

Review of Merry Christmas (movie) in the light of Western Classical Music



I am a big fan of filmmaker Sriram Raghavan and after Andha Dhun the expectations were high. His recent film Merry Christmas did not fail to amuse me. It was a rapturous experience to see his film in theatre. Witty dialogs, on screen flirting, old world charm of Bombay (not Mumbai as he

wrote in title roll) and a Hitchcockian drama in a Victorian set up is all I needed for a thorough entertainment. However, there is more to it if you see details and feel the film. The screenplay is doubtlessly taut with twists and turns every 15 minutes; there is God in details. The visuals of Victorian Gothic and Art Deco buildings of Mumbai added a splendour. Particularly for people who like Mumbai, this movie is a treat because Bombay seeps into it as a character. With an overtone of Christmas, the choice of cityscape cannot be better than Bombay in whole of India.

I never knew Katrina Kaif has so much left in her in terms of acting and histrionics. In Bollywood and regional films of India an actress is outdated after few years being in her peak. She is generally shown and seen as a Diva and an item number. Most of the actresses are out of business before they hit mid-life. So, in that kind of background Katrina has made a comeback and what a comeback it is!! Her charm added to her free willy nature of the character and surprisingly her histrionics later on exhibited the violence and cruelty in that character. Vijay Setupathy made "Non-Acting" his acting style. His witty one liners, awkward dance and subtle expressions made my day. His method acting made it a superb watching experience. And I must mention Sanjay Kapoor, who, in a brief role, was hilarious.

The movie is a dark comedy, a Noir film where two lonely souls with chequered past and shades of grey cross paths on a Christmas night and gets locked forever. You may love or hate the ending but last 15 minutes was extraordinary. And now comes the role of Western Classical Music in creating and maintaining the mood of this film.

I have observed earlier in Andhadhun how beautifully Sriram Raghavan used Beethoven's Symphony no.5 to show the jarring visuals and rapturous moments. Similarly, the background music in "Merry Christmas" was heavily influenced by Western Classical Music. For example, during the gunshot the crescendo

of Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite no 1, "In the hall of the Mountain King" superbly helped to muffle the crime. If you hear this classical music piece you will relate how the slow tempo initially is growing to a thundering crescendo eventually within few minutes. For your reference I am pasting the Youtube link below. If you see the film you can relate to what I mean.

Similarly, to add class, Maria was playing Habanera from Carmen by Bizet. Listen to the video. Ronnie was constantly saying "Oh she is a classy woman." In India, due to a colonial hangover, anything Western means sophistication and it implies that to enjoy western classical music, Opera particularly one needs good education and sophistication, which is treasured by many. So the Habanera from Carmen is a great choice to exemplify class.

And in the end Vivaldi's Winter played for almost 10 minutes to the perfection. Starting with the Pizzicato which exemplified the sprinkling of doubt in the police officer's mind, it moves on to a rise in tempo and tone, where swiftly the hidden things expose fast climaxed with the exchange of ring between two souls with tormented past. There is anxiety, hope, romance, despair, magic realism and baffle in that last 5 minutes superbly portrayed by Vivaldi's Winter. Nowhere in Bollywood I expected Vivaldi's Winter to personify the swift changes of human behaviour amidst the movie characters. Sriram Raghavan deserves a special mention for this intelligent use of western classical music to evoke and maintain feelings in a film.

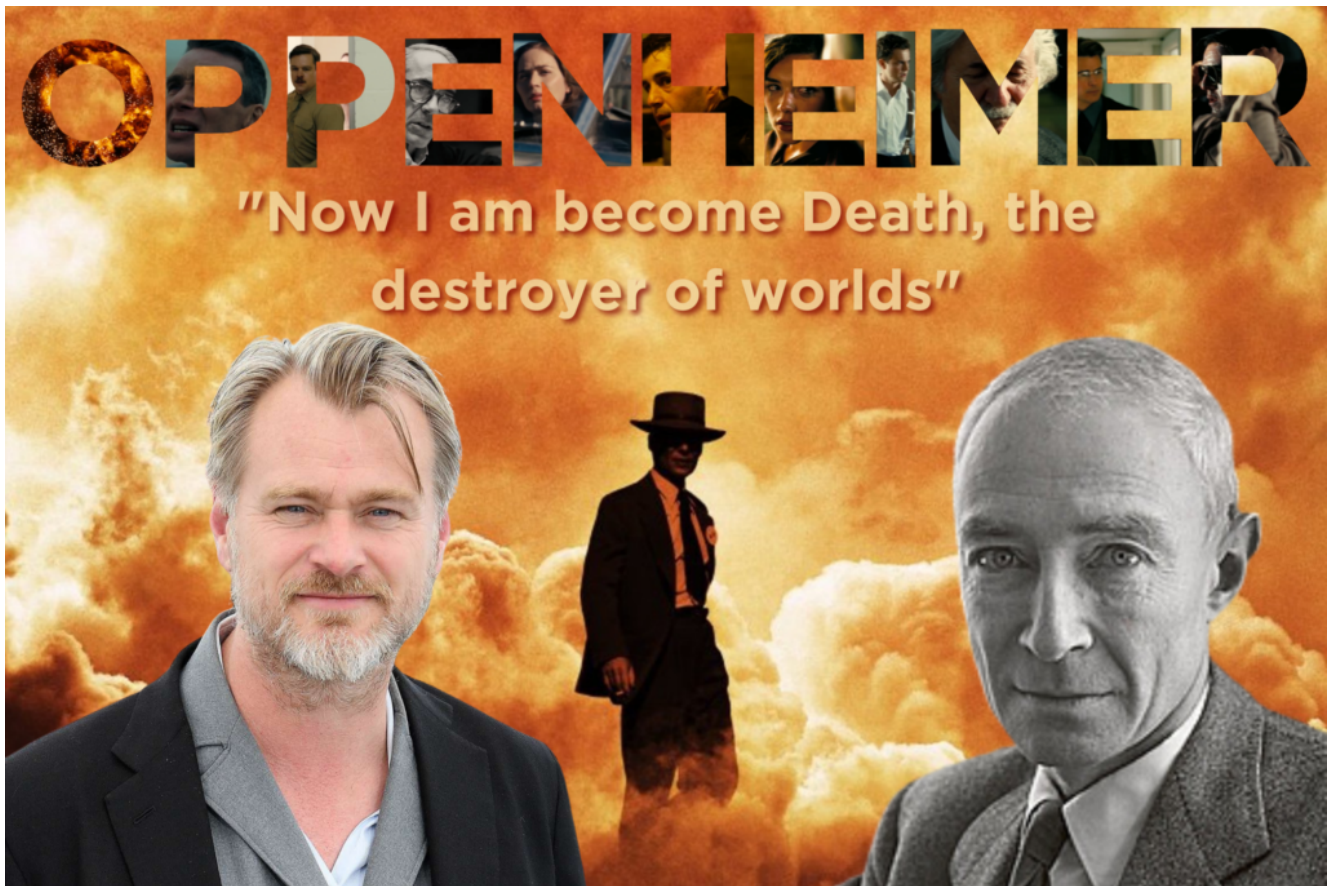
Earlier I have observed use of Western Classical Music pieces in a Satyajit Ray movie or Shyam Benegal movie. For example, Gluck's Melodie from Orpheus and Euridicce was used in "Jana Aranya" by Ray and he also borrowed Mozart's Symphony no 25 in Feluda theme in "Joy baba Felunath" or Mozart Symphony "Jupiter" and Requiem mass in songs of "Hirak Rajar Desh e". Kamaleswar Mukherjee used Beethoven Symphony 5 first movement

in his “Meghe dhaka tara”. Shyam Benegal films like Kalyug, Trikal or Mammo used music of Beethoven and Mozart. However, in Bollywood use of Western classical music motifs are few and far. In a refreshing take, Sriram Raghavan has used Vivaldi, Grieg and Bizet in “Merry Christmas” to reflect and set the mood.

