crushes the man at its centre, in spite of Ben Kingsley's luminous performance (at least he deserved his Oscar). It is as if Gandhi, years after his death, has found in Attenborough the last in his series of billionaire patrons, his last Birla. And rich men, like emperors, have always had a weakness for tame holy men, for saints.

1983

SATYAJIT RAY

I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it,' Akira Kurosawa said about Satyajit Ray's first film, _Pather Panchali_ (The Song of the Little Road), and it's true: this movie, made for next to nothing, mostly with untrained actors, by a director who was learning (and making up) the rules as he went along, is a work of such lyrical and emotional force that it becomes, for its audiences, as potent as their own, most deeply personal memories. To this day, the briefest snatch of Ravi Shankar's wonderful theme music brings back a flood of feeling, and a crowd of images: the single eye of the little Apu, seen at the moment of waking, full of mischief and life; the insects dancing on the surface of the pond, prefiguring the coming monsoon rains; and above all the immortal scene, one of the most tragic in all cinema, in which Harihar the peasant comes home to the village from the city, bringing presents for his children, not knowing that his daughter has died in his absence. When he shows his wife, Sarbajaya, the sari he has brought for the dead girl, she begins to weep; and now he understands, and cries out, too; but (and this is the stroke of genius) their voices are replaced by the high, high music of a single _tarshehnai_, a sound like a scream of the soul.

_Pather Panchali_ was the first Ray movie I ever saw, and, like many cinema-addicted Indians, I saw it not in India but in London. In spite of having grown up in the world's number-one movie city, Bombay ('Bollywood' in those days produced more movies per annum than Los Angeles or Tokyo or Hong Kong), I knew less about India's greatest film-maker than I did about 'international cinema' (or, at any rate, the movies of Robert Taylor, the Three Stooges, Francis the Talking Mule and Maria Montez). It was at the old Academy in Oxford Street, and at the National Film Theatre, and at the Arts Cinema in Cambridge that, with mixed feelings of high elation and shame at my own previous ignorance, I filled in
this lamentable gap. By the middle 1960s, when the Nouvelle Vague hit the cinemas like a tidal wave, and the names of Truffaut and Godard and Resnais and Malle and Antonioni and Fellini and Bergman and Wajda and Kurosawa and Buñuel became more important to us than any mere novelist, and when the new movie in a given week might be called *Jules et Jim* or *Alphaville* and might be followed, a week later, by *Ashes and Diamonds* or *Yojimbo* or *Le Feu Follet* or *L'Eclisse* or 8½ or *The Seventh Seal* or *The Exterminating Angel* or *The Saragossa Manuscript*—when, that is to say, the cinema was ablaze with innovation and originality, I took real pride in the knowledge I gained from Ray's films: that this explosion of creative genius had its Indian dimension, too.

This was not an opinion shared by all Indians. Because Ray, a Bengali, made films in his own language, his films were not distributed outside Bengal. His international success brought predictable sniping at home. Andrew Robinson records, in *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, a paradigmatic expression of this resentment, which also brings the vulgar, energetic (and, it must be said, sneakily appealing) Bombay cinema into direct conflict with the highbrow, uncompromising, 'difficult' Ray. The Bombay movie star Nargis (Nargis Dutt), star of the 1957 mega-weepie *Mother India*, was by the beginning of the 1980s a member of the Indian Parliament, from which exalted position she launched an amazing attack on Ray:

**NARGIS:** Why do you think films like *Pather Panchali* become popular abroad? . . . Because people there want to see India in an abject condition. That is the image they have of our country and a film that confirms that image seems to them authentic.

**INTERVIEWER:** But why should a renowned director like Ray do such a thing?

**NARGIS:** To win awards. His films are not commercially successful. They only win awards . . . What I want is that if Mr Ray projects Indian poverty abroad, he should also show 'Modern India'.

**INTERVIEWER:** What is 'Modern India'?

**NARGIS:** Damns . . .

She was answered by a letter from the Forum for Better Cinema: 'Do you honestly believe that [Modern India] is portrayed in the so-called commercial films of Bombay? In fact, the world of commercial Hindi films is peopled by thugs, smugglers, dacoits, voyeurs, murderers, cabaret dancers, sexual perverts, degenerates, delinquents and rapists, which can hardly be called representative of modern India.' Soon afterwards, Mr Robinson tells us, 'the government informed Ray it could not grant him permission to make a film about child labour since this did not constitutionally exist in India.' (Indian governments often demonstrate a weakness for the ostrich position. My own 1987 documentary, *The Riddle of Midnight*, ran into trouble because, among other things, I mentioned that all the Kashmiri Muslims I spoke to were highly disaffected with India, and wanted to join Pakistan. This was officially unsayable at the time, and so I was accused of fundamentalist sympathies; less than three years later, the lid that New Delhi pushed down over the Kashmir issue for so long may finally have blown off.)

