

FURTHER READING

Deep Focus: Reflections on Cinema

By Satyajit Ray, HarperCollins India, 171pp, Rs 450, ISBN 9789350291351

In tandem with his filmmaking career, Satyajit Ray (1921-92) was also a writer. His fiction in Bengali was commercially successful, especially a series of novellas 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 *Pather Panchali* (1955) – appeared in *Sight & Sound* in 1957 and was reprinted, along with two dozen others, in a 1976 collection of Ray’s writings, *Our Films, Their Films*. 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&S* in 1982. It’s 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 a foreword 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,



“A scorn for mediocrity”: Satyajit Ray was an acute commentator on the craft of film

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 ‘Ordeals 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 wistful 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 were taken, so the dismayed nephew was taken instead to a Bengali 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 close-up showed the woman’s leg rubbing against the man’s.” The young Satyajit, curious and precociously dedicated to the cinema, greeted his uncle’s urgent 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, *Pather Panchali* and Ray’s other masterpieces of world cinema could never have come into existence.

◆◆ Andrew Robinson

New Argentine Cinema

By Jens Andermann, I.B.Tauris, 232pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781848854635

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 she has a tough task. The opening page quotes Gonzalo Aguilar and Janna Page, authors of two acclaimed earlier studies of the crop of independent filmmakers preoccupied “with the national present as a time of crisis, often encountered through neo-realist chronicles of the social and geographical margins”. Whereas Aguilar offered a broad overview of the NAC and its genesis, and Page opted to position these films within the context of a neoliberal economy that imploded 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 Secret in Their Eyes*), activist film and video, and the political allegories of Fernando Solanas (*The Hour of the Furnaces*) – whose model was decisively rejected by the nimble 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 fabricated – with attention paid to the role of editors (including Alejo Moguillansky and Nicolás Goldbart) 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 paraded by Luis Margani’s Rulo in Trapero’s *Crane World* (1999) to Ricardo Darín’s edgy performative invocation of masculinity under siege in a range of films from *Nine Queens* (2000) to *Carancho* (2010).



“Edgy invocation of masculinity”: Ricardo Darín in ‘Carancho’

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 models 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 contextualise the works that slipped into this slippery critical category within a broader (and arguably less festival-friendly) culture of national film production, criticism and distribution. ◆◆ Maria M. Delgado