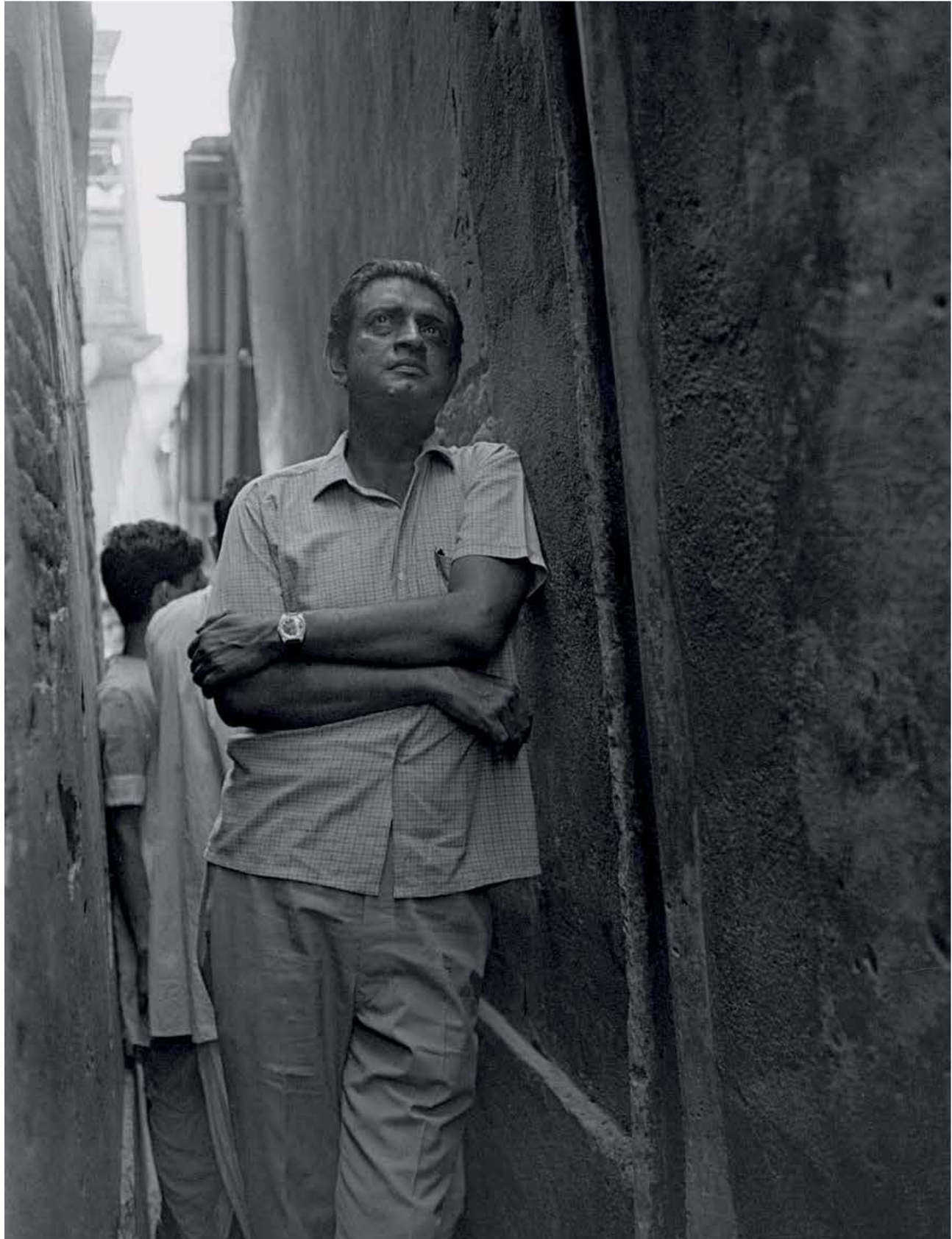
SATYAJIT RAY

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



BENGAL LENSER
Satyajit Ray, opposite, on location in Contai, West Bengal in 1970, scouting locations for his film *The Adversary*

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEMAI GHOSH

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 *Pather 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* [*Seemabaddha*, 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 cuts] is there: the broken lift 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 [by Narendranath Mitra] and the context in which the story took place. Therefore you make the story not like an outsider, but as if you're part of the milieu. It was easy because the story was very revealing, and many of the elements in the film came from the story.

