



[Vimeo link for this week's film and ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

The film is available for streaming on Criterion. UB email account holders can access it free via the [UB Library's Kanopy portal](#)

Directed, produced and written by Satyajit Ray
Based on the novel by Tarashankar Banerjee
Original Music by Ustad Vilayat Khan, Asis Kumar , Robin Majumder and Dakhin Mohan Takhur
Cinematography by Subrata Mitra
Film Editing by Dulal Dutta

Chhabi Biswas...Huzur Biswambhar Roy
 Padmadevi...Mahamaya, Roy's wife
 Pinaki Sengupta...Khoka, Roy's Son
 Gangapada Basu...Mahim Ganguly
 Tulsi Lahiri...Manager of Roy's Estate
 Kali Sarkar...Roy's Servant
 Waheed Khan...Ujir Khan
 Roshan Kumari...Krishna Bai, dancer

SATYAJIT RAY (May 2, 1921, Calcutta, West Bengal, British India – April 23, 1992, Calcutta, West Bengal, India) directed 37 films: 1991 *The Visitor*, 1990 *Branches of the Tree*, 1989 *An Enemy of the People*, 1987 *Sukumar Ray*, 1984 *The Home and the World*, 1984 "Deliverance", 1981 "Pikoor Diary", 1980 *The Kingdom of Diamonds*, 1979 *Joi Baba Felunath: The Elephant God*, 1977 *The Chess Players*, 1976 *The Middleman*, 1976 *Bala*, 1974 *The Golden Fortress*, 1974 *Company Limited*, 1973 *Distant Thunder*, 1972



The Inner Eye, 1971 *The Adversary*, 1971 *Sikkim*, 1970 *Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1969 *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha*, 1967 *The Zoo*, 1966 *Nayak: The Hero*, 1965 *Kapurush: The Coward*, 1965 *Mahapurush: The Holy Man*, 1965 "Two", 1964 *The Big City: Mahanagar*, 1964 *Charulata: The Lonely Wife*, 1962 *The Expedition*, 1962 *Kanchenjunga*, 1961 *Teen Kanya*, 1961 *Rabindranath Tagore*, 1960 *The Goddess*, 1959 *The World of Apu*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1958 *Paras-Pathar*, 1956 *Aparajito*, and 1955 *Pather Panchali*. He also has 47 writing credits: 2011 *Some Maana*, 2011 *Royal Bengal Rahasya* (novel), 2010 *Gorosthane Sabdhan* (novel), 2008 *Tintoretto Jishu* (novel), 2007 *Kailashey Kelenkari* (novel), 2003 *Bombaiyer Bombete* (novel), 1996 *Baksha Rahasya*, 1995 *Target*, 1994 *Uttoran*, 1991 *The Visitor*, 1991 *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo*, 1990 *Branches of the Tree*, 1989 *An Enemy of the People*, 1984 *The Home and the World*, 1984 "Deliverance", 1983 *Phatik Chand* (novel / screenplay), 1981 "Pikoor Diary", 1980 *The Kingdom of Diamonds*,

1979 *Joi Baba Felunath: The Elephant God* (novel / screenplay), 1977 *The Chess Players*, 1976 *The Middleman*, 1974 *The Golden Fortress*, 1974 *Company Limited*, 1973 *Distant Thunder*, 1972 *The Inner Eye*, 1971 *The Adversary*, 1971 *Sikkim*, 1970 *Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1970 *Baksa Badal*, 1969 *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha*, 1967 *The Zoo*, 1966 *Nayak: The Hero*, 1965 *Kapurush: The Coward*, 1965 *Mahapurush: The Holy Man*, 1964 *The Big City: Mahanagar*, 1964 *Charulata: The Lonely Wife*, 1962 *The Expedition*, 1962 *Kanchenjunga*, 1961 *Teen Kanya*, 1961 *Rabindranath Tagore*, 1960 *The Goddess*, 1959 *The World of Apu*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1958 *Paras-Pathar*, 1956 *Aparajito*, 1955 *Pather Panchali*, and 1950 *Chinnamul*.

TARASHANKAR

BANERJEE (1898, Bengal, India – September 1971, India) has 15 writing credits: 2011 *Bedeni*, 2005 *Antarmahal: Views of the Inner Chamber*, 1980 *Aanchal*, 1979 *Ganadevata* (novel), 1978 *Dui Purush* (novel), 1972 *Har Mana Har* (novel), 1969 *Arogya Niketan* (novel), 1963 *Saptapadi*, 1962 *The Expedition* (novel), 1962 *Folk Tales of the River Bend*, 1959 *Bicharak* (novel), 1958 *The Music Room* (novel), 1955 *Raikamal*, 1954 *Kavi* (novel), and 1945 *Dui Purush* (novel).

USTAD VILAYAT KHAN (b. Vilayat Hussain Khan, August 28, 1928, Gouripur, India [now Bangladesh] – March 13, 2004, Mumbai, India) has 5 film composer credits: 1976 *Kadambari*, 1969 *The Guru*, 1964 *The Delhi Way*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1951 *Madhosh*. Asis Kumar, Robin Majumder, and Dakshin Mohan Takhur have no other screen credits but this films.

SUBRATA MITRA (October 12, 1930, Calcutta, West Bengal, India – December 7, 2001, Calcutta, West Bengal, India) was cinematographer for 18 films: 1986 *New Delhi Times*, 1974 *Mahatma and the Mad Boy*, 1970 *Bombay Talkie*, 1969 *Dong fu ren*, 1969 *The Guru*, 1967 *Teesri Kasam*, 1966 *Nayak: The Hero*, 1965 *Shakespeare-Wallah*, 1964 *The Big City: Mahanagar*, 1964 *Charulata: The Lonely Wife*, 1963



The Householder, 1962 *Kanchenjunga*, 1960 *The Goddess*, 1959 *The World of Apu*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1958 *Paras-Pathar*, 1956 *Aparajito*, and 1955 *Pather Panchali*.

DULAL DUTTA (1925, Chandannagar, Bengal, British India – August 17, 2010, Kolkata, West Bengal, India) edited 54 films, some of which were 1995 *Target*, 1994 *Uttoran*, 1991 *The Visitor*, 1991 *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo*, 1990 *Branches of the Tree*, 1989 *An Enemy of the People*, 1984 *The Home and the World*, 1980 *The Kingdom of Diamonds*, 1977 *The Chess Players*, 1974 *Company Limited*, 1973 *Distant Thunder*, 1971 *The Adversary*, 1970 *Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1969 *The Fiancee*, 1967 *The Zoo*, 1966 *Nayak: The Hero*, 1965 *Kapurush: The Coward*, 1965 *Mahapurush: The Holy Man*, 1960 *The Goddess*, 1959 *The World of Apu*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1958 *Paras-Pathar*, 1956 *Aparajito*, 1955 *Pather Panchali*, and 1955 *Debatra*.