Overall, the movie “Merry Christmas” brings a point that “Content is King” in an industry flooded with Jawaans, Pathaans and Animal. Merry Christmas is a thoroughly entertaining movie where you have to sit on the edge not to miss the details. Particularly the edgy ending was something a movie goer will remember for a long, long time. In fact, Merry Christmas opens a new year of pure filmmaking and story telling in Bollywood

_____Biswa Prasun Chatterji.

Openheimer – Said and Unsaid



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Oppenheimer is a biographical film on the most controversial physicist of the 20th century by the celebrated Hollywood director Christopher Nolan, maker of *Dunkirk* (2017), *Interstellar* (2014), *Batman Vs Superman Ultimate Edition* (2016), *Inception* (2016) and a host of other films on eclectic subjects. He is a megastar amongst Hollywood's film directors.

Robert Oppenheimer, was an American Jew, whose intellect, perhaps matched that of Albert Einstein, the German-Jew who, fleeing Hitler's anti-semitic Nazi Germany in 1932, found a home in the United States of America and was celebrated there. Einstein's genius for physics was matched by his ethical conscience. The same cannot be said of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who came to be known as the 'Father of the Atom' bomb and the man who headed the Manhattan Project, comprising a team of scientists working on the Atom Bomb in utmost secrecy and with great speed to have it ready before Hitler's Germany did during World War II (1939-1945).

The ultimate tragedy was that Oppenheimer (the subject of the film) was unable to fully comprehend the destructive potential of the bomb until it was too late. Promotional poster for Oppenheimer (2023)

Nolan's film goes easy on these ethical considerations though there is a sentimental approach adopted by the director in the last shot of the film, when, in response to Einstein's fear that the Atom Bomb may destroy the world, Oppenheimer, in gigantic close up (the film is shot in IMAX, a huge screen format designed expressly to overwhelm the viewer), he says "we already have," meaning have destroyed the world. This lone statement does not compensate for the rest of the film which evades the ethical implications of creating a monster that can destroy the world in a trice.

The film's structure is staccato. It begins with Oppenheimer's trial instigated by the notorious anti-Communist Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was convinced that Oppenheimer was a traitor, because of his communist sympathies, at a time when very many intellectuals, became either members of the Communist Party of America or fellow travelers, having witnessed the failure of American capitalism when the share market collapsing in 1929 and leaving the economy of the nation tottering for a decade and millions struggling for their daily bread. The principal villain in the trial in the film, is Lewis Strauss, a mediocre scientist who thinks he has been wronged by Oppenheimer. Strauss (played powerfully by Robert Downey Jr.) is the driving force of the story and scenes from Oppenheimer's life are intercut with Strauss's 'testament' at the trial.

Cillian Murphy's portrayal of Oppenheimer is involved, in an old fashioned style of Method acting. He lives the part, in accordance with his conception of what the man he is playing may have been like. It is through his portrayal that Nolan's film acquires both its thrust, and aesthetic ambivalence.

It is important to place the real Oppenheimer alongside his onscreen version. The film's Oppenheimer, for all his brilliance, comes across as a vulnerable, and, on occasion, an indecisive man. In other words the victim of his circumstances. It is an interpretation that suits the American audience, still floundering between Christ and Freud, and also, unable to give up its appetite for the overweening comforts of the material world and its attendant perversions.

Nolan, who is also the scriptwriter of the film, sees Oppenheimer as a man obsessed with his work and yet politically aware, who is grateful in an understated way to the American State for providing him the opportunity as it turns out, in retrospect, of playing both Faust and Mephistopheles at the same time. The script is based on J. Robert Oppenheimer's biography, *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, a book that won a Pulitzer Prize. *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin

It is difficult, even today, for the U.S. and its citizens (a vast majority of them) to accept the fact that the Atom Bomb created by Oppenheimer and his team in the Manhattan project had paved the way for the destruction of the world; an observation proven by the proliferation of nuclear weapons all over the world today, with the U.S.A leading the way, followed by Russia (the erstwhile Soviet Union) and China, in that order. All it needs is a lunatic, driven by extreme insecurity to push the Button, to provoke an instantaneous reaction from others to do the same, for the entire world to go up in flames in seconds.

In the film what is stated clearly is the need for America to make the bomb before Nazi Germany does and uses it on the Allies. The outcome of the Second World War is seen to be hanging in the balance. Nazi Germany loses the War and surrenders, but its ally Japan, on its last legs, with hardly any resources—military and financial left, fights on gamely, and possibly may hold out for another month.

The Atom Bomb is dropped over the islands of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nevertheless. Three hundred thousand people die in moments and very many others are maimed and crippled for life and are afflicted by radiation poisoning in varying degrees. Both Hiroshima and Nagasaki are completely destroyed. The real reason for dropping the two bombs was to judge how destructive they could be. As later facts were to prove that the United States of America, immediately after the end of the war in 1945, fearing the rise of communism and Soviet Union's ever increasing political power, had actually planned to use the A-Bomb over 66 cities of the Soviet Union if the situation got 'out of hand'. Surely Nolan, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin were aware of these facts. The film is silent about this crucial detail and the U.S. Government's deliberate, completely inhuman dropping of the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to use the Japanese as Guinea Pigs, giving an absolute racist angle to the exercise. In addition, there are no images of the aftermath of the bombing and the complete destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the film.



The mounting of the production, in layman's language, is gorgeous. Nolan, is perhaps, the greatest showman of our time. He has an exceptionally talented team working to help realise his vision. Hoyte Van Hoytema (Cinematography), Jennifer Lame (Editing), Jake Cavallo (Art Direction), Ruth De Jong (Production Design), Clair Kaufman (Set Decoration), Oliva Peebles (Set Decorator – New Mexico Unit), Scott R. Fisher, Laurie Pellard, Mario Vanillo, Vincent Vanillo (Special Effects Team), Ellen Mirojnick (Costume Design) and a host of others who worked together to give the film its completely authentic look. The Los Alamos township and testing sight is a most impressive combination of engineering construction and art direction.

The scene of the testing of the Atom Bomb is certainly awe-inspiring but what follows later in the story in the Los Alamos township auditorium when Oppenheimer informs his co-workers, not all of whom are scientists, but have been a part of the project, about the devastation caused by the two bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is both scary and nauseating. Every member of the audience in the auditorium is cheering manically like a football hooligan! The film does not clearly say anything about the complete devastation of the two cities but is jubilant about the total military defeat of Japan.

There is an attempt throughout the film to deflect attention from the real issue, that of the destruction of human civilisation till 1945, and, not just the poisoning of the human consciousness but a fatalistic acceptance of the new status quo, that is, nuclear weapons shall remain in permanent existence, and the world, henceforth, shall live in fear all the time.