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

SR: That may be said to be a speciality 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 of being a loner, in the sense that I had no brothers or sisters, and I 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 analysed 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 mean, you do your work.

AR: Would you ever call yourself a humanist?

SR: Not really. I can't think of being anything else but what is represented by my films. I am not conscious of *being* a humanist. It's simply that I am interested in human beings. I would imagine that everyone who makes a film is to some extent interested in human beings... I'm slightly irritated *[laughs]* by this constant reference to humanism in my work – I feel that there are other elements also. It's not just about human beings. It's also a structure, a form, a rhythm, a face, a temple, a feeling for light and shade, composition, and a way of telling a story.

AR: I suppose it was *Pather Panchali* that made critics label you a humanist. What do you think of that film now?

SR: I would re-edit the film. It would improve. The pace sometimes falters, not in the second half though. We shot the film in sequence, and we learned as we went along, and so the second half hangs together much better. But it would definitely improve with cutting. And there are certain things we couldn't do anything about, like camera placements. I don't think the relationship of the three little cottages [within the family house where Apu grows up] is very clear in the film. Because you see, in a film, you have to choose a master angle which you have to keep repeating so that people get their bearings. If you keep 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 know at the time.

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

THE WORLD OF RAY
Clockwise from top: after capturing the rhythms of village life in *Pather Panchali*, Ray focused on the state of modern India in films such as *Kanchenjungha*, *The Hero* and *The Big City*

BFI NATIONAL ARCHIVE (5)

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 the Apu trilogy, especially in your original screenplays, such as *Kanchenjungha* (1962), *The Hero* (*Nayak*, 1966) and the short *Pikoo* (1980).

SR: Yes, I lost my taste for the saga kind of story after the Apu trilogy. Too many lapses of time. It's a kind of novelistic approach. 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 better if the 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.

AR: What do you think is distinctively Indian about Indian art? What qualities are found in it that 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 Rajput 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. 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 quality in art. Would Kurosawa fit into your view of Eastern art?

SR: Kurosawa I do not consider a very oriental artist. Kurosawa is 50 per cent Western, I think.

AR: What about you?

SR: Yes, so am I, I think – which makes me more accessible to a Western audience than someone who's not to the same extent influenced by Western models. I think Ozu and Mizoguchi are far more Eastern in that way.

AR: And Rabindranath Tagore, whose novels and stories you have adapted?

SR: Rabindranath I don't know – he's a completely isolated phenomenon. I find it very difficult to classify him, to put him into a pigeonhole.

AR: Talking of Tagore, what was the process of thought in *Charulata* (1964) that led to your decision to end the film with a freeze-frame on the hands of Charu and her husband Bhupati, followed by the still images of them and the servant carrying a lamp?

SR: That was not in the script. In the script the husband accepts her hand and the two of them walk back into the bedroom, seen from a distance – we see the entire veranda. The original story ends with one single word. Bhupati is about to go to Mysore and Charu suddenly tells him, "Take me with you." And he hesitates and Charu says "*thak*", which means "let that be" in Bengali. This was a kind of very abrupt, logical conclusion to the story, and I wanted a visual equivalent of the *thak* – instead of the word, an image, which would suggest that the two are about to be reconciled and then are prevented from doing so.

I couldn't end with the word because I have a feeling that the really crucial moments in a film should be wordless. The really crucial transitions and climaxes, 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.

LIGHT AND SHADE
***Charulata* is one of several Satyajit Ray films adapted from the writings of Rabindranath Tagore**

AR: What about the servant's lamp?

