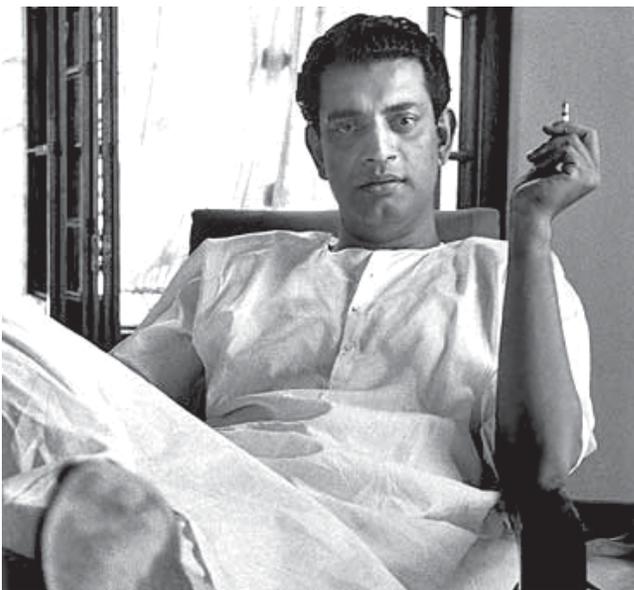


## SATYAJIT RAY: THE TEACHER

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2021 marks Satyajit Ray's (1921-1992) birth centenary. Ray was unarguably among the most creative intellectuals born in our country in the twentieth century. He was a graphic artist, film director, musician, author of science fiction and detective stories, film society organizer, journal editor, polemicist, and much else. In the short span of this essay, I want to touch on a few significant aspects of Ray's life and career concluding with his role as a pedagogue of the cinema. This aspect of Ray has not been explicitly discussed even though it is on prominent display in his voluminous writing on film. I hope that Ray's birth centenary will be an opportunity to present to the reading public similar aspects of his life and works.



Satyajit was born to an illustrious lineage.<sup>a</sup> Chandak Sengupta has written at length about the accomplishments and contributions of his grandfather Upendrakishor Roychowdhury (1863-1915) and father Sukumar Ray (1887-1923).<sup>1</sup> Both men made groundbreaking contributions to the 'visual history' of Bengal. Calcutta in the 1890s was the nerve center of periodical publishing. Despite the ubiquity of printing presses, there was a dearth of affordable technology for reproducing images—both paintings and photographs. Upendrakishor attempted to fill that void. He brought half tone printing and block-making to Calcutta in the 1890s and established his own firm, U Ray and Sons, on 100 Garpar Road, which was also the family's residence. The terrace of the house on Garpar Road was where Upendrakishore practiced his hobby of astronomy while the lower floors contained printing paraphernalia. It is no accident that Garpar Road would feature many years later in his grandson Satyajit's Feluda stories as the neighborhood where the writer of superhero stories, Lalmohan Ganguly, resided. Satyajit's fascination with printing, especially the tri-color covers of the children's magazine, *Sandesh* begun by Upendrakishore, haunt his many writings. Readers will recall the teenage Apu's first employment in Calcutta was at a printing press. Historian Ranu Roychoudhuri's forthcoming work, *(Non)Art for the Masses*, establishes Upendrakishore as one of the pioneers of printing technology and photographic reproduction in India. Roychoudhuri discusses device of the 60 degree cross-screen Upendrakishor used to enhance the visual quality of half tone reproductions. He also developed the screen distance indicator that standardized the distance between half tone negatives and the camera's diaphragm. Upendrakishor and his son Sukumar were contributors to British journal, *Penrose Pictorial Annual*. Both also wrote about visual history and technology in Bengali for the

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a In the rest of the essay I will refer to Satyajit Ray by his first name in order to distinguish him from Upendrakishor and Sukumar.

journal *Prabasi*. In this respect they were pedagogical pioneers.

Satyajit inherited and carried forward this teacherly legacy even though the family lost control of U. Ray and Sons, the firm established by his grandfather. He made it clear in later life that he had no interest in business. But the smell of turpentine never ceased to evoke a surge of childhood that is memorialized in *Jokhon Choto Chilam* (When I was Young), first published in 1981 in the journal *Sandesh*, of which he served as editor.

