SATYAJIT RAY
A MORAL ATTITUDE

To coincide with a three-month BFI retrospective of Satyajit Ray’s work and the release of five of his films on Blu-ray, the following interview has been compiled from a long series of conversations Andrew Robinson had with the great Indian director while researching his biography ‘Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye’, in the years before Ray’s death in 1992

By Andrew Robinson

Andrew Robinson: What would you say is your moral attitude as a filmmaker?
Satyajit Ray: I don’t like to be too articulate about it because it’s all there in the films. One has to see the films and read them. I don’t begin by formulating a moral attitude and then making a film. I think it’s the business of the critic to form his own conclusions. I don’t want to add footnotes to it. I’m very unwilling to do that.

AR: Have your moral attitudes to people and society changed since your first film Pathéer Panchali (1955)? Have you become more cynical?
SR: Not necessarily. I have become more aware of my surroundings. I was probably a little isolated from things in the early days, being so immersed in my various pursuits. I can imagine other young people being more aware of, say, politics. I was not. I gave more time to my intellectual pursuits. I was developing myself as an artist. And I had so many interests right from the beginning that I felt I couldn’t take on any more.

AR: If you have strong artistic gifts, do you think politics are almost irrelevant?
SR: If you are a filmmaker of course your surroundings, politics and whatnot make up the social milieu – that becomes relevant. From 1960 onwards I was becoming more aware of my surroundings and introducing more of such elements into my films, apart from what is contained in the plotline itself. Company Limited [Somabhadha, 1971] need not have had a reference to politics but there are bombs being heard at the cocktail party and people make comments about that. Just as the
element of load shedding [power cut] is then the broken link and all that. That film was not about mechanical gadgets failing, but they enriched the story.

AR: The Big City (Mahanagar, 1963) shows the impact on family life when a middle-class Calcutta housewife gets a job. Is the working woman’s dilemma something you saw in your own family?

SR: My wife used to work before we got married, at what was the Supply Department during the war. And she worked as a teacher. (As a result), one understood the story took place.

AR: Relationships are very strong elements in your films, especially within families.

SR: That may be said to be a specialty of mine. It comes naturally to me, instinctively. I think I understand human psychology.

AR: Are relationships on the screen difficult to establish?

SR: Everything in a film is difficult. There’s no easy solution to anything at all. It needs thought and careful observation and it needs calculation and understanding.

AR: Did growing up in an extended family with your mother in the house of your maternal uncles help you in depicting psychology on screen?

SR: I must have been observing a great deal in my childhood about people, because being a lonor, in the sense that I had no brothers or sisters, and was alone much of the time with my thoughts and with my little preoccupations. So this process has probably been going on a long time even without my being aware of it. I was surrounded by people who were all older than me. I was the youngest. I must have imbibed a lot in my childhood.

AR: You once told Sight & Sound that you had never consciously analyzed whether you were part of a tradition or not. That surprises me.

SR: No, I have not. Does one have to? I don’t know. I never thought about it, have the same qualities as Indian art. In general. Chinese and Japanese art also, if you come to think about it, have the same qualities as Indian art.

AR: In an article on Kurosawa’s films you spoke of this oriental art. Would Kurosawa fit into your view of Eastern art?

SR: Kurosawa is a film that is very difficult to classify him, intrinsically. I think lyricism, the love of nature, the symbolic aspect of art (like showing rain in a few lines of dots in a Kurosawa miniature)… The looking for the essence in natural forms and human forms, and then going for the essence rather than the surface. – That I think is primarily what distinguishes Indian art from Western art. Not just Indian art but Eastern art in general. And Chinese and Japanese art as well. If you come to think about it, they have the same qualities as Indian art.

AR: What do you think is distinctly Indian about Indian art? What qualities are found in what are not found in other art?

SR: Indian art is not one thing. Indian art is so many different schools and styles. (Nevertheless) I think lyricism, the love of nature, the symbolic aspect of art (like showing rain in a few lines of dots in a Kurosawa miniature)… The looking for the essence in natural forms and human forms, and then going for the essence rather than the surface. – That I think is primarily what distinguishes Indian art from Western art. Not just Indian art but Eastern art in general. And Chinese and Japanese art as well. If you come to think about it, they have the same qualities as Indian art.

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AR: What meaning would you attribute to it now?

SR: Light is always associated with awakening or understanding. And the servant also stops. This is still photography that comes at the end after the freeze. It’s very difficult to express what was precisely meant to be achieved with that series of still shots, but something told me instinctively it would be the right conclusion for the film. I can’t explain beyond that.

AR: And about that final mysterious shot of The Big City with one bulb in the Calcutta streetlight working and the other one missing. What did you have in mind there?

SR: The double lamp happened to be like that. That shot was taken from the balcony of the office where we shot most of the exteriors. So it happened that I needed a long shot of the two lamps, one extinguishing and the other one, after office hours. And I saw, as I lifted up the camera, they were walking away; a lovely shot of these two lights in the foreground. One of the bulbs was not working and [laughs]— my God — the amount of interpretation that has taken place because of that one missing light is incredible!

I had nothing in mind. I didn’t want to suggest anything at all, except that it was typical of Calcutta for the streetlights not to be working properly. It makes the shot more interesting, because it adds another layer of meaning to it which I didn’t intend at all. As discovered it, I was quite happy. I felt it was better than both lights working.

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AR: There’s no symbolic meaning?

SR: No.

The really crucial moments in a film should be wordless. Where you want to make a crucial point – it’s better if it’s made visually rather than verbally.

changing the camera angle, it becomes very confusing. In your mind the plan is very clear but to make it clear on the screen you have to use certain devices which we didn’t use at the time.

AR: As your career progressed, you seemed to go more and more for stories that take place in a much shorter span of time than your own era: for example, in your original screenplay, such as Kanchenjungha (1962), The Hero (Nagar, 1966) and the short Pifieo (1980).

SR: Yes, I guess I had to face the saga of the kind of story after the Apu trilogy. Too many lapses of time. It’s a kind of non-continuous which. For the cinema it’s much better to be more concentrated in time. It’s an instinctive feeling: I can’t put it into words why I feel like that. The film’s best when the story period is a day or a week or fortnight or a month, so that nobody grows up everybody’s as they were in the beginning.

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AR: What about the servant’s lamp?

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The really crucial transitions and dimmers, where you want to make a crucial point – it’s better if it’s made visually rather than verbally. So my ending is the visual equivalent of the word: they attempt to come together but the idea is that the process will take time.

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A Ray retrospective runs until 5 October at BFI Southbank, London. The Big City is released in UK cinemas on 30 August. Five Ray films – including The Big City, Charulata and The Hero – are released on Blu-ray in the UK on 12 August. A longer version of this interview will be available online at bfi.org.uk/sightandsound

LIGHT AND SHADE
Charulata is one of several Satyajit Ray films adapted from the writings of Rabindranath Tagore.
DESIGN FOR LIVING

As well as writing, directing and sometimes scoring his films, Ray was an accomplished graphic artist who worked in advertising and publishing

By Andrew Robinson

Satyajit Ray famously became a film director without any formal training, other than some friendly advice from Jean Renoir during the Frenchman’s visits to Bengal to make his 1951 film The River. It’s less well known that, after ten years in this profession, I...