

Publications

2015

Guest Editor's Column

Geoffrey Kain

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, kaing@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/publication>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Scholarly Commons Citation

Kain, G. (2015). Guest Editor's Column. *South Asian Review*, 36(1). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/161>

Kain, G. (2015). Guest editor's column. *South Asian Review*, 36(1), 11-16.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

Guest Editor's Column

Geoffrey Kain

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University,
Daytona Beach, Florida

I ncreasingly in higher education we are said to value interdisciplinary approaches to subjects, to consider creative means to perforate if not actually dissolve some boundaries between disciplines, to potentially develop courses or opportunities for students and/or faculty to establish some innovative bridges between the arts and sciences, philosophy and technology, etc. In his text *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge* (1998), renowned evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson explores the potential for the interchange and synthesis between and among the specialized disciplines. After all, Wilson notes, “the ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship” (8). Nevertheless, despite the promise of and purported value placed on innovative interdisciplinary and synthesizing explorations, ours is largely and perhaps increasingly an era that emphasizes, values, and perpetuates specialization.¹ While it is nonetheless not terribly difficult to find those among us who are able to move somewhat comfortably from one dominant discipline to a seemingly unrelated area of interest or sub-specialization, true polymaths are quite rare.²

Satyajit Ray stands as one of the most notable, rare modern masters in a variety of expressions or disciplines: film, obviously and chiefly, where he looms as a giant, as well as graphic illustration, costume design, calligraphy, music composition, musical performance, short story writing (especially for children, detective and science fiction both), essay writing, and with a strong knowledge of history, various cultures, eastern and western aesthetics, religions and philosophies.

Often, some or all of these talents would be involved in his film production: writing the script (perhaps an original, perhaps an interpretation of Bannerji, or Tagore, or Premchand, or Ibsen, or another notable author), directing the film, composing the musical score (or some of it), designing costumes and sets, creating the poster art, providing the calligraphy (in one of his own created fonts) for the credits. His interest and energy found expression in an attention to virtually all details integral to his productions: for example, Andrew Robinson recounts riding along in Ray's car as he sought for and stopped at Calcutta antique and bric-a-brac shops searching for period-appropriate articles to be included in the filming of *Ghare Baire* [*Home and the World*, 1983] (Robinson 4). In Ray's view, "Any film maker who while at work bears any resemblance to the popular conception of the artist as a withdrawn individual in rapt communion with his Muse is obviously shirking and has no business to be within miles of a movie camera" (*Our Films* 3).

Ray's career in film spans from the mid-1950s to his death in 1992, just prior to which he was presented a lifetime achievement Academy Award (see Dilip Basu's reminiscences about this in his interview included in this issue). With some 35 feature films and documentaries to his credit, innumerable short stories, longer pieces of fiction, personal and critical essays, interviews and autobiographical writing, his posters, book covers, sketch books, and other paintings actually span an even longer period. His career as a visual artist began considerably earlier than his work in film, and he was a connoisseur of international films and a film critic prior to directing his own first film. The narrative of the great risks, obstacles, and problems solved in that first endeavor, the filming of *Pather Panchali* (released in 1955) is now legendary, recounted in detail in Ray's book *My Years with Apu: A Memoir* and in many interviews, essays, and other discussions over the years.

Ray's cosmopolitanism in tandem with his lifelong dedication to and entrenchment in Calcutta (and, more broadly, Bengal) is especially significant. His exposure to and appetite for international cinema (much of which he was introduced to during his working half-year in London in 1950, while with the advertising firm of D.J. Keymer)—French, Italian, Japanese, Russian, American—urged him toward adapting a range of international film characteristics and techniques to the local, Bengali context. Whether classic Hollywood films from the likes of Welles, Huston, or Ford, the visual/photographic aesthetic of Cartier-Bresson, or some techniques of the French New Wave or approaches inspired by Italian Neo-Realists such as De Sica, the masterworks of Renoir, Fellini, Kurosawa, Bergman, Ray passionately consumed and studied them all and considered—given the constraints

and challenges posed by the socio-economic realities of Bengal at that time—how it might be possible to utilize native-born tales, local themes and settings, and create film art worthy of and suggestive of the international standard. Gracefully perforating boundaries, could he infuse some of the best of the West into Indian cinema (against the grain of the established popular Hindi film industry) in the Bengali language almost exclusively, and could the Bengali production, bearing his own distinctly personal stamp, then meet the highest international standard?

