

Interview

**Pradip Biswas**

**Andrey Zvyagintsev: Face to Face**



Andrey Zvyagintsev has come a long way from his Golden Lion winner film *The Return* (2004). In between he has made some outstanding films like *Elena*, *The Banishment* (2007), *New York, I Love You* ("Apocrypha" segment, 2009) – segment cut from theatrical release, *Experiment 5IVE* ("Mystery" segment, 2011), *Elena* (2011), *Leviathan* (2014) and then came *Loveless*. Director and screenwriter Andrey Zvyagintsev is the winner of the Venice Film Festival (2003) and the Cannes Film Festival (2011, 2014, 2017). Two-time the Academy Awards and the BAFTA Awards nominee. Winner of the Golden Globe Awards (2015) for his film *Leviathan*. In 2018, his latest work *Loveless* was awarded Best Foreign Film by the César Academy, France.

Andrey Zvyagintsev attended International Film Festival of India (IFFI), Goa in November, 2011 AND 2014. His latest film *Elena* was shown in the International Section of IFFI. This critic carved out a space to talk to the director on his films.

**Excerpts OF Interview**

P.B: In India all three films of yours have been shown. In the recent time you seem to have explored subjects, very much Russian in content, in your films that have universal appeal.

A.Z: I am glad to hear about the presence of my films in Indian Film Festivals. Not that I know about it in detail. This is the first time I have a scope to accompany my latest film *Elena* and I am glad to know that you have liked the film.

P.B: I am told all your films have been made on a shoe-string budget, a rarity these days.

A.Z: Thank you for the right comment. We cannot afford big budget films. We are short of money.

P.B: I am overwhelmed by the style of your filmmaking and more so marked with poetic image. Most of your films carry poetic sensibilities of Angelopoulos and Tarkovsky's cinema. Structure is brilliant and search for poetic truth essentially humanist.

A.Z: For me cinema is a journey of discovery. Ours is a violent universe and it is more so in Russia now. Cinema is more of geometrical organization. A good film depends on good structure. To make a film too verbal often is the cause of disaster. The more you depend upon image to convey ideas and crisis of life, the better it is for the art of the film.

P.B: Each film such as *The Return*, *The Banishment* and *Elena* takes on to a silent device to carry on the narrative, whatever its length. It is the encounter of images arranged in a way to tell a story of human alienation, social conflict and personal equation. This is all for giving the film a credible poise.

A.Z: Silence is quite important for me. I believed in tight framing of images that speak for words. In words we hear sound carrying the meaning of the content. I am against this method to a large extent. Many a mood is best created through silent image. And it is cinema.

P.B: There are hints of patriarchal domination in two of your films. *The Banishment* in particular is too harsh to Vera, the mother character of two sons, all imposed on her by Alex her husband.

A.Z: They are there I suppose. When a marriage goes amiss, entire understanding falls through. With it soft human values crumble making the gap between the couple wider. In Europe this is so much evident.

Many an ideal small family has been doomed due to non-compliance of family virtue.

P.B: Are your films somewhat autobiographical? It seems there is enough of personal interpolation in the films.

A.Z: It is very much there. My father left me when I was a child. Me and my mother had to struggle hard for survival. But it is not uncommon in Russia. You are the maker of your life and such experiences stay with me.

P.B: Is alienation more in numbers in present Russia?

A.Z: It is like that. I don't have statistics with me but I can say families in disruptions have grown high.

P.B: Is it anyway the impact of the fall of socialism in USSR that once unified a big universe in harmony, peace and egalitarian distributions of wealth!!

A.Z: I think so. The fruits of socialism I saw when I was quite young and my father left us for ever.

P.B: What about the present regime under Putin? How much social security the Russian people enjoy at present!!

A.Z: The present system under Putin has failed to solve essential economic problems faced by the common people of Russia. Frequent protest march is an example.

P.B: I am told, you too joined anti-Putin demonstration to demand social justice and equal rights to each citizen.

A.Z: We are afraid of shortage of social security no doubt. A large section of people are against the present Putin-led Govt.'s anti-people policy.

P.B: This is apparent in your films though obliquely.

A.Z: Your perception is right. I have no reason to counter it.

P.B: A person who is in art can speak of politics through art, you said.

A.Z: I still believe so. The visual medium is a powerful tool to motivate our people to see for themselves what is happening in the state.

P.B: I strongly feel, after the glasnost of which you are critical to some extent, has only transformed the system from one to another. There is a notional change but in practice in terms of welfare society, not much is on view.

A.Z: Overall the people in general are yet to get back the social standing. At present, despair and economic deprivation hit the nation hard.

P.B: The classicism of Soviet cinema is now a matter of the past. At least it seems so to me/us. Is there any way out?

A.Z: The classic stuff you talk about in Russia is no more there. Tarkovsky is the last major auteur who protected the classicism of Soviet cinema. In fact, he served the purpose at the cost of his life.

P.B: How do you replace this vacuum! Do you have new talents who can retrieve the past glory?

A.Z: It is a difficult question to answer. New talents continue to appear in new scenario. But who can guarantee that they would follow the same path!!

P.B: Your films, shown at our end, provide inimitable new expressions and poetic sensibility. This is so rare in the works of others!

A.Z: It is a personal impression that by its very nature cinema must express reality, not cloud it. The purity of cinema is revealed not in the so-called symbolic selection of images, but in the capacity of those images to express a specific, actual fact.

