

In the Realm of Ray

UCSC celebrates the cinema of India's Satyajit Ray **By Morton Marcus**

IN A POIGNANT MOMENT during the 1992 Academy Awards, a TV camera in a hospital room in India broadcast the picture of a bedridden, emaciated old man attached to a maze of tubes and monitoring machines. With great difficulty, the man stammered a thank-you for being presented with an honorary Academy Award for lifetime achievement.

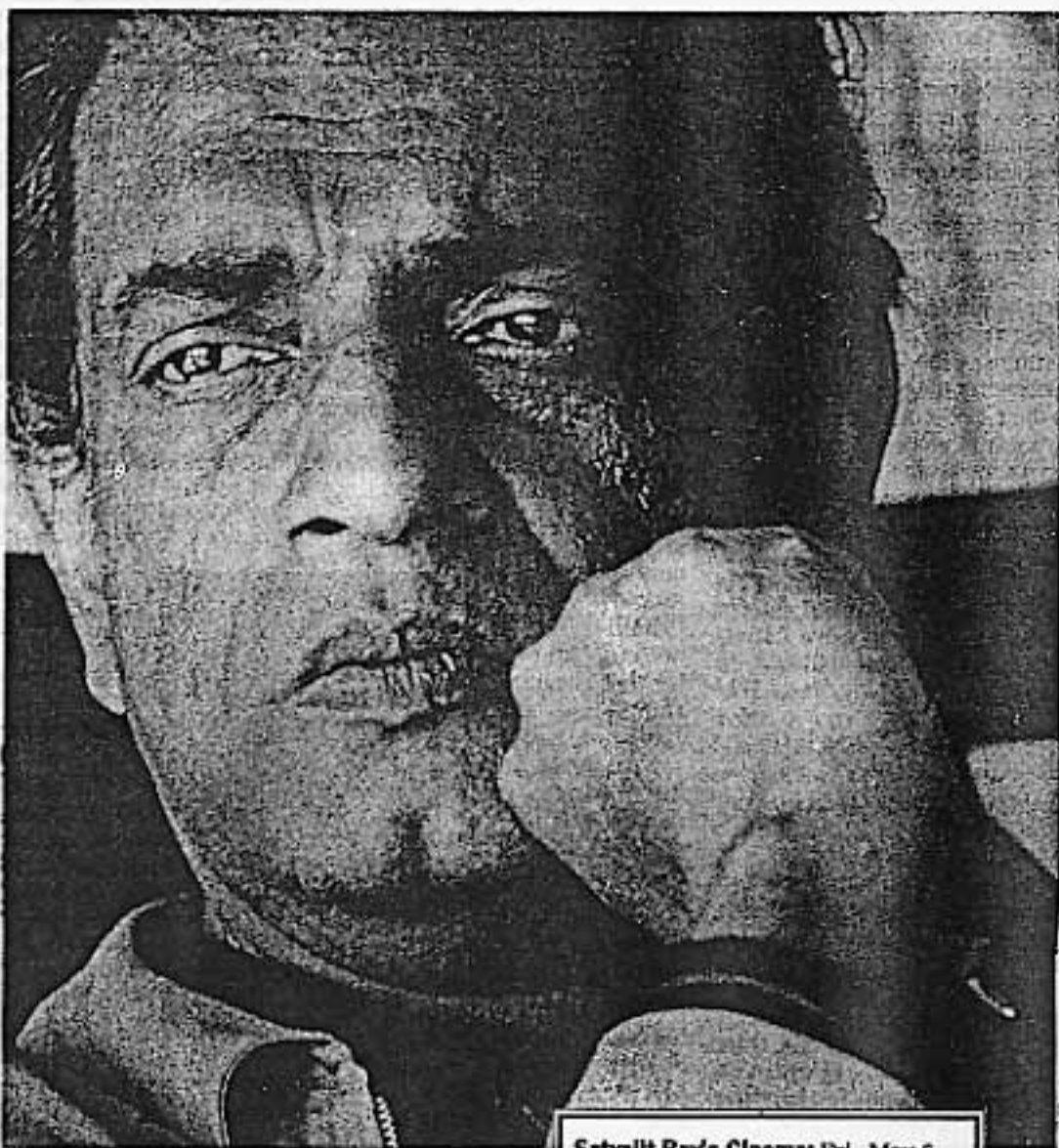
To most of the hundreds of millions watching the scene, the man was a stranger. To film buffs and critics around the world, however, he was one of the greatest and most unusual filmmakers of all time, Satyajit Ray. To his countrymen, especially his fellow Bengalis, he had become a national hero through his films, and when he died shortly after the award presentation, a million people joined his funeral procession in Calcutta.