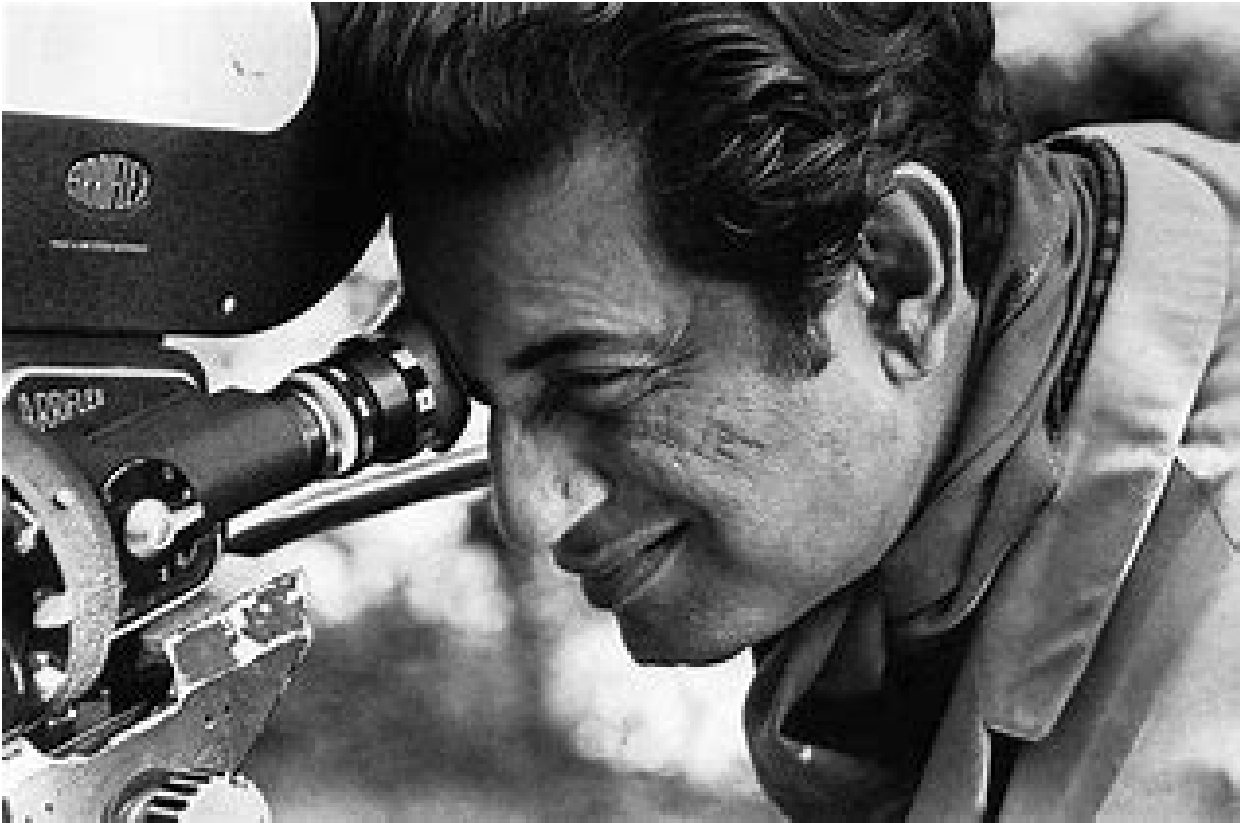
Nolan treats his story differently. He treats President Truman as a callous buffoon in the scene of his meeting with Oppenheimer, who tries feebly to tell him of the enormous destruction caused by the two A-bombs. Truman responds with,

“But we brought our boys home (meaning the Army) safely.” When Oppenheimer, with tears in his eyes, mumbles something about the destruction caused, Truman, draws out his handkerchief and offers it to him and tells his friend, “Take this cry baby away.” Oppenheimer meeting President Truman (Still from movie)

American cinema, certainly in the last fifty years has been gravitating towards a language of misleading heroism and hence machismo. The trial of Oppenheimer, which is the pivot of the film, is cut up in many bits. In a portion, the physicist is called before a Committee of Jurists, mostly from the Armed Forces, who question him about his attitude towards the Atom Bomb (he doesn't want any more to be made, though he is aware that it is going to be a futile exercise) and, of course, his integrity and character. Strangely enough, Leslie Groves (finely played by Matt Damon), a senior Army Officer, Supervising the Los Alamos operations during World War II, comes to his defence.

Oppenheimer, the former Communist sympathiser, makes his compromises with the System steadily and is given official recognition, not unsurprisingly. Nolan makes a film, with no nuances, saying all the right things, which is visually and aurally breath-taking, but far away from what we consider to be a universal truth.

**Remembering Ray | Kanika
Aurora**



Rabindranath Tagore wrote a poem in the autograph book of young Satyajit whom he met in idyllic Shantiniketan.

The poem, translated in English, reads: 'Too long I've wandered from place to place/Seen mountains and seas at vast expense/Why haven't I stepped two yards from my house/Opened my eyes and gazed very close/At a glistening drop of dew on a piece of paddy grain?'

Years later, Satyajit Ray the celebrated Renaissance Man, captured this beauty, which is just two steps away from our homes but which we fail to appreciate on our own in many of his masterpieces stunning the audience with his gritty, neo realistic films in which he wore several hats- writing all his screenplays with finely detailed sketches of shot sequences and experimenting in lighting, music, editing and incorporating unusual camera angles. Several of his films were based on his own stories and his appreciation of classical music is fairly apparent in his music compositions resulting in some rather distinctive signature Ray tunes collaborating with renowned classical musicians such as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar and Vilayat Khan.

No surprises there. Born a hundred years ago in 1921 in an extraordinarily talented Bengali Brahmo family, Satyajit Ray carried forward his illustrious legacy with astonishing ease and finesse.

Both his grandfather Upendra Kishore RayChaudhuri and his father Sukumar RayChaudhuri are extremely well known children's writers. It is said that there is hardly any Bengali child who has not grown up listening to or reading Upendra Kishore's stories about the feisty little bird Tuntuni or the musicians Goopy Gyne and Bagha Byne. He also launched Sandesh, perhaps the first children's magazine in India. Satyajit revived it in 1961 and it is currently available online as well.

He also established the Calcutta Film Society in 1947 with some like mind friends and film enthusiasts; the first film club of its kind in India, dedicated to watching and discussing the best of world cinema.

Pather Panchali (The Song of the Road), directed by Satyajit Ray is rightly considered as one of the greatest landmarks in Indian film history, placing our country firmly on the world's cinematic map inspiring several generations of film directors.

After watching Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves, he recalled his emotions in a lecture in 1984. The film had "gored" him. "I came out of the theatre with my mind firmly made up. I would become a filmmaker. The prospect of giving up a job didn't daunt me any more. I would make my film exactly as De Sica had made his: working with non-professional actors, using modest resources, and shooting on actual locations."

"I was familiar with the camera, possessing a second-hand Leica. And paying homage to a photographer I considered to be the greatest of all—Henri Cartier-Bresson—I wanted my film to look as if it was shot with available light a la Cartier-Bresson... I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that I would

become a filmmaker, starting my career with Pather Panchali. If it didn't work out, I would be back at my desk at Keymer's, tail between my legs. But if it did work, there would be no stopping me." (My Years with Apu.)

But there was no money to make the film. After failing to procure the bare minimum amount required to even contemplate filming, Ray decided to ask some of his friends to contribute a thousand rupees each. The budget of the film had been fixed at ₹ 70,000. He collected ₹ 17,000, and started filming in the October of 1952. The very first sequence that was shot is perhaps the most iconic of the film: Apu and his elder sister Durga running through a field of kaash flowers to see a train for the first time in their lives.

Pandit Ravi Shankar would provide the music and Subrata Mitra was the 21-year-old cinematographer who had never operated a motion picture camera before this. Today he is acknowledged in the cinema world as one of the finest ever to operate a movie camera.

The rest as they say is history.

