Deep Focus: Reflections on Cinema


In tandem with his filmmaking career, Satyajit Ray (1921-92) was also a writer. His fiction in Bengali was commercially successful, especially as a series of novels about an Indian detective duo loosely based on Holmes and Watson, two of which he adapted into films (The Golden Fortress 1974, and The Elephant God 1978). His occasional articles in both Bengali and English on the art and craft of cinema are among the most articulate, unpretentious and enjoyable written by any film director – on a par with the autobiography of his friend and admirer Kurosawa.

One of the best of these articles – A Long Time on the Little Road, about the trials and tribulations of making Rathe Randhali (1955) – appeared in Sight & Sound in 1957 and was reprinted, along with two other essays, in a 1976 collection of Ray’s writings, Our Films (published Another, “Under Western Eyes” – possibly Ray’s finest article ever, about distorted European and American perceptions of Indian culture, including Indian cinema – appeared in S&St in 1982. It is collected for the first time in Deep Focus which brings together most of Ray’s remaining English articles under the editorship of his son Sandip Ray (also a filmmaker), with an introduction by the director Shyam Benegal. Many of these articles were buried in Indian newspapers, magazines and journals, and it’s good to see them disinterred. The book’s additional attractions include stills from the films, plus some of Ray’s own photographs, film posters created by the director, witty caricatures from his pen – and a few striking photos of Ray at work by the documentary filmmaker B.D. Garga.

There are, however, two puzzling omissions: “My Life, My Work”, a five-part lecture Ray gave in 1982, and “Ordels of the Alien”, his sardonic account of the fate of his celebrated science-fiction screenplay in Hollywood in the late 1960s.

The 22 pieces range in length from the substantial to the slight, and in subject from the craft of filmmaking to the dubious pleasures of sitting on a Soviet film-festival jury; there are also personal responses to fellow directors such as Chaplin (with a wonderful sketch by Ray), Godard and Bergman (with a thoughtful photo-portrait by Ray). Every piece, however short, offers rewards. Many are deliciously ironic, somewhat in the manner of Ray’s film Days and Nights in the Forest (1970). My own favourites (apart from “Under Western Eyes”) are a witty piece from 1980 about the vanished silent cinema heritage of Bengal, and a trenchant lecture given at India’s first film school in Pune in 1974. The former begins with a childhood memory of a Calcutta uncle who took the nine-year-old Ray to see the first Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan film. All the seats are taken, so the dismayed nephew was taken instead to a Bengalite silent, The Doomed Marriage (Kaal Parinaya, 1930) – which unfortunately turned out to be an “early example of Indian soft porn”, as an amused Ray writes: “The hero and the heroine — or was it the Vamp? — newly married, were in bed, and a closeup showed the woman’s leg rubbing against the man’s.” The young Satyajit, curious and precociously dedicated to the cinema, created his unde sojourn and periodic “let’s go home” with “stony silence”.

Regarding India’s massive popular cinema — whether made in Bombay, Calcutta or Madras — Ray in his Pune Institute lecture comments bluntly that “in our country at least, films have been made with virtually no contribution from the director, or at least nothing of a positive nature. He does nothing because he knows nothing.” Ray then advises the aspiring filmmakers: “If you are truly gifted, you will sooner or later create your own market. If not, and you still want to stay in business, the only rules you would have to follow would be the rules of compromise.”

Ray was certainly contemptuous of most of Indian popular cinema, apart from some of the innovative songs – too contemptuous, thinks Benegal, who comments that Ray’s attitude was “somewhat elitist”. As Ray’s biographer, I often encountered hostility to him among Indian filmmakers, which persists even two decades after his death. Yet — as the intelligence, subtlety and cosmopolitanism on display in Deep Focus demonstrate — without such a scorn for crowd-pleasing mediocrity, Rathe Randhali and Ray’s other masterpieces of world cinema could never have come into existence.

Andrew Robinson

New Argentine Cinema


According to Cannes Festival Director Thierry Frémaux, the New Argentine Cinema (NAC), which once promised so much, ultimately ‘committed suicide’ by making films destined only for the festival circuit. But you would be hard pushed to gauge this demise from Jens Andermann’s engaging study of the varied highs of Argentine filmmaking over the past two decades. Andermann knows he has a tough task. The opening page quotes Gonzalo Aguilar and Lina Fajas, authors of two acclaimed earlier studies of the crop of independent filmmakers who preoccupied “with the national present as a time of crisis, often encountered through neo-realistic chronicles of the social and geographical margins”, whereas Aguilar offered a broad overview of the NAC and its genealogy, and Repeo focused on particular films, both of which he described as a neoliberal economy that implored in 2001. Andermann provides a discussion that celebrates the multiple achievements of NAC within a broader filmmaking landscape, encompassing the more-commercial products of Juan José Campanella (The Son of the Eye), activist film and video, and the political allegories of Fernando Sábatas (The Hour of the Furnaces) – whose model was decisively rejected by the middle NAC generation.

Although there are treatments here of favoured works by directors such as Raúl Perrone, Martín Rejtman, Pablo Trapero, Lisandro Alonso and Lucrecia Martel, Andermann largely eschews an auteurist approach. Instead he focuses on how the directorial brand is articulated – with attention paid to the role of editors (including Alejo Moguilansky and Nicolás Goldfarb) in shaping the NAC style. Chapters on the politically charged landscapes (both urban and rural) of the films are balanced by treatments of styles of performance – from the experience paradigm by Luis Marqués’s Rulo in Trapero’s CraneWorl (1998) to Ricardo Darín’s edgy performative invocation of masculinity under siege in an arrangement of films from NineQueens (2000) to Carancho (2010).

Andermann is ambitious in his scope, finding room for discussions of popular religiosity as a form of historical experience, musical performance in a medium where the sonic frequently plays second fiddle to the visual, and narrative modes where shared spaces are threatened by an antagonistic exterior force. New Argentine Cinema doesn’t purport to provide an overview of the New Argentine Cinema — that’s Aguilar’s terrain — but it does contextualize the works that slipped into this august category within a broader (and arguably less festival-friendly) culture of national film production, criticism and distribution. Maria M. Delgado

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