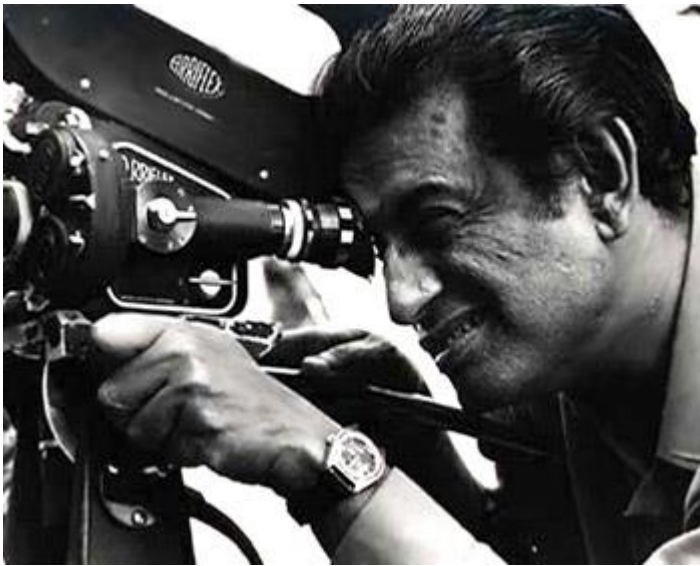
CHHABI BISWAS (Huzur Biswambhar Roy) (b. Sachindranath Biswas, 1900, Calcutta, West Bengal, India – July 12, 1962, Kolkata, West Bengal, India) appeared in 132 films, some of which were 1964 *Kantatar*, 1963 *Saptapadi*, 1963 *High Heel*, 1962 *Sorry Madam*, 1960 *Shesh Paryanta*, 1960 *Smriti Tuku Thak*, 1960 *The Goddess*, 1960 *Hospital*, 1958 *Tansen*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1958 *Paras-Pathar*, 1957 *Pathey Holo Deri*, 1956 *Kirtigarh*, 1956 *Asabarna*, 1955 *Jharer Pare*, 1955 *Joymakali Boarding*, 1955 *Rani Rashmoni*, 1955 *Devimalini*, 1954 *Bhangagara*, 1953 *Jog Biyog*, 1953 *Lakh Taka*, 1952 *Subhadra*, 1952 *Kar Papey*, 1952 *Vidyasagar*, 1951 *Durgesh Nandini*, 1947 *Chandrashekhar*, 1946 *Sangram*, 1943 *Dampati*, 1943 *Devar*, 1943 *Dikshul*, 1942/II *Mahakavi Kalidas*, 1942 *Milan*, 1942 *Pashan Devata*, 1942 *Saugandh*, 1941 *Banglar Meye*, 1941 *Epar Opar*, 1941 *Karnarjun*, 1941 *Pratisruti*, 1940/I *Nartaki*, 1940 *Nimai Sanyasi*, 1939 *Chanakya*, 1938 *Chokher Bali*, and 1936 *Annapurnar Mandir*.

PADMADEVI (Mahamaya, Roy's wife) appeared in 60 films, including 1987 *Lalan Fakir*, 1981 *Swami*

Stree, 1976 *The Middleman*, 1974 *Debi Chowdhurani*, 1973 *Basanata Bilap*, 1973 *Bindur Chheley*, 1969 *Banajyotsana*, 1968 *Gar Nasimpur*, 1963 *Mere Arman Mere Sapne*, 1960 *Haat Baraley Bandhu*, 1960 *Kshudista Pashan*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1957 *Khela Bhangar Khela*, 1957 *Andhare Alo*, 1957 *Chandranath*, 1956 *Asha*, 1941 *Karnarjun*, 1940 *Shapmukti*, 1940 *Hindustan Hamara*, 1940 *Kumkum*, 1940/1 *Kumkum the Dancer*, and 1937 *Kisan Kanya*.

PINAKI SENGUPTA (Khoka, Roy's Son) appeared in two films: 1958 *The Music Room*, and 1956 *Aparajito*.

GANGAPADA BASU (Mahim Ganguly) appeared in 27 films, some of which were 1971 *Bibaha Bibhrat*, 1970 *Nishipadma*, 1969 *Pita Putra*, 1968 *Baluchari*, 1960 *Raja-Saja*, 1960 *Suno Baranari*, 1958 *Ajantrik*, 1958 *Indrani*, 1958 *The Music Room*, 1958 *Paras-Pathar*, 1957 *Prithibi Amare Chaay*, 1957 *Daata Karna*, 1955 *Shap Mochan*, 1955 *Shreebatsa Chinta*, 1954 *Naba Bidhan*, 1954 *Aaj Sandhyay*, 1952 *Swapno O Samadhi*, and 1952 *Nagarik*.



Satyajit Ray, from *World Film Directors v.II*, ed. John Wakeman. The H.W.Wilson Co. NY 1988, entry by Philip Kemp

Indian director, scenarist, composer, was born in Calcutta into an exceptionally talented family prominent in Bengali arts and letters. The ground floor of the large family house was occupied by the printing firm founded by Ray's grandfather, Upendrakishore Ray, a writer, artist, musician, and publisher. His eldest son, Sukumar, Ray's father, was also famous as a writer and artist; the nonsense verses that he wrote for children, with his own illustrations,

have become much-loved classics. Ray's mother, Suprabha Das, was a noted amateur singer. Both parents were members of the Brahmo sect, a liberal and reformist version of Hinduism which rejected the caste system.

On his father's death in 1915 Sukumar, Ray's father, inherited the printing and publishing business, but he lacked financial acumen. When he himself died in 1923 of blackwater fever, the company was near collapse. It was liquidated three years later, and Suprabha Ray took Satyajit, her only child, to live in the house of her younger brother, P. K. Das. The Das household was comfortably off, not particularly literary but highly musical. Ray developed an abiding love of classical music, both Indian and western. He also became a keen cinemagoer. "I was a regular film fan. But I don't know when it became serious. At some point, I began to take notes in the dark on cutting." The movies he watched were almost exclusively western. "The cinemas showing Indian films. . .were dank and seedy. . . . The films they showed us, we were told by our elders, were not suitable for us."

Ray grew up in Calcutta, where he was educated at Ballygunj Government School and then from 1936 to 1940 at Presidency College, majoring in science and economics. After graduating, he attended the "world university" founded by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan, some 130 miles from Calcutta. Tagore, the dominant figure of the Indian cultural renaissance, prolifically gifted as writer, painter and composer, had been a close friend of Ray's father and grandfather, "though by 1940 (the year before his death) he had become a venerable figure whom Ray was too diffident to approach. His influence, though, was all-pervasive, especially in the teaching of all the arts as closely interrelated."

At first, Ray "wasn't particularly keen to leave Calcutta. I was too much of a city person, and Santiniketan was...miles from nowhere. But...the professors I studied under were great artists. Not just painters, but people with vision, with understanding, with deep insight.

I think everything [they taught me] has gone into my work. . . . I read a tremendous lot. . . novels, Indian literature, western literature, everything."

After two and a half years at Santiniketan, "my most important formative years," Ray left abruptly in 1942 to return to Calcutta, when news came the Japanese had bombed the city. He found work as a layout artist with a British-run advertising agency, D. J. Keymer & Co. He stayed with the firm

for ten years, rising to senior art director. Increasingly, though, cinema overrode his other interests. “While I sat at my office desk sketching out campaigns for tea and biscuits, my mind buzzed with thoughts of the films I had been seeing... By the time the war ended, I had taken out subscriptions to most of the film magazines in the English language and snapped up every film book I could lay my hands on.”