Pather Panchali went to the Cannes Film Festival and there is a popular anecdote about how initially it was exhibited late at night at a small theatre with less than a dozen people watching including Francois Truffaut, then a critic who would eventually go on to become a great film director, leaving the hall within 10 minutes, bored by the slow pace of the film. Truffaut later apologized several times and Ray and he became good friends.

Lotte Eisner, who would go on to become the chief curator of the Cinematheque Francaise, as Providence would have it decided that the film deserved a second screening. She lobbied and campaigned for it, resulting in a second show which was well attended and Pather Panchali won the special jury prize for the 'Best Human Document'.

Ray could now become a full-time film director. He started work on Pather Panchali's sequel Aparajito (The Unvanquished), which depicts Apu's teenage years is arguably the finest and most touching film of the Apu trilogy.

Although the first film he wanted to make was Ghare Baire, the one that got made was of course, Pather Panchali. An adaptation of Tagore's 1916 novel, Ghare Baire (The Home and the World) eventually did get made in 1984 and got nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival that year.

In 1982, delivering a lecture, Ray spoke about his work.

"There is a special problem that faces one who must talk about films. Lectures on art should ideally be illustrated. One who talks on paintings usually comes armed with slides and a projector. This solves the difficulty of having to describe in words, what must be seen with the eyes. The lecturer on music must bless the silicon revolution, which enables him to cram all his examples into a cassette no bigger than a small bar of chocolate. But the lecturer on cinema has no such advantage—at least not in the present state of technology in our country. If he wishes to cite an example, he can do no more than give a barely adequate description in words, of what is usually perceived with all one's senses. A film is pictures, a film is words, a film is movement, a film is drama, a film is music, a film is a story, a film is a thousand expressive aural and visual details. These days one must also add that film is colour. Even a segment of film that lasts barely a minute can display all these aspects simultaneously. You will realize what a hopeless task it is to describe a scene from a film in words. They can't even begin to do justice to a language which is so complex."

Ray thought of cinema as a language. "Cinema is images and sound," he said.

"The problem," he wrote, "was over the word 'art'. If the word

'language' was used instead, I think the true nature of cinema will become clearer and there will be no need for debate." Cinema was a language defined by fade-ins, and fade-outs, camera angles, clever editing and quick cuts complemented by classical music.

Composing music for his films was essential to him too. "How interesting to know... that film and music had so much in common!" he wrote (Speaking of Films). "Both unfold over a period of time; both are concerned with pace and rhythm and contrast; both can be described in terms of mood—sad, cheerful, pensive, boisterous, tragic, jubilant."

Ray had mastered the art of conveying the message without actually making it explicitly obvious. In *Apur Sansar*, for instance, the audience gets a sense of the intimacy and comfort that Apu (the incredibly gifted Soumitra Chatterjee, who passed away recently and worked with Ray in fourteen films) and his wife Aparna (Sharmila Tagore in her first film role, who was apparently expelled from her convent school for appearing in a film) enjoy from the little sequences like Apu waking up in the morning, looking decidedly happy and satiated, opening his packet of cigarettes and finding a note by Aparna inside, asking him not to smoke too much.

Ray also ensures that women in his movies exhibit dignity and courage in the face of adversities.

Charulata, based on a Tagore novella called *Nashtaneer*, whose literal translation is *The Ruined Nest* (home in this instance) with the English title, *The Lonely Wife* is a masterpiece by any standards.

The opening sequence which establishes her soul destroying loneliness with no dialogues is fascinating and portrays her unique disposition in seven minutes of near silent shots.

In Ray's own words the seven minutes were about (from *Speaking Of Films*) attempting to use a language entirely free from

literary and theatrical influences. Except for one line of dialogue in its seven minutes, the scene says what it has to say in terms that speak to the eye and the ear.

Madhabi Mukherjee, his rumoured muse and more accomplished the job with practiced ease in the scene which is still etched in his fans' collective memory; the embroidery, the chiming of the grandfather clock, casual lifting of the piano lid and striking a note; the monkey man, the palki, lorgnette and all.

Another personal favourite is her swinging gaily with fairly unusual camera angles and positioning perhaps influence by his mentor Renoir's *A Day in the Country*. So is the brilliant montage announcing the arrival of rains in *Pather Panchali*.

Everyone has a list of their cherished sequence, I daresay from scores of profound, layered and thematically rich Ray films, such as *Jalsaghar*, *Devi* or *The Calcutta Trilogy: Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha & Jana Aranya*.

One is spoilt for choice out of his 28 films which he directed in over four decades.

Most of these are based on classic Bengali literary works, and two; *Shatranj Ke Khilari* and the telefilm *Sadgati* on stories written by Munshi Premchand. Others are based on contemporary novels and short stories, and some, like *Kanchanjungha* and *Nayak* are original scripts written by Ray himself. One of his last films, *Ganashatru* was inspired by Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of The People*.

A few of his films like *Parash Pathar* (*The Philosopher's Stone*), and the two Feluda detective novels of his which he made into film—*Sonar Kella* (*The Golden Fortress*) and *Joi Baba Felunath* (*The Elephant God*) are breezy and immensely entertaining. His two *Goopy-Bagha* films, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (*The Kingdom of Diamonds*) delighted the children as musicals.

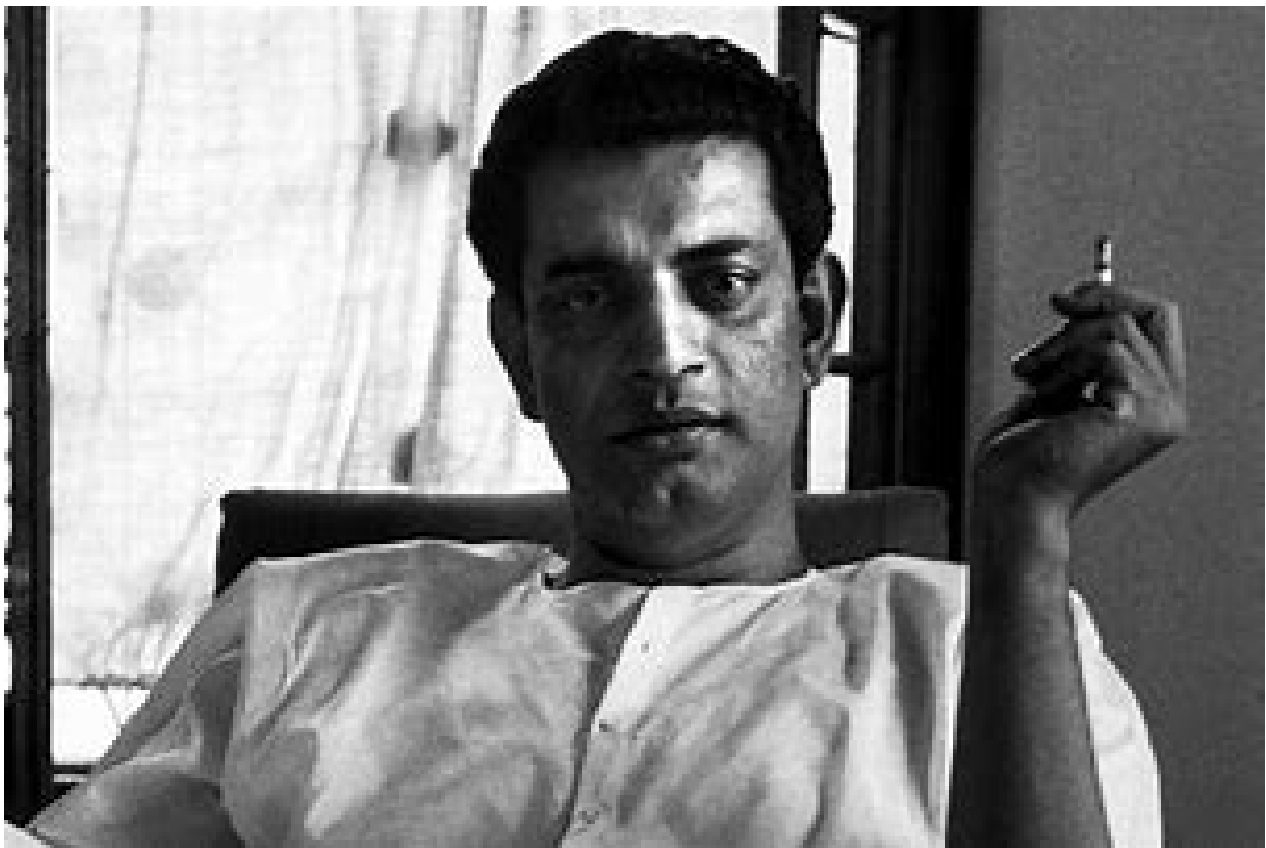
A little known fact about Ray is that without knowing it, he was indeed the first “graphic designer” in India. He even designed two English typefaces -Ray Roman and Ray Bizarre.

