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IMAGINARY HOMELANDS

ESSAYS AND CRITICISM 1981-1991

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ATTENBOROUGH'S GANDHI

Deification is an Indian disease, and in India, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, great soul, little father, has been raised higher than anyone in the pantheon of latter-day gods. 'But,' I was asked more than once in India recently, 'why should an *Englishman* want to deify Gandhi?' And why, one might add, should the American Academy wish to help him, by presenting, like votive offerings in a temple, eight glittering statuettes to a film that is inadequate as biography, appalling as history, and often laughably crude as a film?

The answer may be that *Gandhi* (the film, not the man, who irritated the British immensely, but who is now safely dead) satisfies certain longings in the Western psyche, which can be categorized under three broad headings. First, the exotic impulse, the wish to see India as the fountainhead of spiritual–mystical wisdom. Gandhi, the celluloid guru, follows in the footsteps of other pop holy men. The Maharishi blazed this trail. Second, there is what might be termed the Christian longing, for a 'leader' dedicated to ideals of poverty and simplicity, a man who is too good for this world and is therefore sacrificed on the altars of history. And third, there is the liberal–conservative political desire to hear it said that revolutions can, and should, be made purely by submission, and self-sacrifice, and non-violence *alone*. To make *Gandhi* appeal to the Western market, he had to be sanctified and turned into Christ—an odd fate for a crafty Gujarati lawyer—and the history of one of the century's greatest revolutions had to be mangled. This is nothing new. The British have been mangling Indian history for centuries.

Much of the debate about the film has concerned omissions: why no Subhas Bose? Why no Tagore? The film's makers answer that it would have been impossible to include

everything and everyone, and of course selection is central to any work of art. But artistic selection creates meanings, and in *Gandhi* these are frequently dubious and in some cases frighteningly naïve.

Take the Amritsar massacre. This is perhaps the most powerful sequence in the film. Both the massacre and the subsequent court-martial, at which outraged Englishmen question the unrepentant Dyer with barely suppressed horror, are staged accurately and with passion. But what these two scenes mean is that Dyer's actions at Jallianwala Bagh were those of a cruel, over-zealous individual, and that they were immediately condemned by Anglo-India. And that is a complete falsehood.

The British in Punjab in 1919 were panicky. They feared a second Indian Mutiny. They had nightmares about rape. The court-martial may have condemned Dyer, but the colonists did not. He had taught the wogs a lesson; he was a hero. And when he returned to England, he was given a hero's welcome. An appeal fund launched on his behalf made him a rich man. Tagore, disgusted by the British reaction to the massacre, returned his knighthood.

In the case of Amritsar, artistic selection has altered the meaning of the event. It is an unforgivable distortion.

Another example: the assassination of Gandhi. Attenborough considers it important enough to place it at the beginning as well as the end of his film; but during the intervening three hours, he tells us nothing about it. Not the assassin's name. Not the name of the organization behind the killing. Not the ghost of a motive for the deed. In a political thriller, this would be merely crass; in *Gandhi* it is something worse. Gandhi was murdered by Nathuram Godse, a member of the Hindu-fanatic RSS, who blamed the Mahatma for the Partition of India. But in the film the killer is not differentiated from the crowd; he simply steps out of the crowd with a gun. This could mean one of three things: that he *represents* the crowd—that the people turned against Gandhi, that the mob threw up a killer who did its work; that Godse was 'one lone nut', albeit a lone nut under the influence of a sinister-looking sadhu in a rickshaw; or

that Gandhi is Christ in a loincloth, and the assassination is the crucifixion, which needs no explanation. We know why Christ died. He died that others might live. But Godse was *not* representative of the crowd. He did *not* work alone. And the killing was a political, not a mystical, act. Attenborough's distortions mythologize, but they also lie.

Ah, but, we are told, the film is a biography, not a political work. Even if one accepts this distinction (surely spurious in the case of a life lived so much in public), one must reply that a biography, if it is not to turn into hagiography, must tackle the awkward aspects of the subject as well as the lovable side. The *brahmacharya* experiments, during which Gandhi would lie with young naked women all night to test his will-to-abstain, are well known, not without filmic possibilities, and they are, of course, ambiguous events. The film omits them. It also omits Gandhi's fondness for Indian billionaire industrialists (he died, after all, in the house of the richest of them, Birla House in Delhi). Surely this is a rich area for a biographer to mine: the man of the masses, dedicated to the simple life, self-denial, asceticism, who was financed all his life by super-capitalist patrons, and, some would say, hopelessly compromised by them? A written biography which failed to enter such murky waters would not be worth reading. We should not be less critical of a film.

