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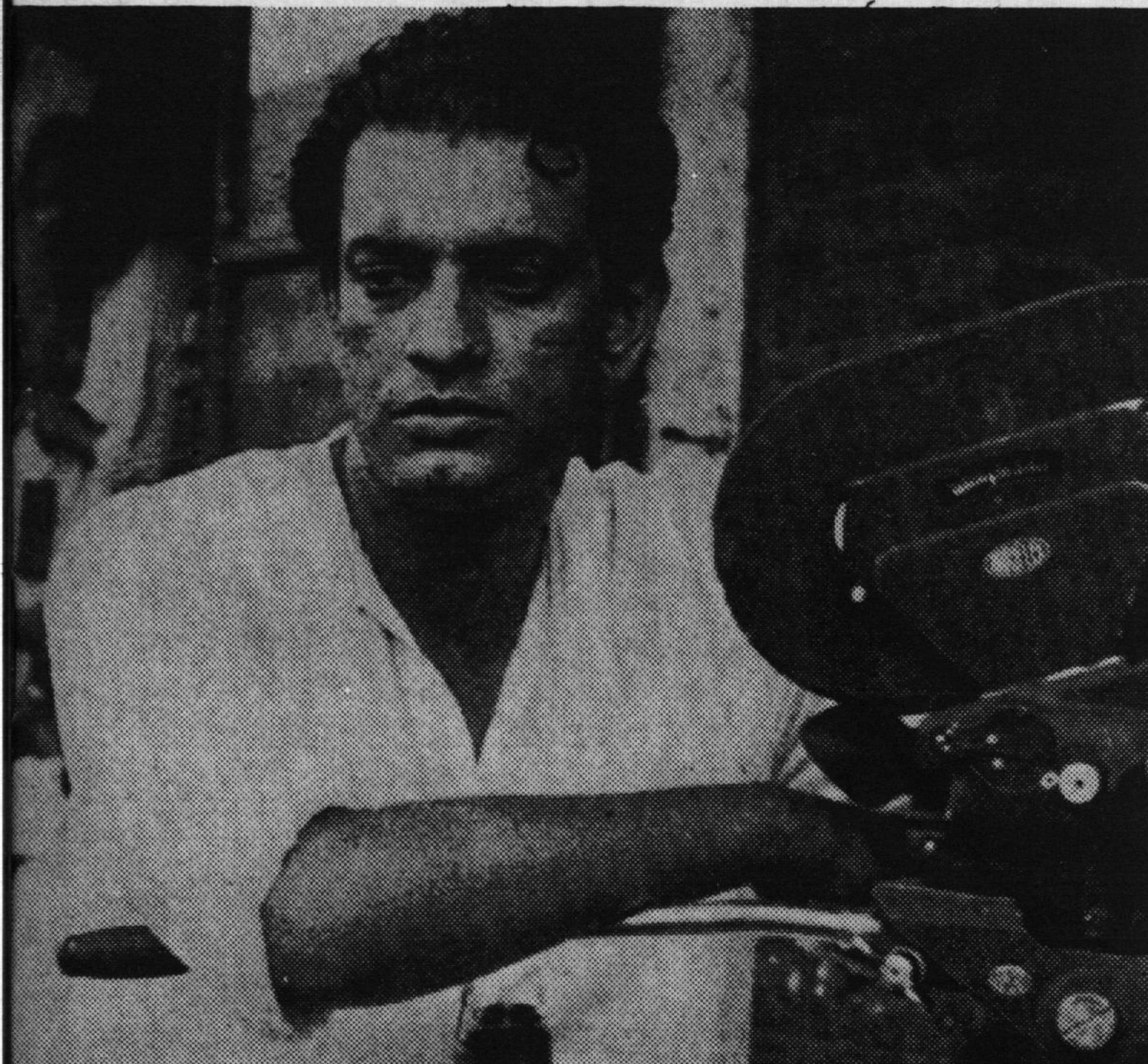
*Cinema Guild and
The Center For South & Southeast Asian Studies*

Present:

