The unique universe of Satyajit Ray

Andrew Robinson delves into the life and work of the famed Bengali film director, who blended art and science, and uncovers the story behind his sci-fi film that didn’t make it to the screen, but nevertheless influenced Hollywood.

Picture a scenic pond nestled within the confines of a small village in Bengal, its calm surface dotted with lotus flowers. Then imagine, one moonlit night, a spaceship splashing down and sinking into its depths, until the only thing visible is a golden spire sticking out of the water. The local villagers think it is a temple risen from the Earth below. Most of them decide to worship it. Little do they realize that the object contains a small humanoid creature that will invisibly play havoc in their lives.

If you think this sounds like an entertaining idea for a science-fiction film, you would be right. And if perhaps, you were to think it somewhat similar to the famous 1982 film E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, directed by Steven Spielberg, you might not be far off either. But this other alien, the one that crash-landed in India and not America, never quite made it to movie screens across the globe, despite being dreamed up in the 1960s by one of the most significant film directors of the 20th century – Satyajit Ray.

Universal appeal
Born in Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1921, the Bengali polymath was not only a film director but also an established author, essayist, magazine editor, illustrator, calligrapher and music composer. Although all of his films are set in India, the finest of them hold worldwide appeal. Between 1955 and 1991, Ray directed almost 30 features, as well as short films and documentaries. Many won leading prizes at international film festivals. In 1991 he was awarded an Oscar for lifetime achievement – the only such Oscar to be bestowed on an Indian director. Ray also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford: the second film director to be awarded this honour after his hero Charles Chaplin.
“Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the Sun or the Moon”, said Japan’s iconic film director, Akira Kurosawa, in 1975. On Ray’s 70th birthday in 1991, British film director Richard Attenborough, who had acted superbly on screen for Ray, called him a “rare genius”. And in 2021, on the centenary of Ray’s birth, American film director Martin Scorsese proclaimed that his films “are truly treasures of cinema, and everyone with an interest in film needs to see them”. Ray’s many admirers include a number of luminaries from science, as well as the arts. Chief amongst them was science writer and novelist Arthur C Clarke, who described Ray’s debut film Pather Panchali (1955) – the first of his classic Apu Trilogy – as “one of the most heartbreakingly beautiful films ever made”. A founder of econophysics, Eugene Stanley, wrote of the “Bengali genius” Ray in a 1992 issue of the statistical mechanics journal Physica A – remarking that the director’s recent death had “left the world immeasurably poorer”. And today, a leading Indian theoretical physicist, Dipankar Home, says that he is “amazed by the profundity and steadfastness of Ray’s commitment to a scientific outlook, permeating his varied creations”.

Fascinated by science
Ray’s grandfather Upendrakisore and father Sukumar were notable writers and illustrators themselves, and both were trained in science (unlike Satyajit). Their stories, comic verse and drawings remain much loved in Bengal today, and their influence on Ray is clear from his many films that reveal the director’s lifelong fascination with science – covering everything from physics and astronomy to medicine and psychology. Perhaps the most famous scene in Pather Panchali shows the curiosity and awe induced in the uneducated village boy Apu by the sound of humming telegraph wires, immediately followed by his first sight of a passing steam train scattering black smoke across a field of white pampas grass. And in Ray’s last feature film, The Stranger (1991), an avuncular anthropologist enchants his schoolboy great-nephew in Kolkata with a puzzling question: why are the apparent sizes of the Sun and the Moon
in the sky similar, and the Earth just the right size for
total solar and lunar eclipses? When the boy has no
answer, his great-uncle tells him: “I say it’s one of the
greatest mysteries of the universe. The Sun and the
Moon. The King of the Day, the Queen of the Night,
and the shadow of Earth on the Moon … all exactly
the same size. Magic!”

In 1983, in an Indian magazine interview, Ray
explained his fascination with science, saying that
“this universe, and its incessant music, may not be
entirely accidental. Maybe there is a cosmic design
somewhere which we don’t know”. Talking about the
wonders of nature, he continued, “Watch the protec-
tive colourations of birds and insects. The grasshop-
per acquires the exact shade of green that helps it
merge in its surroundings. The marine life and the
shore birds put on the exact camouflage. Could it all
be coincidence? I wonder. I don’t mystify it either. I
think someday the human mind will explore all the
mysteries of life and creation the way the mysteries
of the atom have been explored.”

Visitor from other worlds
This attitude triggered Ray’s highly original science-
fiction film project The Alien, which was taken up by
Hollywood in 1967. It emerged in 1964 from a letter
written by Ray to Clarke at his home in Sri Lanka,
requesting his good wishes for a Kolkata science-
fiction cine-club. Clarke replied expressing admira-
tion for Ray’s films and a correspondence developed,
which led to their talking in London after watching
Clarke’s collaborator Stanley Kubrick – who revered
his idea for the project, and Clarke found it compel-
lng enough to discuss it with another friend Mike
Wilson – a flamboyant film-maker and professional
skin-diver. Wilson, who was a keen sci-fi fan, volun-
teered to sell the project internationally.

