

Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and The World of Apu (Satyajit Ray, 1955, 1957 and 1959)

These were the first three films Ray directed. His genius seems to have sprung from his head at once, fully-grown at birth. Doubtless he thought about it all a lot beforehand; but the depth and consistency with which it's all imagined remain astonishing.

Apu *almost* grows into his own father. Both men are studies in unrealised and perhaps over-estimated potential. Both are indifferent to financial responsibility, Apu's father more seriously, since he has a family. He has ambitions to be a playwright: Apu has ambitions to be a short story-writer. The father succeeds in writing nothing. Apu has stories ("about village life") in the college magazine; his friend Pulu admires a later story very much, but Apu finally throws it into the wind in despair, despite Pulu's opinion.

The films echo one another in other ways, so as to suggest that although people move on, nothing improves. The village schoolmaster in *Panchali* doubles as a shopkeeper, and spends more on working at the counter than at teaching – indeed, he not only appears not to be teaching his pupils, but canes one of them who plays naughts and crosses on his slate, there being nothing else to do. Apu's father teaches him writing: "Now," he says, beaming, as though to teach his son to spell the word is to provide him with the thing, "spell the word 'wealth'". It's true that when, at high school, the school-inspector comes, Apu delights him by his reading of a Bengali poem: but we have no guarantee that his fluency is a result of the school's tuition. The head (a Groucho Marx lookalike), aware that he's above average, has no Upper Special Needs Group in which to place him – all he can do is lend him some of his own books – books on Livingstone, on Eskimos and the Aurora Borealis, and on Great Scientists, so that at least his horizons will broaden. The school building is a version of Apu's home in the village – crumbling plaster, and numerous holes, which are the doors to all the schoolrooms. When, in *Aparajito*, Apu gets to college, the only lesson we see is a dryas dust disquisition on the meaning of the word "synecdoche," during which Apu falls asleep and is thrown out. But at least the college walls, though they need a coat of paint, have their plaster intact – and the floors are scrubbed, and even polished.

In the event, Apu lacks the money to go on to university. His education brings him nothing except enlarged horizons, and thus a worsened sense of his own lack of opportunity.

Apu's father spends much time away from home, and doesn't write enough letters to keep his wife secure. After his death in *Aparajito*, Apu, when he moves to Calcutta, commits the same fault.

It's Apu's mother who suffers most, working all day, with a daughter who steals fruit and vegetables for their aged aunt, and a husband whose dreams she's forced to share but who can't even bring himself to ask for his own wages. All her environment elicits from her is bad temper when she has company, and misery when she's alone. Love affairs are not an option: in *Aparajito*, a male neighbour seems vaguely interested in her: she backs away from him in horror. As her son grows away from her, she becomes shriller still, and more demanding. Karuna Bannerjee, who plays her, is a remarkable actress, gifted with a face which can express love or hate, tenderness or irritation, without changing expression except in the eyes.



Everywhere in these films there are apertures – windows – doors – entrances and exits. They suggest escape, but also imprisonment, perception, and distance, and failure to connect. We first see the young Apu in *Panchali* as an eye peeping through a blanket: the trilogy is about how the hole through which he sees life becomes wider and wider until, at the end of *The World*, there's no hole left. The old aunt demonstrates the paucity of her wardrobe by holding up her shawl, and peeping through the hole in that. Apu and his sister first view the sweet-seller through a hole in their brick wall (the house is, as I said, in constant need of repair). The father can please neither the aunt – who never gets a new shawl – nor his children – he hasn't the money to buy them sweets. Apu's sister (we don't find the truth out till much later) steals her friend's beads, for she has no toys. The mother defends her daughter in public, but hales her about by the hair in private, when her accusers are gone, and throws her out at the back gate. Ray frames both weeping females by holes in the crumbling garden wall – this is the run-down environment which causes the daughter's dishonesty, and the mother's shame. Ray can make an emptiness signify anything.



Then there are the trains, which Ray uses with far more variety than does Ozu, for whom they sometimes seem little more than a cinematic full stop. Trains in *Panchali* are heard at first afar off, a magic suggestion that a bigger, more interesting world exists beyond the village. We first hear one in *Panchali* as Apu's father is teaching him to write: there's the sound of the engine, and a whistle; the camera dollies-in to the boy's wondering face as he asks his sister where the line is, and if she's ever seen a train – "Let's go there," he demands.

