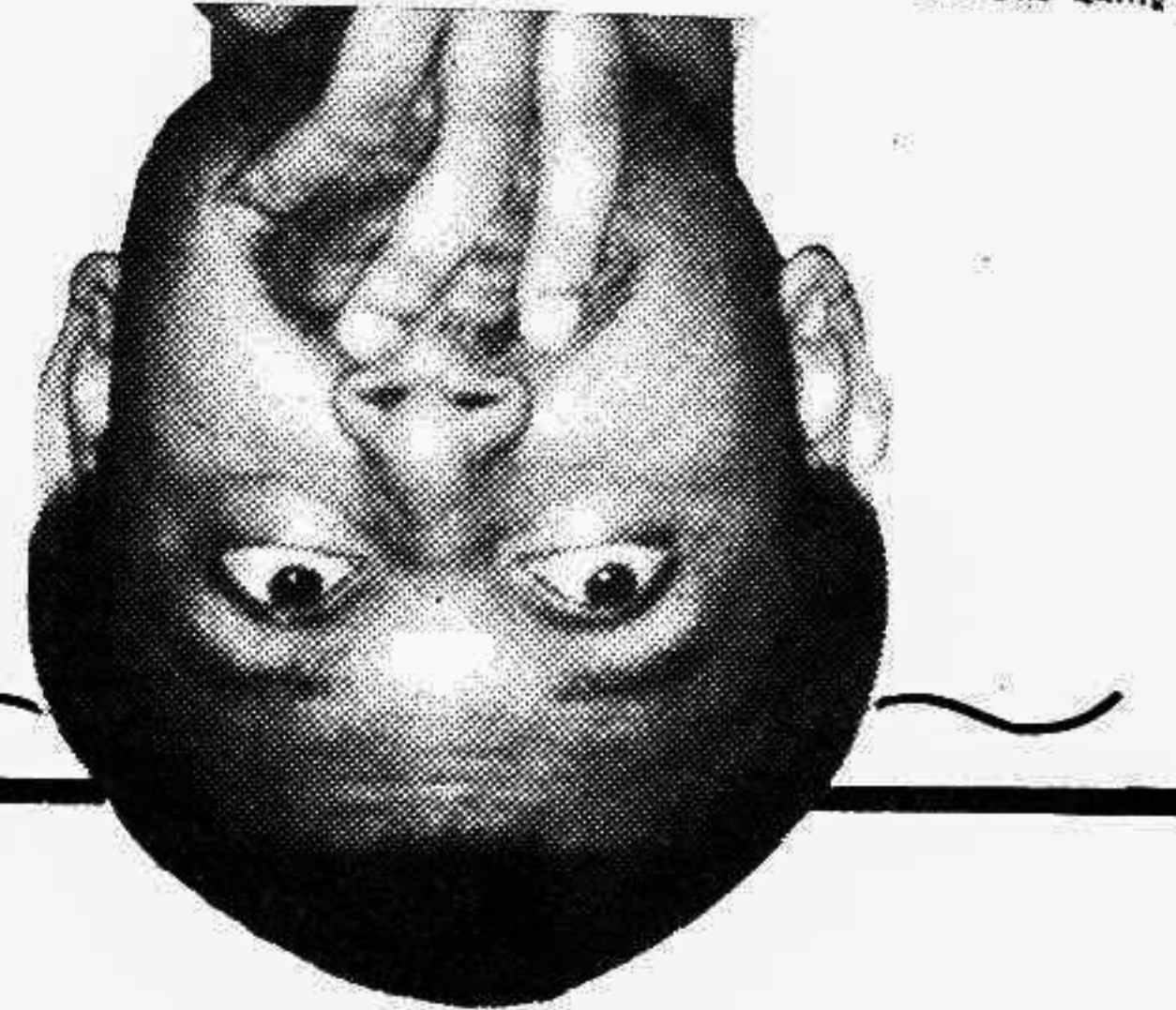
