

ARTS

Shining a light on Satyajit Ray

Andrew Robinson reflects on a Bengali film-maker beloved by cinephiles across the world but still obscure in parts of India

As the Indian film-maker Satyajit Ray himself said, shortly before his death in 1992, after accepting an Oscar for his lifetime achievement: "The most distinctive feature [of my films] is that they are deeply rooted in Bengal, in Bengali culture, mannerisms and mores. What makes them universal in appeal is that they are about human beings."

And therein lies a paradox. Ray's films form an intimate part of Bengali culture and are revered by film-makers across the world. Yet in the Indian subcontinent as a whole, they were never released nationwide and are unknown to mass audiences, even today. According to Ray, in Bengal he sat on "Olympian heights", but in the rest of India he was "only a name".

No wonder, then, that Netflix India has titled its new anthology of suspense films simply *Ray*, in homage to his legendary reputation, while naming not one of his films in its pre-publicity – not even the Apu Trilogy. Rather than the boy hero Apu, Netflix's anthology is inspired by Felu, his bestselling Bengali detective: the subject of 35 stories written and illustrated by Ray from 1965, two of which he turned into feature films, *The Golden Fortress* and *The Elephant God*. Motivated partly by his childhood love of Sherlock Holmes, with hints of Tintin, the plots range across India as Felu and his assistant pursue Indian villains far from Bengal.

There are probably three main reasons for Ray's surprising obscurity across India. First, his films are almost all in Bengali, a language unknown to most Indians, unlike Hindi. Second, for historical reasons, Bengali audiences were more open to western culture

when Ray's work first appeared. Lastly, his films reject the style and values of Bollywood (although he cast some of the best Bollywood actors and actresses of the time). Thrills and spills never interested Ray – except in his musicals and detective stories.

Martin Scorsese has been watching Ray's films since the early 1960s, before he became a film-maker. Recently, he sent me this heartfelt tribute to commemorate the centenary of Ray's birth in May: "When I saw *Pather Panchali* for the first time, it opened my eyes to the lives of the people who had historically been placed in the background of western movies. That alone was meaningful. But it never would have had the impact that it did without Ray's extraordinary artistry. Whenever I take a fresh look at *The Music Room* or *Charulata* or any number of his other films, which I do often, I see another value, another dimension of feeling. His body of work has become increasingly precious to me over time. The films of Satyajit Ray are truly treasures of cinema, and everyone with an interest in film needs to see them."

Other committed admirers included Lindsay Anderson, Michelangelo Antonioni, Richard Attenborough, James Ivory, Akira Kurosawa, Mike Leigh, Jean Renoir and John Huston. Indeed, Huston helped launch Ray's film career during a visit to India in 1954. While in Calcutta (now Kolkata), he watched a silent rough cut of a maiden film shot by a Bengali art director working in advertising (Ray was born in Calcutta in 1921 into a family of writer-illustrators). The film showed a poor and uneducated Bengali village boy, Apu, and his elder sister, Durga, wandering separately through a field of quietly fluttering white pampas grass after a squabble, then reunited by



Above: Satyajit Ray at home in 1982. Far left: Shabana Azmi in Ray's 'The Chess Players'. Left: Madhabi Mukherjee, left, and Soumitra Chatterjee in 'Charulata' Getty Images, Alamy

their first sight of a steam train belching black smoke.

Huston's recommendation led to *Pather Panchali*'s world premiere at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1955. In a letter written just before his death in 1987, Huston told me: "I recognised the footage as the work of a great film-maker. I liked Ray enormously on first encounter. Everything he did and said supported my feelings on viewing the film."

Ray's finest films resonate with unforgettable scenes. In *The Music Room* (1958), a drunken, hubristic Bengali

landowner obsessed with Indian classical music stares madly, post-concert, at candles flickering out one by one in a music room, signalling his imminent death. In *Charulata* (1964), faint, exquisite ripples of emotion on the face of Charu, a lonely housewife in 19th-century Calcutta – as she contemplates her self-absorbed husband's handsome cousin – suggest the disintegration of her marriage. And in *The Chess Players* (1977), the stern, puritanical, British colonial representative General Outram (superbly played by Attenborough) looks guiltily away from the eyes of the outrageously louche King Wajid Ali at Lucknow as he unexpectedly proffers Outram his jewelled crown while abdicating to the all-powerful Raj in 1856.