The exchange between Nargis Dutt and Ray's supporters, the quarrel between the philistine/commercialist/jingoist position and the aesthetic/purist/open-eyed view, can be seen in a number of different ways: as a quarrel between two definitions of patriotic love, because while Nargis all but calls Ray anti-Indian, his love for India is, as Mr Robinson asserts, powerfully evident throughout his œuvre; and, more interestingly perhaps, as a dispute between two very different urban cultures, the cosmopolitan, brash bitch-city of Bombay versus the old intellectual traditions of Calcutta. Ray himself is, with much justification, scathing about the Bombay talkies. 'India,' he says, 'took one of the greatest inventions of the West with the most far-reaching artistic potential, and cut it down to size.' Endless Bollywood remakes of *Love Story*, *The Magnificent Seven*, etc., go a long way to proving his point.

However, being a Bombaywallah myself, I can't avoid
observing that in the battle between Bombay and Calcutta, Andrew Robinson seems more emphatically on Ray's side than Ray himself. He makes a number of unfairly dismissive remarks about the 'new' or 'middle' cinema now growing up in Bombay, Kerala and elsewhere. This attempt to steer a course between mandarin and moneybags attitudes to the movies is, we are told, 'lacking in commitment' to its subject matter, a vague sort of assertion and one that demeanes the solid achievements of the directors he names, Benegal, Gopalakrishnan and Aravindan. There is a superficiality and dullness in most of the work of the "new" cinema that seems to derive from the fake urban culture of modern India, and which arises ultimately from the failure of imagination in the Indian "synthesis" of the last century,' Mr Robinson suggests, in one of the few over-the-top passages in an otherwise scrupulous book. The films he attacks are better than he admits; and while it's undeniable that Indian urban culture, Bombay above all, is full of fakery and gaudiness and superficiality and failed imaginations, it is also a culture of high vitality, linguistic verve, and a kind of metropolitan excitement that European cities have for the most part forgotten. And this is true of that over-painted courtesan, Bombay, as it is of Ray's Calcutta.

The case of Ray's movie Shatranj ke Khilari (The Chess Players) represents the lowest point in the uneasy relationship between Satyajit Ray and the Bombay film industry. This film, Ray's first (and to date only) feature film in Hindi, was a deliberate attempt to enter the mainstream of Indian culture. According to legend, the movie bosses of Bombay ruined the film's chances by putting pressure on national distributors not to book it. Mr Robinson sheds little light on the incident, remarking only that 'Ray refuses to be drawn on the point and has avoided wasting his time trying to find out the truth; but Shama Zaidi, who knows Bombay's film world well, thinks the existence of a conspiracy against the film "quite probable".' Gossip is no substitute for investigation. My own memory of talking to Satyajit Ray about this matter is that he was a more open believer in the conspiracy theory than Mr Robinson allows; but that, in spite of it all, he had found the experience of working in Hindi very stimulating, above all because he had been able to choose from a much larger group of gifted actors than were to be found in the smaller Bengali-language cinema. He was interested in making more Hindi movies; ill health may now have made that impossible.

A highbrow auteur who is nevertheless appreciative of the talents of Bollywood movie stars, Satyajit Ray is also, for a man who disapproves of the movies of Buñuel because of 'the surrealism element', a man with a strong streak of fantasy. His fairy-tale movie, Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne (The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha), is, in Bengal, as well-loved as The Wizard of Oz is here. 'It really is extraordinary how quickly [Goopy and Bagha] has become part of popular culture,' Ray wrote soon after the movie's release. 'Really, there isn't a child in the city who doesn't know and sing the songs.' So it seems that Ray's work has been quite capable of doing more than winning awards; but every one of Ray's fabulist movies—Hirak Rajar Deshe (The Kingdom of Diamonds), Sonar Kella (The Golden Fortress), Jai Baba Felunath (The Elephant God) as well as GB—has failed, outside India, to attract the plaudits accorded to his more realist films. Mr Robinson puts this down to 'the West's historic disinterest [sic] in the legends of India', which may be true. Certainly, when I mentioned to Satyajit Ray that The Golden Fortress was one of my favourite movies, he leapt up from his breakfast and made huge gesticulations of delight, turning into the epitome of the proud parent whose least-appreciated child has just been lavished with unlooked-for praise.