Satyajit lost his father, Sukumar, to a virulent attack of malarial kala-azar when he was only three. His penchant for puzzles, rhyme, and humor were surely traits he imbibed from his father. A memorable sequence in the early scenes of *Charulata* (1964) shows a lonely Charu scuttling from room to room following a rotund, Bengali man walking down the street through the shuttered windows of her prison like mansion with the aid of a lorgnette. The man is imaged like the Bengali babu lampooned by Sukumar in his poems. Satyajit Ray transposed on to the moving image what his father had rendered in verse. I cite a couple of stanzas below of Satyajit's translation of Sukumar Ray's poem that makes (gentle) fun of the vanity of the nineteenth century Bengali *babu* who was likely a *kerani* (clerk) in a government office,

If you think your employees  
Deserve your love—correction please:  
They don't. They're fools. No common sense.  
They're full of crass incompetence. The ones in my  
establishment, Deserve the highest punishment.  
They show their cheek in not believing  
Whiskers lend themselves to thieving.  
Their moustaches, I predict,  
Will soon be mercilessly picked:  
And when that happens they will know  
What Man is to Moustachio:  
Man is slave, Moustache is master,  
Losing which Man meets disaster.<sup>2</sup>

It is entirely possible that Satyajit's penetrating gaze and empathy to women's condition in the nineteenth century owed much to being raised by a widowed mother. The expert, one-stitch with which Charu in the film executes the letter "B", in the handkerchief for her husband Bhupati, bespoke the genteel manners of a Bengali bourgeois housewife. Suprabha Ray nee Das may have also been the spirit animating Arati Mazumdar, the first generation Bengali middle class working woman protagonist of in *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*, 1963).

Between 1936-1939, Satyajit, studied in the Presidency College (now University). He was already addicted to western classical music; he confessed it was his first love, ranking higher than the movies. During his time in college he started frequenting western music concerts along with friends like Nirad Chaudhuri and Chanchal Chatterjee. Andrew Robinson, whose biography of Satyajit remains the most authoritative to date reports that the "day he found Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* 'Manik lost his sleep that night."<sup>3</sup>

Satyajit's was a liberal arts education. He had a voracious appetite for English literature, read some Economics, and had apparently been promised a job by Professor P. C. Mahalanobis in a journal run by the latter. Keen on a career in the graphic arts however the young graduate joined Shantiniketan to pursue a fine arts degree. Robinson notes that four individuals exercised a formative influence on Satyajit during his Shantiniketan days: Alex Aronson, a former student of F.R. Leavis in Cambridge who taught English, renowned artists Nandalal Bose and Binodebihari Mukherjee, and Prithvish Neogy a fellow student with whom Satyajit made a memorable trip to Ajanta and Ellora during his Shantiniketan years.

Mukherjee's commitment to realist detail moved Satyajit profoundly. The murals he created even as his vision—he was born with blindness in one eye and was severely myopic in the other—was steadily deteriorating were encyclopedic in breadth of the human and natural worlds they depicted. We see a reflection of their scope, cohesion and narrative symmetry in Satyajit's films and writings. In *Inner Eye*, the documentary he made on Mukherjee this is what he had to say of one the latter's murals,

The whole composition shows a remarkable cohesiveness, Saints and devotees, cities and mountains, rivers and trees and people, all fuse into an organic whole and make it a profoundly original and valid conception of the theme. There are resonances of other styles and other periods. But all the influences have been assimilated into a synthesis that bears the unmistakable hallmark of Binode Bihari Mukherjee.

For all that he learned there, Satyajit was not at home in Shantiniketan. He went there to gain a "foundation of discipline" in drawing for which he said he had a "flair." With him was "his small but precious collection of gramophone records of classical western music." He needed his "first love" because he was leaving behind his "second love", the movies, in Calcutta. In the first collection of

his essays, *Our Film Their Films*, Satyajit reminisced,

As it turned out, the only cinema in the vicinity of the campus was two miles away, had wooden benches for seats, and showed mythological films. This put me in the doldrums until I discovered in the library three books on the cinema. They were Rotha's *Film Till Now* and two books of theory by Arnheim and Spottiswoode.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere in the book he wrote, "I never ceased to regret that while I had stood in the scorching summer sun in the wilds of Shantiniketan sketching *simul* and *palash* in full bloom, *Citizen Kane* had come and gone, playing for just three days in the newest and biggest cinema in Calcutta."<sup>5</sup>

