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Thursday, 6:15 PM
October 11, 1973

Friday, 9:30 P.M.
October 12, 1973

India 1973
Berlin Festival 1973:
Grand Prize
100 minutes

Ashani Sanket

Distant Thunder



Director

Satyajit Ray

Executive Producer

Mrs. Sarbani Bhattacharya

Production Company

Sarbani Bhattacharya

Screenplay

Satyajit Ray

From the novel by

Bibhuti Bhusan Bannerji

Photography

Soumendu Roy

Editor

Dulal Dutta

Music

Satyajit Ray

Cast:

Gangacharan

Soumitra Chatterji

Ananga

Babita

Chhutki

Sandhya Roy

Dinabandhu

Gobinda Chakravarty

Biswas

Romesh Mukerji

Jadu

Noni Ganguly

Mokshada

Sheli Pal

Moti

Chitra Bannerji

Khenti

Suchita Roy

Nibaran

Anil Ganguly

Adhar

Debatosh Ghosh

Distant Thunder is set in 1942; Singapore has just fallen. To remote Bengali villagers, it all seems far away, but soon the cost of rice begins to escalate. At first Ganga and his wife are not affected. He is a Brahmin, schoolteacher-priest-doctor rolled into one. But he too is to suffer from the hoarding, the profiteering, the corrupt system. This raising of consciousness is masterfully counterpointed by the brilliance of color and image which only serves to intensify the contrast between the beauty of the setting and the (understated) horror of the situation.

Shorts

Alphon in Wonderland

France

**Director: Maxim Ferrier
Gerald Poussin**

Running Time: 5 minutes

Medina

USA

Director: Scott Bartlett

Running Time: 14 minutes

Distributor: A Serious Business Company/Film-Maker's Cooperative

are completely unused to in the film medium--except perhaps in documentary), that we begin to accept our lapses of attention during the tedious moments with the same kind of relaxation and confidence and affection that we feel for the boring sketches in the great novels, the epic poems."

"*Distant Thunder* is not one of his greatest films, yet it's still a Satyajit Ray film, and in how many directors' films does one anticipate greatness? With Ray, you puzzle if a picture is a little less than a masterpiece. If this one lacks the undertones of a 'Days and Nights in the Forest', it's probably because he's trying to do something that sounds straightforward but isn't quite clearly thought out. Ray wants to show us how war changes people (Bergman brought it off in *Shame*), but he also wants to make an indictment. And somehow he fails on both counts. Probably he fails on the first because he doesn't endow the villagers with enough complexity. And maybe he didn't think of them in complex enough terms because he had that second, social purpose in mind. When Gangacharan learns political lessons--when he discovers that what's wrong is that "The peasants do all the work and we live off them"--it's just plain fake. Gangacharan's sponging off the peasants--in the sense that he served them with bad grace, contemptuously, demanding a little more than was fair--is hardly a factor in the starvation. When we get the closing title, telling us that five million Bengalis died in the man-made famine of 1943, Ray uses the term 'man-made' because it implies that the famine was a crime. But it looks more like a horrible pile-up of accidents, plus some criminal greed, and thousands of years of no planning. His statement seems forced: his whole structure is forced, and yet the film is astonishingly beautiful. The character of Gangacharan--a mixture of slothful peacefulness and a sense of dissatisfaction which he takes out on the peasants and an inquisitive, modern mind--is a fine creation, except for terminal loftiness. And there's also a character Ray can't quite get a grip on: a beggar Brahmin with a gap-toothed rabbit smile that Gangacharan calls sly. It's that, and worse. Throughout the movie, whenever he appears, he seems to suck life away. He creates the most disturbing images, maybe because Ray sees him as both the life force and as dirty Death itself. At the end, it's he who arrives with his tribe of dependents--eight in all--to join Gangacharan's household. With his rags hanging on him and his staff in his hand, he's all four horsemen rolled into one. In the final image, the silhouetted figures of this old man leading his family are extended into a procession of the starving advancing on us. It's a poster design, and yet we're also prey to unresolved feelings about that sly beggar. The film is more puzzling than it seems at first. Ray is such an imagist that even his poster art slips into ambiguities.

"I don't know when I've been so moved by a picture that I knew was riddled with flaws. It must be that Ray's vision comes out of so much hurt and guilt and love that the feeling pours over all the cracks in *Distant Thunder* and seals them up." Pauline Kael, *New Yorker*, November 10, 1975.

Light shimmering on the water: what appears to be a dead hand floating just beneath the surface: then the hand idly begins to toy with the ripples, and the camera pans to reveal a girl dreamily bathing in the river and staring up at the sky as five fighter planes sweep by in formation. "How beautiful," she exclaims, "Like a flight of cranes." This sequence of images immediately following the credits of *Distant Thunder* (themselves placed over images of tranquil nature and stormy winds starting to ruffle a field of waving corn) is Ray at his complex and evocative best. Long before we discover that this is sometime after the fall of Singapore and that the distant thunder of World War II will soon break over this remote Bengali village trailing a terrible man-made famine, that corpse-like hand already pollutes the placid river with its intimations of mortality. There is really no need for the complementary image later on in the film when order has begun to collapse in the village, two women save a third from attempted rape by beating her attacker to death, and a stream of blood flowing from a now unmistakably dead hand stains the same placid waters. The tautology here, or perhaps over-expressiveness in an attempt to encompass a vast theme would be a better term, is part of the problem with the film. "Five million starved in Bengal in what has come to be known