**THE
APU
TRILOGY**

by

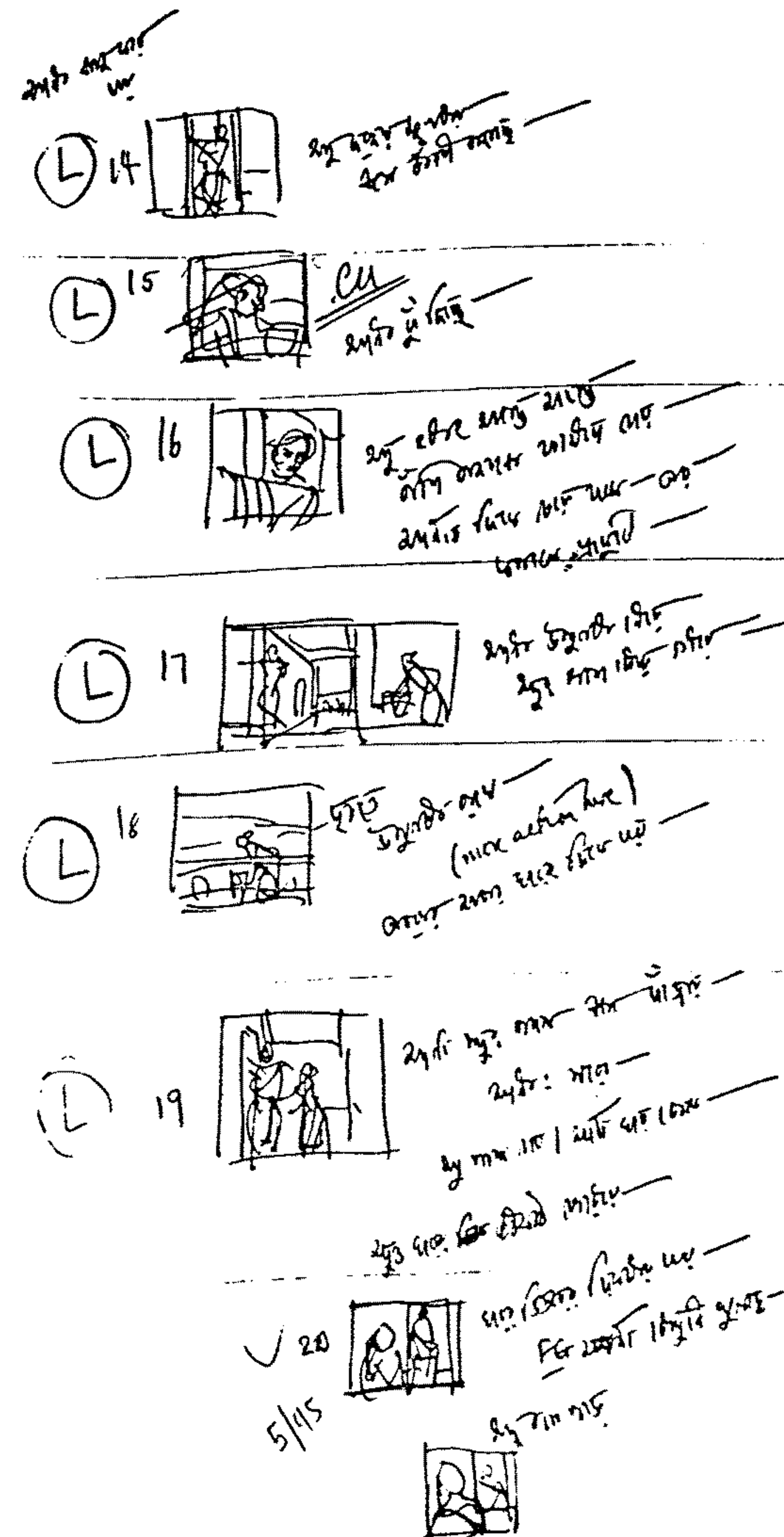
**Satyajit
Ray**



At mid-century, India was second only to Japan in volume of film production, but was producing nothing of comparable quality to European and American films. Seeking to improve their standards, Indian producers often travelled to Hollywood, only to return with more magnificent banalities. The West looked to India for the beauty of her music and art but ignored her cinema. It was in this stifling atmosphere of censorship and bad taste that Satyajit Ray began to learn of the cinema.