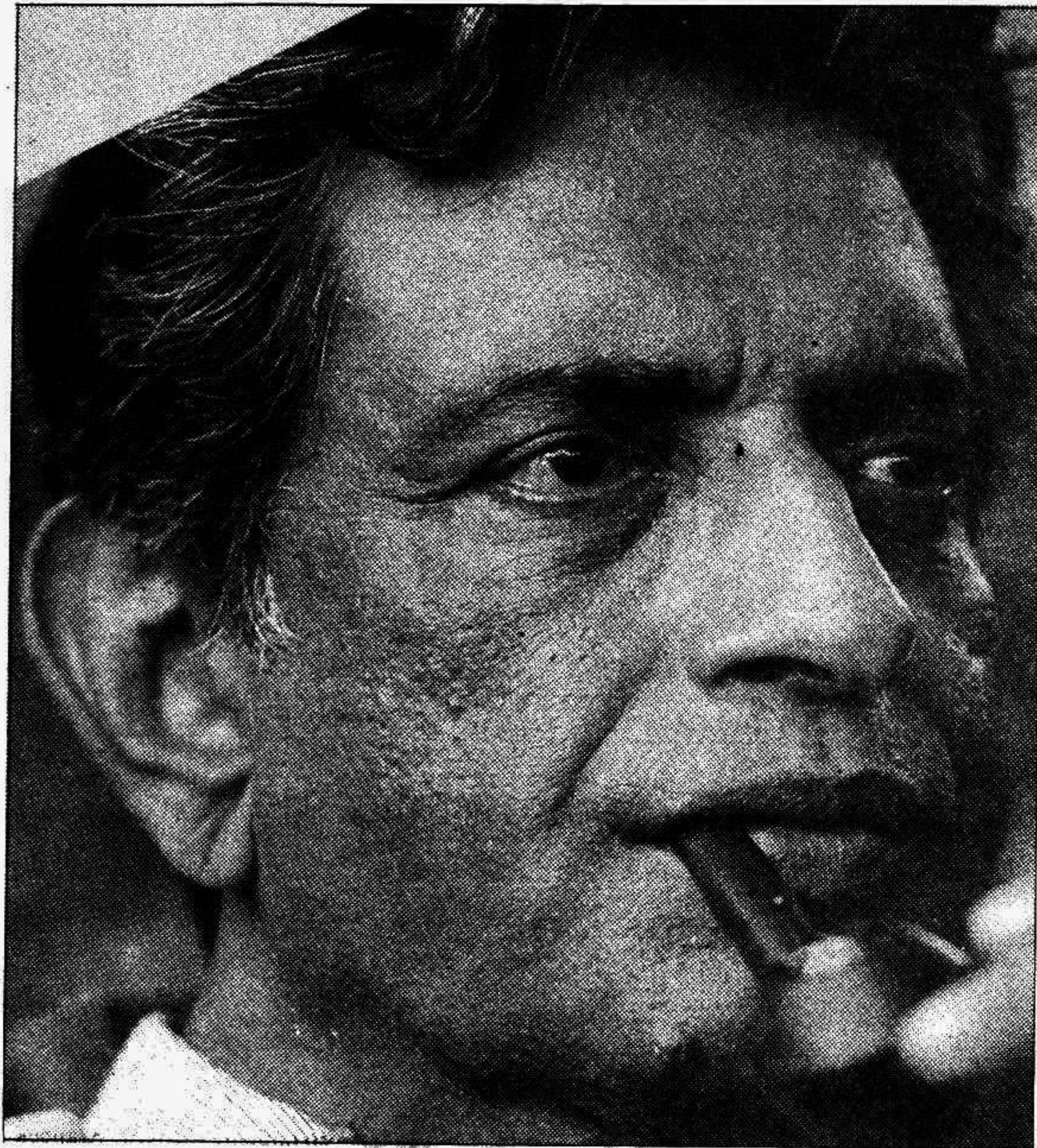