SR: Light is always associated with awakening or understanding. And the servant also stops. These are still photographs that come 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 what 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. The shot was taken from the balcony of the office where we shot most of the exteriors. It so happened that I needed a long shot of the two characters merging into the crowd after office hours. And I saw, as I tilted up the camera as 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'm afraid was not intended. As I discovered it, I was quite happy. I felt it was better than both lights working.

AR: What meaning would you attribute to it now?

SR: I don't know – it just shows a lyrical side of Calcutta.

AR: There's no symbolic meaning?

SR: No.

A Ray retrospective runs until 5 October at BFI Southbank, London. *The Big City* is rereleased in UK cinemas on 16 August. Five Ray films – including *The Big City*, *Charulata* and *The Hero* – are released on Blu-ray in the UK by Artifical Eye on 12 August.

A longer version of this interview will be available online at bfi.org.uk/sightandsound

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, having originally trained to be a painter at India's best-known art school in Rabindranath Tagore's university, Ray abandoned fine art as a career and took his first job as a graphic artist in a British-run, Calcutta-based advertising agency. There he worked for over ten years until he resigned after the success of his first film *Pather Panchali* in 1955.

"How does one design soap wrappings one day and shape the contours of a celluloid saga the next?" he wrote sardonically in 1965, before concluding: "Somebody – I do not remember who – has defined the Cinema as the highest form of commercial art. After ten years in this profession, I have no quarrel with that definition."

Ray's flair for art and design – which was surely inherited from his grandfather Upendrakishore and father Sukumar, both of whom are celebrated book and magazine illustrators in Bengal – was evident throughout his career. Apart from the skill and humour of some of his advertising campaigns, in the 1940s Ray designed dozens of book jackets, becoming in effect India's leading book designer, and also created some classic illustrations for an abridged edition of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's Bengali novel *Pather Panchali*, which first provoked his interest in the idea of making a film. Later, in the 1960s, he revived, edited and illustrated his grandfather's magazine for children, *Sandesh*, which published some of his own bestselling fiction.

In his films, Ray was responsible not only for sketching, shot by shot, his entire shooting script, but also for drawing and painting fine and detailed portraits of the film's characters, set designs and costume designs. In addition, he designed some remarkable posters for the release of his films in Bengal, as well as the calligraphy and typography of the films' credit sequences; he even created two prize-winning English typefaces, Ray Roman and Ray Bizarre, for an international competition in 1971.

Pather Panchali never had a fully developed script, only a set of delightful wash drawings prepared by Ray in 1951-52 to try to interest potential producers (without success), and later a sheaf of notes and sketches. But from his second film *Aparajito* (1956) onwards, Ray wrote a full script in a bulky notebook bound in coarse red cloth, of a kind generally used by North Calcutta merchants for keeping their accounts.

Almost everything about a Ray film is to be found somewhere in these notebooks: not only dialogue and shot divisions, but also background research, set and costume designs, sketches of characters and potential actors (with names and phone numbers), songs and musical ideas, sketches for posters, and lots of doodles. Only the budget is absent.

To leaf through them is to be admitted into the inner sanctum of his creative process. The final shooting script, with its legible dialogue and outline sketches of camera angles and shots, is orderly enough. But one is surprised, in so methodical an artist as Ray, by how jumbled the rest of the notebook seems. In some places, when writing the first draft of a scene, Ray's racing fountain pen jumps entire pages; in others he squeezes the dialogue between narrow self-imposed margins or scribbles it higgledy-piggledy up the page. It is as if too linear an approach might block the flow of words tumbling from his imagination.

Ray's early training as a painter undoubtedly gave him unusual sensitivity as the designer of his films, working closely with his art director Bansi Chandragupta up to and including the lavish period film *The Chess Players (Shatranj ke Khilari)* in 1977. Without making his films aesthetic, he infused them with a painter's feeling for form, texture, colour and composition.