Ray drafted The Alien’s screenplay in Kolkata dur-
ing early 1967, watched by Wilson, who made some
useful suggestions, including the golden colour of the
spaceship. Ray then proposed that British comedian
Peter Sellers should fill the role of Bajoria well. He
had admired Sellers in Kubrick’s Dr Strangelove and
knew that Sellers had already played an Indian in
The Millionairess. Soon, Ray and Sellers met in Paris
over lunch arranged by Wilson, and Sellers appar-
ently accepted the role enthusiastically.

The next stop on Ray’s Alien tour was Los Ange-
les, after he received a sensational cable from Wilson that Columbia Pictures wanted to back the
film. There Ray was taken aback to discover mimeo-
Extra-terrestrial visitor Title page of the “Hollywood” script of The Alien, 1967 (left). A sketch of the alien as envisioned by Ray, and drawn by him to illustrate his 1962 short-story Bankubabar Bandhu (Mr Banku’s Friend), on which he later based the script (right).

graphed copies of his screenplay bearing the legend “copyright 1967 Mike Wilson & S Ray” circulating in Hollywood. He also met Sellers again, then filming another Indian role in The Party, but sensed the actor had developed doubts. After being whisked off by Wilson to a series of glamorous parties with film stars, Ray left Hollywood for Kolkata convinced that his innovative Indian project was “doomed”.

To its credit, Columbia remained committed, subject to Wilson’s withdrawal. Ray felt that Clarke was the only person who might bring this about. Clarke responded with a letter saying that Wilson had shaved his head and gone off to meditate in the jungles of south India as a monk. A brief letter from Wilson to Ray finally followed, relinquishing any rights to the Alien screenplay.

**Striking similarities**

For more than a decade Ray was encouraged by Columbia to revive the project and continued to treat it as possible. Not until he saw Spielberg’s E.T. did he give up hope. E.T., which began life in 1981 as a Columbia project, had much in common with Ray’s concept of The Alien. First, there is the benign nature of the creature. Then, as Ray told me in the mid-1980s while I was researching his biography, there is the fact that it is “small and acceptable to children, and possessed of certain superhuman powers – not physical strength but other kinds of powers, particular types of vision, and that it takes an interest in earthly things”.

Ray felt, though, that the appearance of his alien was much more interesting. “Mine didn’t have any eyes,” he continued. “It had sockets so the human resemblance was already destroyed to some extent. And mine was almost weightless and the gait was different. Not a heavy-footed gait but more like a hopping gait. And it had a sense of humour, a sense of fun, a mischievous quality. I think mine was a whimsy.” Ray could understand the audience appeal of Spielberg’s alien, though he found E.T. “a bit corny at times”. But he did not care for the extent to which the alien had been humanized. “It ought to be more subtle than that,” he said. “But the children are marvellous. Spielberg has talent in handling children; I’m not sure about otherwise.”

The first outsider to spot the similarities was Clarke, who described them as “striking parallels”. Telephoning Kolkata from Sri Lanka in 1983, he suggested Ray write politely to Spielberg about the resemblances. “Don’t take it lying down,” advised Clarke, according to Ray. But despite the fact that Ray remained firmly of the view that E.T. “would not have been possible without my script of The Alien being available throughout America in mimeographed copies”, he did not want to pursue the matter further. Ray agreed with Clarke that “artists have better things to do with their time”; and he knew that Spielberg’s view, according to a letter Clarke wrote to the Times newspaper in 1984, was that he was too young to have been influenced by Ray’s screenplay.

“Tell Satyajit I was a kid in high school when his script was circulating in Hollywood,” Spielberg told his friend Clarke on a visit to Sri Lanka “rather indignantly” – which hardly resolves the doubts, especially as Spielberg in the late 1960s was already an adult getting started in movies. According to Clarke, Ray and Spielberg were “two of the greatest geniuses the movies have ever produced”. However, as Scorsese publicly remarked in 2010, “I have no qualms in admitting that Spielberg’s E.T. was influenced by Ray’s Alien. Even Sir Richard Attenborough pointed this out to me.”

Naturally, Ray regretted that his film never got made. His only consolation was that the screenplay’s delicate effects might well have been crushed by crass Hollywood production values, especially since the story was located in India. One can easily imagine the fate of Ray’s Bengali “whimsy” in Hollywood hands. Perhaps it was for the best that Ray’s project evanesced like the alien spaceship’s lift-off from the pond in the finale of the screenplay – before the Bajorias of Beverly Hills could pump out the water and get a commercial grip on it.