One of the most influential, multi-faceted and greatest filmmakers of all times, Satyajit Ray mastered the art of telling intimate human stories, the journey, the trials and tribulations of the ordinary men and women with extraordinary expertise embodying and showcasing the magic of cinema at its very best.

To recognize his enormous contributions to cinema, he was awarded the Academy Honorary Award days before his death. He was also awarded India’s highest civilian honour Bharat Ratna by the Government of India

The legendary Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa one famously remarked about Ray, “Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.”

Satyajit Ray shall forever continue to illuminate and inspire.



The Dig: A Review by Kanika Aurora

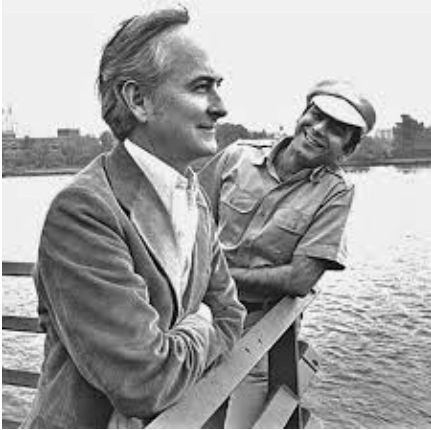
Not for the impatient, watch this movie for the lonely beauty of the blue skies, the nuanced, unhurried, sensitive performances, the appreciation of a collective legacy as well reaffirming your belief that Life is Continuous and “it speaks, the past.”

Gene Deitch (1924 – 2020) passes away / Manohar Khushalani

Eugene Merril Deitch, an American-Czech illustrator, animator, comics artist, and film director was based in Prague since 1959, Deitch was also known for creating animated cartoons such as Munro, Tom Terrific, and Nudnik.

Ismail Merchant: Film

Producer Extraordinary / Partha Chatterjee



Ismail Merchant with
James Ivory

Ismail Merchant's passing away on May 25, 2005 marked the end of a certain kind of cinema. He was the last of the maverick film producers with taste who made without any compromise, films with a strong literary bias which were partial to actors and had fine production values. It is sad that he died at sixty eight of bleeding ulcers unable to any longer work his legendary charm on venal German financiers who were supposed to finance his last production, *The White Countess*, which was to have been directed by his long-time partner James Ivory.

Merchant-Ivory productions came into being in 1961 when, Ismail Merchant, a Bohra Muslim student on a scholarship in America

met James

Ivory, an Ivy-leaguer with art and cinema on his mind, quite by accident in a New York coffee shop. The rest as they say is history. Together they made over forty films in a relationship that lasted all of forty-four years. A record in the annals of independent filmmaking anywhere in the world. Ivory's gentle, inward looking vision may never have found expression on the scale that it did but for Merchant's amazing resourcefulness that included coaxing, cajoling, bullying and charming all those associated, directly and indirectly with the making of his films.

Merchant-Ivory productions' first venture was a documentary, *The Delhi* Way back in 1962. The next year they made a feature length fiction film *The Householder* in Black and White. It was about a young college lecturer, tentative and clumsy trying to find happiness with his wife from a sheltered background. Ironically the script was written by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a Jewess from Poland married to a Parsee Indian architect. James Ivory who knew nothing about the subject did a fine job of directing his first real film. He had made a couple of pleasant documentaries earlier. The crew was basically Satyajit Ray's, a director who was already being acknowledged the world over as a Master and whose *Apu* trilogy, *Jalsa* *Ghar* (*The Music Room*) and other films had made a lasting impression on

international audiences and critics. His cameraman Subrata Mitra, also lionized, photographed *The Householder* which was designed by Bansi Chandragupta, the most resourceful art director in India, trained by Eugene

Lourie, who created most evocative sets for Jean Renoir's *The River*, shot in Barrackpore, near Calcutta in 1950.

The success of *The Householder* in the West was largely due to the efforts of Merchant's energy and drive. He wooed the Press which responded warmly almost to a man. His film went to those distributors who could give it maximum exposure and a decent royalty. His task was made easier by the rousing reception accorded to Satyajit Ray's lyrical cinema to which Merchant Ivory's maiden effort owed clear allegiance.

Their second film *Shakespearewallah* (1965) had an elegiac tone which added poignance to its lyricism. It was a fictionalized account of a true story.

A well-known English theatre couple Jeffrey and Laura Kendall who play people like themselves in the film actually ran a peripatetic theatre company in the British India of the 1930s, and 40s. The troupe got into grave financial difficulties when their audience endowed Anglicized Public schools and Country Clubs whose members belonged to flourishing British owned mercantile establishments suddenly lost interest in all things

English. The purple patches from Shakespeare done by the company, which also had some Indian actors in real life, as in the film, no longer interested people, whose enthusiasm for culture could best be described as ephemeral. Only the romance between the young daughter of the English couple and an Indian rake was fiction. The performances were first-rate and Felicity Kendall as the daughter was moving. Beautifully photographed in B/W by Subrata Mitra and scored by Satyajit Ray, whose music sold half-a- million long-playing records, Shakespearewallah was a huge success in America and Europe. Ismail was only twenty-eight years old when he produced his second feature film. He proved himself to be a man of fine taste, possessing the ability to grasp an opportunity when it presented itself.

In retrospect, one can say he best illustrated the idea that artistes are a product of history. They reflect a certain spirit of their times—so too with Ismail Merchant and his alter ego, the director James Ivory. They came at a turbulent moment in Western politics, culture and cinema. The French New Wave was about to peak and had already revealed the staggering possibilities of film narration. Filmmakers as disparate in temperament as Alain Resnais, Jacques Tati, Robert Bresson, Jean Luc Goddard, Eric Rohmer and Francois Truffaut had enriched film language and

proudly
declared it an art form to be taken as seriously as
literature, music, theatre or

the plastic arts. In the Anglo-Saxon world classical cinema
was in its last

throes, and its greatest master John Ford was unemployed,
ignored by know

all young men running Hollywood. There was a niche for a
different, gentler

kind of storytelling and Merchant-Ivory films filled it.