The discovery of these books was opportune. In speaking of them in the manner he did, Satyajit reveals his investment in film theory and history. In a few years, this interest would magnify into a desire to educate the public on this subject. He was in no small measure responsible for the elevation of cinema's status in postcolonial India. "It is surprising," he wrote "that there should still be people who doubt the claims of cinema to be regarded as art." For a large number of Indians, cinema was a fallen genre without the high cultural properties of classical music, literature, or painting. Satyajit wrote about the particularity of the cinematic medium, how it could become a wondrous object in the hands of masterful artists, and about technical aspects of filmmaking in several articles.<sup>6</sup> Much of this occurred before he embarked on actual filmmaking and continued throughout his life.<sup>7</sup> Lest I jump ahead of myself, let me note that Satyajit left Shantiniketan in the middle of winter, in December 1942, "in the middle of the first spate of Japanese air raids over Calcutta."<sup>8</sup> Within a few months after his return he got a job as a "visualizer" in D. J. Keymer, a British owned advertising agency, at a salary of eighty rupees a month. The return to Calcutta was significant for many reasons. Two most relevant to the discussion that follows are that Calcutta during that time was a base of operations for American GIs. As a result, the cinemas near Chowringhee were showing the latest of Hollywood films that Satyajit lapped up with alacrity. The second was that the reengagement with films led to the formation of the Calcutta Film Society on October 5, 1947, an event whose momentous consequences in the history of Indian cinema has not been sufficiently documented.

Elsewhere I have written about the history of the film society movement in postcolonial India that commenced with this film society.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that most film

society activists regard the Calcutta Film Society (1947) as the pioneer of such associations in India, there is evidence of at least two more film societies, both in Bombay, that were in existence before the one in Calcutta came into being. "Yet these societies," remarked the film critic Chidananda Dasgupta, "were not able to do much more than getting together to see good films or making sporadically inspired attempts to create an infrastructure for the enhancement of film culture. There were too many obstacles in British India to the growth of stable institutions with wide interactions within the country and abroad."<sup>10</sup>

To what extent the independence of India from British rule had a direct impact on the rise and growth of the film society movement remains unclear. But independence certainly increased governmental involvement in a general societal search for "good cinema." Satyajit's efforts in this arena are legion as were the obstacles he (and others) encountered in pursuing the study of film as a serious object of consideration. As mentioned above, a group consisting of Satyajit Ray who was then an employee at the advertising firm, Chidananda Dasgupta, documentary-maker Harisadhan Dasgupta, who had just returned from Hollywood, Hiran Sanyal, a literary personality, and Radha Mohan Bhattacharya, founded the Calcutta Film Society.<sup>11</sup> Many of these early participants recall the numerous problems they encountered as they searched for a venue to convene their meetings. The threat of eviction from rental property—as most Bengali householders did not yet consider people associated with cinema socially respectable—is frequently mentioned. Ironically, most film society members were not directly involved with the film industry. But hostility towards the society was not only a by-product of social prejudice against cinema. Even proprietors of theatres remained sceptical of the endeavour.

"We were...being subjected to a two-pronged attack," wrote Satyajit recalling the early days of the Calcutta Film Society. "One came from the film trade, which spread the word that a group of subversive youngsters was running down Bengali films at meetings and seminars." The other came from the neighbours in a building where one of the members of the Calcutta Film Society had offered the group his living room to host meetings. The group was unceremoniously thrown out of the premises as the owner of the house felt that "film people" were "spoiling the sanctity of his house."<sup>12</sup> The Calcutta Film Society started its own journal *Chalachitra* in 1948 but failed to bring out more than one issue. A measure of their success is evident in the films they screened between 1947-1965, excluding the months in 1950-51 when Satyajit was in

London when the film society operations were temporarily lulled: *Battleship Potemkin*, *General Line*, *Ivan the Terrible*, *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Last Laugh*, *Metropolis*, *Le Million*, *The Italian Straw Hat*, *The Kid*, *Kanal*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *The Childhood of Maxim Gorki*, *My Universities*, *Les Bas Fonds*, *Un Carnet Du Bal*, *Citizen Kane*, *Long Voyage Home*, *Stagecoach*, *Senso*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, *The Virgin Spring*, *The Face*, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, *Harp of Burma*, *Mon Oncle*, *Jour de Fete*, *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*, *Rififi*, *Le Jour Se leve*, *le Courbeau*, *Zero de Conduite*, *L'Atlante*, *He Who Must Die*.<sup>13</sup> By 1964, the Calcutta Film Society had about 300 film related books in their collection and regularly subscribed to publications such as *Sight and Sound*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, *Film Polski*, *Soviet Film*, *Film Quarterly*, *Montage*, *Movie*, and *Indian Film Culture*.<sup>14</sup> They also hosted seminars by film related personalities visiting from abroad like Jean Renoir, Marie Seton, James Quinn, and Jean Gremillion.<sup>15</sup>