Ray was born in 1921 in Calcutta to a family of the intellectual aristocracy of Bengal. His father Sekumar, who was a very well-known author of books and poems, died in 1923, leaving his wife and son in a difficult financial situation. Satyajit managed to attend the University of Calcutta, where he majored in economics. A friend of the family, Rabindranath Tagore, persuaded him to study the arts at Santiniketan. Tagore's school emphasized development from within, including daily meditations and classes in the outside gardens. Ray's reflections on this experience are significant:

"As students of painting, we had to learn the rudiments of Chinese calligraphy. We rubbed our sticks of Chinese ink on porcelain palettes, dipped our bamboo-stemmed Japanese brushes in it and held them poised perpendicularly over mounted sheets of Nepalese parchment. 'Now draw a tree,' our professor Bose would say (Bose was a famous Bengali painter who had made pilgrimages to China and Japan). 'Draw a tree, but not in Western fashion. Not from the top downwards. A tree grows up, not down. The strokes must be from the base upwards....' This was basic--this reverence for life, for organic growth. While you paint, each stroke of brush, each movement of finger, of wrist, of elbow contemplates and celebrates this growth; and not just things that live and grow. Everything that comprises perceptible reality is observed, felt, analyzed and reduced to its basic form, basic texture, basic rhythm. Yet this convention is no strait



jacket, for it has as its basis not mathematics, but Man. A phrase of my dear old professor's sticks in mind: 'Consider the Fujiyama,' he would say. 'Fire within and calm without. There's the symbol of the true Oriental artists'."

While Satyajit Ray's artistic and philosophical attitudes are deeply rooted in Eastern tradition, his love of cinema is, of necessity, directed towards the West. In 1947, while working as a graphic artist for an advertising agency, he founded the Calcutta Film Society with Chidananda Das Gupta. These men spent all their free time trying to get prints of films from outside of India. They studied the available works of Lang, Huston, Lubitsch, Clair, Carné, Eisenstein and Renoir. Ray was particularly excited by the new developments in cinema made by Jean Renoir in *THE SOUTHERNER*.

Then in 1949, he learned that Renoir was coming to Calcutta to film *THE RIVER*. He immediately introduced himself "as a cinephile" and became a friend and helper of Renoir. Das Gupta became Renoir's assistant but Ray could only visit the set on his time free from work; at these times, he watched the master creating and engaged him in discussions. Renoir encouraged him to make a film he had been interested in for a long time, *PATHER PANCHALI*.

But he didn't have time for that then; in 1950, his company sent him to work in their London office. This was his first trip to Europe and open film-viewing opportunities; in five months he saw ninety-five films. He was captivated especially by *LA REGLE DU JEU*, *NANOOK OF THE NORTH*, *EARTH*, and *THE BICYCLE THIEF*. It was this last one, and other films of De Sica and Visconti, which made Ray decide to do *PATHER PANCHALI* in a neo-realist style.

With considerable difficulty (see p. 4), Satyajit Ray finally managed to finish *PATHER PANCHALI* in 1955. At the Cannes Film Festival it was given very poor showing times, making it virtually impossible for all the judges to see it. But the leading French critic, André Basin, protested the inattention given to this important film and it was given another showing. The

judges were astonished at the visual lyricism of the film and voted it the "best human document" of the festival. Subsequently the film received many other honors, including awards at festivals in San Francisco, Ontario, Vancouver, and Edinburgh. Needless to say, Ray was given the greatest respect by his formerly scornful countrymen; the door for making further films was open to him and government officials showered honors on him. Between the filming of *APARAJITO* (1956) and *APUR SANSAR* (1959) Ray made a film on Bengali feudal traditions, *JALSAGHAR (THE MUSIC ROOM)*, and a comedy, *PARASH PATHAR*. In 1960 he made *DEVI*, a film on the subject of Kali worship, which received sharp attacks from fundamentalist Hindus. In 1961 he adapted three short stories of Tagore to make *TEEN KANYA (THREE DAUGHTERS)*. In 1962 he made a film dealing with the Bengali bourgeoisie, and with "the struggle between the old and the new," *KANCHENJUNGH*. His other films, which have not yet been released in the United States, are *ABHIJAN* (1962), *MAHANAGAR* (1963), *CHARU-LATA* (1963), and *THE COWARD AND THE SAINT* (1965).