As an exercise, he began writing scenarios based on books that were about to be filmed, so as to compare his ideas with the treatment that later appeared on the screen. He also prepared an adaptation of one of his favorite novels, Tagore’s *Ghare-Baire (The Home and the World)*, which he offered to a film producer. It was liked and plans for production were initiated. They soon foundered, however, for Ray adamantly rejected all the producer’s suggestions for changes aimed at increasing the film’s popular appeal. “I felt like a pricked balloon at the time, but I can now say... that I consider it the greatest good fortune that the film was not made. Reading the screenplay now I can see how pitifully superficial and Hollywoodish it was.” He never abandoned his plan to film the Tagore novel, though it would be nearly forty years in reaching the screen.

In terms of quantity India ranked with the US & Japan as major filmmaking countries, along with the United States and Japan... Quality, though, was another matter. To most cultured Indians, their country’s films were a joke or a source of embarrassment. Few Indian films were shown abroad, except to expatriate communities; on the rare occasions they were, as Ray wrote in a 1948 article, “even our best films have to be accepted with the gently apologetic proviso that it is ‘after all an Indian film.’”

The typical Indian movie, whether comedy, romantic melodrama, or “mythological,” was constructed to a rigid formula, often summed up as “a star, six songs, three dances.” Heroes, heroines, and villains were stereotyped and unambiguous; plots were crude, and acting cruder; settings were stiflingly studio-bound; and the action, with blithe disregard of dramatic logic, would be regularly halted for lavish musical interludes, sung or danced. Eroticism featured

heavily, but could be expressed only by languishing looks and voluptuous movements, since censorship (and popular morality) forbade any depiction of sexual contact more torrid than a handclasp....

In the forty years of its existence Indian cinema had yet to produce a single director, or even a single film, of unequivocal world stature. Ray ascribed this failure to two major factors. First, that Indian filmmakers had never grasped the essential nature of cinema: “It would seem that the fundamental concept of a coherent dramatic pattern existing in time was generally misunderstood.”

Secondly, misguided attempts to emulate foreign movies, especially those of Hollywood: “What our cinema needs above everything else,” Ray proclaimed, “is a style, an idiom... which would be uniquely and recognizably Indian.”

His ambition was to create, singlehandedly if necessary, this uniquely Indian style and idiom. In 1947, the year of independence, Ray and his friend Chidananda Das Gupta had founded Calcutta’s first film society, “thereby shackling ourselves willingly to the task of disseminating film culture among the intelligentsia.” He also began writing articles in an iconoclastic vein: “I had thought my explosive piece would shake the Bengali cinema to its foundation and lead to a massive heart-searching among our filmmakers. Nothing of the sort happened. The piece was simply shrugged off... as yet another piece of tomfoolery by some arrogant upstart who... knew nothing of local needs and local conditions.”

By 1948 Ray’s increasing salary at Keymer’s enabled him to provide an independent home for himself and his mother. In March of the next year he married his cousin, Bijoya Das. They had grown up together and shared many of the same interests, including a love of cinema. Their son Sandip was born in 1953. In addition to his advertising work, Ray, by now considered one of Calcutta’s leading graphic artists, was often commissioned to illustrate books. One such commission, in 1946, was for an abridged edition of a modern classic, Bibbhu Bhusan Banerjee’s novel *Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)*. Ever since, he had been considering turning this story into a film that he would both script and direct. Two events helped push his ideas into reality.



In 1949 Jean Renoir arrived in Calcutta to make *The River*. Overcoming his shyness, Ray called on him and found him “not only approachable, but so embarrassingly polite and modest that I felt if I were not too careful I would probably find myself discoursing on the Future of Cinema for his benefit.” Ray helped Renoir scout locations, watched him filming whenever possible, and eventually mentioned his own plans. Renoir was full of encouragement. If only, he said, Indian filmmakers “could shake Hollywood out of your system and evolve your own style, you would be making great films here.”



In April 1950 Keymer’s sent Ray and his wife on a six-month trip to London, where the company had its head office. “Doubtless the management hoped that I would come back a full-fledged advertising man....What the trip did in fact was to set the seal of doom on my advertising career. Within three days of arriving in London I saw *Bicycle Thieves*. I knew immediately that if I ever made *Pather Panchali*. . . I would make it in the same way, using natural locations and unknown actors.”

Back in Calcutta, Ray began trying to set up his project. Scenario in hand he visited every producer in the city. Not all of them laughed at him. A few expressed genuine interest: given a reputable director, some well-known stars....Ray realized that to make the film he wanted, he would have to finance it himself. He scraped together all his savings, borrowed from his relatives, raised a loan on his life insurance, and hired some equipment, including “an old, much-used Wall camera which happened to be the only one available for hire that day.” With this, and a group of friends as crew, he began shooting.

Ray’s lack of experience was shared by most of his collaborators. All but a few of the actors were non-professionals, and those few had rarely worked in films. The cinematographer, Subrata Mitra, had never shot a film before; Bansi Chandragupta, the art director, had worked only on *The River*, the editor, Dulal Dutta, was a veteran of two films’ experience. None of them owned a car and they could rarely afford taxis; the equipment was transported by bus or train to the locations, some of which were sixty miles from Calcutta. Since all of

them had regular jobs, filming proceeded on weekends and over vacations.

The plan was to shoot enough footage to have something to show potential backers. Some 4,000 feet of film was edited, assembled and shown around but there were still no takers. Ray sold off his precious books and classical records, and Bijoya pawned her jewelry but to no avail. Some eighteen months after filming had started, Ray sadly disbanded his team. There seemed little hope that the picture would ever be completed.

Around this time Monroe Wheeler curator of the Museum Of Modern Art visited Calcutta seeking material for an exhibition of Indian art. He heard about Ray’s project, saw some stills and suggested that the film, if finished in time, might form part of his exhibition. Ray was highly gratified but Wheeler could offer no financial support. Six months later John Huston turned up, scouting locations for his Kipling movie, *The Man Who Would be King*, and was shown the edited footage. He was favorably impressed and reported as much to Wheeler.

Meanwhile, through a contact of his mother’s, Ray had gained access to the Chief Minister of the West Bengal government, Dr. Roy. News of foreign interest in this eccentric project had filtered through. Roy viewed the footage and agreed that the state government would purchase the film outright, taking in return any profit accruing from domestic exhibition. (According to some accounts, the funds came from the Department of Roads, who believed, taking the title literally, that Ray was making a documentary about road-building.) With this backing and a six-month leave of absence from Keymer’s, Ray was able to resume shooting, now on a full-time basis. Working against time—Ravi Shankar’s evocative score was composed in eleven hours—Ray and his team completed the film in time for Wheeler’s exhibition in April 1955.

“The cinematic material,” Ray wrote later, “dictated a style to me, a very slow, rhythm determined by nature, the landscape, the country. . . . The script had to retain some of the rambling quality of the novel because that in itself contained a clue to the feeling of authenticity: life in a poor Bengali village does ramble.” Affectionately, and never

condescendingly, *Pather Panchali* offers us a series of events, not seen through Apu's eyes but rather reflected in his wide-eyed, responsive gaze. "Instead of simply identifying with the child's view. "Robin Wood observed, "Ray makes us increasingly sensitive to the child's *reactions* to what he sees."