The academic study of film in a University setting began in India in Jadavpur University in 1993, thirteen years after Satyajit Ray proposed the idea at a speech given at that institution. In the remainder of this essay, let me refer to some of the ways in which Satyajit's extensive writings may be regarded as an effort in film pedagogy before the establishment of the academic discipline of Film Studies in India. It should be noted that globally, the discipline of Film Studies has been preceded by the practice of "film appreciation." Satyajit Ray was one of the pioneers of this effort in Calcutta. In 1970 he founded together with Father Gaston Roberge (1935-2020), a Canadian Jesuit priest who settled in Kolkata, Chitrabani, a "media training institute" that held regular film appreciation courses.<sup>16</sup> It may be objected that the language of art and appreciation smacks of elitism. It seems necessary however to constitute something as an object of both academic study and funding.

On the question of film as an art, Satyajit argued that it was fallacious to expect cinema to have qualities that belonged to other art forms, "traits which by its very nature it cannot possess." Films were an industrial form, unlike painting and other plastic arts. They involved collective effort. Even when a film displayed certain elements drawn from the other arts, in order for it to qualify as "good" it had to be an autonomous entity. He was of the view that cinema is best understood as "a language, an enormously potent and flexible language" that could be used in manifold ways.

The essays on the language of cinema are the preeminent sites where the pedagogue in Ray becomes

evident. He drew upon illustrations from the histories of cinema across the world to make his point about how films as a new language. For example, in several essays he discusses the contributions of D.W. Griffiths as someone who initiated the art of story-telling in cinema. He walked the reader through the basics of film language and grammar explaining techniques such as a "mix", "fade", "close-up", "long/ medium shot", "superimposition" and so on. Interspersed with explanations about the technical devices constitutive of cinema are comments about cinema's distinction from the other arts. For example, referring to the close-up Satyajit noted "When close-ups arrived, a distinction between films and the theatre was clearly established in spite of the dramatic content in films, since the audience at a play could not get very close to the actors. ... Cinema offers the chance to bring the actors closer to the spectators, ...."<sup>17</sup> Satyajit also introduced readers to historical figures responsible for these innovations: D. W. Griffith, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, the Soviet school, especially Alexander Dovzhenko, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Sergei Eisenstein, Mayakovsky, Dziga Vertov, and Lev Kuleshov.

In an article on Soviet Cinema, he discussed the history of early Russian films in greater detail for his Bengali readership. It is unlikely that that readership had yet encountered either films by the Edison company or the Lumiere brothers. But they were surely familiar with Maxim Gorky's literary works. It is significant that Satyajit began his essay then by registering Gorky's mixed responses to the newest art,

People today do not find much excitement in the ordinary events of their daily lives. But the same ordinary events acquire a deep dramatic form in cinema and stir the hearts of the same people. I fear that perhaps, one day, the world portrayed in films will overtake the real world and occupy the mind and heart of every human being.<sup>18</sup>

Students of Film Studies are aware that Maxim Gorky's essay "In the Kingdom of Shadows" that first appeared as a newspaper review of the Lumiere program at the Nizhni-Novgorod fair, *Nizhegorodski listok*, on 4 July 1896 is one of the first essays assigned in a introduction to films syllabi.<sup>19</sup> Satyajit then introduced readers to such figures as Sergei Yutkevich, Leonid Trauburg, Mikhail Chiaureli, the history of the Agit-train, which "carried provision for printing newspapers and handbills; crew and equipment to make films, as well as groups of people to write and make new plays." No doubt film society readers would identify with the stories of Sergei Eisenstein's

drawing being used for propaganda in the Agit-train, or be inspired by his involvement with Proletkult. Indeed the ways in which Satyajit presents the history of early Soviet cinema as emerging from theater and socialist ideology would have likely been significant for many Bengali readers whose political inclinations were clearly towards the left and who were familiar with the left leaning theater of the IPTA and subsequently Utpal Dutt, Badal Sirkar and others. Satyajit mentioned the *Kino-Pravda* that came into being in May 1922. “It was,” he wrote “a film version of a weekly newspaper.”<sup>20</sup> Satyajit’s mentioning of *Kino*, *Photo-Kino*, and *Kino-Gazetta* would undoubtedly serve as models for many film society activists and emerging directors for modeling the close relationship between cinema and politics, the use of news reel in films, and so on.

