The Apu Trilogy: Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Apur Sansar

Marcia Landy

To cite this article: Marcia Landy (2010) The Apu Trilogy: Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Apur Sansar, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 27:5, 408-410, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2010.494998

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2010.494998

Published online: 04 Oct 2010.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 5525

View related articles
The Apu Trilogy: Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Apur Sansar

MARCIA LANDY

Too often, cinematic innovation has been identified with the West. Yet Indian cinema in the post World War Two and Indian post-Independence eras saw a form of realism emerge, signaling a significant global intervention in film form. This form, similar to Neorealism, involved location shooting (in unfamiliar lower class urban and regional locales), non-professional actors and casting and professional actors against type, natural lighting, loosely structured scripts, a voyage form, a focus on landscape, and a highlighting of hitherto marginalized social characters in everyday milieus.

As in Europe’s postwar confrontation with the ruins of nation, 1940s India’s struggles over Independence, national identity, modernity, and Partition similarly were a response to a changing political, social, and cinematic world. The trilogy is valued for its emphasis on lyricism and humanism as well as its ethnographic, self-conscious, and novelistic character in dramatizing cultural identity, and social transformation. It has been connected to the problematic of nation building, modernity and the technological optimism and socialist ideals of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) and considered a moving portrayal of poverty in India. What has not been sufficiently appreciated until recently is the trilogy’s innovative contribution to world cinema that differs from functional [or sociological] forms of realism in relation to questions of postcolonial nation formation to introduce the spectator to an affective and thinking engagement with cinema.

The trilogy presents complex perspectives on the characters and their milieu in relation to its treatments of space and time through the uses of onscreen and off screen sound, limited dialogue, musical score, long takes, and framing. The extended periods of time and empty spaces undermine melodramatic clichés and induce a contemplative engagement with rural and urban landscapes in relation to the protagonists to highlight tensions between an impoverished material world and the plenitude of nature: they induce an awareness of hardship and of physical survival through focusing on birth, adolescence, marriage, illness, and death as well as stolen moments of pleasure.

In Pather Panchali (1955), the rural landscape of the village of Nischindipur is juxtaposed to the characters’ sensory perceptions. The film discriminates between generations: the elder family members, mother Sarbajaya (Karuna Bannerjee) and father Harihar (Kanu Bannerjee), and grand aunt Indir (Chunibala Devi) and the two children, Durga (Uma Das Gupta) and Apu (Subir Bannerjee) further distinguished between them. The role of the child is critical to the film’s revision of realism, affecting other characters as well. The dominant treatment of children counteracts naïve conceptions of innocence or guilt. These are not characters that act but rather react. The emphasis is not on adventure or action: it is on their vision of a rural world in which human error, natural and social disasters, and the incursions of technology prevail. The film offers perspectives on seeing and hearing through the characters’ sensory responses that differ radically from a cinema of action. Through the characters’ perceptions of an uncertain world, the spectator is often situated in a place different to them that is exploratory rather than authoritative.
The multi-faceted orchestration of family, social class, economic vicissitude, and enforced mobility also resides in its orchestration of a frail elderly woman ejected from the household by the mother as well as in Sarbajaya’s desperate waiting for her husband to return as he seeks employment in the city. Her suffering climaxes in a montage of a storm that wages during the night of Durga’s dying conveyed through an extended counterpoint of close-ups of Sarbajaya intercut with images of the wildly blowing curtains, the sounds of destruction without, the almost lifeless body of her young daughter, and images of the goddess.

Objects in the film—the stolen guava, Durga’s treasure box, the diminishing rice container, Auntie’s old and new shawl, the necklace stolen by Durga and thrown into the water by Apu after her death—are not symbols. Along with the reiterated intrusion of a passing train, these images bear the imprint of material history, recollection, and affect, as fragments, or ciphers, that communicate the “transience of things” through the introduction of banal, everyday events, objects, attitudes, and descriptions. These sequences inject the force of time in a mode in which history and memory can be experienced, culminating in the father’s return and the family’s journey to Benares toward an unknown future.

In Aparajito (1956), we follow the family’s experiences in Benares. The filming of the landscape offers striking differences to that of their ancestral village, a different form of physical hardship for the adults, but of adventure and wonder for the young boy. Harihar struggles to support his family but is inflicted with a fatal illness, leaving Sarbajaya to struggle with the burden of caring for herself and her young son (Pinaki Sengupta). Her decision to live again in the countryside is the occasion to underscore the growing differences between the two in relation to the striking contrasts between the two generations. Sarbajaya and Apu’s train journey to a provincial village in Bengal captures the ways in which Ray orchestrates film as both literal and psychic journey. This lengthy sequence alternates between shots of the exterior urban landscape and enigmatic close-ups of Sarbajaya’s face framed by the train’s window enhanced by a musical score. The lesser shots of Apu have a different valence, one of anticipation, if not of restlessness, that are developed as Apu grows into adolescence and then adulthood.

