BACK TO ONE

LEONEL WOLF

Shaheen Dill-Riaz is a documentary film-maker based in Berlin. Born in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, in 1969, Shaheen moved to Berlin in the early 1990s where he studied Art History and Theatre Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. He later attended the University of Film and Television Konrad Wolf in Potsdam-Babelsberg, where he graduated in Cinematography. His films have received numerous awards, including the prestigious Grimme Prize for Eisenfresser (2010) and have been shown at festivals across the globe. A profound belief in humanity accompanies and inspires all of his works.

Foto: Sabcat Media

Today he is sitting next to me on a purple old couch drinking a glass of water. It's 7:30 in the morning and together we want to go back to one:

When did you first want to make films?

It's hard to pinpoint when I decided on this as a career. The desire grew gradually. My fascination with cinema started in childhood. I grew up in Bangladesh and lived there until I was 23, Bollywood films were, of course, the dominant influence, and later it was Hollywood films. For me and my peers, cinema was a world of imagination, more than books. We did read books, but we really grew up with the fantasy world of cinema. My interest developed early, but it wasn't until I was in ninth or tenth grade that I discovered arthouse films. They were artistically ambitious, and I became curious. But I could only read about them—there was no way to watch them, because I went to a military academy. Originally I was expected to join the military, but I was too short. Once I transitioned to civilian life, I started seeking out arthouse screenings which were mostly held by film clubs. The films were shown in smaller venues. Sometimes not even cinemas, but cultural centers hosting various events.

In that time some of my friends, were making films with independent approaches — not commercial, but through their own initiatives, with sponsors and so on. I got involved and started observing how films were made.

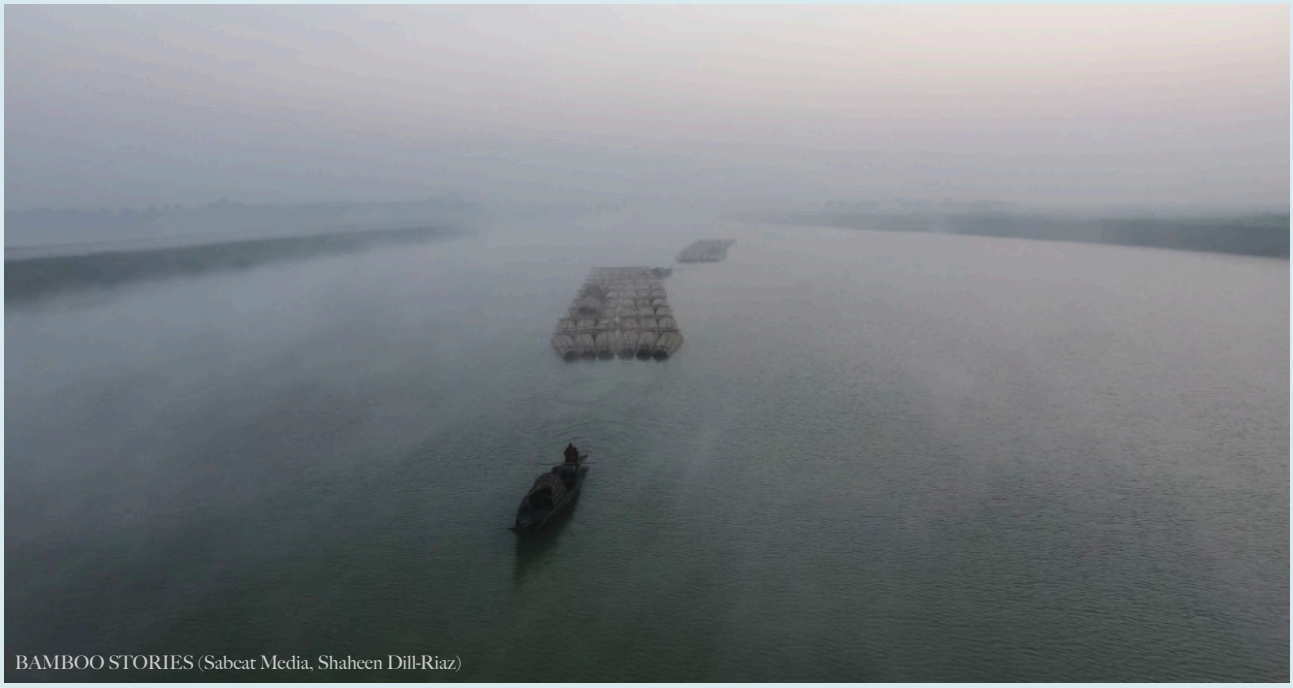
How did you connect with these people?

They were members of film clubs that organized screenings. I got to know them, and they said, 'We need people—we're shooting a small film. Would you like to join?' I was 18 or 19 at the time and had plenty of free time, so I said yes.

Did you assist with the camera work in that film?

Not really. I mainly helped with small organizational tasks here and there. I wasn't allowed near the camera because that was handled by professionals. It wasn't very intensive, and the project only lasted a few months. So, I didn't really get much hands-on experience back then.

me. This was in Goslar. I returned to Berlin and decided I truly wanted to study film because I couldn't shake my passion for it. I applied to the DFFB (German Film and Television Academy), but I didn't get in. I wanted to make good use of my time, so I decided to pursue another degree while preparing to apply elsewhere for film studies. I applied to the film school Babelsberg, but there was about a year and a half in between. During that time, I began studying Art History and Theatre Science at Freie Universität Berlin. And then my application to Babelsberg was successful.