As Adib, film critic of *The Times of India*, recognized, something revolutionary had appeared in Indian cinema: "it is banal to compare it with any other Indian picture—for even the best pictures produced so far have been cluttered with clichés. *Pather Panchali* is pure cinema. There is no trace of the theatre in it. . . . The countryside lives in the quiver of every leaf, in every ripple on the surface of the pond, in the daily glory of its mornings and evenings. The people live in every nerve and we live with them. . . . If sequence after sequence fixes itself in the mind of the audience, it is because every scene has been intensely conceived."

With some reluctance, since it was felt to give an adverse impression of India, *Pather Panchali* was chosen as official Indian entry for the 1956 Cannes Festival. Many critics stayed away, convinced by past experience that no Indian film could be worth watching, but almost all who attended the screening hailed the debut of a major new director, and the revelation of an unprecedented maturity in the Indian cinema. (A dissenting voice came from François Truffaut, who walked out after two reels, announcing that the film was "insipid and Europeanized," and that in any case he was not interested in Indian peasants.)

Pather Panchali was awarded the prize as Best Human Document and went on to win a fistful of other awards including the Selznick Golden Laurel at Berlin, and received wide international release. In *Sight and Sound* Lindsay Anderson described it as "a beautiful picture, completely fresh and personal," in which Ray's camera "reaches forward into life, exploring and exposing, with reverence and wonder."

Many critics found *Aparajito* a disappointment after *Pather Panchali*. "The film is neither realistic nor symbolic: it is merely awkward," wrote Eric Rhode.... Stanley Kaufmann, on the other hand, who had dismissed *Pather Panchali* as "rewarding if taken as a dramatized documentary,"



now realized that Ray was "in process of creating a national film epic unlike anything—in size and soul—since [Donskoi's] Maxim trilogy." In *Film* (March–April 1960), Douglas McVay considered it "the most profoundly sensitive panel of the triptych," singling

out the moving scene of Sarojaya's lonely death: "Through the gathering dusk, the sick woman glimpses the approach of one more locomotive on the skyline.... She stumbles to her feet and gazes eagerly out into the darkness.... Only the light of the fireflies twinkles back at her."

Aparajito was awarded numerous prizes, including the Golden Lion at the 1957 Venice Festival....

The theme of change, of the countervailing gains and losses attendant on the forces of progress, has often been identified as the central preoccupation of Ray's films. This theme, underlying much of the Apu trilogy, finds its most overt expression in *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958). The hero, an aging *zamindar* (feudal landlord), lives amid the crumbling grandeur of his vast palace, idly puffing his hookah and watching the last of his ancestral wealth trickle away. Out in the fields a solitary elephant, survivor of a once extensive herd, pads morosely about, intermittently obscured by dust raised by the trucks of the upstart village money lender, whose star has risen as the *zamindar*'s has sunk. Further off, an estuarial river flows sluggishly past mud flats; the very landscape seems gripped by terminal lethargy.

The *zamindar*'s only passion are the *jalsas* (recitals of classical music) held in his music room. When the money lender builds a music room of his own, the old man's pride is aroused. The palace's faded splendors are dusted off, the most expensive dancer is hired, the money lender is invited and, when he attempts to offer financial tribute, publicly snubbed. "That is the host's privilege," the *zamindar* reminds him as, with a fatuous but splendid gesture, he tosses his last few gold coins to the dancer. Next morning he meticulously dons his riding costume, mounts his sole remaining stallion, rides madly towards the river, and is thrown to his death.

John Coleman, writing in the *New Statesman* compared *The Music Room* to the best of Renoir: "It doesn't so much duck taking sides, as animate both of

them with an indigenous sympathy.” The *zamindar*—played with magisterial torpor by the eminent stage and screen actor Chhabu Biswas—is effete, indolent, patently absurd and yet, in his genuine devotion to music, in the doomed extravagance of his final gesture—perversely magnificent. Ustad Vilyat Khan, whose own family had been generously supported by a *zamindari* household, tended in his score to emphasize the nobler aspects of the protagonist: had Ray composed his own score, as he was later to do, “I would have given an ironic edge to it...but for him it was all sweetness and greatness.”

Marie Seton maintained that, far from pandering to popular taste by incorporating long musical episodes, Ray “challenged the whole convention of songs and dances in Indian cinema.



Audiences...conditioned to the introduction of songs and dances as entertainment interludes and [as] dramatic and romantic stresses, had never before been confronted with...classical singing and dancing as integral focal points of realistic sequences.” At all events, both critical and public response was puzzled and lukewarm, though the film gained a Presidential Award at New Delhi. (Very few of Ray’s films have won an award of some kind; he must rank among the world’s most honored directors.) Internationally *The Music Room* was more warmly received. John Russell Taylor described it as “one of Ray’s most masterly films, exquisitely photographed and directed with a complete, unquestioning mastery of mood....For those willing to place themselves under its hypnotic spell it offers pleasures of unique delicacy.”...

With the completion of the Apu trilogy, Ray was widely acclaimed as one of the great masters of humanist cinema, comparable with Renoir, Flaherty and de Sica. As far as the rest of the world was concerned he stood as the dominant figure in Indian cinema, sole representative of his country’s vast movie industry. Within India his status was more ambiguous. Although he enjoyed huge prestige as the only Indian director to have achieved international respect, he was also the object of considerable resentment, especially in Bombay; and his work—then

as now—was limited to a relatively restricted audience: the intellectual middle classes of the Bengali-speaking minority. (Ray always refused to have his films dubbed into Hindi or other languages)....

Some critics, following Truffaut, have accused Ray of tailoring his films to European tastes, of making—as one of them put it—UNESCO cinema. Ray has consistently rebutted such attacks (“All my films are made with my own Bengali audience in view”), pointing out that even the most sympathetic western viewer, unless extraordinarily well-versed in Bengali language and culture, will find much in his films alien and incomprehensible.

...One film which Ray thought so esoteric that it would scarcely be worth releasing abroad was *Devi* “*The Goddess*, 1960), a study of religious fanaticism in nineteenth-century rural Bengal.... “Villains bore me,” Ray has remarked....To Ray’s surprise, foreign audiences were in general highly appreciative of *Devi*, although for a time it seemed they might never have the chance to see it. The film caused widespread controversy in Bengal, being taken in some quarters as an impious attack on Hinduism, and was initially refused an export license on the grounds that it portrayed India as sunk in primitive superstition. The order for its release is said to have come from Nehru in person....

In all Ray’s films, even *Pather Panchali*, interiors are shot in the studio, although so subtly are the sets constructed and lit that we are rarely aware of artifice.

“Calm without, fire within,” the title of Ray’s essay on the Japanese cinema, could well, as Chidananda Das Gupta noted, describe *chiarulata*....