In his 1958 essay “Problems of a Bengal Film Maker” Ray details the obstacles to potential success in serious cinema—limited market, limited resources, limited potential audience—but he was able to make his mark early and emphatically via international screenings of and awards for his Apu trilogy films, and he had thus discovered the potential for making the local/global, Bengali/Western dialectic work (and remain financially solvent):

The situation that faces us now is this: working in Bengal, we are obliged morally and artistically to make films that have their roots in the soil of our province. Secondly, having in mind the nature of our audience and the resources at our disposal, we are further obliged to aim at an overall simplicity of approach. ‘Big’ stories are out, and so are big stars. The problem of reaching the masses cannot be solved yet, and will remain with us as long as illiteracy on a large scale exists. If the simple-but-serious approach can develop into a movement instead of being confined to a handful of directors, there is the possibility that the taste of the public can be moulded to accept the new and reject the old.

As for the audience abroad, they seem the likeliest to solve the financial problem, but our approach must be cautious and honest. There is no reason why we should not cash in on the foreigner's curiosity about the Orient. But this must not mean pandering to their love of the false-exotic. A great many notions about our country and our people have to be dispelled. (*Our Films* 42-43)

As Ray points out, “Art wedded to truth must in the end have its reward” (43), and, in his case at least, time has proved him right.

In this same early, seminal essay Ray records what can be regarded as a mission statement:

Can a serious film maker, working in India, afford to shut his eyes to the reality that is so poignant, and so urgently in need of interpretation in terms of the cinema? I do not think so.

For the truly serious, socially conscious film maker, there can be no prolonged withdrawal into fantasy. He must face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema. (41)

Despite this declaration, Ray was at times criticized for seemingly ignoring vital local/domestic issues (see for example Dasgupta). A number of pieces in our present collection resist this appraisal, however, exploring Ray's critical perspective on a number of social realities. Suman Ghosh details Ray's typically "understated" and "nuanced" assessment in several of his 1960s films that reflect the explosive experiences of Calcutta life at the time; following this piece, Torsa Ghosal then explores Ray's approach to the turbulence in Calcutta in his 1970s "Calcutta trilogy" films—as opposed to Mrinal Sen's depictions of the same in his own Calcutta trilogy during this same period. In his interview, which begins this issue, Dilip Basu also comments on Ray's socio-political perspective, especially in his late films. Similarly, Suranjan Ganguly, Nishat Haider, and Suchismita Bannerjee all consider the socio-political perspectives evinced by Ray's interpretations/reshaping of his fictional source material (in *Pratidwandi*, *Sadgati*, and *Charulata*, respectively). Ray's hallmark ambiguity (or balance), which may be a cause of some frustration for critics seeking at times a clearer, stronger political and/or philosophical stance, is neatly explored by Anway Mukhopadhyay in his article "Ray Between Two Owls."

Finding a synthesis between/among the many and various expressions of one exceptionally productive artist is no small task, and is not in fact, the goal of the present volume. Instead, serving as Guest Editor for the Special Topic Issue of *SAR* on Satyajit Ray, I initially posted a call for papers that might address the potential range of these various disciplines, and then waited to see what scholars might be inclined to address. Responses came in from a number of countries: India, the US, Canada, Germany, England, and Spain.