The great respect that critics have for Ray's work is well expressed by the following excerpt from a review by Pauline Kael:

"We see his characters not in terms of good or bad, but as we see ourselves, in terms of failures and weaknesses and strength and, above all, as part of a human continuum--fulfilling, altering, and finally accepting ourselves as part of this humanity, recognizing that no matter how much we want to burst the bounds of experience, there is only so much we can do. This larger view of human experience--the simplicity of De Sica at his best, of Renoir at his greatest--is almost miraculously present in every detail of Satyajit Ray's films."

"In cinema," Ray says, "we must select everything for the camera according to the richness of its power to reveal."

PATHER PANCHALI (SONG OF THE ROAD) (1955) Screenplay by Satyajit Ray from the novel by Bibhuti Bannerji. Photography by Subrata Mitra. Music by Ravi Shankar. With Kanu Bannerji (the Father), Karuna Bannerji (the Mother), Uma Das Gupta (Durga), Runki Bannerji (Durga as a child), Subir Bannerji (Apu), Chunibala Devi (the Old Aunt).

While working as a book designer and illustrator, Ray was assigned the job of designing the popular Bengali novel **PATHER PANCHALI**. Needless to say, he took great interest in adapting it for film; and he managed, despite offers by many producers, to obtain the rights for it. He drew up his entire screenplay in a notebook for seeking the support of producers. This notebook included explanations and sketches of each shot, (see p. 2), and an accompanying notebook contained wash sketches of dramatic highlights (see back cover). But, of course, the producers had different things in mind, like stars, songs, and dances. Finally Ray decided to go ahead with pre-



parations for the film without financial backers. He began test shooting with two friends who were to work with him throughout the trilogy; Subrata Mitra, a well-known still photographer, did the camera work and Bansi Chandragupta was the set designer. Without money, however, they were not able to begin making the film. This was a period of particular hardship for Ray: "It is difficult," he wrote, "to describe the peculiar torments of a production held up for lack of funds. The long periods of enforced idleness produce nothing but the deepest gloom. The very sight of the scenario is sickening, let alone thoughts of embellishing it with details or brushing up the dialogue."

In 1952, he decided to make the film at any cost. To raise the money, Ray negotiated his life insurance policy and subsequently sold all his books and the jewelry of his mother and wife. On the basis of film shot, he managed to get some financial support; but after a few months the producer had second thoughts and backed out.....progress again ground to a halt. But it happened that John Huston was in Calcutta and visited the Calcutta Film Society. Ray showed him the completed footage; Huston was very impressed and he told the Museum of Modern Art, which was planning an exhibit on India, of this promising young director. At the same time Ray approached the West Bengal government with a request for money. The interest they knew the Museum was taking caused them to favor support of the project and Ray was given enough money to finish the film. In 1954, after two years of work, the film was almost finished; the Museum of Modern Art invited Ray to send it to New York for a premier showing. A frantic effort was made to get it there for the deadline: intensive editing, all night recording and mixing sessions, and the creation of the historic music score by Ravi Shankar in a few hours. The success of the screening it got in New York led to its distribution in America and a screening at the Cannes Festival.

In a sense, the difficulties Ray encountered were inevitable, and in a sense they were beneficial. For he had to create a



significant art and this could only be done outside an industry which considered significance a danger. His co-workers could only be amateurs (in the professional sense), because anyone else would be below the level of the film. Lack of funds often created the need for innovation; but innovation which discovered more basic, and better, techniques. Large producers considered the studio the only place for filming and had even developed a way of making "rain" inside. Ray got a much better effect by learning to film in the rain outside. The long sequence in which Durga runs through the woods would have been shot by a camera moving on tracks parallel to her in a studio production. The sequence was shot more smoothly, however, by a stationary camera with a telephoto lens which panned around a big circle as she ran, keeping her always in close-up.