An exhibition of Satyajit Ray's poster designs, drawing on the collections of the BFI National Archive and the Society for the Preservation of Satyajit Ray Archives and Ray Estate, Kolkata is at BFI Southbank, London until mid-October

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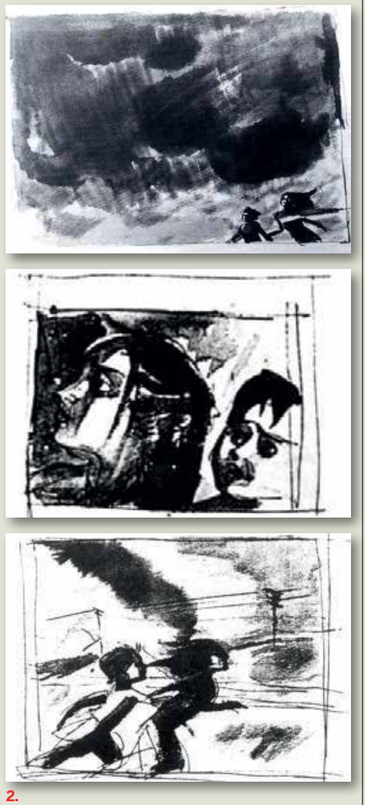

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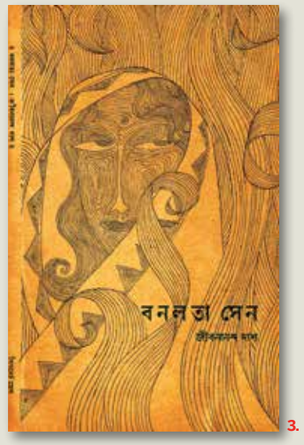

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IMAGES COURTESY THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF SATYAJIT RAY ARCHIVES AND RAY ESTATE, KOLKATA

1. WOODCUT ILLUSTRATIONS FOR A NOVEL, 1944

Ray illustrated *Am Antir Bhenpu* (*Mango-stone Whistle*), an abridged edition for children of *Pather Panchali*, the classic 1929 Bengali novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay. Ray's interest in filming the story started here, and intensified when he read the full-length novel not long afterwards – though he didn't begin work on a film script until 1950.

2. DRAWINGS FOR A FILM TREATMENT OF 'PATHER PANCHALI', 1952

These drawings are part of a purely visual treatment of the story sketched for the purpose of raising interest from Bengali film producers. They show what would become one of the most famous sequences in the film, in which Apu and Durga wander in a field of white *kaash* (pampas grass) and see their first train.

3. BOOK JACKET, 1952

Ray began designing book jackets in the mid-1940s for Signet Press in Calcutta and continued to design them, off and on, for the rest of his life. "The jackets I was really proud of were the jackets for the poetry books," he said; they included this jacket for a collection of poetry by Jibanananda Das, the title of which is taken from a celebrated poem, 'Banalata Sen', written in 1934.

4. POSTER FOR THE RELEASE OF 'DEVI' ('THE GODDESS'), 1960

The story of *Devi* concerns a lovely young woman in a wealthy family in mid-19th-century Bengal, whose orthodox father-in-law dreams that she is an incarnation of the goddess Kali and begins to worship her. The poster alludes graphically to the dream sequence, in which the girl's red forehead mark is transformed into the third eye of the goddess.

5. MAGAZINE COVERS

The four covers on the left are for *Sandesh*, a Bengali monthly children's magazine founded by Satyajit Ray's grandfather and revived by him and others in 1961. Each cover plays with the letters of the title, a word with the dual meanings 'News' and 'Sweetmeat'. "I normally spend seven or eight months a year on filmmaking, the rest on *Sandesh*," said Ray.

The four covers on the right are for *Eksan*, a Bengali literary and cultural magazine founded in 1961, which was published for three decades with a cover by Ray. Using the three Bengali letters of the title, which means 'Now', Ray gave rein to his fascination with typography. *Eksan* published many of his screenplays, sometimes with his notes, as well as occasional articles by Ray.