

DIRECTOR

MRINAL SEN



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Twenty minutes into Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1971), we accompany the main protagonist Ranjit Mallick (played by Ranjit Mallick, in his debut feature) on a Calcutta tram, on his quest for a Western suit for a job interview. A young woman on the tram reads a film magazine. She stops when she sees Ranjit's picture, doing double-takes between the image and the man beside her. Suddenly, he breaks the fourth wall to address the viewer directly. He introduces himself as Ranjit Mallick, an actor working in the film for the director Mrinal Sen.

The moment comes out of nowhere, completely surprising the audience. For Sen, it was essential to involve the viewer in the creative process. As he said in a 1996 interview, "This is a two-way traffic. The spectator has to meet me halfway."

Born in Faridapur in an undivided Bengal in 1923, Sen came to Calcutta as a student in 1940. His first Bengali-language production *Raat Bhore* (1955) was a commercial failure, but he found success with his second, *Under the Blue Sky* (Neel akasher neechey, 1958), set during Japan's invasion of China and exploring a platonic friendship between a married Indian woman and an immigrant Chinese worker. Set in the 1930s, and conveying a message of solidarity and internationalism, Sen's *Under the Blue Sky* was released in 1958 when Indian-Chinese relations had soured due to border conflicts. While a commercial success, the Indian government was uncomfortable with its political message in the lead-up to the India-China war of 1962 and it became the first film to be banned in independent India.

Satyajit Ray's international success with *Pather panchali* in 1955 made government funding available for non-commercial and experimental Indian films. Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) was a beneficiary of this, telling the simple tale of a hardened jobsworth in late middle age (played by Utpal Dutt), who works for the Indian railways. During a hunting expedition in the inhospitable

rural landscape of Gujarat, Dutt's character Shome is left a changed man after he meets a charming young woman (Suhasini Mulay, in her debut performance).

The uncluttered premise allowed Sen to experiment with visual flourishes, freeze-frames, animated sequences and bold vistas shot in the windswept vastness of Gujarat's desert dunes. *Bhuvan Shome* also introduced audiences to Amitabh Bachchan, who performed the knowing voiceover narration.

Sen received the National Film Award for Best Feature and Best Director for the film, alongside international recognition as the pioneer of the Indian New Wave.

Sen's Calcutta trilogy – *Interview*, *Calcutta 71* (1972) and *The Guerilla Fighter* (Padatik, 1973) – documents and responds to the communist Naxalite upheaval in Calcutta in the 1970s, in varied ways. Freeze-frames are weaponised by Sen in *Interview*, as shots of the handsome urbane Mallick are jarringly interspersed with scenes of impoverished children. In using images of poverty, Sen never stopped interrogating his own position of privilege as an urban filmmaker. The Calcutta trilogy in particular underscores his absolute rejection of representations of poverty as somehow dignified, and his refusal to let the Indian middle classes off the hook for benefiting from a colonial legacy of social inequality.

Sen met his lifelong partner, actor Gita Shome, in 1946 on a film shoot and they married in 1953. He often spoke of her crucial role in his career and acknowledged her as his collaborator.

Sen's work deserves wider recognition for his unflinching political and social gaze, but in his films he's also capable of extraordinary sensitivity. By the end of *Bhuvan Shome*, we find the arrogant bureaucrat on the hunting trip, now tamed. Ready to return to his natural habit, Shome gently cradles a bird he's shot but wounded, which he then sets free. This was Sen's gift, to never lose sight of the human within the radical. 📺

Shruti Swamy



John Carter, 95: editor who was the first African-American to join the American Cinema Editors society (*King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis*; *The Heartbreak Kid*).
Anne V. Coates, 92: editor celebrated for her work on *Becket*, *The Elephant Man* and especially *Lawrence of Arabia*, for which she created one of the most famous match cuts.
Mark Livolsi, 56: edited popular Hollywood films (*The Devil Wears Prada*; *The Blind Side*).

PRODUCERS & EXECUTIVES

Andre Blay, 81: businessman who convinced 20th Century-Fox to make its films available on videocassette, launching the VHS era.
Martin Bregman, 92: manager-turned-producer known for his long association with Al Pacino (*Serpico*; *Dog Day Afternoon*; *De Palma's Scarface*).
Raymond Chow, 91: founder of Golden Harvest studio who was a major player in Hong Kong's film industry and helped make stars of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.
Raymond Danon, 88: French producer especially known for his long partnership with Alain Delon (*Flic Story*; *Mr. Klein*).
Philip D'Antoni, 89: turned the car chase sequence into a staple of the modern police drama as the producer of *Bullitt* and *The French Connection* and the director of *The Seven Ups*.
Joel Freeman, 95: had a long Hollywood career as an assistant director, producer (Gordon Parks's *Shaft*) and production supervisor (*The Music Man*).
Harry Gulkin, 90: Canadian producer (*Lies My Father Told Me*) who also played a central role in Sarah Polley's autobiographical documentary *Stories We Tell*.
Arnold Kopelson, 83: won an Oscar for *Platoon* and also produced *The Fugitive* and *Seren*.
Gary Kurtz, 78: producer who was a key, if often unheralded, collaborator with George Lucas on *American Graffiti*, *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*.
Benjamin Melniker, 104: producer who helped introduce filmgoers to a darker, more modern Batman and was credited on every film in the franchise from 1989 to the present day.
Anthony 'Tony' Ray, 80: son of Nicholas Ray who started as an actor (*Cassavetes's Shadows*) and became a producer (*An Unmarried Woman*; *The Rose*).
Allison Shearmur, 54: executive with various studios and a producer of recent blockbusters (*The Hunger Games* series; *Rogue One*).
Barbara Stone, 83: renaissance woman: independent film as producer (*Film Portrait*; *Milestones*), exhibitor and distributor, often in collaboration with her husband David.
Paul Junger Witt, 77: producer of popular films (*Dead Poets Society*; *Three Kings*) and TV sitcoms (*The Golden Girls*).
SCREENWRITERS
Ray Galton, 88: comedy writer for TV (*Hancock's Half Hour*) and occasionally films (*The Wrong Arm of the Law*) known for his long collaboration with Alan Simpson.
William Goldman, 87: see box, opposite.
Hashimoto Shinobu, 100: one of Kurosawa's most trusted collaborators (*Rashomon*).