PATHER PANCHALI is first and foremost a visual experience; if you please, a matter of form. But the form concerns Ray only as a vehicle, as a biproduct of the narration he wants to present. For him, the pace and focus of the narration is the subject itself; that is to say, how he tells the story becomes, in fact, what the story is. The characters exist only within the framework of the pace and focus which he provides. The narrative is so subtle and inobtrusive, however, that it is often confused with the subject matter itself--"a case of art concealing art."

"My first film," said Ray, "had as sources European-American cinema, and Bengali literature. It owed something to cineastes like Flaherty and Donskoi, but its style was that of

the adapted novel. For me, in cinema, the style is determined by the matter, by the subject treated. Do not take me for a theoretician. I work by instinct. Let no one believe that I draw all my films shot by shot before directing them. If I did that for PATHER PANCHALI, it was that I had time to spare."

The family of PATHER PANCHALI lives at a biological level, seeking always the means for obtaining another meal. But the concerns of the characters go far beyond this; they care about love and life, about the past and the future. Apu's past and his elders are of great importance; but the present shapes the future. The discovery of the train is of the greatest significance, arousing his interest and foreboding the direction his generation will take. The mother, attempting to keep the family together, sells the silver, depriving Apu of his patrimony and signaling the separation of the family. The style of life, the nature of relationships between the characters, cannot be represented by any type-definition; all the elements of this are the film itself and explanation here is just as limited as explanation of a poem.



APARAJITO (THE UNVANQUISHED) (1956) Screenplay by Satyajit Ray from the novel by Bibhuti Bannerji. Photography by Subrata Mitra. Music by Ravi Shankar. With Pinaki Sen Gupta (Apu as a boy), Smaran Ghosal (Apu as an adolescent), Karuna Bannerji (Sarbojaya), Kanu Bannerji (Harihar), Ramani Sen Gupta (the Old Uncle), Charu Ghosh (Nanda Babu).

After the great success of *PATHER PANCHALI*, it was easy enough for Ray to get supporters for his second film. The problems that the crew did run into, however, had a worse effect on the final product than much greater problems had had on the first film. Ray was using a second-hand Arriflex which caused him serious shooting troubles. When a number of scenes did not come out at all on film, he couldn't afford to reshoot them and had to change the scenario. During part of the shooting Ray was sick. *APARAJITO* was badly received in India and might possibly have cost Ray his career. At the Venice Film Festival, however, the film was awarded the Golden Lion. To





the critics, the artistic achievements of the film far outweighed any incidental difficulties encountered.

Two characters from the first film become the center of interest in *APARAJITO*, Apu and his mother. Just as the passing of trains is a continual motif throughout the trilogy, the mother herself becomes a continual motif in this film. She is incessantly cleaning, cooking, and going about her duties. When the boy returns home from play, he can be assured that he will be greeted by her worried and hard-working expression.

And just as the discovery of the train was a pivotal point in *PATHER PANCHALI*, the shot of the boy with a homemade globe followed by a shot of his sundial is a pivotal point here. "Time and space have begun to be conquered." Apu has defined himself and his direction; the consequences of this are predictable. Everything his mother feared, the collapse of the family, her desertion, and defilement of the family traditions, comes to pass. But nothing of this sort can be seen by Apu; he is acting quite normally, with no cause for concern. The conflict is easily recognized from the outside; two people operating on a different series of assumptions, living with two different world views, cannot satisfy one another. Eric Rhode says: "Death with Ray, though regular, is always unexpected." And, of course, death comes.

Many critics consider the Apu Trilogy to be a statement by Ray on the social and historical traumas of post-independence India. Perhaps it would be worth considering one of these opinions; Pauline Kael writes: "The Apu Trilogy expresses India in transition, showing the development of the boy Apu's consciousness from the primitive, medieval village life of *PATHER PANCHALI* through the modern city streets and schools of Benares to the University of Calcutta in *APARAJITO*, and then, in *THE WORLD OF APU*, beyond self-consciousness to the destruction of his egotism, and the rebirth of feeling, the renewal of strength. But Ray himself is not a primitive artist any more than, say, Robert Flaherty was when he chronicled the life of the Eskimos in *NANOOK OF THE NORTH*."

APUR SANSAR (THE WORLD OF APU) (1959) Screenplay by Satyajit Ray from the novel by Bibhuti Bannerji. Photography by Subrata Mitra. Music by Ravi Shankar. With Soumitra Chatterji (Apu), Sharmila Tagore (Aparna), Alok Chakravarty (Kaiol), Sivapan Mukherji (Pulu).