Outside the avant-garde, there is perhaps no filmmaker who exercises such control over his work as Satyajit Ray. Scripting, casting, directing, scoring, operating the camera, working closely on art direction and editing, even designing his own credit titles and publicity material—his films come as close to wholly

personal expression as may be possible in mainstream cinema. Not that his working methods are in the least dictatorial; those who have worked with him pay tribute to his patience, courtesy, and unfailing good temper in the face of all the setbacks and disasters inherent in moviemaking. “I make films for the love of it,” he once wrote. “I enjoy every moment of the filmmaking process,” from the first draft of the scenario to final cut. This enthusiasm is evidently communicated to his collaborators; Ray’s direction, Soumitra Chatterjee told an interviewer, “is inspired, and it’s an inspiration that is contagious and spreads to the entire crew.” Actors have been known to pass up three lavishly-paid Bombay spectacles to work on one of his low-budget productions.

...Hitherto, all Ray’s films had been based on novels or stories by others, although he had often altered the originals considerably in his scripts—and, especially with *Teen Kanya*, been censured for doing so by literary purists. As he explained, “I don’t have enough experience of life to write about peasants or even nawabs...My experience is all middle-class and that’s rather a limited field. So I turn to others.” His first original script was for *Kanchanjungha* (1962), which was also his first picture in color....“Chekhovian,” an epithet often applied to Ray’s work, was used with particular frequency about *Kanchanjungha*, within whose quiet microcosm the social conflicts of a nation are clearly mirrored....

Kanchanjungha was also the first film for which Ray composed his own score. Though he had received no formal musical training, he had grown up in an intensely musical household., acquiring an extensive knowledge of Indian and western classical music....Finding it increasingly frustrating to work with professional composers, whose ideas often ran contrary to his own, he has since *Kanchanjungha* composed all his own film scores, as well as those for James Ivory’s first two features, *The Householder* and *Shakespeare Wallah*.

From [*Mahanager/The Big City* 1963] on Ray took personal control of yet another filmmaking function, operating the camera himself. “I realized that, working with new actors, they are more

confident if they don’t see me, they are less tense. I remain behind the camera. And I see better and can get the exact frame.”

“Ray’s admirers,” Richard Roud observed, “often quarrel a to which are his best films.” Few of them, though, would disagree in placing *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964) among the very finest. Ray himself rates it his favorite: “It’s the one with the fewest flaws.” The script is taken from a novel by Tagore....

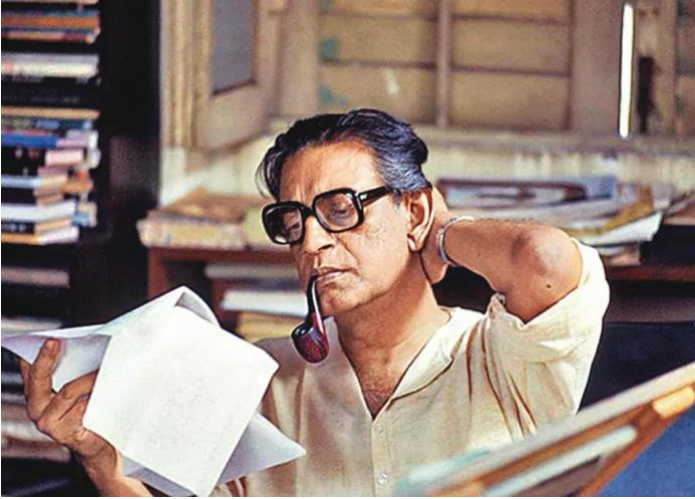


“I have not often been praised or blamed for the right reasons,” Ray has remarked. One surprisingly persistent view of him, apparently based on *Pather Panchali* and not much else, is as the gifted natural, an untutored primitive of the cinema, adept at semidocumentary studies of simple peasant life but sadly out of his depth with more sophisticated subjects. ...Most critics, though,

would more likely concur with Penelope Houston’s assessment of him as “obviously a highly sophisticated artist. Like Renoir he looks, and looks, and looks again; builds his films through painstaking observation; assists his players...to act with that suggestion of unforced naturalism which looks spontaneous and means hour of the most concentrated patience. Ray is no peasant, and the limpid clarity of his style is not achieved by luck or chance.”

Allegations of the “un-Indianness” of Ray’s films often seem to stem mainly from their wide appeal to foreign audiences—an argument rarely used to adduce a lack of national character in the films if, say, Fellini or Bergman....

He succeeded in making Indian cinema, for the first time in its history, something to be taken seriously, and he presented his fellow Indian filmmakers with an unprecedented opportunity to make worthwhile pictures. He has also created a body of work which, for richness and range, will stand comparison with that of any other director. At their finest—in *Charulata*, *Days and Nights in the Forest*, *The Middleman*—Ray’s films move to their own inner rhythm, individual and wholly satisfying, full of warmth, humor and a constant sense of discovery.



**from *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*
Andrews, Sarris, Ed. Visible Ink Press Detroit
1998, entry by Satti Khanna**

The power of Ray's early films comes from his ability to suggest deep feeling by arranging the surface elements of his films unemphatically.

Audiences in India who have responded warmly to Ray's early films have sometimes been troubled by the complexity of his middle films. A film like *Shatranj Ke Khilari* was expected by many viewers to reconstruct the splendors of Moghul India as the early *Jalsaghar* had reconstructed the sensitivity of Bengali feudal landlords and *Charulata* the decency of upper class Victorian Bengal. What the audience found instead was a stern examination of the sources of Indian decadence. According to Ray, the British seemed less to blame for their role than the Indians who demeaned themselves by colluding with the British or by ignoring the public good and plunging into private pleasures. Ray's point of view in *Shantranji* was not popular with distributors and so his first Hindi film was denied fair exhibition in many cities in India.

In focussing on inner lives and on human relations as the ground of social and political systems, Ray continued the humanist tradition of Rabindranath Tagore. Ray studied at Santiniketan, the university founded by Tagore, and was close to the poet in his last years... As the poet Tagore was his example, Ray has become an example to important younger filmmakers (such as Shyam Benegal, M.S. Sathyu, G. Aravindan), who have learned from him how to reveal in small domestic situations the working of larger political and cultural forces.

**from *Conversations with The Great Moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden Age*. Ed. George Stevens Jr.
Alfred A Knopf NY 2006**

Satyajit Ray

"First it's finding a story which excites you. Second, it's converting it into the terms of a screenplay. Third, it's casting, which I do myself. People just come to my house. There's a knock on the door, and there's somebody waiting outside with acting ambitions."

"I try to pack my films with meaning and psychological inflections and shades," he said, "and make a whole which will communicate a lot of things to many people." Ray's cinema flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river," said Akira Kurosawa. "People are born, live out their lives and then accept their deaths. There is nothing irrelevant or haphazard in his cinematographic technique."

April 13, 1978 *You have been making films for more than twenty years. The subjects have varied widely—the rural poor, commercial urban life, the British presence—but all the films have been set in India. Do you have any interest in directing outside your country?*

Not really. I have turned down many offers from here, though wouldn't mind working with American actors. In fact, I came to Hollywood about ten years ago for a project that would have been filmed in Bengal and that needed an American actor. But I wouldn't want to work outside of India. I feel very deeply rooted there. I know my people better than any other. I would like to narrow it down even further and say, things Bengali, because I think of India as a continent, and every state has its own topography, language and culture. There is an underlying link of Hinduism perhaps, but on the surface the states are very different. You can move from the Himalayas to a desert.

