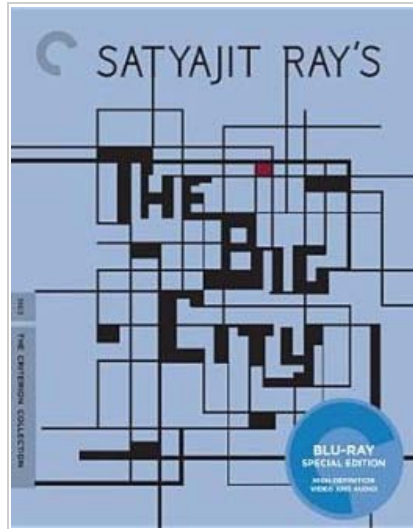
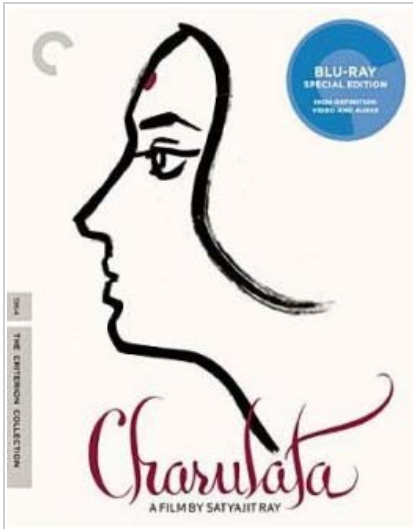


DVDs: The Rise and Rise of Indian Director Satyajit Ray

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Here's a roundup of great recent releases from **Criterion**, the premiere label for reissues of classic cinema. It goes without saying that anything released by **Criterion** is worth renting and/or buying for any serious movie fan.



CHARULATA (\$39.99 BluRay; Criterion)

THE BIG CITY (\$39.99 BluRay; Criterion) -- Satyajit Ray is one of the giants of cinema. Everyone knows this -- he garnered countless awards during a career that included dozens of films, documentaries and shorts. His debut film -- *Pather Panchali* -- and the Apu Trilogy often appear on lists of the best films of all time. At one point, *Pather Panchali* ranked in the Top Ten on the famed **Sight + Sound poll of critics worldwide**. In the most recent poll, it ranked at #41 and Ray's *The Music Room* was at #183 and *The World Of Apu* at #235. Three movies on the extended list of 250 films? Any filmmaker would be proud of such enduring recognition.

And yet...India's Ray is held in high regard but his movies have been slipping in those polls and slipping in the popular consciousness of movie buffs. There's one simple reason: they haven't been able to watch his movies. (It's the same reason Abel Gance's *Napoleon* has slipped in visibility; it's too difficult to show that behemoth in the proper fashion.) Even the beloved *Pather Panchali* -- a delightful film that can be embraced by audiences with ease (it's not just for cineastes) -- is hard to see. I've gone to august locations like Lincoln Center to watch the Apu Trilogy and been forced to see scratchy old prints. The DVDs of his movies were mostly subpar. This is hardly unusual; even a director as commercially popular as Alfred Hitchcock can see his movies fall into disrepair. *Rear Window* needed a full restoration and if that does despite the highly commercial nature of the film and the fact that studios can easily make money off of it, then any movie can fall through the cracks.

So Ray is a giant of cinema, acclaimed throughout the world even 21 years after his death but his movies simply haven't been seen much and rarely in the great prints they deserve. Now, finally, that's changing. A major restoration of Ray's body of work has been underway for years. The **British Film Institute is hosting a retrospective of his work** taking advantage of these new, fully restored prints. That retrospective will surely travel the globe. And now Criterion is releasing BluRays of key works. Wisely, they're starting with movies other than the Apu Trilogy since most reviews would start and end with that landmark work. *Pather Panchali* and the other two are indeed classics, but Ray's body of work is far, far richer than just those three films.

Criterion begins with Ray's personal favorite film *Charulata*, a tale in the 1800s of a woman drawn to her husband's poetry-spouting cousin. Ray always said this film was closest to the vision he had in his head for it. The other movie is also female-

centered. It's *The Big City*, a drama about a wife who breaks tradition to take a job and finds she's damn good at it. Both challenge conventional Indian attitudes towards the role of women. Both sets include thoughtful extras that add to your knowledge of these films in particular and Ray in general. Here's a trailer for *The Big City*; note -- it does NOT look as good as the restoration.

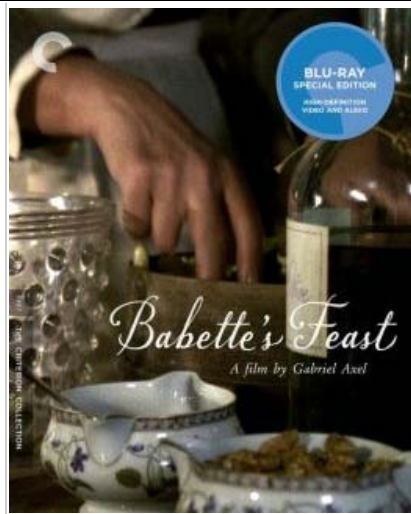


But what do these BluRays *look* like? Despite a lifetime of admiration, I've never seen a good print of *Pather Panchali*. What would these less well known films look like? I trust Criterion but they're only as good as their source material. I popped in *Charulata*, held my breath...and was astonished. These restorations are impeccable, beautiful, striking. The genius of Ray and how gorgeous his movies are came through with astonishing power. *The Big City*? Just as good. The details were vivid and sharp. I feel like I'm truly seeing Ray's work for the very first time. (Criterion also has a great BluRay of *The Music Room* available on BluRay.)

