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Gaston Roberge, *Satyajit Ray: Essays 1970-2005*, Manohar,
New Delhi (India), 2007, 280 pp., hb , ISBN: 81-7304-735-9

Reviewed by Gëzim Alpion

In its scope and depth, Gaston Roberge's new book on Satyajit Ray, is one of the most important publications to appear on this great twentieth-century film director since his 1992 death. The book includes twenty-four essays, which were written between 1970 and 2005. The timeline is important to trace the growth and maturity of Ray's art as well as Roberge's admiration for and appreciation of his *oeuvre*. The essays were originally prompted by teaching assignments and requests for articles as well as by Roberge's long-standing and growing interest in the work and talent of the Calcutta-born filmmaker. Only Essay 8, the discussion of *Jana Aranya* (*The Middle Man*, 1975), was written for this collection to 'complement' the book and 'improve' Roberge's 'perception of the evolution' (p. 14) he seeks to describe from the *Apu* trilogy to the *Heart* trilogy.

Some of the essays have been edited slightly by the author to avoid repetition and, more importantly, to reflect important changes in

technology since the time the articles were first published. So, for instance, in Essay 13, which appeared in print initially in 1974, Roberge rightly argues that the editing was warranted by the fact that, in the digital era, the technology of film can no longer be defined solely as the succession of still images.

The articles included in the anthology and their length do not indicate preference for or a classification rating on the part of the author for certain films; rather they reflect the word count preferred by various media outlets that initially commissioned them. The essays are grouped into Six Parts followed by Conclusion. In Part One, Roberge records his personal recollections of his initial interests in and meetings and friendship with Ray since 1961, the year when he first went to India.

Part Two consists of two sections. In the first one the films discussed include the *Apu* trilogy, *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*, 1958), *Aranyer Din Ratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1969), *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1970), *Jana Aranya* and *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1984). Section two covers the *Heart* trilogy: *Gana Shatru* (*An Enemy of the People*, 1989), *Shakha Proshakha* (*The Tree and the Twigs*, 1990), and *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*, 1991).

Roberge has been teaching Film Studies in India for more than three decades and in all that time Ray's films have been at the core of his teaching materials. This explains why he has entitled Part Three 'Teaching Film with Ray's Films'. The three essays included in this part of the book will prove useful to film scholars and students alike for the wealth of information on how Ray used the particular language of

cinema to share his dreams with the audience (p. 120). Of particular interest in this part of the book is Roberge's application of Christian Metz's large syntagmatic category to three of Ray's films to highlight, among other things, that in these works, especially in *Aranyer Din Ratri*, Ray 'totally masters the image he creates' (p. 143).

The four essays included in Part Four root Ray's work and art firmly in his rich native Bengali literary, cultural and cinema tradition. Having highlighted the lasting influence that the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore had on Ray, Roberge then draws attention to the extent to which the cinéaste even surpassed his literary master. Films like *Ghare Baire* and *Charulata* (1964), based respectively on a novel and novella by Tagore, reveal that Ray chose to remain 'totally free while handling Tagore's material' even transforming it 'whenever he felt that he could not follow Tagore without betraying his own sensibility' (p. 152). This 'liberty' comes as no surprise from someone who as an artist firmly believed that 'I too have my way of seeing things' (*ibid.*).

Like any great artist, Ray had to pay a price for 'seeing things' his way. His conscious departure from Tagore as well as the unflattering Bengali and Indian reality he often depicted, especially in his first film *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Little Road*, 1955), meant that the Calcutta public and many Indian critics failed to appreciate the realism, humanism and hope in his cinema. This is rather sad considering that as Roberge rightly concludes, 'Ray did for the Bengali cinema, what Tagore had done for the Bengali literature' (p. 153).

In his 1978 interview in Part Five, Ray reveals how much he had learnt from and creatively appropriated the Western literary, musical and film tradition, and the importance he attached to his 'orderly method of work' (p. 209). In the interview Ray is candid about how seriously he took every aspect of film production and especially about how responsible he always was with the money that people invested in his films.

In the two essays included in Part Six, Roberge traces Ray's interest in and dedication to Film Societies in India as early as 1948 when at the age of twenty-seven he had a clear vision of what was wrong with them and what they should be aiming at.

Sharing Ray's attachment to Indian Film Societies, in this part of the book, Roberge articulates clearly the challenges they face in the new media environment emphasising that they still have a significant role to play in the twenty-first century.

The overall theme of Roberge's articles, also reiterated in the concluding essay 'A Journey to the Cave of the Heart', is that in spite of the often unflattering Indian reality he depicted in his films, Ray was an optimist, and that, like Tagore, he never lost faith in man (p. 259). Ray did not believe 'that a film can change society' (p. 97), and perhaps he was right. With his multifaceted creativity, brilliantly executed films, intellectual and professional integrity, and lifetime devotion to film societies, however, Satyajit Ray obviously made a difference more than he could see or his modesty allowed him to admit. This is what Roberge captures convincingly throughout his witty and well-researched essays.

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