# YEP TALK



## Problems of a Bengal Film Maker

Satyajit Ray



Satyajit Ray

I suppose the only statement one can make about film making without fear of contradiction is that it is, at all times and all events, a complicated business. The cumbersome nature of its creative process, the involvement of so many men and so much money, all combine to lend it an air of bizarre complexity.

The avant-garde experimentalist has to grapple with problems that are mainly of an aesthetic nature. He deals with them in much the same way as a painter or composer deals with problems of tone and texture and form. He is essentially a free artist, being responsible only to his own artistic conscience.

Far more complicated, to my mind, are the problems that beset the serious commercial film maker, for it is he who strives to turn an ostensible business enterprise into a stimulating creative pursuit and make the best of both art and commerce.

The problems that he faces in the process are extremely varied. Some are of a universal nature; others relate to conditions obtaining in his country, and yet others to the particular film he is making. But, whatever their nature, they all affect, in varying degrees, the final shape and quality of his film.

Working in India, and more specifically in Bengal, I have my own artistic problems as well as those that arise out of the peculiar circumstances of film making in my province, which is one of the three provinces where films are produced in India, the other two being Bombay and Madras.

We make films in the Bengali language. In Bombay, the language employed is Hindi, while in Madras it is Hindi as well as a choice of five different South Indian languages. Bengali is understood by about fifteen per cent of India's total population, which makes the market for Bengali films a very small one indeed. It has been

calculated that if a Bengali film costs above Rs. 150,000 (£10,000), in nine cases out of ten it will not get its money back. A Hindi film can afford to spend six times as much and reasonably expect to make a profit.

As a result of this, investment in films in Bengal has been cautious and limited, and little has been done in the past twenty years or so in the way of technical improvements. Studios remain only partially equipped, laboratory work continues to be erratic, and a general air of privation pervades all departments of production. What Bengal has achieved so far has been more through human ingenuity and hard work than any skilled employment of technical resources.

Of the total number that constitutes the film-going public in our province, about twenty per cent is literate. Renoir once remarked that it was the alertness and receptivity of the French public that made possible the resurgence of the French cinema in the 'thirties'. The public that would support a truly serious film venture in Bengal is so small that it makes nothing longer than a two-reeler a safe business proposition. If one makes films aimed solely at this minority, one obviously makes them for love. In reality, no director can afford to do this, for once the stigma of esotericism attaches to his name, his days in the profession are numbered. Obviously, if he has to continue to earn his bread, he has to try and reach the larger suburban audience.

There are three familiar and well-trodden paths open to him. He can make mythological films, or he can make 'devotional' ones, or he can make 'socials'—preferably melodramas—which must have the adornment of the latest favourite star team. All three must have the usual concomitant of songs and dances and must not be below two and a half hours in length. This last proviso is so rigid, and so firm

is the Exhibitor's faith in it that a film which dares to disregard it may never see the light of day.

Needless to say, these formulas do not work every time, but they are the ones that have had the longest and the most lucrative existence. They have evolved out of the producers' deliberate and sustained playing down to a vast body of unsophisticated audience brought up on the simple tradition of the *Jatra*, a form of rural drama whose broad gestures, loud rhetoric and simple emotional patterns have been retained in the films to a degree unimaginable to those not familiar with this unique form of film making. The songs and dances too are a legacy of the theatrical-epic tradition.

One can imagine a Utopian situation when the spread of literacy might have gone hand in hand with an attempt on the part of the producers to come out of the groove and present the film-going public with something more worthwhile than tired reworking of hackneyed old patterns. But this has not happened, and is not likely to happen for some decades yet, unless some chance revolution should bring about the process. So the mythological and devotional will stay and continue to provide the staple fare for the majority of Bengal's film public. What, then, should be the serious film maker do? Should he accept the situation and apply himself to the making of serious mythological and serious devotional, keeping the popular ingredients and clothing them in the semblance of art? This is obviously a way out of the impasse, but it raises an important question: can a serious film maker, working in India, afford to shut his eyes to the reality around him, the reality that is so poignant, and so urgently in need of interpretation in terms of the cinema? I do not think so.

For the truly serious, socially conscious film maker, there can be no prolonged withdrawal into fantasy. He must face the challenge of contempo-

rary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema.