The papers represented in this volume do not and cannot cover all the bases of Ray's phenomenal artistic oeuvre, but this issue does provide a range of scholars and topics selected to offer a taste of Ray's artistic and intellectual spectrum and the breadth of his appeal. Some of his earliest films, his period films, the contemporary "problem" films that focused on his Calcutta/Bengal, his documentaries (explored here by Somdatta Mandal), his children's film (closely considered by Darius Cooper), and his fiction (in this case, the many beloved Feluda detective stories, thoroughly investigated by Sayendeb Chowdhury), are all considered in the following articles. It is gratifying to represent established, recognized scholars, as well as those who are emerging—contributors range from younger graduate students to full or retired professors. It is clear that critical interest in Satyajit Ray is alive and well across generations and national boundaries. It is also a very special treat to have Satyajit Ray's writer/film maker son (and sometime collaborator) Sandip Ray supply a brief personal reflection

and memorial to his father with the opening piece, "My Father, My Teacher."

As submissions for this issue arrived, it also reinforced, however, that there remain some areas of Ray scholarship needing to be more thoroughly addressed, especially Ray's visual art and his musical composition. Full length studies of either or both of these aspects of the Ray canon are warranted, and would be most welcome. Darius Cooper makes this point, also, in his contribution "*The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha: A Critical Rendering of a Musical Fairy Tale*"; he invites a broad and extended analysis of Ray's music, while recognizing the promising work done by Suman Ghosh in a 2006 article on the musical achievement of Ray's *Kanchenjunga* (and, as mentioned above, Ghosh is also represented in our present issue, though on another topic).

Ray's eloquence and elegance, his pedigree, his and his family's affiliation with the Tagores, his prolific artistic and critical output over so many years, his place among the pantheon of world-class film makers—and yet his easy personal accessibility—invite our respect and admiration, clearly, while the great bulk of his work continues to be assessed and reassessed from newer critical approaches (postcolonial theory, gender theory, trauma theory, etc.). Digesting the whole of the Ray corpus is a very tall order, but no matter the critical vantage point taken, Ray's own integrative vision and practice is, one might hope, an ongoing model of highest personal achievement, even in our era defined by acute specialization.

Acknowledgements

By way of special acknowledgments, I wish to thank the Embry-Riddle Faculty Research Development Grant for support of this project, as well as Dilip Basu and Dayani Kowshik Basu of the Satyajit Ray Film and Study Center (University of California, Santa Cruz) for their generous hospitality and the time they spent with me, opening their archives, introducing me to all elements of the Ray Center, answering my questions, and being of invaluable assistance; also, thank you to Arup De of the Satyajit Ray Society, Kolkata, for his assistance and prompt replies to my queries. Finally, a warm thank you to Henry for being the wonderful catalyst.

Notes

1. See for example, Scott Jaschik's "Interdisciplinary Penalty" in a recent issue of *Inside Higher Ed*.

2. See, for example, Nancy Andreason's article "Secrets of the Creative Brain" and Edward Carr's "The Last Days of the Polymath." The latter of which also highlights Andrew Robinson's biography of the nineteenth century polymath Thomas Young (*The Last Man Who Knew Everything*, 2006) and,

intriguingly, Robinson is the more recent and now better known of two biographers of Satyajit Ray, the other being Marie Seton.

Works Cited

- Andreason, Nancy C. "Secrets of the Creative Brain." *The Atlantic* July/August 2014. n.pag. Web. 11 October 2014.
- Carr, Edward. "The Last Days of the Polymath." *Intelligent Life* Autumn 2009. n. pag. Web. 16 October 2014.
- Dasgupta, Chidanda. "Ray and Tagore." *Sight and Sound*. British Film Institute, 1966: 36. Print.
- Jaschik, Scott. "Interdisciplinary Penalty." *Inside Higher Ed*. 31 October 2013. N.pag. Web. 17 October 2014.
- Ray, Satyajit. *My Years with Apu: A Memoir*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1994. Print.
- . *Our Films, Their Films*. 1976. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2012. Print.
- Robinson, Andrew. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*. London: I.B. Taurus, 2004. Print.
- . *The Last Man Who Knew Everything*. London: Oneworld, 2006. Print.
- Wilson, E.O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage, 1998. Print.