Forty years before, in 1952, with no financial backing and no practical filmmaking experience, the 31-year-old Ray, then a graphic artist in a Calcutta advertising firm, embarked on his first film. The result was *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Road*), the first Indian film to win international praise as well as a Cannes Film Festival special jury prize as the "best human document" of the 1956 festival. *Pather Panchali* was the first of three films that today are recognized together as one of the world's most beloved cinema classics, popularly known as the Apu Trilogy.

In the course of the 40-year film career that began with *Pather Panchali*, Ray wrote his screenplays and directed all his films. Much of the time, he designed their sets, props, costumes and makeup. He also set up camera shots, meticulously storyboarded scenes and sequences and, in many of his later films, composed the musical scores.

FEW FILM DIRECTORS have immersed themselves in so many aspects of their art or shown such masterly results, and few have received as many awards. All told, Ray made 40 films, 30 of them features and the rest documentaries or shorts. This weekend, in an event titled "Satyajit Ray's Cinema: Women, Discourse and Counter Discourse," the great director will be the subject of a two-day conference at UCSC, where many of his papers are stored in the Ray Film and Study Collection.

Ray's films explore the lives of a whole range of characters, from intellectual but diffident husbands, shop owners, teachers, maharajahs, corporate executives and unemployed professionals to the poor and disenfranchised. Many of the films are about women trapped not only in India's rigid caste system but also in its interlocking male-dominated social structure.



Apu-Attitude: Satyajit Ray, circa 1980

The films are, by turn, realistic portrayals and folkloric fantasies, and include dramas, slapstick comedies, satires and tragedies. As a group they create a canvas so specifically Indian yet so broad in scope as to become, in the end, a *comédie humaine* that surpasses the intention of Honoré de Balzac, who, in dozens of novels, attempted to depict all of French society.

Ray had the uncanny ability to evoke the universality of his characters in every film he made, despite the fact that his characters were imprisoned

Continued on next page

Satyajit Ray's Cinema: Fri., May 6 at 4pm, there will be an exhibit from the Ray archives at Special Collections, McHenry Library, UCSC. Sat., May 7, 9am-4:30pm, there will be panel discussions about gender themes in Ray's cinema. At 4:30pm, there will be a screening of *The Visitor* at the Nickelodeon Theater in Santa Cruz. Sun., May 8 at 9am, there will be a panel discussion about the restoration and preservation of Ray's works. All events are free. (408/459-4012)

in a particularly Indian social and historical milieu. That is what makes his films so unusual.

He was able to elicit from us a recognition of our place in the human condition, regardless of our cultural background. His films make us go back into our lives and reflect on the limitations we've accepted because of the system in which we live, or because we've abandoned our personal dreams to pursue our own culture's socially directed goals.

AS PART of this weekend's conference, there will be a special screening of the director's last full-length work, *Agantuk (The Visitor)*. The film is a parable, a light comedy that crowns Ray's career in much the same way *Fanny and Alexander* capped Ingmar Bergman's. But unlike the Swedish director's lavish, operatic farewell, *The Visitor* is a small film, although a deceptive one.

The plot is simple but intriguing. The wife in a wealthy Calcutta family receives a letter from a long-lost uncle, her last-known relative, announcing that he is coming for a visit. She hasn't seen the man in 35 years and doesn't even remember what he looks like, because she was a child of 2 when he disappeared. And that's the problem. Is this really her uncle? Or is he an impostor, possibly a fortune hunter, or worse—a thief?

Ray's gentle, satiric thrusts at the pettiness of the woman's executive husband, at the woman herself, and at their circle of friends gradually give way to more serious issues, as Ray addresses questions about personal identity and finally seeks to identify what it means to be human in the contemporary "civilized" world. The climax is a stinging dialogue between the "uncle" and one of the husband's abrasive friends, possibly the most intelligent on-screen debate since *My Dinner With Andre* or the more recent *Mindwalk*, and more succinct and provocative than both. Suffice it to say that what the wife and husband learn in the course of the film is a lesson for us all.

Once more, Ray pursues his favorite theme of how people get mentally as well as physically locked in their social and economic systems. But now the more ominous aspects of the idea are lightened, and its application is clear from the start. Like the global village in which we find ourselves living in the 1990s, the world of *The Visitor* is contemporary and overtly universal.

The film is a fitting summation of a great filmmaker's career. Rich in human insight and provocative ideas, full of fine performances, masterly pacing and consummate, if unobtrusive, cinematic artistry, *The Visitor* is a cornucopia of delights. Its ending is heartwarming without being mawkish and is an apt reply to those who think the world is "going to hell in a handcart." One is tempted to say that in his last film Satyajit Ray has left us with a tough-minded but shining Ray of hope.