The fact that Satyajit wrote at some length about the Soviet school is not surprising. His Bengali readers were much more likely to be familiar with early Soviet films than the comedies by D.W. Griffiths, Buster Keaton, or Mark Sennett. The other reason for dwelling on Soviet cinema was also perhaps to make a point about the ways in which film suffered due to governmental interference. As Satyajit noted, “[E]very major Russian film-maker—Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko—have had to bear the cross of governmental interference at some time or other in their careers. And it does not have to be reiterated that these are all talented, socially conscious film-makers.”<sup>21</sup> Satyajit also made a case for the practice of careful watching and arguing about films among his viewers. Important for his discussion on the language of cinema was the way he makes aesthetic distinctions in the filmic language deployed by the great Soviet filmmakers.

Writing of Dviga Vertov and Kino-Eye, Satyajit noted, “Vertov proved that if the camera places itself face-to-face with reality, and embellished with thoughtful detailing, reflects that reality, films need not depend on fiction to win favour with the audience.” Verotv, he argued, the contemporary *cinema-verite* of the 1960s. He compares Pudovkin’s *Mother*, based on the novel by Maxim Gorky with Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, as both films were centered around the same revolution. If Eisenstein worked with geometric precision thereby rendering the “human element of his material ... simple, strong, and supple” Pudovkin was more of a humanist whose film had lyrical qualities but none of the “mathematical precision” one found in the maker of *Potemkin*. To give readers a sense of the way in which Ray’s teacherly persona emerged in his writing let me cite his description of montage, a technique invented by Eisenstein.

Eisenstein had realized that if different shots—each of them meaningful—could be joined to one another, whole new meaningful sentence would emerge; or even if a shot did not have a clear meaning, it could be added to either another similar shot without a distinct meaning, or one just the opposite. ... This style is called montage.<sup>22</sup>

A filmmaker could narrate a story in “one breadth” as it were, by breaking up the film into segments called scenes, which in turn are made of shots. The “grammar” of cinematic language expressed through the camera depended on the use of certain “mechanical and chemical techniques” such as a “mix,” a “zoom,” or a “fade” or “deep focus”. Today, these expressions have become the stuff of daily parlance. My reason for dwelling closely on Satyajit’s writing is to underscore that our familiarity is a learned trait.

The new film history pioneered by the Chicago school of film historians Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning, and Yuri Tsivian critiqued earlier views that regarded silent films as instances of films’ infancy, or as primitive cinema. It should interest readers that Ray was one of the earliest intellectuals in India to speak at length about silent films. Once again his tone is professorial: that of a pedagogue both introducing his students to new objects as well as inculcating a sense of discipline into the practice of viewing. He argued that in silent films the language of cinema was “pure” for it was primarily comprised of images. The advent of the talkie transformed film language into a combination of both image and sound. Today scholars might take issue with Satyajit that the silent film was an entirely distinct aesthetic object from the talkie. Lest we see him as “belittling” the talkie he qualifies his position noting that there was no artistic reason, “no aesthetic justification,” for which the talkie replaced the silent film. Probably dictated by market compulsions, which in turn reflected changing tastes of the audience talking films squeezed out silents out of the market probably because they were seen as more “life-like”. “Ideally” he wrote, “the two should have coexisted. The fact that they couldn’t do so only goes to prove the cruel illogicality of commercial pressures which decide the fate of films and film-makers.”<sup>23</sup>

