

Film

A Humane Lens on the Rawness of Life

Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy from the 1950s is being rereleased.

By ANDREW ROBINSON

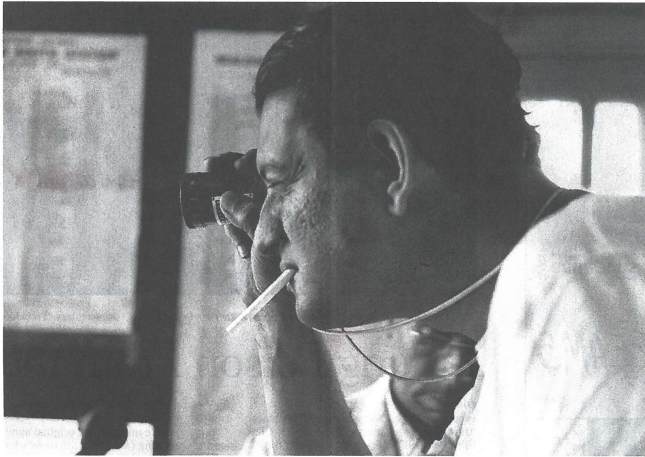
John Huston and Satyajit Ray. One might not think these two major directors had similar taste in movies. In the 1950s, Huston made "The African Queen" and "Moby Dick"; Ray made the three films generally known as the Apu Trilogy: the epic story of Apu, a boy born in a village in India who struggles for education and recognition as a man in the cosmopolitan city of Calcutta (now Kolkata). Yet, when I was writing a biography of Ray in the 1980s, Huston sent me a letter about Ray and his work. "I recognized the footage as the work of a great filmmaker," he wrote. "I liked Ray enormously on first encounter. Everything he did and said supported my feelings on viewing the film."

The footage was from Ray's maiden venture, "Pather Panchali," the first entry in the trilogy. In 1954, Huston saw part of this film in a silent rough cut in India. He strongly recommended it to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where "Pather Panchali" received its world premiere the next year, before it was released in London in 1957. When eventually released in New York in 1958, "Pather Panchali" ran for eight months at the Fifth Avenue Cinema. Two years later, "Pather Panchali"; "Aparajito," the middle installment, which had won the Golden Lion at the 1957 Venice Film Festival; and the final part, "The World of Apu" — all with music composed by Ravi Shankar — together entranced audiences in New York, including a teenage Martin Scorsese.

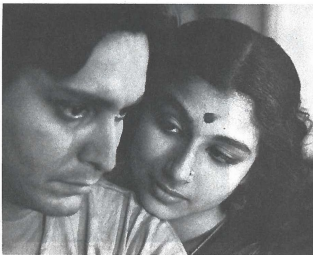
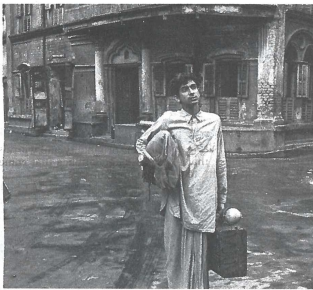
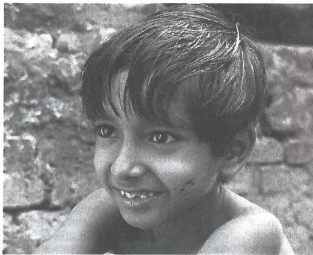
Akira Kurosawa once said of "Pather Panchali": "I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it. I have had several more opportunities to see the film since then, and each time I feel more overwhelmed. It is the kind of cinema that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river." Just before Ray's death, at 70 in 1992, he was given an Academy Award for lifetime achievement, at Mr. Scorsese's prompting. Now, a new generation of filmmakers has a chance to discover Ray's humane genius in a rerelease of the Apu Trilogy, first in New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles in May, and then in selected theaters around the country, after a lengthy and painstaking restoration by the Criterion Collection in collaboration with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Like all enduring works of art, the Apu

'The kind of cinema that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river.'



MARC RIBOUÉ/MAGNUM PHOTOS



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM JANUS FILMS

From top, Satyajit Ray working on "Aparajito" in 1956; Subir Banerjee, who played Apu in "Pather Panchali"; Pankaj Sengupta as Apu in "Aparajito"; and Soumitra Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore in "The World of Apu."

Most of the film — except for night scenes — was shot on location, a much-derided idea among Indian movie professionals at the time. A village only six miles from the center of Calcutta served as the atmospheric setting for Apu's childhood encounters with, for example, neighbors both kind and mean, a grimly comical grocer-schoolmaster, an itinerant seller of sweets and a hungry stray dog. A field of swaying white pampas grass beside a railway line provided the memorable backdrop for perhaps the film's most famous scene: Apu and Durga's running after a roaring black steam locomotive.

But the cast didn't consist entirely of nonprofessional actors. Apu's priestly Brahmin father, his wizened and unforgettable auntie, two female neighbors and the schoolmaster were all played by film professionals, while Apu's mother and sister were played by actresses with stage experience. Only some smaller roles were given to villagers. As for the young boy chosen for the role of Apu, after a long search, Ray's wife spotted him playing on the roof next to their flat in south Calcutta. He

looked perfect for the part. Later Ray discovered that the boy "couldn't act at all" and required constant direction of his every gesture and spoken word.

You would never know this from watching "Pather Panchali." So natural is the character Apu — and indeed almost every character, major and minor — that the film appears to be the work of a highly experienced director. That said, the cinematography and editing of the first half of the film lacks polish, as the New York Times critic Bosley Crowther pointed out in a decidedly mixed review, and as Ray himself acknowledged. By the time of "Aparajito" and "The World of Apu," Ray was in total command. For all the rawness of life and emotion on the screen, these are works as sophisticated in technique and sensibility as the Indian civilization that produced their maker.

On Ray's 70th birthday, Mr. Scorsese wrote of his first memory of the Apu series: "I was 18 or 19 years old and had grown up in a very parochial society of Italian-Americans and yet I was deeply moved by what Ray showed of people so far from my own experience."

The Apu Trilogy put India on the map, cinematically speaking. It concerns a poor boy growing up in India nearly a century ago — and yet, miraculously, it concerns us all.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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Andrew Robinson is the author of "Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye," "Satyajit Ray: A Vision of Cinema" and "The Apu Trilogy: Satyajit Ray and the Making of an Epic."