At the Venice Film Festival in 1957, when APARAJITO was awarded the grand prize, Ray was asked if that film was the second of a trilogy. Although he had never thought of that possibility, he responded that it was; thus, he found himself planning a third film about Apu. He wrote the scenario with little reference to the Bannerji novel. The earlier theme-- "in what way can man control the world, and what is the price he must pay for trying to do so?" --is introduced again.

Eric Rhode, in an excellent article in SIGHT AND SOUND, analyzes the film: "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 preoccupation 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. 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.....(Apu) is caught in the prison of his mind. Inevitable 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)

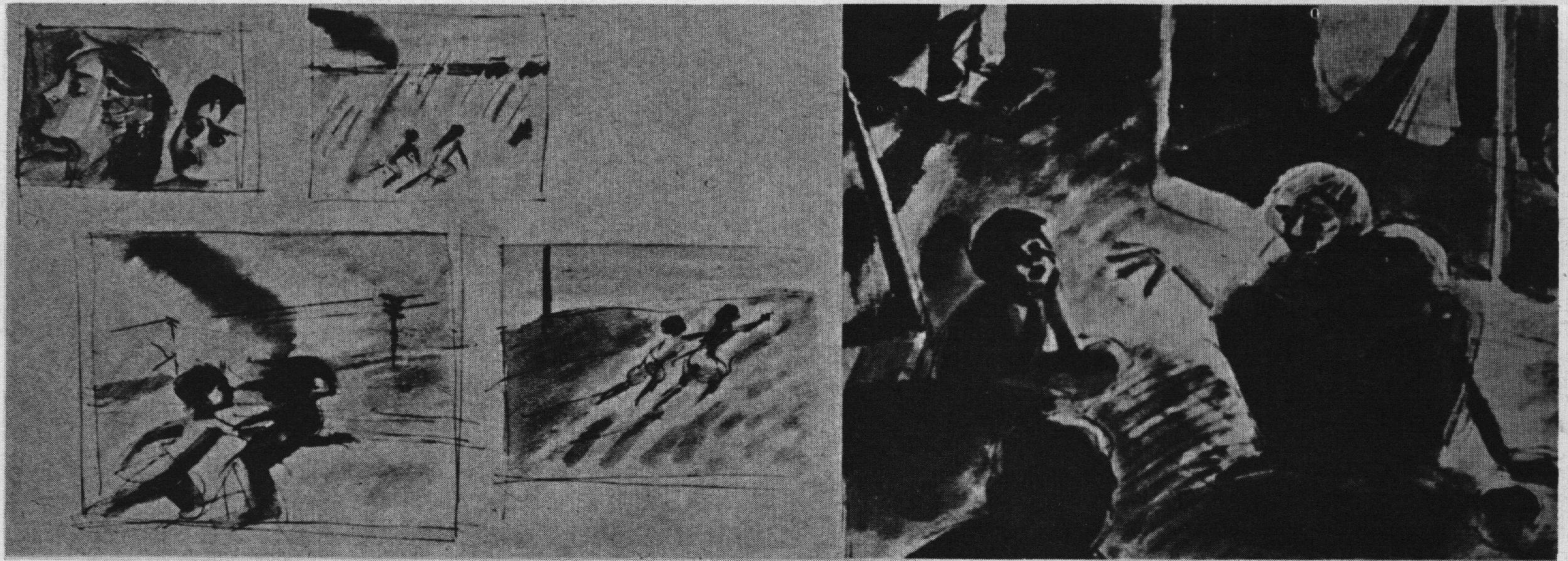
autobiographical novel. People enter his room as if they had come from some foreign land.

"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 never envisaged. He thought he had achieved some sort of order and that he had somehow categorised the world. 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 realizes 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. It is through the boy, in his uniqueness and his unselfconscious vitality, that Apu begins to return to sanity."

It is the lesson that he learned at Tagore's school which Satyajit Ray puts to use on the screen; the ability to show the inner man, states of mind, by means of artistic creation.



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Compiled by Richard Ayers