"It's like a Shakespeare scene," said V.S. Naipaul. "Only 300 words are spoken but, goodness, terrific things happen!"

From the Apu Trilogy – *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu* – in the 1950s until his death in 1992, Ray

directed almost 30 features, as well as shorts and documentaries. All were made from his own scripts, some of them original screenplays, others based on his own popular novels and short stories, which included science fiction that is said to have influenced Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* Most of the films have scintillating soundtracks composed by Ray, with a remarkable fusion of Indian and



Sharmila Tagore in 'The World of Apu' – Alamy

western music, sometimes including his own hugely successful songs.

"My deep bow to this wonderful master," wrote Mstislav Rostropovitch on Ray's 70th birthday in 1991. His music "is not just an accompaniment of actions, but an expression of heroes' souls, of their moods".

These films depict all strata of society and walks of life – from Dalit (Untouchable) peasants to dissolute aristocrats – in villages, towns and cities. They span periods from the mid-19th century to the times in which they were made. They inhabit an astonishing variety of genres, including detective stories and musical fantasies, and mingle moods ranging from tragedy to slapstick. The inner struggle and corruption of the conscience-stricken individual fascinated Ray; his films primarily concern thought and feeling, rather than action and plot.

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Taken together, they seem to encompass a whole culture: an achievement few in the history of cinema can match.

Was he a "rare genius", as Attenborough put it in 1991? Ray himself used "genius" only for Charlie Chaplin and John Ford in his anthology of film criticism *Our Films Their Films*. He compared Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* to Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, "the most enchanting, the most impudent and the most sublime of Mozart's operas" – adjectives that apply to many of Ray's films, too.

Charulata, which the director and many western critics regard as his greatest film, was unquestionably inspired by the ensemble singing in Mozart, whose music Ray had adored since youth; the subject of his final (radio) documentary was *What Mozart Means to Me*. Maybe this is the most appropriate comparison for Ray, despite his and his films' thoroughly Bengali ethos: the Mozart of cinema.

Andrew Robinson is the author of *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Bloomsbury) *Ray* is on Netflix from June 25

The ups and downs of downloading

GAMING

Tom Faber



remember the smell more than anything. My brother and I would often go to the game store in Camden Town, north London, and scour the shelves for our next shared passion. This smell wasn't in the shop, though, but rather it was the sharp whiff of plastic as we prised open the case of our chosen game on the way home, gazing in awe at the disc, glowing with potential. One day in 2002 I smelled something different – our new football game, *FIFA 2001*, had a scratch-and-sniff disc that gave off the turfy aroma of a sports pitch.

It was a gimmick, certainly, but a memorable one. The fact is, buying discs in shops simply isn't a part of my life any more. Today I download everything. Like the rest of the entertainment industry, gaming is forsaking physical media for intangible code. The pandemic has accelerated this shift, with digital downloads overtaking physical sales and the year's biggest industry event, E3, taking place entirely online last week. For the most part, this transition is cheaper, more convenient, and – indisputably – inevitable. Some argue that digital games are also better for the environment because they cut out the carbon emissions of production and transport, though there is the counter-weighing cost of increased energy use from internet servers. But some, including myself, can't help wondering if, in our relentless march towards the digital, something of value is being lost.

Digital game downloads went mainstream around 2003, thanks to rising internet speeds and increased hard drive space. The Steam store dominated the PC digital download market for the rest of the decade. Today it faces tentative competition from Ubisoft, EA, and of course Epic Games, which is currently shaking the market firmament with its lawsuit against Apple surrounding the

cut that stores take on digital purchases. With the most recent consoles, Xbox and PlayStation also took a step towards a digital-only future by offering cheaper versions of their consoles which did not include disc drives. They have turned physical media into a luxury.

The most important reason consumers favour digital is convenience – why go to a shop when you can download something from the comfort of your sofa? Digital games have other advantages: they cannot be lost, stolen or damaged. They don't take up space on your shelves. They are greener and more lucrative for publishers, saving on production, delivery and storage costs,

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and can be cheaper for the consumer, too, as online stores regularly run deals offering discounts of up to 90 per cent. Importantly, the fact that developers can now sell their passion projects directly to gamers, rather than being forced to make deals with risk-averse publishers, has spurred the growth of the indie game scene.

This transition has come at a cost. The rise of digital games spells an end for independent stores, reselling old games, and the fine tradition of sharing favourites among friends. It also poses an issue

Part of the appeal of gaming used to be owning the physical object



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