Global Bollywood | The Hollywood Scope

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SCENE STUDY / *By Suyash Pachauri*

Pather Panchali's Train Belongs to Durga, Too

Apu runs. His sister listens. Satyajit Ray's railway sequence looks different when you follow the girl who first pays attention.



Original editorial illustration inspired by the railway sequence in Pather Panchali (1955).

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Following Durga

A hand over a little brother's mouth holds the secret of Ray's famous train sequence.

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The Fin Without the Music

What the beach hoax in Jaws tells us about how an audience learns to trust a score.

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GLOBAL BOLLYWOOD

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THE COVER STORY

Pather Panchali's Train Belongs to Durga, Too

In Satyajit Ray's Bengali debut, Apu gets to see his first train. His older sister is the one who tells him when to listen.

By Suyash Pachauri

When the train is still somewhere beyond the flowers, Durga puts a hand over her little brother's mouth. Anybody who grew up with an older sister knows that hand. Apu has a question. She needs him to be quiet. Give him an answer and he may ask another. Hush him and, for a few seconds, both of them can hear what she has heard.

Try remembering the train sequence in Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* from that point. The picture that usually gets pride of place is of a small boy, a black train and a field of white flowers. Yet the person who makes the encounter possible is the girl who falls on the way to the tracks. How did one child's discovery come to look so much like the other child's story?

Durga has done something like this before. Earlier in the film she picks out a faint bell. The sweet seller is coming. She sends Apu to ask their father for money. He comes back empty-handed, so the children follow the man anyway. A dog falls in behind them. Seen in the pond, their little procession makes a glorious outing of an unsuccessful shopping trip.

Durga has a talent that any younger brother would value. She can find something to do on a day when there is no money to do it.

In the field, that talent comes with a small inconvenience for Apu. The white *kaash* grass is high enough for Durga to disappear into. Before he can locate a locomotive, he has the more pressing business of locating his sister. A child can be quite brave about going to the ends of the earth provided the person who brought him is somewhere within calling distance. Ray allows Apu the indignity of being the younger one.

There is already something worth hearing in the wires overhead. Durga puts her ear to a pole. It makes perfect sense to a child that getting closer to a thing might explain it. Here is the modern world arriving in rural Bengal, and the first practical question it raises is where to put your ear. When Durga later hears the engine, watch Uma Das Gupta's hand. She gives the girl an older sibling's confidence in her right to interrupt. From the instant she hushes Apu, the audience is listening on her instructions, too.

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Directing a child in a field

Pather Panchali's Train Belongs to Durga, Too

Ray had to work surprisingly hard for Apu's air of distraction. He later recalled that on the first day of shooting, Subir Banerjee had difficulty walking naturally through the field while looking for Durga. Ray gave him small obstacles to step over. Three assistants, stationed apart, called to him in turn. Now the boy had somewhere to put his feet and a reason to turn his head. What looks on screen like a child making up his mind from moment to moment depended on several adults knowing exactly where to stand.

There's a pleasure in seeing the scene again once you know that. Somewhere outside the frame, a grown-up has just called to Subir. Within it, a little boy looks up in the hope of finding his sister. Both things can be true in the same tilt of his head.

Then the children run. Durga stumbles. Apu gets far enough to see the carriages go by, and for once the younger child has got ahead. Ray lets him have the whole astonishing sight. He also leaves us with a little piece of unfinished family business. We know whom Apu would ordinarily turn to with his questions about what he has just seen. She is the one person missing from his side.

In *Aparajito*, the second film, Apu is old enough to buy a ticket. After a visit to his mother, he goes to the station to return to Calcutta. The train arrives. Apu lets it go, comes home and pretends he missed it. Once, getting to the tracks in time was everything. Now he knows what it would mean to someone if he came back.

Return to the field after that scene and Durga's hand takes on an extra tenderness. She has heard something marvellous. She wants her brother to hear it while there is still time. Anyone who has ever grabbed a sibling's arm at the cinema just before a favourite moment knows the impulse. The pleasure begins a second earlier for the person who gets to say, *listen*.

FILM NOTES

Pather Panchali (1955)

Bengali / Directed by Satyajit Ray

Aparajito (1956)

Second film in Ray's Apu Trilogy

THE HOLLYWOOD SCOPE SOUND & SCREEN

At the Editing Desk

The Fin Without the Music

A beach full of swimmers sees a shark. John Williams gives the audience a reason to keep listening.

By Suyash Pachauri

Imagine getting the job of scoring the moment a shark fin appears on a crowded beach. You already have a theme for that animal. It takes only two notes. The director likes it. An audience will recognise it in an instant. Where, exactly, do you bring it in?

In Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, John Williams lets an entire scare go by without playing it. A fin moves among the swimmers. The beach erupts. People trying to get out of the water have every reason to be frightened. When the prank is exposed, we finally get a good look at what has been swimming out there. Two boys with a fake fin.

There are two different jobs available to the composer in that scene. He could take the swimmers' side and put their fear into music. He could also let the score tell us something about the water that the swimmers cannot know. Williams has already taken the second job. The opening of the film taught our ears to recognise the animal long before our eyes could pick it out.

Play the two notes over that fake fin and the prank works on everybody. At the next attack, would you trust the score? It has just mistaken a boy with a prop for the real thing. Leave the cue out and we can be frightened for the swimmers while suspecting they have the wrong idea.

Out on the boat, Brody is shovelling chum when the real shark rears up beside him. His backward recoil supplies the downbeat. Even someone who has learned Williams's two-note warning by heart can jump at that entrance.

Here's a worthwhile experiment at an editing desk. Take one shot of someone turning toward a closed door. Play a cue before the turn, then on the turn, then after it. On the first pass the audience knows something early. On the second, it shares an alarm. On the third, it has a moment to decide what it thinks. Same door, same performance. Three rather different seats in the room.

ON THE SOUNDTRACK

Jaws / **1975** Direction Steven Spielberg Original score John Williams