You've acknowledged Jean Renoir as one of your earliest influences. How did that come about?

In the forties, I saw the American films of Jean Renoir. The first one was *The Southerner*. Eventually I saw *The Diary of a Chambermaid* and a few others. I also read about his French work, and I was familiar with his father's paintings. Then, in 1949, Renoir came to Calcutta to look for locations for *The River*. ...I just went and presented myself as a student of the cinema. I got to know him quite well. He was comparatively free in the evenings and I

would often just drop in. Later I accompanied him on his location hunts because I knew the countryside quite well.....

He talked about the difficulties he had had in Hollywood trying to convince people that the film ought to be shot on location and not in the studio. He dropped occasional remarks which I found very illuminating. For instance, he said that a film does not have to show many things, but the few that it shows have to have the right kind of details. He kept insisting on details and the value of details in films. We would drive through the countryside, and he would say, "Look at that!" and point to a clump of bananas or plantains. "That is Bengal. That little palm, that is quintessential Bengal for me." He was always trying to find in the landscape details that he felt were characteristic of the place and that he was eventually hoping to use in the film. That left an impression, because I myself was very interested in details. ...

Has censorship affected your films?

Not to a very serious extent, because I have always been oblique in my statements, even on human relationships. In any case, we can't afford to be too permissive. And I'm not particularly anxious to be too permissive, because I think there has to be some room left for suggestion and obliqueness. In the cinema there is, I believe, a strong political censorship of violence. There's a lot of fighting in the new commercial cinema, but there's no blood shown. Apparently you are free to show a lot of bashing about. But if you show catsup, then you are in for it....

What form do your scripts take?

My scripts are in visual form. They are not written documents which can be duplicated and passed out to the members of the crew. They're just little framed sketches with directions down the right-hand side, and little notes on dialogue and camera movements. I don't think it's a literary medium anyway, so why waste work? It's only when the question of publication comes that you have to devise a part-novel, part-drama form. But I've never wasted time in being literary.

What led to your approach?

Well, I was trained as a painter; I did illustrations. But I'm not the only one who works this way. I once saw a script by Kurosawa which looks exactly like mine. I know of some other directors who use a visual form.

Music seems to have a special importance in your films. What do you see as its use?

I've been using less and less music in my films of late because I've always had the feeling that

background music was one element that was not part of pure cinema. It was an admission of inadequacy on the part of the screenplay writer—or the director, perhaps—to have to use music to underline certain things. Perhaps it was out of a lack of confidence in the audience. Of course, I was quite surprised to see some of the American films of the thirties, for example, *Scarface*, which had no

music at all. It's later—late thirties and early forties—that music really came into its own. Then you had big composers like Max Steiner and Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Alfred Newman writing symphonic scores which run right through the film almost. I find that those are the films which have dated most now.

I personally prefer a slightly drier approach, but I realize that one cannot do without music. In the trilogy I did not write my own music. I used Ravi Shankar, as you probably know. The film without the music would have seemed slower, I'm afraid. I think what music does is to provide the audience with something to react to so that they are kept occupied. At least their ears are kept occupied. With that, there is something happening.

What do you think about using music as counterpoint?

Yes, fine. That's one of the recommended uses, certainly. Kubrick has done that in his films, using "The Blue Danube" for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I think it's better to do it that way, because the other way would be totally logical. It would be saying the same thing in terms of music as is being expressed in rhetorical terms. In any case, I don't like the Mickey



Mousing of music by providing songs with every action. That's very bad.

I watch my films with the audiences. Certainly on the opening night, but I also go just to see how the audience is reacting. I've often found that the audience's reaction in a way changes the film for me. Often, during the passages which have very little dialogue, or just subtle things on the soundtrack, and no music, I felt terrified. I wanted to walk out of the theater. I would think, now why didn't I use music here, which would pacify the public who are being restive and fidgety? It remains a very acute problem, I think, whether to use music or not. I would ideally not like to use music at all. I certainly do not approve of well-known pieces of classical music used in the background. What happens is that the film is rarely able to come up to the level of the music. What really happens is that the music is brought down to the level of the film, which is upsetting.

How did you work with Ravi Shankar on the Apu trilogy?

Shankar was then already a very famous concert virtuoso who was constantly touring, if not outside of India, then inside India. For *Pather Panchali* he was available for just a day. I was able to show him half the film in rough cut. The music I wouldn't say was composed, because there was nothing written down. He just hummed and whistled, and the musicians just performed. All the music was done in a single session. This is not the best way of doing it, mind you. I got worried, and I had him play three-minute and four-minute pieces and various ragas in various tempos. Either a solo sitar or a combination with the flute, with drums, whatever. But a lot of the work was done in the cutting room. There was considerable wrestling with the music and the images.

...Music has always been my first love....

You operate your own camera?

I've been doing so for the last fifteen years. Not that I have no trust in my cameraman's operational abilities, but the best position to judge the acting from is through the lens. Also, I've noticed working with nonprofessionals, that they are happier if they don't see my face while I'm directing....

Do you have a philosophy that you care to articulate?

It's there in my films. I'm afraid I can't be articulate about it. I'm very bad at verbalizations.

That's why I'm not a writer; I'm a filmmaker. I'm afraid you will have to draw your own conclusions.



Matinee Idylls: Reflections on the Movies. Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee. Chicago, 1999. "Satyajit Ray: Days and Nights in the Art Houses"

I had been assigned to produce the film tribute to the greatest of "Indian Chappies," Satyajit Ray, for the 1992 Academy Award broadcast, on which he was to receive an honorary Oscar....When I began telling people what I was working on, I discovered that it was only among my contemporaries—and, of course, the critics and film historians—that Ray was a recognizable name. And then only as a figure from our past. They, no more than I, had any sense of the size and strength of his body of work as it has developed in the last two decades or so. As for younger people, they had quite simply never heard of him.

This was a shock to me. But not as great as the dismay that came over me as I tried to get to work on my little montage, which instantly turned into the worst logistical nightmare I have ever endured in over two decades of making compilation films.

As far as I could determine, no American company held television rights (and therefore a viable print or tape) of any of Ray's films. For that matter, I could turn up no one who held American theatrical rights in any of his pictures. There were a few scattered, battered 16mm prints of his films available in the audiovisual market, but most of them were near-unwatchable....To put the point simply, there was simply no market for Ray's films in the United States, therefore no impetus to keep good copies of his work available for public exhibition....

Advised not to bother with Indian sources

because in a poor nation film preservation is not a high priority and the state film bureaucracy is mysterious and impenetrable, I finally turned to Britain. There, at last, I was able to obtain air-worthy prints. The reason for that, I believe, is simple and exemplary: it is because the National Film Theatre and the British Film Institute created and continue to sustain a small but commercially viable audience for movies that are not made in America and are not comedies or action films aimed at the only audience that seems to count these days—young, brain-damaged males.

The previous year Channel 4 in Britain had presented—in prime time, mind you—a retrospective that included almost all of Ray's best work....

