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The boy Apu: this pure unvarnished close-up reveals in black eyes and hair, in swarthy skin, the universal depths of wondering childhood and its grave, placeless beauty.

Apu Trilogy

Pather Panchali

Aparajito

The World of Apu

Satyajit's Ray's trilogy came from India, whose teeming industry is still so little known to other countries because of its mediocre products. This work, however, shows India to us scenically, humanly and imaginatively. Even Ravi Shankar's musical accompaniment, its wizardry being better known to music listeners than movie-goers, joins the inviting, global familiarity of this film spectacle. Ray based his work on a two-volume novel by Bibhuti Bannerji, a best seller in India since 1934. Yet so intense an empathy is revealed by the film-maker for this story of one man's life that it might be his own autobiography. Made separately from 1954 to 1959, the films as a whole took more international honors than there is space to mention here. American reviewers tended to be ecstatic, and thus their superlatives—more fervent than usual—more convincing. Even considering that India is a country apt to awaken special sympathies among the liberal-minded, Ray's films, exceptional by any standard, won their fame honestly and (I should guess) lastingly.

Of the three parts, *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*, those nay-sayers, who have ideals of what pure film should be, might complain of general staidness in Ray's screen imagery, too much restraint in his exploitation of the screen's possibilities. But Ray, a man of taste, and sincere as they come, had his special message and knew how it should be conveyed. The trilogy covers its hero's life from early childhood to manhood and fatherhood; it boasts, moreover, actors quite unaffected (so it seems to Western eyes) by either headlines or personal publicity; their very "anonymity" to foreigners helps their performances. To Western audiences, there seems nothing to stand in the way of their *being* their rôles. A series of small boys takes the rôle of Apu as he grows up and Apu's small son; the last of them, as played by Swapan Mukerji, has a personality half angelic and half demonic; in other words, that of a typical little boy with the added charm of being, to those unused to Indian actors, "exotic." And yet altogether, Apu himself, his mother, his sister, his friend



A little fugue in human personalities and their plastic attitudes: Apu, his mother and sister are played by ideal Indian types.

and then his wife, do not seem exotic. They have a quality of beauty and authenticity setting them apart from white-skinned players but marking them as types of native beauty and eloquent human beings. The grandmother in *Pather Panchali* is an old actress whom Ray brought out of retirement for the rôle. She is a model of the excessively aged, the excessively skinny, the ultra-pathetic: a sacred crone destined to wring our hearts with her unwantedness as she hovers on the edge of death.

Ray learned the film medium when still a very young man, going to movie houses and taking notes about the films he saw. The rest was technique and his own experience and love of life. By the time he started converting Bannerji's novel to the screen, writing the film script himself, he knew both humanity and film, as it were, by heart. No cheapness mars his sure touch, his sense of what is visually needed to project his story, including the spare conversation among its characters. Noticeably, however, its action is quite wordless—and then are furnished the moments when the rectangle of the screen tells us most; for example, the sequence when Apu and his sister, outside their Bengal village, get caught in one of the dense Indian downpours, and the girl, with the proper medicine lacking, dies from the illness contracted. Here, as in the grandmother's redundant existence, economic considerations merge with individual human predicaments. The smallness and isolation of his village home, after his sister's death,

oppress the young Apu. He has received hints of a greater world, a domain of learning and more dynamic happenings where people do not simply wait around to die or sicken helplessly with some dangerous illness. His father's effort to break out of their narrow world into this other world completely fails, yet this does not daunt the younger Apu.

His father, Harihar, a lay priest who heals the sick, has been away on a mission at the time of his daughter's death. Despairing of his village's primitive decadence, Harihar decides to move his family to the great city of Benares. Too pious for its hustling pace, the kaleidoscope of its seething life, he dies from a neglected contagion, against which prayer is unavailing. Though having an impulse to turn away from his family tradition, Apu, now adolescent, starts training for the priesthood under the care of his mother, who works as a cook to support them both. Played by Karuna Banerji, she is a superb incarnation of mature Indian womanhood, solidly, realistically, tenderly drawn. Then death takes his mother, too; alone, Apu understands that he is really dominated by the desire for knowledge; he only wants to write and dream—and, of course, to love.

The manner in which he finally marries a young girl of beauty and refinement, taking her to live with him in poverty, is poetically and plausibly set forth. Their



Character comes across in incidental mature figures without evident make-up or any hint of rhetoric.



Apu's withered grandmother: an outright family burden, she is allowed to starve to death in a pitilessly gaunt sequence that puts the heart beyond pity.

The bridging years of Apu's growth: his father, lay priest and healer, moves his family desperately from their primitive village to the city, his death from illness then leaving his wife and son to their uprooted, now more precarious, existence.



The black etching of poverty only enriches this scene where Apu, adolescent now, spends bleak domestic hours with his mother, shortly also to be taken from him by death.



Apu, as a young man, opens his heart to his friend. Grown up, he is played with magnificent authority and a wealth of virile beauty by Soumitra Chatterjee.



Apu's bride shyly contemplates the city through the ragged curtains of her new home. Hold this picture upside down to see with what abstract ingenuity of design it has been composed.





Apu returns for his son: the climactic action of the trilogy; hating the little boy for having "caused" his mother's death, Apu has at once abandoned him to the care of the grandparents. This quietly tense sequence proceeds with a choreography hiding the calculation of its every move.

East and West are spanned in a twinkle by this close-up of Apu, junior, who might roam the city streets or the countryside, pitch stones into the Ganges or the East River.





A study in black-and-white values, a happy family relationship and the tone of time: Apu, the man, is united with his son and with "the remembrance of things past."

brief happiness is cut short by her death in childbirth, which takes place at her parents' home. Apu, seized with grief, at once hates the surviving infant, whom he abandons to its grandparents' care, seeking isolation far away after destroying the manuscript of his precious novel. Only the loyalty of a man friend brings his life to a stage promising future happiness. The reunion of father and small son is the old-fashioned, even obvious, episode concluding the trilogy. Yet Ray manages this cliché of fact and fiction as though it were fresh to human experience. There is not a trace of self-consciousness in its forthright sentiment.

Those who, now and recently, wish to take the film world by storm with the dazzlement of means (while "selling" sex, corruption and crime) might well ponder Ray's remarkable courage and its almost flawless success. This man's camera reveals what may be called the unexpendable moral nudities of human nature; it

demonstrates that two human heads may meet and blend in the same frame with ultimate plastic effect; that merely to "state" things as they exist may be better than finding an extraordinary way of "looking at" them; that beautiful chiaroscuro is created from the depths of a human action, magically rather than mechanically from artificial lighting. How costly the clothes of poverty seem here, how rich the texture of its flesh! Had Ray's trilogy not captured its special formal continuity and eloquence, no amount of human honesty could have earned the telling of it so much fame. The fact is that Satyajit Ray is one of the most unpretentious of film artists, a *leader* in the understated meaning of that term; a leader, in fact, such as was his countryman, Mahatma Gandhi.