy sign-off from a great filmmaker.

Aptly enough for a farewell performance, *Agantuk* features what looks very like a slyly mocking self-portrait. Manmohan (an engaging, urbane portrayal from Utpal Dutt) shares many of Ray's attributes: the taste for jokes, word-games and the play of ideas, the sceptical eye for the blessings of civilisation and the immediate rapport with children, delighting young Satyaki and his friends with foreign coins, astronomy, and accounts of Machu Picchu. True, Manmohan has spent most of his life abroad, whereas Ray never quit his native Bengal. But it's Manmohan's cosmopolitan stance that makes him an object of suspicion, and throughout his career Ray was accused in some quarters of making films for foreign audiences, of not being a true Indian filmmaker.

But if *Agantuk* was conceived as a valedictory film, there's nothing in the least solemn about it. Ray's ironic humour suffuses the action, and there are scenes as funny as any in his output – as when two friends, the actor Ranjan and his wife Chhanda, are invited to meet the maybe-uncle. Quivering with curiosity, Ranjan (played by Rabi Ghosh, a Ray regular since the 1962 *Abhijan*) commits ever clumsier gaffes the more he strives to be tactful – to Anila's alarm and Manmohan's growing amusement. Here as throughout the film, the satire is tolerant. Even the offensive lawyer Sen Gupta is seen as more blinkered than malicious, and Sudhindra's suspicion and parsimony (not only may Manmohan be a fake, he moans, but he's costing 50 rupees a day in food) are no more than gently mocked.

You can't hope to reach the core of the person, Manmohan observes, 'by peeling the onion'. *Agantuk* is a warning against certainty, against easy and complacent assumptions. Nobody and nothing is truly knowable, and that part of the world that calls itself civilised doesn't by any means have all the answers. But civilisation can't simply be unlearned, sloughed off at will: 'Marx. Freud. Tagore are in my blood,' Manmohan regretfully admits. 'You can't just bring yourself to act like a savage.' Even so, Ray suggests, every contact with other perceptions can be a source of joy and enrichment: watching Anila join in the tribal dance, Manmohan murmurs, 'I had doubts whether she was really my niece. Now I know.' It's not only the stranger whose genuineness has been under test.

The end of Ray's last film takes us back to his starting points. The small Bengali village, where boys play around a giant banyan tree, recalls the world of the young Apu, and nearby Santiniketan where Sital Sarkar lives is also where in the early 40s Ray attended Tagore's pastoral university, the 'Abode

of Peace' (Ray's mentor, Renoir, sprinkled similar personal references into his own final film, *Le Petit théâtre de Jean Renoir*). After this, it's hard not to see Manmohan Mitra's final gesture as Ray's own legacy, leaving us with the rich inheritance of his films, and of the humanist tradition he himself inherited from Tagore. The stranger's surname was certainly not chosen at random: Mitra, in Hindu mythology, is the god of harmony, the creative principle that brings reconciliation and understanding.

Philip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, September 1993

THE STRANGER (AGANTUK)

Directed by: Satyajit Ray
Production Company: National Film Development Corporation, Erato Films, D.D. Films, Soprofilms
With the participation of: Canal+
Executive Producers: Gérard Depardieu, Daniel Toscan du Plantier
Producer: Satyajit Ray
Production Supervisor: Anil Chowdhury
Assistant Directors: Ramesh Sen, Subrata Lahiri, Ramen Chatterjee
Written by: Satyajit Ray
Director of Photography: Barun Raha
Camera Operator: Sandip Ray
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Production Design: Ashoke Bose
Costume Design: Lalita Ray
Make-up Artist: Ananta Das
Music: Satyajit Ray
Songs: S. Bannerjee
Music Arranger: Alope Dey
Sound Recording: Sujit Sarkar
Sound Re-recording: Hitendra Ghosh

Cast

Deepankar Dey (*Sudhindra Bose*)
Mamata Shankar (*Anila Bose*)
Bikram Bhattacharya (*Satyaki/Bablu*)
Utpal Dutt (*Manmohan Mitra*)
Dhritiman Chatterjee (*Prithwish Sen Gupta*)
Rabi Ghosh (*Ranjan Rakshit*)
Subrata Chatterjee (*Chhanda Rakshit*)
Promode Ganguly (*Tridib Mukherjee*)
Ajit Banerjee (*Sital Sarkar*)

India/France 1991
120 mins

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SATYAJIT RAY

THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Stranger (Agantuk) Thu 21 Jul 20:40; Sun 31 Jul 18:20
The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha Goopy (Gyne ar Bagha Byne)
Sat 23 Jul 12:10
The Kingdom of Diamonds (Hirak Rajar Deshe) Sat 23 Jul 14:50
The Middleman (Jana Aranya) Sun 24 Jul 18:10
Joi Baba Felunath (The Elephant God) Mon 25 Jul 20:40
Company Limited (Seemabaddha) Tue 26 Jul 20:45
The Golden Fortress (Sonar Kella) Wed 27 Jul 18:00
Branches of the Tree (Shakha Proshakha) Sat 30 Jul 12:20
Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road) Sat 30 Jul 14:30
The Unvanquished (Aparajito) Sat 30 Jul 17:40
The World of Apu (Apur Sansar) Sat 30 Jul 20:30 + pre-recorded intro
Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 1: Rabindranath Tagore
+ **The Inner Eye** + **Sukumar Ray** Sun 31 Jul 12:00

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

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