

Interview

Siladitya Sen

‘Either Refusal or Revolt’: Volker Schlöndorff



Volker Schlöndorff visited Kolkata as an honourable guest of the International Kolkata Film Festival in November 2019. Few of his films were screened in the festival. He is one of the pioneers and most prominent member of the New German Cinema. He won the Palme d’Or at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, as well as Oscar in 1980 for his film *The Tin Drum* based on the novel by Nobel Prize-winning Author Gunter Grass. I had an opportunity to have a long conversation with him at Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata. This interview would not have been possible without the support of Mr. Friso Maecker, the Director of Goethe-Institut. The Institut’s Programme Officer, Ms. Sharmistha Sarker, who organised everything with special care and under utmost supervision of Mr. Sharanya Chattopadhyay, Public Relations Manager, Goethe-Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata, the audio visual was documented. I am extremely thankful and obliged to each of them for all the support they have provided me.

Siladitya: You were born in 1939.

Schlöndorff: That’s right.

Siladitya: Very interesting year, the year of 2nd world war.

Schlöndorff: Just before the war I am born ... (laughs)

Siladitya: So, when we are going through your films, we are getting the politics, we are getting the sense of history and your film is a weapon... a political weapon, a historical weapon to understand the world scenario. Throughout the years you were experiencing the Second World War. Could you please share with us something about your upbringing?

Schlöndorff: Of course! If I look back at my films, I realize more than half of 30 films, at least 15 or more are more or less about the second world war and the consequences...

meaning, I was completely determined by my birth date, March 1939, which I could not choose, and therefore the films I made I could not choose either. The films chose me but that only dooms later when you start film making and you know you want to impress the audience, you want to be recognized as person, as an artist and you are not really aware that history is speaking through your mouth. You think it is all me, it is all ego. So when I chose *Young Toerless* as my first film, it was really the experience of having just spent three years in boarding school and relationship between boys where there is always a homosexual component, there is always a power struggle too, it's like with young dogs, where everybody wants to be the number one and to impose power. When I made the film, I was 25yrs old, not even seven years out of boarding school. It was the only real experience of life in air until then. But there was of course a political dimension to the film which was conscious on my part that it could be read as a metaphor of engagement and commitment and how in a society you cannot stay as an outside observer and that you have to partake in civil life, because if you don't then others will decide for you and you may find yourself under dictatorship and maybe even under a negative one, not an enlightened one. But I think the true motivation must have been the personal experiences. It is like Henry James says a good novel has to be about the life lived. And I think the only conscious life I had lived until then was that of the boarding school experience.

Siladitya: I watched your film *Calm at sea* where you have portrayed Paris, a ghetto, the relationship of young people in defiance... somehow, I feel your presence in that period, 1941.

Schlondorff: yes. I came upon this story because our boarding school in France was just

next to this place Chateaubriand where all this happened and in fact the German soldiers were shot in front of one of my classmate's house. When we were 14-15-16 yrs., we did not talk about the Second World War, but the memories must have stayed with me. So later when I read about this incident, I thought this is for me, I have to tell this story. This is actually one of the few original screenplays I wrote.

Siladitya: At the beginning of your career as a film maker, you were friends to Louis Malle and Tavernier and you also assisted Alain Resnais. We are eager to know, when you were working with them, how these masters influenced you not only in the film making but also in the thinking process.

Schlondorff: It was an interesting moment, when I wanted to make my first film I of course thought of making a French film, my friends, Tavernier and Louis Malle said ' No no no, we have enough directors in France, you go back to Germany and make a German film. There is no German cinema and we don't know anything about the country.' So, I started to make films about German problems, German literature, and German people. That was very good because I always had little bit of the look of an outsider, or a revenant. My way of working on the set is also completely influenced by the way I saw my French masters' work. You always have a personal side that is given to you by birth, which you cannot control, and there's also culture of course and in that sense, I was very much influenced by the French. Bertrand Tavernier and I went to the same boarding school, so we had the same experiences, all in Paris. The difference was I was intern meaning I was in the dormitory and living in school and Tavernier was extra meaning he went back home after school. So, he was my relationship to the outside world. We went to see the same movies, same con-

certs, same theatres, we were curious in the same direction. That is a big influence.

Siladitya: I had an opportunity to meet Mr. Tavernier at the Goa International Film Festival of India (IFFI) and I was able to introduce my work about Mr. Mrinal Sen to him.

Schlendorff: Goa is the luxurious Festival and Kolkata is the real-world festival.

Siladitya: You were very young when you and your friends began the New German Cinema in 1960s. The New wave cinema of France also ran parallel with the New German cinema.

Schlendorff: I lived in the French Nouvelle Vague, I mean I was there when it all started in 1958-59, the first short films of Truffaut, Godard, and then when I came back to Germany in 1965; I discovered that there was a New German wave starting. It was then I met Alexander Kluge. He had an apartment which he rented out, so that is where I lived, in his furniture. The first young filmmaker I met was Werner Herzog who had just done a first short film and he was actually editing in the cutting room of Leni Reifenstahl. I told them that I want to shoot the 'Young Toerless' and I was special landscape looking for a special type of village with 19th century essence. He said he had the exact place. I was in Cannes in May and he was in Venice in September, a year later Werner Herzog made his first film, that was I would say the beginning of the German New Wave cinema.