The advent of the talkie opened a conflict between good cinema and a cinema that catered to popular demand. This is a theme that Satyajit returned to again and again in his discussions on Indian cinema. We should thus pause on this point. Contrary to the commonly held assumption that “good cinema” had limited appeal among cognoscenti, in most his writings Satyajit highlights the

importance of films having a wide popular appeal. He invokes examples from the silent period in Hollywood “when books on film aesthetics had yet to be written.” But “film-makers who were in the forefront were geniuses who instinctively produced works of art which at the same time had a wide appeal. That films had to reach a wide public was taken for granted, since film-making was a costly business.” Despite the pressure to appeal to a wide public, these silent films did not pander to the audience. The one concession to popular demand may have been the use of slapstick, something that was directly imported from “the music hall and vaudeville.” But, in the hands of a filmmaker of genius, “even slapstick could be so inventive, so precise in timing and so elaborate in execution that it acquired a high aesthetic value, while retaining its power to provoke laughter.”<sup>24</sup> With the arrival of the talkie however, “... this double function of artist and entertainer was rarely sustained.”<sup>25</sup> The result was that “popular entertainment, too often, came to mean films of overt escapism, when the artist was conspicuous by his absence.” In another essay he recounts how the advent of the talkie also dictated the penchant for formulas that could guarantee a film’s success.

When looking at the nature and language of films made in the 1940s, what one must consider is the responsibility of the audience as well as that of the film-makers. It was not easy for a film-maker to completely overlook what the audience would understand, what they wanted and what would please them. They wanted a story with a solid plot ... dramatic conflict, good-looking actors and actresses (hence the advent of the star system), beautiful scenery, neat and compact surroundings, and an enjoyable amalgamation of various moods, which might—at the end of the film—leave the viewers with a feeling of utter contentment.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these constraints however, he submits that “many good films were made.”<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, here Satyajit makes a distinction, perhaps unconsciously, between two types of “good films”. The first, about which he does not write very much else were those that did not “contain any surprises in terms of their language.” The second category included films that were ahead of their times and for they “were extraordinary in terms of cinematic language.” Two directors discussed in this context were Jean Renoir, and Orson Welles. Renoir’s *La Regle du Jeu* (Rules of the Game 1939) and Welles *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* did not succeed in the box office at the time they released. They are widely recognized

today as among the great films of all times. Is it the case that their reevaluation worldwide had something to do with film *taste* becoming more democratized? Possibly. Let us make use of Satyajit’s birth centenary to deepen ours so that we prioritize the archiving, preservation, and analysis of all kinds of films. In this moment when the dizzying burst of new media seemingly threatens film with obsolescence let us return to film history for a deeper insight into cine-media. Satyajit has a lot to teach us as we do this. □

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3. *Ibid.* p. 43.
4. Satyajit Ray, *Our Films Their Films*, Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1976, pp. 4-5. Paul Rotha was a British critic and documentary filmmaker, Rudolf Arnheim was a art and film theorist with a training in psychology, and Raymond Spottiswoode was a British film theorist.
5. *Ibid.*
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7. He wrote in both Bengali and English.
8. *Our Films Their Films*, p. 5.
9. Rochona Majumdar, “Debating Radical Cinema: A History of the Film Society Movement in India,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, part 2 (May 2012), pp. 731-67.
10. Chidananda Dasgupta, *Seeing Is Believing*, p. 84.
11. *Indian Film Society News: Questionnaire for film societies in India*, p. 2. Also see IFSON Special number, (Jan 3-17 1981), 21 Years of FFSS, ‘Recollections,’ 3(1): p. 10. (The latter article was a reprint of an early report on the Calcutta Film Society that appeared in May-June 1949 issue of *Indian Documentary* edited by Jag Mohan)
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13. *Indian Film Society News: Questionnaire for film societies in India*, p. 2.
14. *Ibid.* p. 7.
15. *Ibid.* p. 3.
16. See <https://www.chitrabani.net/article.php?mid=1&alias=about-us> (accessed on October 3, 2020). Chitrabani was affiliated with St. Xavier’s college through Father Roberge.
17. “The Language of Cinema”, *Speaking of Films*, p. 46-47.

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19. See an English translation of the essay in Colin Harding and Simon Popple eds., *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema*, London: Cygnus, 1996, pp. 5-6.
20. "Soviet Cinema," *Ibid.* p. 79.
21. *Ibid.* pp. 84-85.
22. *Ibid.* p. 52.
23. "The Art of Silence", *Deep Focus*, 96.
24. He cited the example of Buster Keaton in *The General* (1926) playing the driver of a runaway train as one of "the most elating aesthetic experiences in cinema".
25. Ray, *Our Films Their Films*, 11.
26. Satyajit Ray, "The Language of Cinema", 56.
27. *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.