

DISTANT THUNDER

A movie review by John Hospers

The films of India's foremost director, Satyajit Ray, are always rewarding--for their stunning visual beauty, the lovely Indian music on the sound track, the slowly building but always sure and penetrating human characterizations, the intimate details of Indian village life, the exquisite mixture of humor and pathos, and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of such grinding poverty as few Americans are able to imagine. Ray's trilogy *Azarajito* some years ago was a film classic acclaimed around the world. The first film in the trilogy, *Pather Panchali* was hailed (with great justification, I think) as one of the twenty or so greatest films made since the invention of talking pictures.

His latest film *Distant Thunder* is not in the same class with *Pather Panchali*, but it has the same stroke of the master. The chief difference lies not on the artistry but in the subject-matter, which may be too depressing for some viewers. The film deals with the widespread famine and starvation in Madras in 1943-4 when World War II kept most of the world from hearing much about it. Gradually and inexorably we see life reduced to its most elemental. At first, we are introduced to kindly and generous people, and bit by bit we see people (but far from all of them) stealing from their dearest friends for a scrap of rice; a proud and loyal wife prostituting herself to a grotesquely deformed man in order to fend off starvation; a young girl fainting in a roadway after six days without food; a lady giving the last of her own food to her; and a village boy waiting behind the trees and then snatching the food from her dying hands. When an old man from another village, whom the main character (a school teacher) and his wife have befriended with food earlier in the film, appears again on the scene with ten hungry dependents, the camera multiplies the images of the starving family into hundreds and then thousands, and we are told then (at the very end) that more than five million people died in that famine.

The film is, among other things, an exercise in free-enterprise economics: perhaps purposefully since the film titles refer to "the man-made famine of 1943." Example: when through inflation the price of rice rises from 6 rupees to 8 and 10 and finally 1,000, some villagers accuse the local grocery man of hoarding; they tie him up, beat him, and raid his store, only to find out that there is nothing there.

But the delicate human touches, the great human sympathy, the details of individual characterization, the cumulative power, are all there, and they make the film all the more heart-rending. In the end, the bitterness one feels about man's ignorance of

elementary economic principles, and one's indignation at superstition and economic planning, and one's deep regret and hurt that suffering on such a massive scale occurs in human history, are tempered by one's affectionate and abiding memory of the earlier life of the villagers, who one by one, each in his or her individual way, become dehumanized by starvation, and finally succumb to it.