Gandhi presents false portraits of most of the leaders of the independence struggle. Patel comes across as a clown, whereas he was one of the hardest of hard men. And it was witty to portray Jinnah as Count Dracula. But the important changes are in the personality of Nehru and in the decision to erase Bose from history.

In both cases, dramatic interest has been sacrificed in the interests of deification. Nehru was not Gandhi's disciple. They were equals, and they argued fiercely. Their debate was central to the freedom movement—Nehru, the urban sophisticate who wanted to industrialize India, to bring it into the modern age, versus the rural, handicraft-loving, sometimes medieval figure of Gandhi: the country lived this debate, and it had to choose. India chose Gandhi with its

heart, but in terms of practical politics, it chose Nehru. One can understand nothing about the nature of India's independence unless one understands the conflict between these two great men. The film, by turning Nehru into Bapuji's acolyte, manages to castrate itself.

And Bose is selected out. Bose the guerrilla, who fought with the Japanese against the British in the war, Bose whose views could have provided another sort of counterweight to Gandhi's, and so improved the film. But Bose was violent, and the film, if it means anything, seeks to mean that non-violence works, and that it could work anywhere, in any revolution. All counter-arguments are therefore rigorously excluded. The message of *Gandhi* is that the best way to gain your freedom is to line up, unarmed, and march towards your oppressors and permit them to club you to the ground; if you do this for long enough, you will embarrass them into going away. This is worse than nonsense. It is dangerous nonsense. Non-violence was a strategy chosen for a particular people against a particular oppressor; to generalize from it is a suspect act. How useful would non-violence have been against, say, the Nazis? Even in India, the leaders of the independence movement did not succeed because they were more moral than the British. They won because they were smarter, craftier, better fighting politicians than their opponents. *Gandhi* shows us a saint who vanquished an Empire. This is a fiction.

All devotees of unintentional comedy will relish the scenes in *Gandhi* in which Bapu re-enacts his marriage for the benefit of a Western journalist; in which one man's hunger strike pacifies a rioting Calcutta, and repentant hooligans promise Gandhi that they will adopt Muslim orphan children; in which Mirabehn is played as a woman in a permanent hypnotic trance; or in which the Partition is sorted out during a two-minute break in the independence negotiations. If this is the Best Film of 1983, God help the film industry.

What it is, is an incredibly expensive movie about a man who was dedicated to the small scale and to asceticism. The form of the film, opulent, lavish, overpowers and finally

crushes the man at its centre, in spite of Ben Kingsley's luminous performance (at least *he* deserved his Oscar). It is as if Gandhi, years after his death, has found in Attenborough the last in his series of billionaire patrons, his last Birla. And rich men, like emperors, have always had a weakness for tame holy men, for saints.

1983

SATYAJIT RAY

'I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it,' Akira Kurosawa said about Satyajit Ray's first film, *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Little Road*), and it's true: this movie, made for next to nothing, mostly with untrained actors, by a director who was learning (and making up) the rules as he went along, is a work of such lyrical and emotional force that it becomes, for its audiences, as potent as their own, most deeply personal memories. To this day, the briefest snatch of Ravi Shankar's wonderful theme music brings back a flood of feeling, and a crowd of images: the single eye of the little Apu, seen at the moment of waking, full of mischief and life; the insects dancing on the surface of the pond, prefiguring the coming monsoon rains; and above all the immortal scene, one of the most tragic in all cinema, in which Harihar the peasant comes home to the village from the city, bringing presents for his children, not knowing that his daughter has died in his absence. When he shows his wife, Sarbajaya, the sari he has brought for the dead girl, she begins to weep; and now he understands, and cries out, too; but (and this is the stroke of genius) their voices are replaced by the high, high music of a single *tarshehnai*, a sound like a scream of the soul.

Pather Panchali was the first Ray movie I ever saw, and, like many cinema-addicted Indians, I saw it not in India but in London. In spite of having grown up in the world's number-one movie city, Bombay ('Bollywood' in those days produced more movies per annum than Los Angeles or Tokyo or Hong Kong), I knew less about India's greatest film-maker than I did about 'international cinema' (or, at any rate, the movies of Robert Taylor, the Three Stooges, Francis the Talking Mule and Maria Montez). It was at the old Academy in Oxford Street, and at the National Film Theatre, and at the Arts Cinema in Cambridge that, with mixed feelings of high elation and shame at my own previous ignorance, I filled in