Their early productions were devoted to selling exotic India
abroad and who

could do it better than Ismail? The third film that Ismail and
James did

together was set in Benares. The Guru (1968) had the
contretemps of a

famous classical sitarist with his two wives—one traditional,
the younger

one modern, as its focal point. Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental
Meditation

had swept across America promising deliverance from the
ravages of greed

and avarice brought by relentless capitalism. Recognizing this
phenomenon,

the story included as a catalyst an English pop star and his
girlfriend. India

and its contradictions, the musician attracted to modernity
but comfortable

only when maintaining status quo, his celebrity English
disciple and his girl

both hoping to find peace in the holy city where the ustad
lives, all this

constituted a visually interesting but not witty or incisive
narrative.

Energetic promotion prevented the film from being a dead loss.
While it did

not make a reasonable profit, it made money—only some.

Bombay Talkie (1970) the fourth Merchant-Ivory offering was about an ageing male star, who was unable to cope with his own life, fame that was soon going to elude him, and the unreal world of Hindi cinema. Apart from Zia Mohyeddin's powerful performance as an ignored lyricist, and Subrata Mitra's camerawork, including a long bravura sequence at the beginning, there was little to recommend about the film. Utpal Dutt, whose dynamic presence held The Guru together, was just about adequate as a harried film producer. Shashi Kapoor who was so good in the first two films, looked tired here.

Bombay Talkie did nothing for Ismail Merchant or James Ivory. Two films in a row that barely made money, put the company under financial strain. For the first time in his life, Ismail was forced to deal with the unyielding Jewish moneymen of New York on less than equal terms. The experience marked him for life and made him a skinflint. His old friend and colleague Shashi Kapoor, remarked on television that Ismail did not like paying any of his actors and technicians anymore than he absolutely had to. The Savages (1973) was made in the U.S. in an old colonial Restoration mansion, in Scarborough, forty minutes away from New York. The old place

and the jungle nearby gave Ivory the idea of bringing in jungle dwellers from Stone Age into the twentieth century. An object the "Savages" had never seen before, a coloured ball, suddenly descends in their midst. The retrieval of it by people from the modern era provides material for a potentially hilarious and wise film. The script based on an idea by Ivory and not written by Jhabvala, lacked subtlety and humour. Although the director saw it as a "Hudson River Last Day in Marienbad", his film had all of Alain Resnais's intellectual tomfoolery but none of his poetic intensity. Merchant understood right away that original material was not the duo's cup of tea, and thereafter relied, exclusively on literature to provide the ballast for their films.

After *The Wild Party* (1975), a sincere but inept attempt to recreate the excesses of the Jazz age in sinful old Hollywood, an undertaking the inspiration for which may well have been the jewelled prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Merchant Ivory production was again in dire straits. Certain critics including Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* even called Ismail and James a pair of amateurs. The energy that drove their first two films seemed to have deserted them.

Merchant would have to turn things around speedily before

America wrote them off. *Roseland* (1977) set in a real ballroom of that name in New York where people come to shed their loneliness was too civilized, too tentative to move viewers. Although it had a solid cast led by old-timer Teresa Wright with Lou Jacobi, Geraldine Chaplin and Christopher Walken who featured in the three inter-connected episodes, it was lacking in drive. Ivory seemed to have found a cinematic language that was true to his temperament, but it still needed polishing. The opportunity came with an adaptation by Ruth Praver Jhabwala, who else, of Henry James's *The Europeans* (1979). The interiorized pre-modern drama was just what Merchant Ivory productions needed. Accolades followed and actress Lee Remick's performance in a pivotal role was greatly appreciated. It was more than a success d'esteeme. People in large numbers bought tickets to see it. Ismail and James had finally made it to the front rank of American and European filmmakers. They were still in their late thirties.

The following year in 1980, they tried their hand at an experimental musical *Jane Austen in Manhattan* about various troupes wanting to perform a 19th century manuscript by Jane Austen written in her childhood that was recently discovered. It starred Anne Baxter, who shot to fame thirty years

earlier as Eve Harrington in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All about Eve* and Robert Powell, also a contemporary of hers. Made on a shoestring budget of 450, 000 dollars, it was like the proverbial curate's cake, good in parts. *Quartet* (1981) based on Jean Rhys's despairing existentialist novel about bohemian Paris in the late 1920s starring Isabelle Adjani, Maggie Smith, Alan Bates and photographed in luminous low-key by Pierre L'Homme, cinematographer to Jean Pierre Melville, father of the French new wave, was a feather in James Ivory's cap. It was possible only because of Merchant's exceptional organizing skills and uncanny judgment of the artistic and commercial climate of Europe and America.

There was indeed room then for a quieter, more reflective kind of cinema in the English-speaking world, especially after Hollywood had expended its energies on mainly violent moralistic dramas and thrillers. The 'serious' French cinema, thanks or no thanks to the brilliant cinematic combustions of Jean Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Jacques Rivette and Chris Marker had been forced to virtually abandon the linear narrative, with the notable exception of Francois Truffaut and, more so, Jean Pierre Rappeneau. It secretly welcomed well-told stories from any part of the world. Satyajit Ray's films and those of Merchant Ivory found favour with discerning French

audiences,
principally in Paris.

Ismail and James returned to the twilight world of Maharajas and 'illicit' love; the consequences of one is probed by a young Englishwoman in *Heat* and *Dust* (1983). Julie Christie is the woman who comes to India to understand her late grandaunt's affair with a Maharaja (Shashi Kapoor) and falls in love with a handsome youth (Zakir Husain) and gets impregnated by him. It was a big hit. Though Merchant-Ivory had to take a lot of flak from the critics. Ismail's logic was clear. Someone had to pay for the homes and offices in London, New York and Bombay (now Mumbai). The next year it was time to regain critical acclaim and the affections of a loyal audience. Once again it was Henry James to the rescue and his *Bostonians* was Merchant Ivory's key to success. It restored their prestige and gave them an unspoken right to adapt works of 'difficult' writers for the screen.

E.M. Forster, a great but not popular English writer was next on their agenda. *A Room With a View* (1986) featuring Daniel Day Lewis, son of poet C. Day Lewis, Helena Bonham Carter, Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, was the first attempt to find a cinematic equivalent to Forster's prose which was at first glance unsuitable for an audio-visual

interpretation. There was too little physical action in his writing—A Passage to India and Where Angels Fear to Tread have short bursts of it—most of what occurs was in the minds of his characters. Merchant and Ivory won a fair bit of critical acclaim, and made decent amounts of money on it.

Their films were always about people, trying to find themselves—deliberately or not. The price they pay to arrive at an understanding with life is usually heavy. Most often they are aware of their dilemma; however, there are exceptions. Does Stephen, the faithful old butler in Lord Darlington's household really comprehend what an unfair hand he has been dealt by his former employers in Remains of the Day (1993)? Only Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, who like Stephens is now without a job, seems to know despite a stoic acceptance of her fate.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel helps Ivory make perhaps his finest film: a quiet, understated, but never the less powerful depiction of class and privilege in pre-war England. The same pair of actors Anthony Hopkins, and Emma Thompson from their Forster triumph of a year earlier Howards End were repeated to great effect in Remains of the Day.

Howards End (1992) was set during the economic depression that swept Europe and America in the late 1920s through the mid-1930s. It

was about
naked abuse of power and ruthless assertion of privilege.
Anthony Hopkins
as an aristocrat with a roving eye is riveting but it is the
women who elicit
both respect and sympathy. Emma Thompson and Helena Bonham
Carter as
sisters from the middle-class whose trust is betrayed
heartlessly by the
aristocrat, culminating in the murder of a male friend of the
younger sister,
with their accurate reading of social situations, throw the
film into a political
perspective which needs no polemics to comprehend.
If this article is as much about Ivory as it is about Merchant
then there is a
reason for it. They were joined artistically at the hip. One
was at his best
only when complementing the other. It was Ismail who
encouraged, even
inspired James, to stretch himself to discover his true
métier; to take risks
with complex literary texts that were difficult to film but
could be
immensely rewarding once an effective method was discovered.