I say this with all conviction because I myself have been, in my own humble way, trying to do this, and have found out that sometimes it even pays to be uncompromising, and at all times, it makes one feel better to be so. Let me briefly recount my experience with my first two films.

When I began *Pather Panchali* in 1952, I was aware of the consequences of departing from the beaten track: past experience of other directors had warned me. But I was undeterred because I had great faith in my story, in its seemingly artless simplicity and in the appeal of its very recognisable, human characters. I also felt that if the departure were artistic enough, it would perhaps acquire the value of novelty which is itself would act as a bait to the public.

When the film was half finished and our money ran out, I was obliged to show the 5,000 ft. rough cut out to nearly every distributor in the province. They were unanimous in their distrust of the material. But this did not shake my faith in the story, and it was at last justified when the film was completed and released under government sponsorship. *Pather Panchali* was a hit in the cities. In the suburbs too it did unexpectedly well.

With the second film I grew bolder, and the consequences were less happy. My mistake, from a commercial point of view, was to take even bigger liberties with my source material than in *Pather Panchali*, which had at least retained the main contours of the original. As a result, the urban audience which was largely familiar with the plot of *Aparajito* was irritated by the deviations. As for the suburban audience, it was shocked by the portrayal of the mother and son relationship, so sharply at variance

with the conventional notion of mutual sweetness and devotion.

*Aparajito* lost money. It was at this point that the European film festivals came into the picture. The awards won by the two films put a new complexion on the situation, and I realised that a Bengali film maker did not have to depend on the home market alone.

The situation that faces us now is this: working in Bengal, we are obliged morally and artistically to make films that have their roots in the soil of our province. Secondly, having in mind the nature of our audience and the resources at our disposal, we are further obliged to aim at an overall simplicity of approach. 'Big' stories are out, and so are big stars. The problem of reaching the mass cannot be solved yet, and will remain with us as long as illiteracy on a large scale exists. If the simple-but-serious approach can develop into a movement instead of being confined to a handful of individual directors, there is the possibility that the taste of the public can be moulded to accept the new and reject the old.

As for the audience abroad, they seem the likeliest to solve the financial problem, but our approach must be cautious and honest. There is no reason why we should not cash in on the foreigner's curiosity about the orient. But this must not mean pandering to their love of the false-exotic. A great many notions about our country and our people have to be dispelled, even though it may be easier and — from a film point of view — more paying to sustain existing myths than to demolish them.

We expect no quick returns. Personally I have been lucky with my first two films, but what is really important and exciting is not the immediate gain, but the ultimate vindication of the belief that I hold dearest as an artist: art wedded to truth must in the end have its reward.

From Satyajit Ray's 'our films their films'.

## Meet the Directors



**YEP:** First let's talk about you. We know that you studied Physics and Philosophy. Why did you choose to become a film maker?

**KZ:** It's a question I keep answering for years. If you answer the same question many times you start to believe in your own answer. But do I actually know, I don't. I wasn't satisfied with myself in Physics, however I loved Physics very much and science. I remain faithful to science and that was my friends who are scientists. I follow their work. It's a beautiful vocation but it's not mine. I don't find a place in science. I am eager to know what they invent, they discover but I know I'm not going to discover anything myself. Philosophy was great. It's study was great, opportunity to make you think but it isn't a profession. I was into many other things— student theatre, journalism and amateur film making. And suddenly this amateur film making became my passion. I think it's important what you do in life is somewhat verified, double checked by the outside world. Somebody must tell you I like what you're doing. You can't decide only yourself. I found satisfaction I found that suddenly in film making people said I'm good. They liked it. Then I tried in Film Academy. After 3 years of studies I was kicked out of the Academy and that was the decisive moment of my life. That's when I was actually certain I'm going into film making. That was decided I'm not going to give up even if they don't believe in me I know by now that this is my profession that this is what I want to do in the future. And I reapplied and finally they re-admitted me. And I spent 30 years trying to prove to my Professors- do you know how wrong you were? Meanwhile live become professor myself. Now how wrong I may be when I judge other people's work. How dangerous it is to decide who has talent and who has none. Now probably I'm very cautious myself and very much afraid. But I know must keep my judgement. It's unfair if a professor does not tell you anything whether your work is good or bad. He should encourage you and he must discourage you sometime.

