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Book Review:

*Travails with the Alien: The Film That Was Never Made and Other
Adventures with Science Fiction*

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Ray, Satyajit. *Travails with the Alien: The Film That Was Never Made and Other Adventures with Science Fiction*. Edited by Sandip Ray (in association with Dhritiman Chatterji, Arup K. De, Riddhi Goswami, and Deepak Mukerjee). HarperCollins India, 2018. ISBN: 978-9352779154.

To connoisseurs of world cinema, Satyajit Ray is likely to be a familiar figure as the creator of masterworks such as the *Apu Trilogy* (1955, 1956, 1959) and *Charulata* (1964); he is also the only Bengali (and Indian) filmmaker to have received an Honorary Academy Award (1992). To a lesser extent, recent scholarship has focused on Ray's science fiction (sf) short stories and novellas, which present a complementary yet divergent vision (from Euro-American sf) for the genre as practiced in Bengali. *Travails with the Alien* brings to an international audience for the first time a confluence of the auteur's commitment to both filmmaking and science fiction. It also shines a spotlight on one of the biggest controversies in Bengali and Indian film history – one that continues to be hotly debated in Bengali intellectual circles, as Ray remains the greatest Bengali cultural icon after Rabindranath Tagore: i.e., did Steven Spielberg plagiarize *ET* from Satyajit Ray's *The Alien*?

Travails with the Alien has three main sections, including a foreword by Sandip Ray, Satyajit's son and a renowned filmmaker himself. Sandip Ray sets the tone by outlining Satyajit's contribution to Bengali science fiction through reviving the Ray family flagship children-and-young adult periodical *Sandesh*, as well as his contribution to creating the Science Fiction Cine Club in Kolkata in 1963 – the first such establishment in the non-western world. We are next greeted with a full-page image of a spaceship travelling past erupting and pock-marked planets – one of Ray's many iconic illustrations, this one for his serialized science-fiction hero Professor Shonku's debut "Journey of a Space-farer" for *Sandesh* in December 1961.

The first section contains three articles by Ray and his interview with All India Radio on science fiction as a genre and its cinematic history and appeal. Some previously uncollected facsimiles of memorabilia from the Science Fiction Cine Club and two personal letters from Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke conclude the section. The short essays reveal Ray's innate and unique sensibilities on science fiction, as he discusses H. G. Wells's and Jules Verne's *oeuvres*, iconic sf films such as *A Trip to the Moon*, *Metropolis*, and *The Shape of Things*, plus the work of filmmakers François Truffaut and Stanley Kubrick. The short essay "SF" succinctly encapsulates Ray's vision for the genre: sf thrives on wonder and will continue to do so as long as there are men willing to dip into a tale that will make him feel small in the face of the expanding universe, and let

him share the triumph and the futility of men probing into spheres of darkness – in space, on earth, on an alien planet, or in his own mind and body. (7)

In a “Look at Science Fiction Films”, originally published in 1966, Ray analyzes and categorizes a proliferation of sf themes in film – monsters, genetic mutation, alien planets, technology – foreshadowing Carl D. Malmgren’s typology in *Worlds Apart* (1991) a quarter century later (10). With the proliferation of scholarly criticism on sf since Darko Suvin’s 1979 *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction*, Ray’s analysis may not have the critical edge that one might expect today; we must remember, though, that he was more creator than critic, and then-contemporary American and British sf authors such as Clarke and Bradbury produced criticism on much the same scale as Ray. He does not delve into the “science” component of “science fiction” to any great degree; as Andrew Robinson (an American critic of Ray’s cinema) comments, Ray’s “thoughts were as uninhibited by convention and his lack of higher scientific knowledge as were Tagore’s” (*Inner Eye* 299). Indeed, the diffuse and often outright *unscientific* premises in Ray’s Shonku stories have been a matter of contention among Bengali critics, even though we learn in the All India Radio interview that Ray attempted to keep abreast of current scientific trends (22). In this interview, Ray also discusses his own growing *oeuvre* and visuals for the film that was never made; for instance, the interior of the spaceship in *The Alien* should have “a feel of veins and arteries” like “a living thing” (26). One of the more fascinating sections from the SF Cine Club memorabilia is a selection of quotes from well-wishers: Walt Disney, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Kingsley Amis, and Brian Aldiss. In his interactions with Kubrick, Clarke, and others, plus his discerning critiques of “western” sf and sf films, Ray’s persona comes across as unfailingly cosmopolitan – an equal among equals. It is then ironic indeed that Ray’s venture into Hollywood came to the end it did.

The second short section contains “Bonkubabu’r Bondhu” (“Bonkubabu’s Friend”) – Ray’s much-anthologized first sf short story and a TV script based on the story, both in translation, which served as a “springboard” for *The Alien*. The narrative focuses on the plight of a docile schoolteacher, Bonkubabu, who is bullied by his peers. The turning point occurs when he meets the alien Ang who, giving lie to the common precept that aliens would only land in metropolitan centers like New York and London, accidentally lands in a forsaken field in suburban Bengal (Kankurgachchi in the story; Lochanpur in the TV script). Ironically, Bonkubabu is shown exotic wonders of this world (the North Pole, the Amazon rainforest) by this extra-terrestrial alien, and he regains self-confidence through the interaction, the process being more pronounced in the TV script than the short story.