Who for instance had dared to film primarily uncinematic
authors like
Forster and James in an Anglo-Saxon cinema? Who dared to
gamble and
win but Ivory egged on by Merchant. To make meaningful cinema
out of
texts with sub-terranean relationships hidden under a patina
of good
manners, where what was being said and done often meant the
opposite, was
no mean achievement.

This kind of interiorized drama was also the highlight of Mr and Mrs Bridge (1990) with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward playing the eponymous couple. Set in Kansas City during the Depression, it travels over two generations to Paris. The inclusion of the Louvre as a location was a masterstroke, made possible through Ismail's penchant for legerdemain. Apart from Newman and Woodward's stand out performances as a rich couple stultified by time unable to understand the changing world around them, there was the elegant presentation of a difficult idea. Adapted from two novels by Evans Connell, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge was a critical as well as a commercial triumph.

Ismail had once said in an interview that he had brought in Jefferson in Paris (1995) for five million dollars; a feat beyond any producer, independent or backed by a Hollywood studio. To make a period piece about the second president of the United States and him courting his future French wife, for such a sum was a well nigh impossible task. The film was panned despite Nick Nolte's caring performance and Pierre L'Homme's telling photography.

It was only a year earlier in 1994 that Ismail had made his own debut as a director in feature films. It is not that he had never been behind the camera

before. His short *The Creation of Women* (1960) had been nominated for an Oscar in its category and later *Mahatma* and *The Mad Boy* (1974) of twenty-seven minutes duration was highly acclaimed. It is quite possible that he had grown tired of fundraising for large projects that had to be reasonably budgeted to be commercially viable. He wanted to do a small, intimate film he could call his own. He chose Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* to do as *Muhafiz* in Urdu. He got Desai and Shahrukh Husain to write the screenplay, which was set in contemporary Bhopal. Noor, a huge, custardy man, a once important Urdu poet is on his last legs, dying of adulation heaped on him by sycophants much like the rich food he so enjoys. He lives with his two wives, one like him old but unlike him reliable and the other a young,

opportunistic tart rescued from a local brothel and the mother of his son.

Devan, a young Hindu lecturer devoted to the Urdu language is asked by his publisher friend to do an interview with Noor for his journal. What follows, is in turn, comic and sad. Noor's interview is botched by a novice sound recordist. He dies suddenly, but Devan somehow manages to bring out a collection of Noor's poems.

Muhafiz is also about a highly expressive language that is being allowed to

die out in independent India for exclusively political reasons. All official work in courts and police stations was done in Urdu before the partition of India in 1947. Immediately after, Hindi became the official language of the State. All avenues of Government employment suddenly closed for Urdu students. Noor a poet of sensitivity and discernment became a victim of capricious politics. To add insult to injury, his second wife sang his ghazals and passed them off as her own.

Ismail chose the more difficult intimist mode for his film. Rarely did the cinema go out of the poet's house. There were precisely five other locations, namely Devan's home and his college; his colleague Siddiqui's home and the office of the Urdu weekly which has commissioned Devan to do Noor's interview and the visit by boat to Sufi Saints' Mazar on an island in a lake. The last scene of Noor's funeral procession is seen mostly from a distance, mainly to create scale.

Too many things went wrong for intention to match achievement. For one, Ismail had been away from home for much too long; true he did come back periodically to make films, but these were not connected closely with the imperceptibly changing social scene. He did not really have the time to study India for he was far too busy administering to the needs of

the film at hand.

His knowledge of Urdu, for all his enthusiasm, was at best sketchy.

Choosing the poetry of a revolutionary poet like Faiz Ahmed Faiz to do duty

for most of Noor's was a mistake. Anyone familiar with Faiz's oeuvre will

immediately realize that it does not sit well on the lips of a bacchante like

Noor. Perhaps Josh Malihabadi's poetry would have been more apt, for it

would have been closer to Noor's spirit. More attention should have been

paid to his ghazals especially those picturised on his second wife. They are

sung in a lackluster manner by Kavita Krishnamurthy. Even the one

rendered by Hariharan lacks conviction. They should have had more

melody, more raga content. This was all the more surprising because Ustad

Zakir Husain was the composer.

Ismail was in much greater control doing his second film Cotton Mary

(2000) in English, with a script by Alexandra Viets adapted from her own

play. It was about an Anglo-Indian Ayah who decides to make herself

indispensable to her English mistress whose baby she helps to nurse. Mary,

though, a servant uses her dominant position over her employer suffering

from post-natal depression, to push her own case to go to England—home

country for the Eurasian. As expected all her schemes fall apart and she is

finally taken in by her relatives who she had till recently despised. Mary never really comes to terms with her own identity.

This problem of identity forms the core of *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* (1998) directed by James Ivory and based on an autobiographical novel by Kaylie Jones, daughter of James Jones, author of *From Here to Eternity*, *Go to the Widow Maker* and *The Thin Red Line*. The fundamental question of recognizing oneself is raised once again in *The Mystic Masseur* (2002) the last film that Merchant directed. V.S. Naipaul's comic novel about an Indian from Trinidad trying to discover himself in London allowed for a mixture of wit and seriousness.

Ismail and James worked together for the last time together in 2003 on *L'Divorce*, a farce set in contemporary Paris in which doltish Americans and French do not know what to do with themselves. An American young woman, pregnant with her first child, is abandoned by her upper class French husband for another woman. The hapless mother-to-be is joined by her younger sister newly arrived from the U.S. only to be seduced by her estranged brother-in-law's rake of an uncle! The absconding young husband dies a gratuitous death; a sweet, chubby baby is born to his wife. Nobody learns anything from what life has to offer.

Ismail Merchant's life had a lot to offer. In middle age he had become a gourmet and gourmand, a television celebrity and a writer of popular cookbooks. He had proved his worth and durability as a producer of quality cinema whose foundation lay in good writing and had gifted the world an unusual and talented filmmaker in James Ivory. He had also paved the way for those independent producers and directors, not necessarily from India, who were to follow after him. Last but not least he had proved that if there was a will to make a really fine film then the means to make it could also be found. He was a man of rare qualities.

Marcello Mastroianni- An Actor for All Seasons / Partha Chatterjee



Marcello Mastroianni with Sofia Loren in Yesterday Today Tomorrow

Marcello Mastroianni (1924-1996) was for many the most charismatic of European actors, and along with Jean Paul Belmond, the most subtle. He was, for many the most versatile actor in the world. There is something loutish about the obviously gifted Gerard Depardieu as there was about Marlon Brando, but there was nothing but finesse about Marcello Mastroianni's screen performances, even when he played negative characters. In his own gentle, self-effacing way he became the embodiment of the Italian, and even the European male, marooned, between the romantic, poetic memories of a not too industrialised Italy/Europe before the First World War, and the aftermath of the Atom bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America to end the Second World War. His first memorable role was opposite the young, sassy Sophia Loren, already with her talent for comedy in place, in Alexandro Blasetti's, *Too Bad She's Bad*. He played a harried taxi driver pushed beyond his bounds of patience by a beautiful girl-pickpocket (Loren) and her bogus professor father (Vittorio de Sica). Mastroianni revealed a flair for comic timing, and held his ground against a formidable actor/comedian like de Sica, who was also one of the giants of Italian Neorealism having directed emblematic films like *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D*, and *Miracle in Milan*.