**YEP:** In your lifetime you've gone through three phases of changes in your country the World War II, the communist rule and now democracy how did these changes affect your film making?

**KZ:** War I lived through as a child. My conscious life I grew up in a country after war- that was a communist country we all suffered very badly from the beginning. None of my friends nor in my family was ever close to the communist ideology. They were all very much socialists- so they considered communism as a terrible abuse to politics. So they were very strongly against it. My father was many times imprisoned. I described it in one of my films- a recent film - It's about a child in Stalinist Poland. It's a comedy. I laugh at my childhood. However life was very cruel and full of injustice. When Stalinism was over communism became softer, because the resistance of people was strong against it and they never accepted that it was imposed by the Soviets on us. So finally it was ten years ago we managed to get rid of it. Rejected it totally. It's a new society, free market- full of contrast, full of bad things and full of good things at the same time. People have more choice than the previous communist society they have more chances. This is absolute value. But there's also suffering and there's challenge. As an artist I was much much far better in the communist system but I don't advocate it. It's an evil system.

**YEP:** In your first film *Structure of Crystals* we saw you deal with moral dilemma of your protagonists. In your most recent

films which were screened in the Festival I noticed you are still dealing with the same issue. How contemporary do you think these ethical problems in the more permissive 80s.

**KZ:** They are eternal, so they're always contemporary. Because one cannot exercise freedom without choices. Choosing between two options usually has a moral reference. Something is better for whom me or the society. For my spiritual growth or for my bank balance. What is better when I choose to do something or go to somewhere not to go somewhere else. These moral dilemmas are constantly related to human being. I find them in our society today I found them in previous society in communist system as well. They're general. But they have different manifestation. So today people are mostly tempted by money by the power money gives. But in previous system power was at-



**Krzysztof Zanussi is one of the most acclaimed directors of modern cinema. Zanussi along with Andrej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski and Roman Polanski carved a niche for Polish films in the World cinema. Zanussi studied Physics and philosophy in the University but later went on to join the Film Academy. *Death of a Provincial* The diploma film that he did to finish his course earned him many laurels in different film festival. Since then as they say there was no looking back. Though never returned to his academic disciplines his first film *Structure of Crystals* has scientific community as its backdrop and most of his films deal with the ethical problems and complexities in human relationship. This great film maker was in Dhaka for four days to attend the 6th International Short Film Festival, 199 where six of his were screened. During his stay Aka Reza Ghalib interviewed Krzysztof Zanussi on behalf of YEP. The maestro talked on issues ranging from Physics to Metaphysics, Communism to Consumerism, here is a verbatim account for the YEP reader.**

traction for money. Power is very corrupting - corruption is a very natural thing for mankind. We are all tempted by corruption. But we've some power to fight against it.

**YEP:** How your background in Philosophy helped you to find an answer for this?

**KZ:** It helped me in wording my questions and finding references in philosophical systems. The problems I deal with became very personal in my brain. So they are purely intellectual, if I want to resolve them intellectually then I write an article. I write a piece. I don't make a film. So philosophy helps me but it also brings danger to an artist, because it's a different language. When you speak philosophical language you don't speak artistic language. So you must choose either or. I mostly abandoned philosophical language now, but I like philosophy. But there's another factor beyond philosophy which is religion. I think I want to qualify myself as a religious person. Religion inspired me. Religious upbringing gave me sensitivity which otherwise may be I wouldn't have.

**YEP:** But what is the status of film in this age of globalisation, we have internet, multiple TV channel, video. Do you think film has any chance?

**KZ:** I think definitely it suffers a lot because of it. You call it globalization it is one aspect massification is another aspect. But these process invoke a contrary trend- so when something is more and more globalized it also becomes more and more local. It's like that. So this new resistance against globalization it will come one day. At the same time which are global are not necessarily universal. And universalism is also a very important factor. Why Kurosawa film has such a strong appeal on so many people in different culture, because they have great universal appeal. They had nothing to globalization at the time of Kurosawa Japan did not participate in global leadership but his films did. So I don't panic. Of course I'm upset to see that same Hollywood rubbish you have on television almost universally all over the world.