Visually, a distinction will increase between Sarbajaya’s static existence, her only actions dedicated to caring for Apu, watching him and waiting on his needs, and Apu’s evolving world. Now an adolescent (played by Smaran Ghosal), he seeks to escape from his mother’s anxious hovering. The distance between the two is most evident upon Apu’s return from college in Calcutta. Sarbajaya is identified with a tree under which she sits waiting for her son, while he, bored and yawning, can find no adequate responses to her questions about his life in the city. Poignantly, she attempts to call his attention to her aging and infirm condition, asking him anxiously if he will care for her should she fall ill, and he responds by falling into sleep.

The impossibility of bridging the distances between them is starkly portrayed through camera angles, framing, minimal dialogue, and flute music. When he leaves again for Calcutta, leaving Sarbajaya in her appointed place under the tree, it becomes evident that this is to be their last sight of each other, for when he returns from school upon learning of her illness, she is dead, and he is ostensibly freed from this weight of the past. Aparajito is one of the rare films to address the problematic of a mother son relationship without maudlin or judgmental treatment, paying instead scrupulous attention to the impossibility of fulfilling the mother’s desire and the burden that it places on the son’s capacity to respond.

In Apur Sansar (1959), Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee), now an adult in Calcutta, seeks employment but is nonchalant about his poverty, reveling rather in his freedom and determined to be a writer. His friend Pulu invites Apu to a wedding at an upper class estate far from
the urban environment. Pulu plays a critical role throughout as catalyst, akin to a mythic figure, in Apu’s reluctant engagement with reality. The unexpected occurs when the bride’s mother vetoes her daughter’s marriage to a man mentally incapable of being a husband, and Pulu appeals to Apu to save the bride Aparna (Sarmila Tagore) from becoming unmarried. After the ritualized wedding ceremony, Apu returns to his penurious lodgings with his upper class wife, and their marriage blossoms into a romantic and companionable relationship, ending with Aparna’s death in childbirth.

Once again free, Apu, consumed by loss, is unwilling to assume responsibility for the child, Kajal, and leaves Calcutta, working as a laborer, literally throwing his writings to the wind. Again, Pulu appears at a moment of choice and urges a still reluctant Apu to return and reclaim his son. The film ends with Apu’s return to the estate where he had married Aparna, and there, in the now desolate mansion, succeeds in inviting Kajal to join him on a new journey. Stylistically the film evokes memories visual and auditory echoes from the earlier films, but time is situated in a trajectory that moves through the past into the present and implies a tentative future.

Ray’s Apu trilogy is a major contribution to an understanding of a cinematic form that subtly orchestrates questions of history, memory, and social space. Unfortunately, this major cinematic achievement so timely at a moment of thinking globally is not available as a box set, depriving scholars and general viewers of access to the high quality of Criterion’s film texts with their valuable commentaries. There used to be single DVDs available on each of these titles, but they are now out of print. Films this valuable deserve to be available perpetually, both for audiences now, and in the future.

Marcia Landy is Distinguished Professor of English/Film Studies. Her numerous publications and essays focus on the history of and in film.

Die Sieger

MARCO ABEL

First scene. Two men, colleagues, perhaps friends, are driving in a quintessential petit-bourgeois family car, a VW station wagon, on the way to a hospital. Sepia colored and accompanied by minimalist piano music, the scene’s ontological status is oddly difficult to ascertain: are we exposed to a memory, maybe a dream, or a conventionally historicist representation of the past? But while we may still be wondering about the exact representational significance of the scene’s subtly haunted atmosphere rendered affectively sensible without yet having depicted an explanatory object-cause for this sensation, the film assaults us with a moment so shocking that it purportedly caused some of the original audience to leave the theatre, thus forcefully demonstrating that any representation of reality is first of all the effect of the reality of that representation.

Cut to scene two. As we are still reeling from what we just witnessed—if we haven’t stopped watching Dominik Graf’s great, largely ignored and today nearly forgotten policier, Die Sieger (1994)—the film proceeds to immerse us in one of the more expertly elaborate and playfully imagined action set-pieces German cinema has ever produced. Without