



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)

Days and Nights in the Forest... the very title rings with enchantment, and the old Ray magic is soon at work again. This time the spell is a rug spread out in the sun, a picnic by the river, a charmingly silly parlour game. Nothing much happens during this key sequence, but the setting holds the same promise of peace and fulfilment as the garden with the sun rippling over the girl on the swing in *Charulata*, the music room emerging from its chrysalis of disuse in *Jalsaghar*, or the snowy peak appearing from behind the mists in *Kanchenjunga*. Elsewhere the problems of the world may hang heavy, but not in these oases where Ray's characters, their dreams and their surroundings merge in a harmony that momentarily suspends time.

Once again the familiar comparisons spring to mind: Chekhov for the comedy of pretensions and the tragedy of lost opportunity, Henry James for the sense of feelings, confessions, explanations, reverberating beneath a moment of silence. But the odd fact remains that whereas it would be impossible to detach Chekhov's characters, or indeed James's, from their very precise social contexts, Ray's characters seem to belong so essentially to no other time than their own that they could step quite easily out of *Charulata* into *Days and Nights in the Forest*, bridging three-quarters of a century in the process. Partly, of course, this is because aspects of Victoriana have survived quaintly in Indian life; partly because Ray has a respect for traditional (especially cultural) values which is hardly shared by modern society; but mostly because he withdraws so determinedly from the tempo of this technological age that time becomes almost as important a factor in his films as it is with Resnais (though in a very different way).

Days and Nights in the Forest opens, for instance, with a car journey as four young men from Calcutta set off for a holiday in the country. We are given no idea how far they are going, nor how long the drive has taken them. One moment they are pausing for petrol, the next they are pulling up before an invitingly empty rest-house. Even the long-held shot of the forest flashing by gives less an impression of speed than of an alien landscape which is waiting, hostile and impenetrable, to baffle the intruder. And yet the sequence as a whole is a lengthy one, because Ray uses the incidents and frustrations of the journey as a perfect excuse to explore his characters at leisure.

Hari brooding irritably over a broken love affair, Sanjoy quietly reading in a corner, the irrepressible Sekhar joking and bouncing about, Asim taking the wheel and surveying life with lordly amusement. These deft little observations at first seem like amusing character notations, no more; but as soon as the four men automatically pair off to occupy the two rooms at the rest-house, one realises that Ray has not only defined each man perfectly, but given an exact gauge of his limits and capacities. Reverting to school terminology, one might see Asim as the head prefect, brilliant and self-assured, and Sanjoy as the quiet boy who admires but does not aspire to emulate him; Hari as the handsome sporting hero, who chums up with the scatterbrained Sekhar because he is too dull-witted to be irritated like everyone else by the latter's

shrill, ingratiating eagerness to be popular. This almost scientific classification is important because it suggests that Asim is the only one of the four with sufficient strength of character, as well as the intellectual capacity, to profit from their time out from time in a world of almost perfect stasis. A summer's day, a forest clearing, two women strolling wistfully in a shady avenue, love and the need for love echoing as plangently as the mysterious sound that haunts *The Cherry Orchard*.

Parenthetically, but still pursuing the theme of time, it is interesting that the most frequent criticism levelled against Ray by his detractors is that his films are too slow, and by his admirers, that he cannot handle melodrama (e.g. much of *Abhijan*, the end of *Mahanagar*, the assault on Hari in *Days and Nights in the Forest*). Opposite ends of the same candle, these criticisms arise because Ray's cinema is essentially one of contemplation in which both he and his characters like to ponder first, act afterwards. A good illustration is the scene in *Days and Nights in the Forest* where the four young men wake up after a heavy night of drinking to find they have overslept a formal invitation to breakfast. Dismally aware of their breach of etiquette, but unaware that their hosts know all about the reason for it, the hangdog quartet trail off to make their apologies. But time has not frozen on the social gaffe in their hosts' home as it has for them: the old man is singing his devotions, his daughter is busy with a book, his little grandson with a game. And as they – and the film – wait for the song to end, unwilling to be so graceless as to interrupt, the moment is miraculously bridged so that an apology is no longer necessary and the crisis is reduced to its proper proportions as a joke.