Siladitya: How did it grow from here? You were witnessing the development of the New wave.

Would you like to share something about the movement?

Schlendorff: Those who stayed in Germany had the feeling that the wrong films were being made because these films represented a fake reality, let us say it was bit like Bollywood cinema. There were also musicals, but they were melodramas or telenovelas and it was all in the spirit of Heimat which means homeland but in a very regressive way. So, people revolted against this type of film making and expressed the urge to make movies that showed their country the way it was that time. This impulse was similar for me. When I came from France, I wanted to explore and discover the then generation of Germans, what do they think. I had lost contact. I was gone for eight-nine years. I left when I was 16yrs and I came back when I was 25yrs... a long time away. I think the so called young German Cinema was to explore the reality we were living in. Not so much as who we are, but what is this society we were living in, and very strongly questioning the society, because it was a society that pretended like the Second World War had never happened. They said let's move forward, no use thinking about the past, but when you are 15 -16 yrs., you want to know about your past and who were our parents... that was really the dynamic of the films.

Siladitya: After you, Kluge and Herzog initiated the movement, Margarethe Von Trotta, Fassbinder also joined. Did Reinhard Hauff join too?

Schlendorff: Yes yes...it was almost the same time in 1969, I met Fassbinder and Margarethe Von Trotta, when I was casting for a film I made called *Baal*. I was looking for the main actor and main actress and I saw Fassbinder and hired him, and I saw Trotta and hired her. In the next film I made called *The sudden wealth of the poor people of Kom-bach*, I looked for people who belonged to a certain part of Germany because they had to

speak a certain dialect Hessian and I found out that Reinhard Hauff was from the same part as I was, and I convinced him to be an actor. In the film he played Margarethe von Trotta's farmer-husband. So, you see, it was a very incestuous affair. We were in this small-town Munich, not even a million inhabitants. We were about few dozens of film buffs and everybody knew and influenced each other. There were of course jealousies and competition but there was also solidarity.

Siladitya: Were you ever influenced by Marxism and leftism in your philosophical, psychological, cultural, or literary thought process?

Schlondorff: It is a very important question. I was twice influenced strongly. The first time was when I was still in boarding school in France; there was this Algerian war, which was the war of independence for Algeria. When I came to France from Germany and I arrived at the school, there were few Muslims from Morocco. I befriended them and they told bit about the Arab world, and at the same the Algerian war of independence began. This war was very much supported by the communist parties and Communist world. Now I thought Communist is a kind of a monster with a knife in his mouth, because that was the way it was represented in West Germany--- they were the ones who cut our country into half, they were the ones who oppressed East Germany. So, the Communist party was completely prohibited in Germany. You will end up in jail for being a communist. And here in France I saw, normal people were communists, like our Jesuit priest had inclination towards communism. That was where I was introduced to Marxism in a very practical way. As a sympathizer, I tried to help the independent films by distributing the film leaflets which was illegal in the French school. Then in 1960, I made my first short film about the

independent fighters who deserted the French army and came to Frankfurt in Germany. The film was immediately forbidden both by German censorship because it criticized a friendly nation, and in France it was forbidden because it criticized colonial fight. I was in the middle of the Marxist ideology. It was when I went to the University in Paris and I had some teachers who were communists, I realized that all that I had done so far out of young adolescent instinct of sustaining the struggle of the oppressed suddenly became a theoretical object. And that is when I started to study a bit of Marxism and studied economics and politics. That was my introduction to Marxism. I could not help to make the connection to aesthetics because then you would wonder what Marxist cinema would be like or Marxist aesthetics is. That is how we discovered Bertold Brecht and tried to bring all that together in my films. And it of course was in complete opposition to everything that was valid in German culture at that time. But a couple of years later in 1965, I shot the *Young Törless*, it got released in 1966 and two years later in 1968, the student's revolution began. That was the logical continuation, but the influence of Marxism on me was more of a French association and it lasted for many years.

Siladitya: Your films *The sudden wealth of the poor people of Korbach* and *Tin Drum* reflects the aftermath of the aura of Nazism, the psyche and perversity of Nazism. You have also portrayed the human relationships through these films.