**YEP:** What about the Polish film industry?

**KZ:** It's not very big, making about 20-25 full length feature films a year and a lot of television films. There's public and private television law in many European countries are obliged to spend a certain amount of money in local production. They must not show American films only. They're obliged to spend money on local market. Americans objected on the basis of democratic practice. It is a very bad demagogic confusion. Because monopoly kills freedom of a customer. If you monopolise all the channels there's no freedom of choice. In order to have freedom of choice there should be no freedom of monopoly. The Polish people are watching more Polish film today so I'm optimistic.

**YEP:** Were you never tempted by Hollywood?

**KZ:** I did make a film in America. But it was an independent film. It's difficult to sustain in mainstream Hollywood. Even Louis Malle couldn't. Only Milos Forman did. He was lucky. He found enough flexibility himself. So he was one of the few exceptions.

**YEP:** Polanski was also successful.

**KZ:** Polanski did. But I know his temperament. I know mine is different. I'm unable to go so far as to meet the American society. Their sensitivity, their philosophy is alien to me. Milos Forman once said to me, said many times to his students in Europe - If you want to be successful in America you must love hamburger and Coca Cola. I hate Coca Cola and I don't eat hamburger.

**YEP:** You along with Wajda, Kieslowski started a new trend in Polish cinema. Where does it stand now with Kieslowski now dead.

**KZ:** Wajda is very active, I'm active and there's some audience who make us responsible that there's no dead end. But in a way it was easier when there's censorship we're acting and the stage was ours. Now there are many other actors on the stage. There's free press, many television channels many foreign films. So we've competition. There's distraction for public more attraction.

**YEP:** So TV is taking over.

**KZ:** Things change very fast. You've to ask what Television since there's no one television. There's now totally different kind of cable television, which has no advertisement. You just pay for viewing. Which is totally new opportunity for ambitious film to be distributed. With the new technology high definition very soon will have high quality television, which will be as good as cinema. What I care for is to communicate with people. I prefer to communicate in a dark cinema. But if there's no cinema fill go to television. Why not? I want to meet my audience. If my audience is not waiting in cinema I'll go and meet them at home.

**YEP:** You've been in Bangladesh for four days. What's your impression about it?

**KZ:** In this short stay live some feeling why it is different from West Bengal in what way it is different from India, how it is different from other Islamic Countries. Intuitively I start to feel that there's some identity of this country. It is a very new country new political identity and still growing.

**YEP:** What about its cultural identity?

**KZ:** When you see from European perspective you don't make any distinction between India and Bangladesh. It looks all the same. But I've seen one of your films *Interrogation*. I was very pleased very interested. And also I knew Bengali culture from Calcutta perspective. It is more rural and less anglicized perspective which you have here.

**YEP:** Do you want say anything to the young film activists in the country?

**KZ:** I'll convey the same message I try to convey when I'm teaching an addressing film makers. The message is you must have common language for you audience. However uneducated or primitive your audience is. It is your audience. You must respect them. I try to tell them don't be arrogant watching commercial cinema. It is cinema which is usually very bad. But it reaches heart of many people, who are very primitive very un-cultivated people. Try to do something to enter this market and make this better. Festivals alone, film societies alone they don't make film culture you need more. You need more following. It is hard to say because I know how low is common denominator. I know how difficult it is to make film which go a certain way between commercial and alternative. I don't know the answer but I know arrogance is bad answer. After I had some discussion with the students in Indian film Institute in Poona, I feel it very wrong to follow Jean Luc Godard and make in Bangladesh highly sophisticated film which only interest some different audience. You must be able to address your own audience, your own tradition your own narrative form. Your villagers what kind of entertainment they're used to. Try to see your roots what is essentially true in your culture. What language is better. In another word try to reach your audience despite bad taste and low cultural level.