By the time we arrive at *The World*, he's accustomed to riding on them – but, rather than look out of the window and watch the scenery go by, he prefers to crouch over his globe of the world, imagining places on it which are still further away. He has to dream: reality is never enough. In his electricity-lit room over the print sweat-shop in *Aparajito*, where he has to work to pay his college fees, he keeps the globe – in the open window. Later the remarkable moment comes when, previously angry at his mother for allowing him to oversleep and nearly miss the train, he waits on the platform until it pulls in, but then doesn't board it, preferring to return to her. He appears to have weaned himself from trains and dreaming: but it was a mistake – in the next scene she's complaining that she hasn't heard from him.

Trains echo like banshees through all three films. In *The World*, he has a Celia Johnson Moment, and nearly throws himself under one.

When *The World* opens, after the credits, with Apu lying on a bed, with the wind and rain billowing through a hole in the curtain behind him and a train whistling noisily just outside, we may begin to wonder whether Ray isn't being a bit mechanical, a bit self-restrictive. The aperture here doesn't protect in the way it should, and the train is now a threat, we can see ... might there not have been another way of saying that Apu is now at once grown-up and with fewer defences? But we're made to think, when he goes out on to the balcony and starts

exercising with vigour in the rain, that he's too confident – doesn't he remember that playing in a downpour was how his sister caught pneumonia?

The films are very careful in their differentiation between head-shots and two-shots. In the scene between Apu and the landlord, there are two-shots; but Apu's back is turned. The landlord's viewpoint is one he won't share – although we do. Coming home on a bus after an unsuccessful day's job-hunting, Apu pays the conductor, and all that we see of the functionary is a hand thrust into frame, while Apu goes into a dream. It's like the charm-vendor on the train in *Aparajito*, from whom Ray pans to a close-up of Apu: we must never see Apu and anyone else in the same shot at the same time. That would show his world enlarging to include another, which at this stage of his life it can't. Most important is The Woman Next Door, who in *The World* seems to be waiting to see Apu when he returns home. We and he see her through not one, but two windows. She's dark and mysterious, in silhouette only, but seems interested in Apu; Apu, however, rejects the sight of her, closing the shutter with his flute and lying back to play himself into the world of reverie (showing us, incidentally, that he's an excellent flute-player). Though he and she share the shot, they can't see one another.

I used to have debates in Year Nine between my Occidental and Oriental pupils (all girls) about the advantages and disadvantages of arranged marriages. The Occidentals were loud in disapproval, but the Orientals made many excellent points: your parents are more likely to choose well than you are, so many Occidental so-called love-matches break up in misery, and so on. What no-one ever envisaged is what happens to Apu to get him married: he stands in at the last moment for the groom, when the groom goes crazy. Otherwise women might go on for a long time playing as remote a part in his life as does The Woman Next Door.

The shot (it's one long take) in which we see, from the inside of his litter, the groom gone mad, is one of the most powerful in the trilogy. Ray takes us to it by a sudden cut, so that there's no build-up. The shot is from inside the litter, from inside his world, which is dominated by his looming face, twitching and eyerolling as he tears his bridegroom's headgear to pieces, in rejection of the role in which society would cast him. Male relative after male relative kneels at the window, staring at him and suggesting different solutions to his insoluble problem. Not even the sensible, well-adjusted, and successful Pulu – the bride's cousin – can see a way out for him. Eventually he's dragged from the litter through the window and out into the ceremony – which is of course a ceremony no more. We've just seen his litter being taken along a riverbank – a very rare travelling shot – while before him the band gives an execrable rendition of *For He's A Jolly Good Fellow* (or *Malbrouck s'en va-t-en-guerre*) and above, on a rise, Apu lies oblivious – he's supposed to be a wedding-guest – playing his flute. Apu is rejecting the idea of the marriage just as surely as the groom is – albeit in a different idiom and for a different reason. He's a dreamer, the groom's a lunatic: neither is ready for marriage and manhood. Each is a *doppelgänger* for the other.

But Pulu has already said he can get Apu a job, so Apu reluctantly takes the groom's place. His motives are completely wrong in any perspective, Occidental or Oriental.

The bride, Aparna, is played by Sharmila Tagore, fourteen-year-old great-granddaughter of the poet and future wife to the Nawab of Pataudi, famous in cricketering circles. Aparna never looks at anybody, but stares calmly either at the ground or ahead of her, whatever's going on.