Schlondorff: Through these films, I questioned Marxism. When I worked with Heinrich Boll, he was pretty much leftist, sort of Christian Marxist. But with Gunter Grass, I came to understand what had happened in Germany when the Nazis came to power and how was it was a failure. The Marxist and Socialists came together and were fighting each

other at that time and National socialists took advantage of the situation and imposed themselves. I started to question the class struggle of the Proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the validity of that. What happened in Germany was the conflict of the lower middle class against the proletarians and the upper middle class. It was the revolt of a class that did not quite exist in Marxism and neglected by others and who suddenly came over. And that is when; I questioned Marxism for the first time. The second time was when they all came down in 1989. That time I came to the former East Germany for work. I was looking after all the studios and I had 710 people working under me and they were all the product of the so-called socialist society, which had utterly failed. I had a feeling that it not only destroyed the economy, the city, and the environment, it also destroyed the people. I had that feeling... the backbone of the people had been broken in that system. All the wonderful socialist economic planification did not work at all. It produced bureaucracy and orthodoxy of state socialism. The Marxist theory is still one of the most beautiful constructions of world view, but it is entirely theoretical, and the reality is unfortunately totally different. The failures of the guidelines of Marxism reflected in my film making.

Siladitya: Did the fall of Soviet Union in 1991 also reflected in your films?

Schlondorff: Yes.

Siladitya: We are aware of the collapse of Soviet Union and other East European countries including your East Germany in the last decade. The power monger socialists were gone by then. In the new millennium, there was sort of a right-wing wave. And in the second decade of this new millennium, you made your film *Calm at Sea*, which is again going back to the past and you portrayed the atrocity of

the Nazi rule. I am eager to know your outlook towards this global politics.

Schlondorff: It is curious to see, as you pointed out, how these Neo-patriotic or Neo-fascist movement occurred in so many places all over the world probably for so many reasons. I do not understand it. 10 yrs. ago, French anthropologist, Claude Levi Strauss, at his age of 100, said that he has the feeling that history is moving in kind of underground movements, in waves. Nobody could ever explain why in 1968 the student revolution happened simultaneously in Berkeley, in Tokyo, in Berlin... probably in India too and in many more places. He said I have no scientific explanation but by observing I see, these movements are like the pendulum... it sets off in one form and comes back in another; we seek salvation in different ideologies; it doesn't work and then we set off in a new direction. This process questions the continuous progression of humanity. The Western philosophy of progress emphasize on steady betterment, which is not ideal. I think development of human society is more like evolution, where an accident in some gene mutates to some new entity and thus the mankind on the planet keeps changing. I feel there is no particular direction of this progression... but the direction is definitely towards something more. I mean, it is more complicated than the Marxist theory and unfortunately there is no coherent theory right now to explain the evolution of human civilization. Unless you are religious, but that is a belief, not a theory.

Siladitya: We have some very important directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, Shyam Benegal, Girish Kasaravalli and many more. Can you connect your sense of history, culture, politics, and filmmaking with that of Indian cinema? I am excited to know about your thoughts on the Indian cinema.

Schlondorff: I was always looking for other ways of storytelling. The central European way was based more or less on the theatre of 19th century--- Ibsen or the comedies

which was exported to Hollywood largely. It is always like there is exposition, then there is a conflict, then climax, then there may be redemption of the character, a catharsis and finally a resolution. I think Nouvelle Vague (French New Wave Cinema) first questioned this dramatic structure, because Godard said, of course each movie needs to have a beginning, middle and an end, but not necessarily always. In real life things does not happen in three acts and I do not think there's ever redemption, there may be several climaxes, and there's very seldom catharsis. So, I was curious, how other cultures deal with it. For me, this is where Indian cinema comes in. I discovered this not through an Indian film, but through James Ivory film 'Shakespeare walah'. I think that was the first time I was aware of India in cinema, soon followed by early films of Satyajit Ray in Paris. I was awed by the Appu trilogy--- the way he captured humans, animals, plants, nature, I felt that is a richer view of capturing human life. Later, I watched his new films at Berlin film festival. I then came across Films of Mrinal Sen and so on. Mrinal Sen introduced revolution in his storytelling keeping the sensuous quality intact. I felt, Satyajit Ray, in the best sense in conservative; whereas, in Mrinal you had this element of revolt, which I liked very much. In my films too, lot of times, the main character is someone who is revolting, and most of the times, he does not succeed. But there is always a driving force which is the element of revolt. It is not the idea of progress; it is either refusal or revolt. Much later, through Jean-Claude Carriere, and Peter Brook, I dis-

covered Mahabharat, it defined the multitude of forces, which brought me back again to my idea of mutation and evolution. It can never be clear or have a proper end. There cannot be the idea of "Happily lived ever after" under the Communist ideal society. There will always be an open end. The only end can happen when we lose our race to climate changes and destruction of our planet.

Siladitya: Before concluding, do you wish to say anything to our audience about any wish you have or anything about your film making?

Schlondorff: I am much honored to go back to the origins and talk about film making. I enjoyed the conversation because I have a feeling, I am back to the old days where I knew what is going on, or at least I thought I knew. Whereas today, I really do not know where we are heading to, or what are the driving forces and mainly what is going on films. There are no art house films; there is no longer the communal experience of watching films; everybody is on his own with his phone and even the viewing of films is reduced to a very solitary experience. I don't know if I would even become a film maker today, because I always thought that film making is a wonderful mean to reach out to a multitude of people, whom you manage to unite through your work. I have a wish for the film schools and young films makers--- always go back to the origins; what was film like in the days of silent film making--- that was the true essence which, we must not ever loose.

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