The third section is the longest and contains a miscellany of material on the unmade film *The Alien* – the complete script that Ray wrote for Columbia Pictures, including the script’s facsimile excerpts, interviews, articles, news reports, and correspondence.

The film screenplay introduces a whole new cast of characters: a poor boy Haba, a Marwari industrialist Bajoria, a scientific-minded journalist Mohan, an American engineer Devlin, and of course a re-imagined, mischievous, unnamed Alien. Embedded is sense of cultural degeneration and nostalgia for times past, whether for the glories of the ancient Hindus (who discovered the mathematical concept of zero) or for a depreciation in the quality of life (i.e. diluted cow’s milk, failing crops). The screenplay also comments on social issues peculiar to Bengal that recur in Ray’s other fiction and films – that indigenous Santhal women are exotic sexual objects; Marwari industrialists are greed personified; the rural population is gullible and easily exploited; and so on. For instance, the relevance of Bajoria’s assertion that “business and religion make the . . . most effective, the most miraculous, the most extraordinary . . . the most wonderful cocktail in the world” (95) is likely not lost on the contemporary reader. The ironic twist, recurrent of Ray’s other sf, occurs when the alien spaceship, an artifact of science beyond human comprehension, is interpreted as a supernatural, divine object, a long-forgotten temple emerging out of a pond. The Alien is

likewise seen as a mischievous god who first bestows largesse on the village but then withdraws it, possibly after witnessing the everyday acts of cruelty and immorality rife within rural Bengal. Interestingly, the Alien neither speaks nor shares screen space with any other character, with the exception of an unconscious Habu and an inebriated Devlin – both marginal characters, and both beyond rational consciousness in those moments. The screenplay ends on a somber note.

The remaining part of this section deals with what Ray calls “Ordeals with the Alien”, supported by facsimiles of letters, newspaper reports, and photographs, all of which begin with optimism and promises but end in a long-drawn-out process of rejection. Ray writes that he was encouraged by Arthur C. Clarke to present his screenplay to Columbia Pictures; Mike Wilson was slated to direct it, and Peter Sellers was initially enthusiastic about playing Bajoria’s role. The project received much media attention and the script was widely circulated, but even after several trips to the UK, the US, and France, the project remained unrealized. Then, 15 years later, Steven Spielberg’s *ET* was released with uncanny resemblances to the plot and character designs initially presented in *The Alien*. Ray was dejected but chose not to take any legal action. Particularly interesting among the facsimile documents are two letters from Arthur C. Clarke in 1983 and 1984 requesting Ray not to sue Spielberg on charges of plagiarism, citing “unconscious plagiarism” and taking at his word Spielberg’s indignant reaction: “Tell Satyajit that I was a kid in High School when his script was circulating in Hollywood” (186-87). Critically evaluating the “truth-value” of historical documents of this nature leads to a conundrum, as there is no way to factually prove or disprove Ray’s contention (supported by other investigative journalism included here) – that *ET* did in fact plagiarize large sections from Ray’s *The Alien*. As the plagiarism charge is often much more heavily skewed against “non-western” practitioners (say a Kaavya Vishwanathan or a Yambo Ouloguem), it remains crucial to shed light, as this volume does, on alternative versions of history which are not represented in Hollywood film history, for one, and Spielberg’s *oeuvre*, for another.

The volume, though, ends on a sweeter note with the Appendix, which contains two additional short stories in translation – Sukumar Ray’s “Henshoram Hunshiyar’s Diary” and Satyajit Ray’s “Tipu, the Maths teacher + The Pink Man”, which are delightful reads. One of the strengths of this volume is indeed the wealth in translations from Ray’s original Bengali, making his work accessible to a larger reading public.

Travails with the Alien collects illustrations, photographs, film stills, letters, book covers, tickets, posters, telegrams, etc., lending to its value as a research sourcebook, but the proliferation may be a little overwhelming for the lay reader. The volume also fails to provide any overarching narrative linking the various sections or the rationales for volume organization. Overall, though, it brings together under one cover much fascinating, previously unpublished material related to Ray’s broad-ranging interests in filmmaking and science fiction, as well as the unmade film *The Alien*, which will be particularly useful for researchers, scholars, film enthusiasts, and lay readers interested in learning more about the controversy around the unmade film.

Works Cited:

Robinson, Andrew. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*. California UP, 1989.

Biography: Anwasha Maity is a recent PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her dissertation on Bengali science fiction explores the impact on the genre of colonial and postcolonial history, the question of what “science” is, and indigenous aesthetic-philosophical systems. She has published in *Science Fiction Studies*, *Studies in the Fantastic*, and *Jadavpur University Essays and Studies*, and her co-edited volume, *Indian Genre Fiction: Pasts and Future Histories*, is currently available from Routledge.