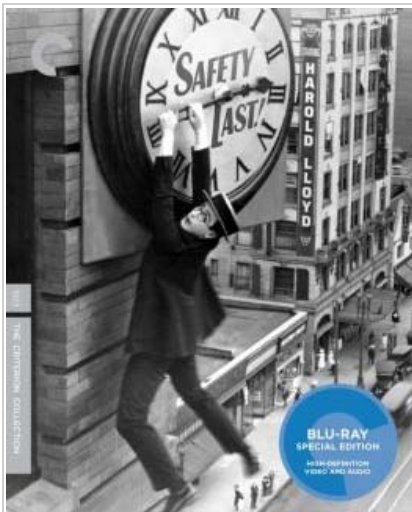
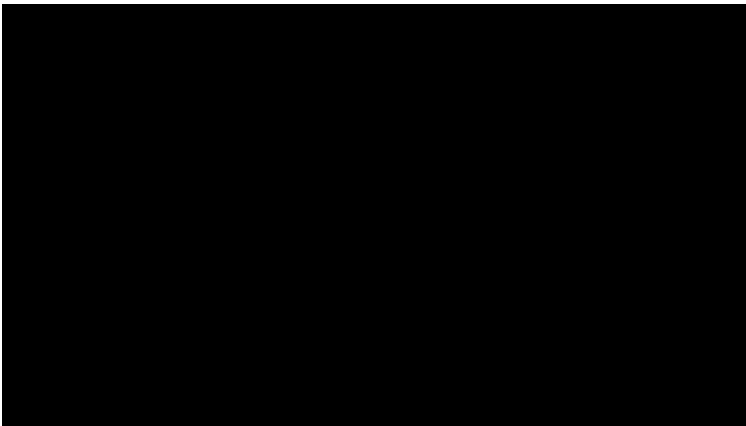
So it won't be a reappraisal of Satyajit Ray, exactly. We've known for a long time how important he is as a talent. But it's a reemergence of his body of work and a new appreciation for the breadth of his accomplishment, one that should keep him right up there with world masters like Ozu and Kurosawa and Bergman and others. If people can't see your movies they can hardly cherish them. And soon, in the next year or two we'll finally have a terrific boxed set of The Apu Trilogy in a glorious restored version. With the renewed attention this will bring, expect Ray's stock to rise higher and higher in the years to come back to where he belongs -- on everyone's short list of cinematic giants.



THE EARRINGS OF MADAME DE... (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- In some ways, the movies of director Max Ophüls suffered the same fate as Ray's. For various complicated familial reasons, it's been said that his son (the legendary documentary filmmaker Marcel Ophüls) didn't allow the films of his father to enjoy wide circulation. That's changed in recent years and his ravishing work is being savored again. Most would agree that *The Earrings Of Madame de...* is the first among a handful of his best, that also includes *Le Plaisir*, *Letter From An Unknown Woman* and *The Reckless Moment*. *Earrings* -- the sophisticated tale of an aristocratic woman who sells off a piece of jewelry to pay a debt with tragic unforeseen consequences -- is so beautifully acted and dazzlingly shot that even a neophyte knows they're in the presence of greatness. It's never looked better, either.

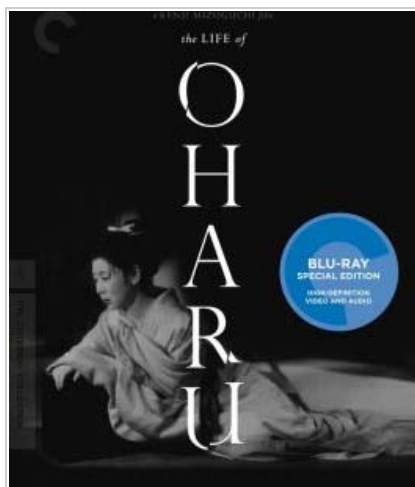
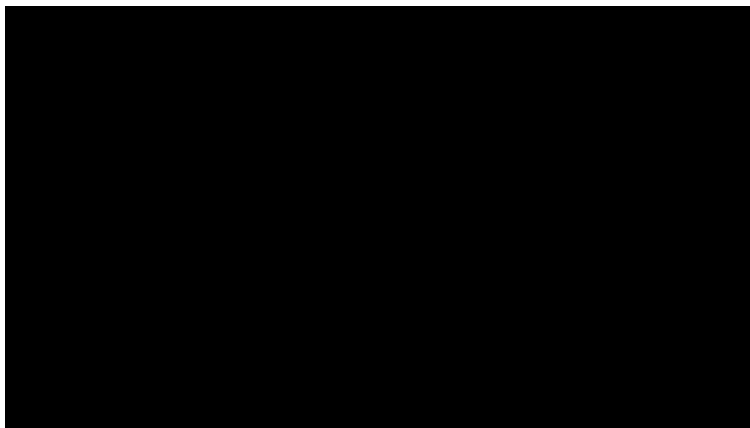