As I learned a few years ago, when I taught a criticism course at the USC film school, young people today, even when they would like to, cannot replicate the experience [of seeing many foreign films] the fifties generation enjoyed.... Today's young people cannot gain convenient (or even inconvenient) access to their film heritage or to cinematic cosmopolitanism.

...Working with Ray's work in some measure reanimated something like my youthful idealism about the movies and about the utility of the critical gesture, not as a way of passing ultimate judgments but as a way of stirring interest in, discussion of, yes, even passion for the movies in their infinite, and in this case, marvelously exotic variety.

I said earlier that coming upon the Apu trilogy anew I was struck by the lasting power of its quite simple imagery. But there were other things I could see about it now that were hidden from me thirty-five years ago. Viewing the three films back to back I was struck by their cumulative power. In everything but physical scale they constitute an epic. They range over two decades and embrace both village and city life in modern India and all of the most basic human emotions in the most tender and patient way. More important, I was now able to see that the films—especially the final one, *The World of Apu*—hinted at what I can now see as Satyajit Ray's great if always indirectly spoken theme.

That is the ineffectuality of the male in a colonial and postcolonial society.... This is a major body of work, embracing more than thirty gracefully executed films, the overriding theme of which—the psychological and cultural devastation of a society only recently released from colonialism—is not without interest even to those people who are uninterested in the cinema as such. What matters even

more to me is that its felicities—there are no crude villains in Ray's work, no caricatured exploiters of the people (or heroes of the people either)—and its subtle wisdom are unavailable to us in our present, devastated cultural climate. I wish I knew what to do about this situation, beyond protesting it.



Philip Kemp: "The Music Room: Distant Music"
(Criterion Notes)

In May 1956, an Indian film was screened at the Cannes Film Festival. It wasn't well attended. The Indian delegation had done little to promote it, arranging only a single midnight screening that clashed with a party in honor of Akira Kurosawa. In any case, few festivalgoers bothered to show up for "just another Indian movie." Luckily, certain influential critics decided to skip the party and attend the screening—among them, Georges Sadoul, André Bazin, Gene Moskowitz (Mosk of *Variety*), Lotte Eisner, and Lindsay Anderson. Having watched the film, they were furious over its disdainful treatment, insisted on another screening at a more accessible time, and ensured that it was put up for an award.

The film was *Pather panchali* (1955), the work of a young, first-time director, Satyajit Ray, who, along with most of his crew, had no previous experience in filmmaking whatsoever. It told, with limpid simplicity, of a boy, Apu, growing up with his family in a small Bengali village. And, as many in Cannes soon realized, it was quite unlike any other Indian film they had seen. There was no melodramatic story, no exaggerated acting, no arbitrary interpolation of song and dance episodes. Writing about the festival in *Sight & Sound*, Anderson devoted the lion's share of his report to *Pather panchali*. The film, he wrote, "dominated Cannes this year, surpassing new work by artists of the caliber of Donskoi, De Sica, and Kurosawa . . . The lives of these people are all the story of the film: there is no tight dramatic construction or conventional plot. The

tension is poetic rather than dramatic, created by the artist's intimate contact with his material, physical as well as emotional."

Pather panchali was awarded the festival prize for best human document and went on to win a dozen more awards around the world. As its reputation spread, it was recognized that a major filmmaker had appeared on the scene. Ray had done something wholly unprecedented: for the first time, an Indian film and an Indian filmmaker had achieved world status.

Ray had drawn his script from a much-loved Bengali novel by Bibhutibhushan Banerji, and he now proceeded to mine the book and its sequel for a further film about Apu, *Aparajito* (1956). He would go on to complete what became known as his Apu Trilogy with *The World of Apu* (1959). But between the second and third parts of the trilogy, he set out to extend his range with two very different films. *The Philosopher's Stone* (1958), a would-be satirical comedy about a poor clerk who finds a magic stone that turns base metal into gold, is generally considered one of his rare failures. But his second film of that year was quite another matter—gentle, subtle, elegiac, though not lacking a vein of quiet social comment. For some critics, *The Music Room* remains his finest work.

When Ray was trying to find backing for *Pather panchali*, several potential producers had dismissed his ideas out of hand on learning that the film would include no singing or dancing—both, in those days, considered indispensable ingredients of any Indian film. But now, with *The Music Room*, Ray was ready to demonstrate how, in his view, songs and dances *should* be used in a film—not as irrelevant interludes but as an integral and essential part of the action. "Here was a dramatic story," he later wrote, "which could be laced legitimately with music and dancing, and distributors loved music and dancing. But here, too, was scope for mood, for atmosphere, for psychological exploration."

Change, and the countervailing gains and losses attendant on the forces of progress, has often been singled out as one of the main themes of Ray's work, and nowhere is that clearer than in *The Music Room*. The script, by Ray himself, is adapted from a short story by the Bengali writer Tarasankar Banerji. The period is the late 1920s, and the protagonist is an aging zamindar (feudal landlord), Biswambhar Roy, who lives amid the crumbling grandeur of his vast palace, idly puffing on his hookah and watching the last of his ancestral wealth trickle away. Out in the

fields, a solitary elephant—perhaps the sole survivor of a once extensive herd?—pads morosely about, inter-mittently obscured by the dust raised by the trucks of the nouveau riche moneylender Ganguli, whose star has risen as the zamindar's has sunk. Farther off, the river Padma flows sluggishly between mudflats; the very landscape seems gripped by terminal lethargy.

When we meet him, Roy (played by the eminent stage and screen actor Chhabi Biswas) is sitting quite motionless on the roof of his palace, as if embalmed. His aged servant, Ananta, approaches, bringing the hookah, and Roy barely stirs. "What month is this?" he inquires. Then he's roused by the distant sound of a *shehnai* (an oboelike instrument); Ganguli, he's told, is celebrating his son's *upanayana*, a coming-of-age rite for boys. And at once, so subtly that at first we hardly notice it, we slip into a forty-minute flashback, as Roy remembers his own son's *upanayana*, a few years earlier.

Music—crucial, of course, to the whole concept of the film—carries us across the transition to the flashback. A *shehnai* is still playing but now accompanied by a *tanpura* (a stringed drone instrument) and a *tabla* (a drum). A few years later, beginning with *Kanchenjunga* (1962), Ray would start composing the scores for all his films, but at the outset of his career, he called on the services of leading Indian classical musicians. Ravi Shankar provided the scores for all three parts of the Apu



Trilogy; for *The Music Room*, Ray invited the distinguished Bengali maestro Vilayat Khan, scion of a long line of musicians, to compose the score. He was later to have slight misgivings about his choice. Khan, whose family had been generously supported for generations by a zamindari household, tends in his score to emphasize the nobler aspects of the film's protagonist. Had Ray composed his own score, he reflected, "I would have given an ironic edge to it . . . But I liked Vilayat's theme as a piece of music, and I

felt the story would tell what I wanted to tell and the music would not interfere with my general attitude toward feudalism.”