She seems to ignore her mother as her mother makes her up. As her mother bewails the groom's breakdown, she stares over her mother's shoulder. As the priest and her father intone the wedding ritual, she stares calmly at the floor while Apu (in a new wedding headdress) stares at her in terror. In the next scene (all done in one shot, with just two cutaways) she stands still at one corner of the frame, a fulcrum, while Apu wanders about, expressing his doubts, his insecurities, his fears, and trying to explain his motives for marrying her ("I thought I was doing something noble," he lies). He walks about at the back, talking about himself non-stop, framed by an article of furniture covered with wedding decorations – she stands in front of the frame, a spectator, an audience who never looks at him. For her, he, her new husband, is a spectacle which inspires – what? Amusement? Indifference? Blossoming love? Boredom? We can't at first tell. Whatever he says, she just stands there, still, only answering him monosyllabically when she has to, and staring all the time at the floor. Is she possessed of infinite female wisdom, like Byron's Aurora Raby? Or does she just not know how to react to anything, and is hiding behind a façade of artificial cool? In her inexperienced inexpressiveness, she seems the reverse of Apu's mother.

At first the scene is accompanied by a man outside, singing a song. Three-quarters of the way through his voice fades and is replaced by a more gentle sitar.

Then, looking at the article of furniture, we realise that it's the marriage bed. He's talking and talking to postpone the moment when he has truly to become a husband – she's staring at the floor waiting for him to make the first move.

Having had less than a day to prepare for marriage, he's also not realised that a Bengali bride is her husband's thing – his toy – his object – with no will independent of his. Her demure deportment should signal this to him, but he's so inexperienced (no parents to instruct him) that he asks, as a westerner might, all sorts of naïve questions about her state of mind: things a Bengali husband should never even think about.

Back in Calcutta, the trains scream past and she can't bear their whistling. But she has replaced the dirty, torn curtain with a whole, pretty one, and replaced his globe of the world on the window sill with a flowerpot.



Ray's images of death are his most memorable. When in *Panchali* the old aunt is found dead, the clunk as her head hits the ground is sickening. Likewise sickening is the look on the eyes of Apu's father as he takes his last mouthful of water. In *The World*, we don't see the death of Aparna; but the punch-in-the-face Apu gives to the cousin who brings him news of it is a terrible, unexpected eruption of violence – the first we've seen since the mother beat the daughter for stealing the beads, and since she slapped Apu in *Aparajito*, during the quarrel over whether or not he should go to college in Calcutta. It's from his suffering mother, not from his washed-out father, that he gets his tiny propensity for violence.

Also remarkable is how Ray signals a death approaching. In *Panchali*, the daughter runs and dances in the rain, then joins her brother on the verandah. Suddenly she sneezes. In *Aparajito*, the mother, squatting on the floor ill, hears Apu call "Ma!" from off-screen. In the case of the daughter sneezing we at once know from the sudden close-up and the camera

angle that she's caught a fatal fever; in the case of the mother's face lighting up we can tell that she's hearing things, and that her son isn't there.

Ray has been criticised by western Saidists for modelling himself on western film directors, and thus (so goes their p.c. logic) producing movies which are too good for an Indian; and he's been criticised by eastern marxists for making poverty beautiful. It's true that many of his actors, no matter how poverty-stricken their environments, react and emote in what seem bourgeois ways (Chunibala Devi, the extremely old, bent actress who plays the aunt in *Panchali*, being a notable exception). Most of his leads are very handsome and sophisticated-looking. It's a question for critics who know Bengal better than I do.

When his wife dies, Apu loses every one of the ties which *The World* has painstakingly built up for him. He resents his son's existence because it deprived him of hers. He leaves his job. He leaves Calcutta. He destroys his novel. He drifts away. He has nowhere to go – he speaks of going abroad, but where? It's the same fantasy that the globe of the world represented. He belongs nowhere. Pulu finally tracks him down to a coal mine where he seems to be working – at what? Who cares. He doesn't.



But Pulu talks to him about his son, and he agrees to see him despite his resentment at the fact of the child's existence.

We see that the boy is running wild, threatening everyone who threatens him that "his father" will give them a thrashing – "He lives in Calcutta." He wears a demon-mask, but underneath it is innocent, vulnerable and bewildered. Apu arrives and finds him asleep. Apu circles the bed, staring at him in bewilderment, trying to adjust to the idea he represents – he has a son – he does belong in the world after all.

He wakes the boy up and tries to introduce himself. But the boy runs away, and throws a stone at him. Only when he tells the boy that he is not his father but his friend does the boy accept the idea of relating to him. There is a reconciliation – on the banks of the river where Apu once lay, playing his flute as the wedding procession went past. They set off for Calcutta, to see "the boy's father".

What will happen when they get to Calcutta, who knows? Ray will allow us no more than a respite.