P.B: Women characters in Antonioni's films are very crucial. They appear to be the very spine of the films.

Amazingly, I find such resemblances in women characters of your films, though at variance.

A.Z: Personally, I am so impressed by Antonioni's films and the style in which he made them. Women characters in my films may have common values on life but they act differently, not necessarily in the same manner.

P.B: How do you respond to the kind of Hollywood cinema? Does it go with you!!

A.Z: Laughs! Hollywood stands for block-buster films. We do not share its perception or the method of execution. Our culture largely is of our own and our stuff cannot be compared with Hollywood movies, consumed like coco-cola. Our films bear Russian reality quite different from America's. Any comparison as such should be ignored.

P.B: Sincere thanks for sharing valuable times with me. Finally, I must say, given the way your films have emerged at the International Film Festivals, you have miles to go. And intimately I wish you so.

A.Z: Such exchange of ideas is good for me. We hope to continue our dialogue in future. Thank you again for talking to me

#### ANDREY ZVYAGINTSEV ON CINEMA

The way I have conceived the film is largely dependent on the transformation of Russia that took place in one fine morning. We have noticed how social and economic situation changed after the fall of socialism, responsible for the formation of USSR. What interests me is what happens after the return of the father after a long time at a small family that stayed headless for 12 years. Indeed, absent-present scale of reality has touched me so much. What you see in the film is how social alienation is born in a split society.

#### On Family Relationship

Family relationships play important roles in our life. I love the dynamics of the family that fascinates us. For both films I was just looking for a subject that would touch me. This happened with both *The Return* and *The Banishment* as soon as I read the script. It could just be coincidence that the stories which moved me happened to be about families, but perhaps there is an element of substitution there too, because I feel that I myself never had a complete family. My father left me when I was six and ever since then I have moved from place to place. It felt like was living in a hotel.

You manage to extract extraordinarily convincing performances from the children in your films. How did you achieve this?

In some ways it's very difficult to work with children, but in others it's actually easier than working with adult actors. You have to create a situation in which they can live. You find the right children and they just live the lives of the characters, and you film them. What you can't do is give them an objective for the day and expect them to comply. After the first film I decided that I would never work with children again. But then, of course, I did. [In *The Banishment*], there's a scene which involves a small donkey. It lasts seven or eight seconds on screen. But it took us half a day to film it. We used three cans of film. Now I say will never work with animals again.

#### On Cultural Reference

There are very few cultural references in *The Banishment* – it could almost be set anywhere. Some say religious symbolism is used and it is Christian symbolism. There is no deliberate Christian symbolism as assumed. I think, the function of religion in the film is to wipe out the borders between all the characters' different confessions. The function of religion in the film is to wipe out the borders between all the characters' different confessions. But without any reference to Christianity at all, the film would lean too much towards mythology. It's not an apocalyptic scenario, as some people have suggested. It's much closer to the reality in which we live today.

But without any reference to Christianity at all, the film would lean

#### On Realism in Films

Yes. I belong to the old school of theatre and cinema and I believe that every work needs a catharsis. A film is basically another reality. It's like a dream. It's important that the viewer can give themselves to that dream and live within it, so when they enter the cinema they are in one kind of space and when they leave it they are in a different space. On Feeling pressure in *Making The Banishment*, to live up to the success of *The Return*. It was impossible to avoid feeling the pressure. [After *The Return*], I had all this attention directed at me. It was like being a passenger standing at the end of a tube carriage, and suddenly everyone on the carriage turns to look at you. That's how it feels.

#### On Film Elena

I'd say there are three layers of the story, the three generations. There's the first (Elena and her husband Vladimir), the second (Elena's son Sergey and Vladimir's daughter Katya), and the last generation being Sasha, the grandson, and his friends. The third generation was lacking the depth that the others had, so that's where this idea came from", the filmmaker explained. This and the next episode when Elena and her family move into Vladimir's apartment was all new, written almost near the end of production. We found that location Sasha goes to, with the apple garden, the industrial pipes, the uncultured piece of land next to the building... it became clear that they had to go in and something had to happen. That's where I got the idea that there would be a fight. It predicts the possible future of this kid and reflects what he's all about, what he lives by, what's on his mind". Considering Elena committed a pretty heinous act to get this boy into school, his future doesn't look so promising. In a way, the director considers this her punishment -- she gets her way, but will things really play out in her favor?

But what was the original ending? Apparently, it was to end right before we follow Sasha to the rumble, while everyone is still in Sergey's apartment and dealing with a brief blackout. "Initially the movie was supposed to finish in the hallway when the lights were off. One of the characters is outside checking the fuses, the light goes back on, and that would be the end. I don't know if you have this in America, but in Russia, the fuse boxes have discs that tell you how much electricity the apartments on the floor are using", he described. "So the last shot would be that

disc that keeps rotating, accumulating the electricity, and the camera would slowly zoom in on that disc... that was to be the end". Quite a powerful closing image, and given the filmmaker's interest in sound design, we're sure he could somehow make an electricity monitor seem unnerving. That said, the finale that he came up with last minute is just as powerful, and provides enough closure to be satisfying in a way that the original wouldn't have been.

☞ **Mr. Pradip Biswas is a veteran Film Critic, and an Author. He is an Honorary Member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Kolkata.**

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