His throwaway good looks also made him over the years a huge star in Italy, and eventually internationally. He wore his stardom lightly as he did his enormous acting talent. Chiara, his daughter by longtime lover and dazzling French cinema actress Catherine Deneuve, remembers him as a father who came to fetch her from school when she was a child. He was the embodiment of an extraordinary man hidden inside an ordinary man; perhaps that is the reason why women found him so attractive. Both his strength and his vulnerability can be seen in that sequence from Luchino Visconti's, *White Nights*, in which he is dancing frantically in a public place, and suddenly falls down. Visconti's interpretation of a tale by Dostoyevski became both controversial and famous, and Mastroianni's performance remained in people's minds. Federico Fellini found in him the ideal actor to play his frazzled, alienated characters, funny in an off-centre way in two films, *La Dolce Vita*, and *8 1/2*. The first film dealt with the Roman glitterati at the end of the 1950s determined to live it up as if there was no tomorrow, the second, was about a film maker who is trying to shoot a film with autobiographical dimensions but does not know what to do. When asked by journalists how does he plan to end the film? the Stetson-hatted director (Mastroianni) replies "I am looking for an answer." His reply rings true.

Michelangelo Antonioni, between the two Fellini films, cast him in *La Notte*, in 1961. There was no scope for humour, even implied, in this dour master's films, not in this one. Mastroianni took it in his stride and delivered a quietly moving performance alongside the sultry French actress, Jeanne Moreau. Antonioni's angst-ridden film captured the imagination of intellectuals in Europe and America. It was time to get back to comedy with a serious touch.

Vittorio de Sica cast him opposite Sophia Loren in *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. It was a three-part film about Naples and Neopolitans. In the first story he is a harassed husband and father of a large family, whose wife has been sent to prison for selling American cigarettes in the blackmarket; in the second he is a journalist having a clandestine affair with a multi-millionaire's wife whose Rolls Royce car he manages to damage while saving a child; finally he is a foolish son of a rich man in love with a religious prostitute! Loren and Mastroianni excelled themselves in this film, need one add. He showed his versatility again by playing a turncoat who literally puts on the wrong coat and gets shot dead in *Allonsanfan* by the Tavianni brothers, which was set in the Garibaldi period and the unification of Italy in their late 19th century. A little before that he had played Mersault, the accidental killer, very convincingly in Visconti's, *The Stranger*, a rather academic version of Albert Camus's profound novel, *The Outsider*. Of course, there was that wonderful chemistry with Sophia Loren, in Dino Risi's bitter-sweet comedy, *The Priest's Wife*.

The 1980's saw him reunited with Fellini: He played himself in *Intervista*, a film about Fellini, and then in *Ginger and Fred*, he was paired with Guilettina Masina a marvellous actress and Fellini's wife. It was a poignant story of a couple of old time Music Hall performers who do the dance routines of Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers from old Hollywood musicals on a Television Christmas Special. It is difficult to forget him as a middle-class homosexual with whom a fading, overworked housewife (Loren, who else) falls in love during the Fascist late 1930s under Mussolini.

He remained married to his wife from 1948, Flora Carabella, and the union produced a daughter, Barbara. When he died of cancer, his last partner film maker, Anna Maria Tato was with him. The most enduring image of him, that weds the person to his art, is of him as Mandrake the Magician dancing with the aging but still voluptuous Anita Ekberg, first in front of the camera, and then in silhouette behind a translucent screen in *Intervista*. It was the acme of romance.

Paul Leonard Newman – in

Memoriam

Paul Leonard Newman – in Memoriam

by
Naveen K. Gupta



Paul Newman from Exodus Trailer

Paul Leonard Newman was more than an American actor, film director, entrepreneur, humanitarian and race car driver, he was as my kid brother lamented, "a part of our childhood". As a philanthropist, his donations had exceeded US\$220 million, by 2007.

On September 26, 2008, Newman died as per his wish at home in Westport, Connecticut, of complications arising from lung cancer. He was born in Shaker Heights, Ohio, the son of Theresa and Arthur Samuel Newman, owner of a sporting goods store. His father was Jewish and his mother practiced Christian Science. Newman showed an early interest in the theater, which his mother encouraged. At the age of seven, he made his acting debut, playing the court jester in a school production of Robin Hood. Graduating from Shaker Heights High School in 1943, he briefly attended Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

Newman served in the Navy in World War II and hoped to be accepted for pilot training, but this failed when it was

discovered he was color blind. He was sent instead to boot camp and then on to further training as a radioman and gunner. After the war, he completed his degree at Kenyon College, graduating in 1949. Newman later studied acting at Yale University and under Lee Strasberg at the Actors' Studio in New York City. Newman made his Broadway theater debut in the original production of William Inge's *Picnic*, with Kim Stanley. His first movie was *'The Silver Chalice,'* (1954), followed by acclaimed roles in *'Somebody Up There Likes Me,'* (1956), as boxer Rocky Graziano; *'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,'* (1958), opposite Elizabeth Taylor.

Newman successfully made the transition from 1950s cinema to that of the 1960s and 1970s. His was a rebel that translated well to a subsequent generation. Newman starred in *'Exodus'* (1960), *'The Hustler'* (1961), *'Hud'* (1963), *'Harper'* (1966), *'Hombre'* (1967), *'Cool Hand Luke'* (1967), *'The Towering Inferno'* (1974), *'Slap Shot'* (1977) and *'The Verdict'* (1982). He teamed with fellow actor Robert Redford and director George Roy Hill for *'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid'* (1969) and *'The Sting'* (1973).

He appeared with his wife, Joanne Woodward, in 10 feature films from *'The Long, Hot Summer,'* (1958) to *'Mr. and Mrs. Bridge.'* (1990). In addition to starring in and directing *'Harry & Son,'* Newman also directed four feature films in which he did not act starring Woodward.

His last screen appearance was as a flawed mob boss in the 2002 film *'Road to Perdition,'* opposite Tom Hanks, although he continued to provide voice in Disney/Pixar's *'Cars'*. He won the prestigious Le Mans in 1979 himself, an year after he had lost his only 28year old son Scott to drug overdose.



Paul Newman at an announcement for a new 'Hole in the Wall Camp', in Carnation, Washington in 2007.

With writer A.E. Hotchner, Newman founded Newman's Own, a line of food products, in 1982. The brand started with salad dressing, and has expanded to include pasta sauce, lemonade, popcorn, salsa, and wine, among other things. Newman established a policy that all proceeds from the sale of Newman's Own products, after taxes, would be donated to charity, the franchise has been a source of \$200 million in donations

He founded 'Hole in the Wall Gang Camp,' a residential summer camp for seriously ill children, first time in Connecticut. There are now several such camps in USA, Ireland, France and Israel. The camp serves 13,000 children every year, free of charge. Paul Newman was nominated nine times from 1958 to 2002, for Academy Award in a leading role or supporting role and yet the Academy gave him the clear nod in 1986 for his role in 'The color of Money' only! He was awarded the Oscar as an honorary award in 1985 for his many compelling performances, and then as Jean Hersholt Humanitarian award in 1994 for his charity work. Maybe because Paul Newman was always there year after year keeping us enchanted, by those sparkling blue eyes. But then as his best friend for decades, the other half of the legendary duo, Robert Redford probably sums up the kind of man that Paul Newman was; "This was a man who lived a life that really meant something and will for some time to come," Robert Redford said about his late friend and

co-star, Paul Newman.



Robert Redford and Paul Newman in the 1969 film "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," directed by George Roy Hill.

You will be missed Mr. Newman by everyone, whose part of childhood you were! – Naveen K. Gupta.