

Film Criticism

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Avijatrik - A Cinematic Challenge

Satyajit Ray's film trilogy *Apu* and Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's literary work, on which they are based, continue to enrich the worlds of film and literature, with undiminished magnificence. Connoisseurs of both realms, relive their eternal captivation, through their personal realization and unexplored journeys. "Aparajito", Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel inspired Satyajit Ray's two-part magnum opus *Apur Sangshar* and *Aparajito* in the mid-20th century. Six decades later, drawing inspiration from the novel's concluding part, Subhrajit Mitra's film *Avijatrik* is poised for a commercial release. The ardent fellowship, the cinematographic legacy and socio-cultural mores of Satyajit Ray's *Apu* trilogy [*Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sangsar* (1959)] have garnered an ever-increasing traction over time. It is certainly a momentous task to create a new world for *Apu*, while the image of Satyajit's *Apu* is still fresh and vivid in the minds of movie buffs the

world over! Subhrajit Mitra's task is neither to divorce the audience from their first love - Satyajit Ray's *Apu*'s world, nor to allow *Avijatrik* to become a cover version of the original. The cinematic challenge is to live up to this tremendous legacy, and simultaneously establish a unique directorial signature. As a director, Subhrajit Mitra has successfully conquered these challenges and established himself as a mature director, portraying *Apu*'s unstable-restless yet ambitious mind, whipped into a turmoil by the conflicts of reality versus make-belief; imagination versus memory; on a proscenium that is in equal parts, believable and emotionally strong.

The film *Avijatrik* is constructed on the scaffolds of a journey; the journey is the motivational force, the beginning, the translocation and the continuum. As the saga of *Apu*'s slow philosophical journey unfolds, the journey by train, underscores and

quickens the physical tempo. Out of the blue, Apu meets Lila on the night train, while travelling to Kashi, with his son, Kajol. They are given less than the duration of a night's journey to renew long lost memories of a life time, before a lurking ailment snatches her away from Apu on the running train. The devastated Apu is left going through the motions of the physical journey.



In Kashi, Apu revisits all the places of his childhood days; attempting a personal reconstruction, through a journey into yesterday. Strangers and fellow travelers are also part of Apu's Kashi journey; Pankaj Babu (played by Sabyasachi Chakravarty) is an avid traveler and passionate explorer of things unknown. Apu, in Pankaj Babu's company has a reawakened a sense of curiosity and eagerness to travel to lands far away. Apu returns to Kolkata, greeted by the excellent reception of his first published book; his journey as a writer, has finally arrived at a point of acknowledged satisfaction! Kolkata, holds another startling experience for Apu; his friend's association with the freedom movement! As an apparently lonely traveler, these experiences offer solace, as does the infallible presence of his departed wife, Aparna, through the many of travails of his life. Kajol, Apu's son remains a constant companion in all his journeys; but as a writer, Apu is desperately bereft of Aparna's physical and loving presence.

Avijatrik showcases two more journeys that Apu undertook- one to Nischindipur along with his son and another, befittingly into the unknown, at the end of the movie, with Pankaj Babu joining them. At Nischindipur, his ancestral home, Apu has a rather

unexpected experience- he meets a lady, one of his few remaining relatives, who has preserved with love and care, his uncompleted, early writings. At the end of the film, Apu starts another journey with his son and Pankaj Babu, to an unexplored place. The movie moves from the mind and landscapes of the past into the future, with Apu searching for something new and unknown; thus philosophically, transcending the past to attain another vantage point in life.

The director has meticulously planned the screenplay as a combination of five episodes, which defies the traditional three act structure of a screenplay. Yet at the end, the film definitely comes across as well-structured, with a logical and sensitive portrayal of the inherent crises, mingled in the plot and the interpersonal relations among the characters. The philosophical undertone of the film is the inner world of a creative writer who travels in the past, present, and imagination, seeking the elixir to heal his life. The pace of the entire narrative is perforce restricted by the conflicts between the past and the present; memory and reality. Once the tone is set, the audience are well primed to savor the perfectly poised slow pace. Subhrajit Mitra has successfully overcome the challenges of presenting a naturally nuanced yet detached narrative that does justice to the story scripted by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay.

Subhrajit Mitra's *Avijatrik*, does also suffer from a surfeit of inherent presumptions that, 'everyone knows of and has seen, Apu and his world'. Therefore, the screenplay writer and director have often allowed dialogues to predominate instead of taking the opportunity to shoot and build up a meaningful, cinematically rich, and more carefully crafted sequences. The dependence on dialogues to bridge the past do take a toll on the unversed audience and clarity of communication; thus, the build-up of Apu's character, and the reasons for his journeys are difficult to fathom on oral support alone. Even the sequence of Lila's death, relies on a background wrought in words instead using the full strength of the visuals. Among the missed opportunities in stronger characterization are Apu's

status as a published author, and his bond with the lady who preserved his early writing. If better executed, it would have contributed to making the character stronger and closer to the original. The director brings down the curtain, using the inherently beautiful Rabindra sangeet, “*Akash bhara surya tara*”. Unfortunately for me, on a personal note, the song instantly broke down the illusion of Apu’s world which the director had created with great sincerity and artistic expertise.

On the other hand, credit must be given to the script writing; it has created with a great deal of success the complex and multilayered character of Apu. After all, to etch a character who lives in two opposite worlds was no easy challenge. Apu, the melancholic family man who remains deeply attached his departed wife, and finally grows to love his son; versus Apu, the very creative writer and traveler with a wanderlust are well scripted.

The director of photography, Supratim Bhol’s master stroke is in the adoption of the grey tone for this film, establishing an astonishing individuality and uniqueness, despite its similarity to the black and white world of the original. His choice of the 16: 9 ratio frames against the 4: 3 ratio of the Apu trilogy; and dexterous handling of the wide frame with its width and depth, deserve full credit. The controlled camera craft and excellent picturization are evident from in the first episode of the film. The wide frame in the hands of Suprotim Bhol animates the cramped compartments of a running train. On the other hand, his artistic and aesthetic brilliance in capturing the depth of the narration, amid the wide building of Apu’s home at Kolkata, is a joy to behold! Suprotim Bhol has risen magnificently to the occasion in capturing an eighty-year-old time frame in which the story is set. Recreating villages and Benaras of that era in 2020 is a herculean task, well executed!

The music in *Avijatrik*, composed by Bikram Ghosh is melodious, given his penchant for Indian classical based music; but hardly adds anything innovative to

the theme of the film. The father-daughter legacy is probably used to bring a sense of continuity, but Anushka Shankar is only asked to contribute her technical expertise in *Avijatrik*, while Pandit Ravi Shankar had scored the background music of Apu Trilogy; reminiscent echoes of the past notwithstanding!



Editor Sujoy Dutta Roy has brilliantly controlled the pace of the movie, though scenes of Nischindipur and the conversations with Pankaj Babu would have benefitted with more brevity. Though the final take on the length does lie with the director and not the editor. The film is episodic, a confluence of juxtaposed sentiments; and the pace is complicated against the nuanced theme handling and the natural representation of reality. Sujoy Dutta Roy has certainly pulled off a masterly oeuvre!

Avijatrik, in the final assessment, is a complete departure from the contemporary style of filmmaking. The epic detachment and deep-rooted sensitivity are a tribute to the great author Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay and to the art of film making. *Avijatrik* is a breath of fresh air in a world ruled by the contemporary, predictably packaged in a semi journalistic fashion, with little lasting impact. *Avijatrik*, is a rare cinematic experience that celebrates its legacy and creates a unique, fresh signature on the sands of time.