In any event, Khan’s score, passionate and evocative, effectively sets the mood of the film. As the credits roll, we hear an urgent sitar solo, backed by Western-style strings, while the camera tracks in very slowly on an ominously swaying chandelier. This chandelier, the centerpiece of Roy’s much-prized music room, will figure prominently in the film: we’ll see it again swaying at the approach of a storm that brings major tragedy into his life, but it also symbolizes his whole existence, grandiose but

obsolescent. Elaborate and impressive though it is, its numerous crystal sconces are filled not with light-bulbs but with candles. From Ganguli’s house, meanwhile, disturbing the zamindar’s peace, comes the monotonous chug of a generator. The moneylender has installed electricity.

Omens abound in *The Music Room*. It’s unlikely that Ray himself believed in them, but his protagonist does. As the concert staged during the storm reaches its climax, Roy glances into his glass and sees a struggling insect drowning in it; he reacts with dismay, and a few moments later comes the fatal news that the boat bearing his wife and son, summoned back to attend the occasion, has capsized. After the final concert, on which he has expended his last remaining funds, the zamindar wanders drunkenly through his now deserted music room, toasting first the gallery of his forebears—“To you, my noble ancestors!”—and then his own portrait, only to see a huge spider scuttle across his image. (Three years later, in Ingmar Bergman’s *Through a Glass Darkly*, a disturbed girl would see a spider on the wall as an image of God, alien and indifferent—could Bergman have taken a hint from Ray’s film?) And as he turns away, disgusted, Roy sees reflected in his glass of brandy the lights of the chandelier above him going out, one by one. The metaphor is unmistakable: his world is guttering, growing dark and dying.

The music itself, to which Roy is so

passionately if insensately devoted, becomes a key character in the film. Ray takes the opportunity to include several of the chief modes of Indian classical performance, from the Lucknow *thumri* (a romantic, sensual form of song generally performed by a woman) of the first concert we see, through the

Muslim *khyal* (intricate, virtuosic singing, usually the province of male performers) of the second concert, to the *kathak* dance (an ancient form of solo narrative ballet) of the third and final concert. In Banerji’s original story, the *kathak* dancer is Roy’s mistress. Ray omitted this element, not from prudery but because he felt it was melodramatic. “Its elimination makes the



film more austere,” he explained.

The zamindar’s palace, in decline yet still imposing, also becomes a character in its own right. After a long search for the building he envisaged, Ray and his team were told of a palace at Nimtita, in the Murshidabad district of Bengal, just across the river from what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). It proved to be ideal. “No one could have described in words the feeling of utter desolation that surrounded the palace,” Ray wrote in his essay “Winding Route to a Music Room” (see page 16). “[It] was a perfect materialization of my dream image.”

Ray was to use the Nimtita palace twice more, in *Devi* (1960) and in the “Sampati” episode of *Three Daughters* (1961). In one respect, though, it wasn’t perfect for *The Music Room*: it did have a music room, but it was small and unimpressive. Instead, a much larger and more elaborate specimen was fashioned by Ray’s regular set designer, Bansi Chandragupta, the largest set Ray had yet used; and its size, which seemed to invite overhead shots, led to a tragic incident. Showy camera work was rarely a feature of Ray’s films, but in this case, he succumbed to the temptation. “I had just won an award at Cannes and felt justified in asking for a crane,” he later admitted. On loading the cumbersome device onto a truck after the shots had been taken, it toppled and fell, killing one worker and crippling another for life. Guilt-ridden, Ray realized, “All this would not have

happened if I had not set my mind on those overhead shots.”

In some quarters, it's been suggested that Ray admires the zamindar and the feudal order he represents. It's hard to sustain such a reading in the face of the evidence, though. True, the portrayal of Ganguli, representative of the newly risen moneyed class, is hardly flattering; but Biswambhar Roy is shown as selfish, petty, and blandly indifferent to the consequences of his actions. His wife, Mahamaya, about to leave with their son, Bireswar, to visit her ailing father, addresses him like a child: “I'm



afraid to leave you alone. There's no telling what you might do,” she says to him. “Behave.” Yet simply in order to upstage Ganguli, who, he learns, has planned a New Year's Day concert, Roy immediately arranges a lavish rival event, to the alarm of his steward, who knows how little the dwindling estate can afford it. Even worse, it's Roy's insistence that Mahayama and Bireswar return for the concert, despite a gathering storm, that leads to their deaths.

It's rare, though, that Ray's humanistic vision portrays any of his characters in a wholly negative light (“Villains bore me,” he once remarked), and there's undeniably a perverse, misguided grandeur in the zamindar's pursuit of his obsession to the brink of disaster and beyond. In this, he foreshadows other ill-advised Ray protagonists: the very different though equally misguided zamindar in *Devi* (again played by Chhabi Biswas), who decides that his daughter-in-law is an incarnation of the goddess Durga, with tragic results, and Wajid Ali Shah, King of Oudh, in *The Chess Players* (1977), whose single-minded devotion to poetry leads him to neglect the encroaching menace of British imperialism, poised to annex his kingdom. Though fully alive to their weaknesses, Ray never withholds his sympathy from these characters.

In India, the critical and public response to *The Music Room* was puzzled and lukewarm. Some critics who had been disconcerted by the international acclaim for *Pather panchali*—a film so alien to the conventional notion of Indian cinema—had

concluded on the basis of that film and its successor that Ray was an untutored primitive, a kind of Bengali Robert Flaherty. *The Music Room*, with its distinguished lead actor and sophisticated subject matter, wrong-footed them, leaving them even more

bewildered. The public, for its part, had never before seen an Indian film that integrated musical elements seamlessly into the story; this was not, it was felt, how music and dance should be used on the screen. Indeed, though Ray was already becoming the most internationally famous and respected of Indian directors, he would always remain something of a minority taste in his

own country.

Abroad, the success of Ray's debut film had aroused considerable curiosity over what this exceptional director might do next. Initial reactions to *Pather panchali* had been mixed; not all foreign critics shared Lindsay Anderson's enthusiasm. Bosley Crowther, all-powerful reviewer of the *New York Times*, was notoriously unsympathetic (as he was to certain other acclaimed masterworks of the art-house era, such as *L'avventura* and *Bonnie and Clyde*), though he was later to recant his dismissive views. But by the time of *The Music Room*'s overseas release, Ray's reputation had blossomed to the point that the new film was assured of an audience and of considered reviews—even though Ray himself, believing it too culturally specific to attract non-Indian audiences, “didn't think it would export at all.”

In subsequent years, the film's reputation steadily grew, along with Ray's stature as an artist. (In 1981, more than two decades after it was made, it was a rerelease of *The Music Room* that finally succeeded in opening up the hitherto indifferent French market to Ray's films.) Today, *The Music Room* can be seen as an early pointer to the future breadth and variety of Ray's work, as well as to the grace, lucidity, grasp of social resonance, and sympathetic insight into complex human emotions that make him one of the world's finest filmmakers.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2021 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 43:

October 5 Andrei Tarkovsky ANDREI RUBLEV (1966)
October 12 Stanley Kubrick BARRY LYNDON (1975)
October 19 Roman Polanski CHINATOWN (1974)
October 26 Roland Joffé THE MISSION (1986)
November 2 Mike Nichols CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR (2007)
November 9 Asghar Farhadi A SEPARATION (2011)
November 16 Hsiao-Hsien Hou THE ASSASSIN (2015)
November 23 Chloé Zhan NOMADLAND (2020)
November 30 Rob Reiner THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

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