critics in India, Father Gaston Roberge founded the Chitrabani media institute in 1970 with support from the late Satyajit Ray, and was a lecturer in film studies at the University of Kolkata before retiring in 2006. This interview was taken last month on the most recent of his many visits to Dhaka.

You are a Jesuit, a member of a religious society. Why did you go to study films?

There are two reasons mainly. First as a member of a religious society I do what I am told. So, why I was told to work in the films? We are committed to the education of people, helping people to take a meaningful place in society. But it is felt that the educational system alone cannot provide the education required. During the 1960s we became aware of the importance of the mass media in the life of people and if this was true in the mid 1960s it is still more true today.

The second reason I work in this field, I have been interested in films from a very young age. As a schoolboy I used to attend shows. There was no TV of course. But in the school we were shown serials of cowboys. I was very fascinated by those stories. After that, when I was about sixteen, I heard that a film society was being created in the city I was staying. I asked if I could join without knowing what it was about and then I discovered cinema. I saw many films prior to that as a sort of exciting dream. But once I joined the film society I discovered that cinema was much more than just fun.

What interested you about film? What do you like best in film?

For me it was the meaning of a film. Of course, I was not insensitive to the form in which the film is made. But I felt that when I saw a film that has a deep meaning, I became much enriched, much better from that.

However, I can say that the first film I saw as a cine film member disturbed me. It left me with a little uneasiness. You will find this strange, but that film was *Battleship Potemkin*. For maybe ten years some scenes would come back to my mind and I could not understand why. It was disturbing. Only when I studied Eisenstein I understood. Because he explained that the purpose of his making films is to plough deep in the psyche of the spectators.

Perhaps I could say that even when I was watching the cowboy films as a kid, I experienced the power of cinema, which I understood only later. What I mean to say is that even if I saw films that we would consider of little worth, I was experiencing cinema even as a kid. This is very important to me because the films that the scholars tend to dismiss as worthless have something in them. And it should be the duty and responsibility of the film scholar and film critic to help people make the best of the film experience that they have -- even so-called commercial films.

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You spent your early days in Canada. Then in 1961 you came to Calcutta and experienced Indian cinema. How was it different from your earlier experiences of cinema? How much did it influence you?

I can say that I started cinema in various steps and with various events. As a kid I used to see films, and then came the discovery of cinema with not only *Potemkin*, but other films such as the *Bicycle Thief*. My third discovery of cinema was when I saw the Apu Trilogy.

ticular frame of mind; namely, it was the last night before leaving my country for India by boat. I had to spend the night in a small hotel in New York and I looked at a newspaper like anybody would do and found that there were three films from Kolkata, being shown in an art theatrethree, not only oneso I thought let me see that because I was going to Kolkata. So I saw the entire trilogy, *Panther Panchali*, *Aporajito* and *Apur Sansar* in one seating.

It had a tremendous impact on me. It was like introducing me to Bengal. I found the characters so lovely, so human that I was very fascinated. After that in the ship, it took nearly forty days sailing to Italy, going to Mumbai. So I had the time to think and it was as if I was creating my own *panchali* about the India that I was going to see. Even before that I thought with love about the people I was going to, but here it was more concrete.

Did you find any difficulty with Satyajit's Indian characters as a man born and brought up in the west?

There was no difficulty at all. On the contrary it would have been difficult not to love them -- Apu, Durga, Sabrajaya, Harihar and Pishima -- because they were so human. That they lived in a village, that they were poor and worse, was almost insignificant to me. What was fascinating was their human quality. Humanness is not measured in takas or dollars whether it is in India or in Canada.

You see what is happening in the Apu Trilogy is that the *aporajito* [unknown] is *jibon* [life] -- *cholchhe cholchhe abar ashchhe cholchhe ashchhe cholchhe kono poriborton noi*. Also, the death of Harihar is given much attention. In American films there are many deaths but nobody dies, whereas in the Apu Trilogy there are at least five deaths. Harihar has one of the most realistic deaths on the screen. It is death as part of life.

Film scholars and critics tend to dismiss popular film as worthless, but the people are very interested in these films. How do you view this gap as a film scholar in the context of the Indian subcontinent?

As a film scholar, I am interested in the films that people see.