Time, in this sense, plays a key role throughout the film, since it not only creates the comedy of embarrassments which bursts the balloon of Asim's pomposity – confronting him with the ladies whenever his debonair self is most absurdly compromised – but allows him to profit by his experiences. For time, in effect, stands still between the flashback near the beginning where we see a supercilious Asim at a cocktail party while Aparna hovers in the background, and the moment at the end when she scribbles her telephone number for him on a five-rupee note. In between these two points, the Asim whom Aparna says she didn't even want to meet because he was so conceited disappears; he becomes a new person, forced to acknowledge his own shallowness in the face of suffering, and with whom Aparna, one might say, falls in love at first sight.

The theme is brilliantly extended and completed by the two main subplots involving Hari and Sanjoy (Sekhar, being essentially a hanger-on, has no subplot of his own). For Sanjoy, a weaker version of Asim, already so overwhelmed by self-doubt that he is fully aware of his inadequacies, time provides not a long hiatus but a brief moment of affirmation. The young widow, with whom he has been dabbling in a flirtation bordering on love, makes him a gift of herself and her need; but he hesitates, and is lost.

Hari, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of Asim and Sanjoy, and his place in Ray's scheme is one of disruption rather than eventual harmony. Already, in the early flashback of his quarrel with his fiancée in Calcutta, he is revealed as a man of impulse, of action rather than reflection; and everything he does in the film – his passion for 'Miss India', his accusation of the servant – shows him jumping the gun, plunging into action before time has had its say. Hence (time is out of joint) the disruptive melodrama of the attack on Hari in the forest by the aggrieved servant.

I could go on endlessly about the subtle correspondences which underlie the film, supporting its intricately formal structure, but one will have to suffice. Just as preparations for the picnic are completed, Hari is standing a little apart, brooding unhappily on the riverbank. Aparna comes to summon him, but as he rejoins the party, she pauses for a moment, almost unconsciously taking his place and pose to stare out over the river. Suddenly, jumping like an electric spark between them, one sees his self-pity ignite in her as compassion. Then she returns to the picnic, and the moment passes, to lie dormant until she finally manages to fan it alive again in Asim. Of such moments are poetic masterpieces made.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1971/2

DAYS AND NIGHTS IN THE FOREST (ARANYER DIN RATRI)

Director: Satyajit Ray

Production Company: Priya Films

Producers: Nepal Dutta, Asim Dutta

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

From the novel by: Sunil Ganguli

Photography: Soumendu Roy, Purnendu Bose

Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta

Music: Satyajit Ray

Sound: Sujit Sarkar

Cast

Soumitra Chatterjee (*Asim*)

Subhendu Chatterjee (*Sanjoy*)

Samit Bhanja (*Hari*)

Rabi Ghosh (*Sekhar*)

Pahari Sanyal (*Sadasiv Tripathi*)

Sharmila Tagore (*Aparna*)

Kaveri Bose (*Jaya*)

Simi Garewal (*Duli*)

Aparna Sen (*Atasi*)

India 1970

115 mins

SATYAJIT RAY THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)

Thu 18 Aug 18:15; Sat 27 Aug 14:40

The Expedition (Abhijan)

Sat 20 Aug 14:30

Kapurush (The Coward) + Mahapurush (The Holy Man)

Sat 20 Aug 20:20

The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)

Sun 21 Aug 17:50; Wed 24 Aug 20:20

The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari)

Tue 23 Aug 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Shabana Azmi); Sun 28 Aug 14:40

Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 2

Wed 24 Aug 18:20

The Hero (Nayak)

Thu 25 Aug 20:40

Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

Sat 27 Aug 12:00; Wed 31 Aug 20:45

Distant Thunder (Ashani Sanket) + Deliverance (Sadgati)

Sat 27 Aug 17:30; Mon 29 Aug 14:40

Enemy of the People (Ganashatru)

Sun 28 Aug 12:10; Tue 30 Aug 18:15 (+ intro by Ashvin Devasundaram)

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