Goopy and Bagha, Andrew Robinson rightly says, 'released the vein of pent-up fantasy in Satyajit Ray, that is given free rein in his grandfather's and father's work.' By far the strongest section of Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye is the opening seventy-page biographical study. Ray came from a family of fantasists, creators of nonsense verse and fabulous hybrid animals—Stortle, Whalephant, Porcupucken—and both Ray's father Sukumar and his grandfather Upendrakishore
and illustrations, which means, as 0 and 1, and 0 and 1. Information. But intellectual and printer whose were stolen by a side, and saw his deeply affected his own creation... cannot close examination rather than the realistic 

brilliant. His great- mother, and also 'a/first people in India make phonogram phonograph, in due course, a phonograph of music, a film phonogram was the name of it, Nitin Bose, who make art direction and service up to, Ray had a child to sounds remember various those days you could observe the sound of of who could identify was the sound 'had a glass and pink as the car develop magical, for example, 'had not looking at Satyajit, he could hear,' and approach up to he provides an 

absorbing account. Then, somewhat regrettably, he switches to a movie-by-movie account of Ray's career, and only occasionally attempts to weave the story of the movies into the larger story of Ray's personal and intellectual development. It is as if Ray's own famous reticence on personal matters has permeated the book.

Such attempts at contextualization as are made are unfallingly interesting. Sukumar Ray's commitment to the movement that swept Bengal from 1903 in reaction to Lord Curzon's proclaimed intention of partitioning the province sheds valuable light on his son Satyajit's later decision to film the novel Râbîndranâth Tagore wrote about that movement, Ghare Baire (The Home and the World); and Ray's own family associations with Tagore himself provide equally valuable sidelights on the film director's lifelong engagement with the writer's work. Again, Ray's reactions to the great Bengal Famine of 1943-4, his sense of shame at having done nothing to help the dying, powerfully informs our knowledge of the great film he later made on the subject, Asani Sanket (Distant Thunder). There is much interesting information about the films and their reception, too: the story of how Devi (The Goddess) was attacked by religious extremists as anti-Hindu is one such snippet. One cannot avoid saying, however, that the film-by-film approach does reduce the interest of this book for non-movie buffs; which is a pity because, as those opening pages demonstrated, a full-blooded biography could not have failed to be of wide general appeal.

The book deserves to be welcomed nevertheless. It is extremely thorough, often perceptive and at times highly entertaining. It is good to have a sympathetic portrait of one of the giants of the cinema. After a heart attack and bypass surgery in 1984, Satyajit Ray's ability to work has been restricted; his latest film, Ganaâstru, a version of Ibsen's An Enemy of the People, has perform been filmed in the studio, with Ray's son assisting his father. It is to be hoped that Ray will manage to complete many more movies, but his already-completed achievement is astonishing; and you could say that the entire aura is, like the very first film, a 'song of the
SATYAJIT RAY

little road', because Ray has invariably preferred the intimate story to the grand epic, and is the poet par excellence of the human-scale, life-sized comedy and tragedy of ordinary men and women, journeying, as we all journey, down little, but unforgettable, roads.

1990

HANDSWORTH SONGS

In The Heart of a Woman, volume four of her famous autobiography, Maya Angelou describes a meeting of the Harlem Writers’ Guild, at which she read some of her work and had it torn to pieces by the group. It taught her a tough lesson. 'If I wanted to write, I had to be willing to develop a kind of concentration found mostly in people awaiting execution. I had to learn technique and surrender my ignorance.'

It just isn’t enough to be black and blue, or even black and angry. The message is plain enough in Angelou’s self-portrait, in Louise Meriwether’s marvellous Daddy Was A Numbers Runner, in Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall; if you want to tell the untold stories, if you want to give voice to the voiceless, you’ve got to find a language. Which goes for film as well as prose, for documentary as well as autobiography. Use the wrong language, and you’re dumb and blind.

Down at the Metro cinema there’s a new documentary starting a three-week run, Handsworth Songs, made by Black Audio Film Collective. The ‘buzz’ about the picture is good. New Socialist likes it, City Limits likes it, people are calling it multi-layered, original, imaginative; its makers talk of speaking in metaphors, its director John Akomfrah is getting mentioned around town as a talent to watch.

Unfortunately, it’s no good, and the trouble does seem to be one of language.

Let me put it this way. If I say ‘Handsworth’, what do you see? Most Britons would see fire, riots, looted shops, young Rastas and helmeted cops by night. A big story: front page. Perhaps a West Side Story: Officer Krupke, armed to the teeth, versus the kids with the social disease.

There’s a line that Handsworth Songs wants us to learn. ‘There are no stories in the riots,’ it repeats, ‘only the ghosts of other stories.’ The trouble is, we aren’t told the other stories. What we get is what we know from TV. Blacks as trouble;