BABETTE'S FEAST (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- I've had a grudge with *Babette's Feast* for years. The movie is thoroughly delightful but when it won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, it beat out Louis Malle's *Au Revoir, Les Enfants*. Both were on my list of the best films of 1987, but for me *Au Revoir* is a piercingly great film. That's unfair of course. It's not the fault of *Babette's Feast* that it's a crowd pleaser, that it proved a hit at the box office, that the elaborate meal at the heart of the film was so enticing that theaters created package deals where you could see the film and then partake of a meal like the one shown in the film. Based on a short story by Isak Dinesen, it's the charming tale of a French housekeeper stranded in a dour little village in Denmark in the late 1800s. She asks one favor: to prepare them a "proper" French meal and the villagers find their religious fear of pleasure sorely tried by the brilliant feast that Babette prepares. It's a delight. I must say that a 1995 documentary about Dinesen aka Karen Blixen and an interview with a sociologist about cuisine and French culture were very subpar by Criterion's standards. But if you're like me and care 99% about the movie and 1% about the extras, rest assured that the film itself looks great.



SAFETY LAST! (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- As long as people watch movies, they'll keep rediscovering and laughing along with the works of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. *Safety Last!* is surely the perfect introduction to his talent, which combines smart comedy with breathtaking stunts. Seeing Lloyd climb up the side of a building and then hang from the hands of a giant clock -- well, fearless and foolhardy don't begin to cover the emotions raised by this bit of derring-do. It happened 90 years ago and is still more exciting than most action scenes you'll see today. It's the highpoint of a tale about a lowly clerk in a department store who has big dreams about rising up the corporate ladder. Most people climb up the ladder on the *inside* of an office building, but whatever works! The excellent extras include three more shorts, commentary and documentaries including *Harold Lloyd: The Third Genius*, a film made for the American

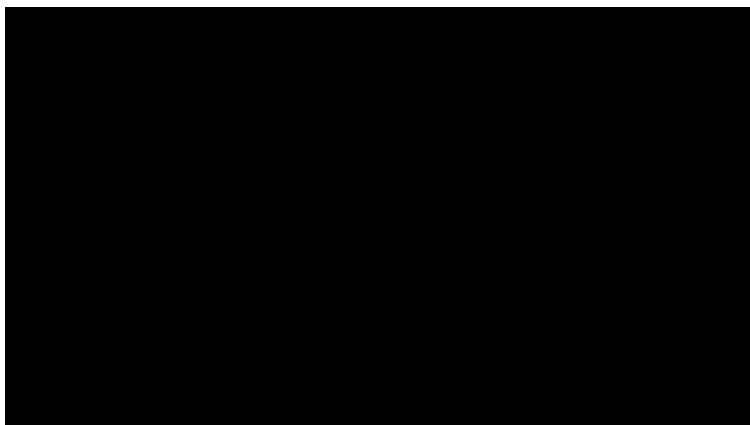
Masters series that fueled interest in his work. Just watch the trailer and you'll see so many good gags you'll just have to see the entire film.



THE LIFE OF OHARU (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion) --

Once upon a time, Japanese cinema to Westerners began and ended with Akira Kurosawa. Those days are long past. In fact, it's time for Kurosawa to regain supremacy after a backlash when some discovered he was too "Western" for Japanese critics and pulled away a bit from his films in favor of more "authentic" Japanese films. Nonetheless, it's been a welcome development that we have a much broader appreciation for the breadth and depth of Japanese cinema, from giants like Ozu to the great B movies that emulated our noir and gangster flicks with their own wacky flair. Surely one of the best discoveries is Kenji Mizoguchi, a legend alongside Ozu and Kurosawa. Shockingly, he died at 58 years old. It's shocking because he left such a rich

body of work (some 70 plus films). Among his greats are *Sansho The Bailiff*, *Ugetsu*, *The Story Of The Last Chrysanthemums* and *The Life Of Oharu*. This movie propelled his post-war career and worldwide fame, thanks in part to a marvelous central performance by Kinuyo Tanaka as a lady-in-waiting at court who falls inexorably lower and lower until she's nothing but a street prostitute. For me, the movie is a soap and nothing but a catalog of woe. One disaster after another strikes Oharu and I found it repetitive. Don't get me wrong. It's a good movie, just not a great one. I much prefer others of his works. But it's extremely popular and Tanaka is great. Among the extras is a documentary about Tanaka going to Hollywood on a goodwill tour where she meets Bette Davis, gives her a kimono and generally does the rounds back when a Japanese movie star was an exotic idea to Westerners indeed. Here's a clip from the documentary extra below.



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