Document Citation

Title	**A brahim beset by adversity**
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Source	*Publisher name not available*
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ashani sanket (Distant thunder), Ray, Satyajit, 1973

A Brahmin Beset by Adversity

By Joy Gould Boyum

"Foreign Film B.O. Turns Hot in U.S.," reported a recent Variety. The European film box office, that is, for if Swedish, French and Italian films have been finding audiences in the United States, this is not the case with Asian or African movies. "Xala," a satiric treatment of Senegal's black bourgeoisie, opened recently in New York to close after a mere four-day run; while all we've been getting from the Orient in recent years is Kung Fu and more Kung Fu.

This dearth of non-Western, non-Kung Fu imports certainly can't be explained by quantity, since both India and Japan produce more movies each year than either of the top Western moviemakers, Italy and the U.S.—and not all of them martial arts epics. Nor can quality be the answer either, especially in light of the tripe steadily brought in from Europe—to wit, such current Italian nonsense as "Down the Ancient Staircase" and "The Devil Is a Woman."

On Film

"Distant Thunder"

"Night of Counting the Years"

It is rather that even among film enthusiasts, non-Western films ignite very minimal sparks of interest, calling up visions of the academically worthwhile but deadeningly dull. For what we imagine we will find in such films is mostly the documentary interest of foreign landscapes and manners and very little in the way of dramatic involvement or spontaneous enjoyment.

Often, of course, these preconceptions will be borne out by the non-Western films we do get a chance to see. But sometimes, too, they will be proven false—as they currently are by Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray's "Distant Thunder," a subtle and powerful film that is remarkable in many ways, not least of all in the immediacy of its impact and in its absolute accessibility.

Its subject, for example—a famine that actually occurred during World War II and its effect on various individuals in a remote Bengal village—is one that presents little difficulty to our American understanding. And the themes which grow from this tragic situation—those of the responsibility of one human being for another; of men being destroyed by what they can neither comprehend nor control—are universal in their significance.

A central issue of the film is the impact of status and privilege on human behavior. The only Brahmin in his village, Gangacharan (Soumitra Chatterji) is treated with an awesome respect of which he takes awesome advantage. He sets himself up as a doctor (doing little more than taking pulses); he starts a school (smoking away on his pipe as the children learn by rote); and even makes of himself a shaman (he mumbles some prayers to ward off cholera). And receiving payment for each of these self-appointed tasks, Gangacharan is totally self-satisfied and totally self-absorbed—that is, until the "distant thunder" of war creates a drastic food shortage.

Seeing men riot and steal for a few grains of rice, watching women dredge a pond for snails, he begins to sense it wrong that "the peasants do all the work" and we Brahmins "live off them." And seeing his exquisite wife, Ananga (Babita), husk rice in a lower caste house, remove her bracelets that he may exchange them for food, and give her own meager portions to an elderly man more hungry than herself, Gangacharan also begins to see his own selfishness.

It's hardly news, of course, that adversity can make for moral growth. But Ray expresses this observation in such authentically human terms that it somehow gains in originality and freshness. Scenes such as that in which Gangacharan, offered lunch by a rice merchant because of his Brahmin status, sits awkwardly before his food, too ashamed to eat and too hungry to resist, are not only presented with economy and dramatic tension, they are also strikingly rich in emotional and psychological complexity.

By the end of the film, we fully grasp and even sympathize with Gangacharan's emotions. And we also gain considerable insight into his world—a world in which the lovely Ananga can look up at warplanes flying in formation to remark naively, "How beautiful, like a flight of cranes"; a world, too, in which when Gangacharan finally agrees to take into his home a starving old man and his dependents, the camera can transform this family into a population of families. And it is this starving mass coming ever closer that makes for both the film's final image and its shattering statement about human responsibility.

Surely, culture places no barrier to either our feelings or understanding in "Distant Thunder." Culture may, however, limit both to a considerable degree in another recent non-Western import, Egypt's "Night of Counting the Years." Based on an actual archaeological discovery made near Thebes in 1881, the film concerns a mountain tribe who ostensibly raise sheep for a living but who in actuality survive by plundering ancient tombs. And this secret livelihood and the whereabouts of the hidden royal cache are passed on at the tribal chief's death to his son who, morally stricken, betrays his heritage and informs the Cairo authorities.

Obviously, the film's drama is a rather exotic one, though the conflict central to it—that between ancient traditions and modern values — does have universal resonance. Still, played out in the terms it is here, the drama remains too stylized, too ritualistic, too foreign, if you will, to really absorb us. Pace is one problem with both actors and camera moving languorously throughout. Dialog is another with the subtitles reading like a book of maxims: "Follow, observe, but do not question"; "You are but a grain of sand in the mountains"; etc. Acting seems still another with everyone's tone heavily portentous.

Still, there is one way in which the film does surprise us and that is in its technique. Directed by Shadi Abdelsalam, "Night of Counting the Years" is an extraordinarily beautiful movie. Throughout, its exquisite subjects—ancient architectural ruins, suggestively painted sarcophagi, hieroglyphic covered stones, black and white robed figures who meet on craggy mountains and windswept sandscapes—are presented in equally exquisite compositions and colors. And if this beauty alone won't make "Night of Counting the Years" seem worth a visit, perhaps what will is the possibility that without some curiosity and audience support, this first Egyptian film ever to be exhibited in the United States might also be the last.