BAMBOO STORIES (Sabcat Media, Shaheen Dill-Riaz)

It was hard to break into the practical side of filmmaking, and honestly, I wasn't very eager to dive into it. I was more interested in reading about films, watching them, and exploring them on a theoretical level. I also attended workshops, where Filmmakers or film teams from Europe would come to share their knowledge and try to inspire us young people. Around the same time, I started learning German at the Goethe-Institut, and eventually, I got the chance to go to Germany on a scholarship.

But not to study film yet?

No, not yet. It wasn't very serious at the time, and my family wanted me to study engineering or computer science instead.

How did your family feel about your passion for film?

They weren't very supportive. They saw the independent film scene as a 'breadless profession'.

Did they know much about the industry?

A little. They had seen how my older friends lived and earned, and it was clear that while there was passion, it wasn't financially stable.
That's why my family wasn't thrilled, and I ended up studying computer science instead.
But then I dropped out after just one semester. I quickly realized that natural sciences and engineering weren't for

When you think back to growing up in Bangladesh. What was film for you back then?

I loved the intensity with which life was observed in the arthouse films, especially in the feature films. At that time, I hadn't even discovered documentaries yet. It touched me. I also began to recognize the value of these films compared to commercial Bollywood films, for example. Back then, I made that distinction. Now, of course, I see it differently. But theadded value of arthouse films was my discovery. There was also a certain seriousness to them. It wasn't just about dancing or the usual Bollywood fluff. It was about the reality we live in, questioning it, and juxtaposing it.

Do you remember your first 'wow' moment with an arthouse film?

My key experiences were multiple, not just one. For example, the films of Satyajit Ray, the Indian filmmaker. I saw two of his films that completely blew me away. They showed life in a way that commercial films didn't, with brutal honesty about people, conflicts, and reality. I watched these films at least 10 or 12 times in a small cultural center. The guy at the door, who felt sorry for me, started letting me in without paying. Then at the Goethe-Institut, I discovered Wim Wenders' films. That too was a key experience because those films were so different. Through him, I discovered a completely new way of storytelling. At that time, Wenders' black-and-white films like *Alice in*

the Cities (1974), *Kings of the Road (1976)*, *Falsche Bewegung (1975)*, and *Summer in the City (1970)* opened my eyes to a whole new approach to cinema. These were the films I saw that made me say, 'I have to go in this direction.' I felt that I could do something like this, and I knew it would be something I'd enjoy.

In Babelsberg you got into cinematography without really having much practical experience beforehand?

Not much. I did have an internship in Nuremberg at a documentary film production company. But it was short, about three or three and a half months.

And did you shoot a film in that internship?

Yes, not directly, but I supported a cameraman, a team, and so on. That's where I learned a bit about the technical side.

But looking back now, it's important for me to tell young people to gain as much practical experience as possible before going to film school, because it helps!

In my studies, I saw that almost all my classmates had practical experience. They had either worked at some tech rental companies where they learned about the equipment. .. or they had assisted people or worked as material assistants. And I was the only one with the least experience when it came to the technical side. Especially with feature film equipment, I had nothing, only experience with documentary films. And even then, just with video.

So, I think it's important, if you're going to film school, not to go there empty-handed, but to have tried something beforehand. Nowadays, it's not like you have to do an internship; you can also shoot on your own, with a camera, and try editing and so on. But working as part of a team is, of course, an experience you should also have. Ultimately, it's all about teamwork.

Do you think that just doing is important, just make a film—and then learn from it, learn from this chaos?

Chaos is a good keyword. It's really interesting that within this chaos, a certain order has to be created. You have to deal with that chaos. It's the same in real life. Everything is chaos, and we try to give it structure; otherwise, life doesn't work. And it's the same with projects—you have to deal with that chaos.

But this structure, this order you give, must also have a certain meaning. It's not just about creating order for the sake of it; it must have purpose, meaning and intention. And fulfilling that purpose and meaning is, I believe, the challenge we face as artists.

How do you create order and structure in these chaotic documentary projects, often in Bangladesh, where you work in multiple roles with a small team of 2-3 people?

The first thing you need is to not be afraid of chaos.

So, you're always facing chaos when you start a project, no matter how well prepared you are. Something always shifts or something unexpected happens, and suddenly everything gets mixed up.

But you have to trust that you have a goal in mind, you know what you want, or rather, you know what you don't want. That's also a strategy. Many people don't realize that. Andreas, my editor, often says this: it's not important what you want, but it's crucial to know what you definitely don't want. Then you can start narrowing things down. And then you can see what is actually relevant for you in this chaos. I think it happens automatically that you focus on the important things. What you shouldn't do is tick-boxing — thinking you need this, this, and that. Of course, we still do it, like including some establishing shots or detail shots. But that's not what matters. What's important is identifying which moments are truly significant, valuable, and worth telling. In the beginning, it might be a bit vague, and things won't be so clearcut.

This is something you can't really teach; it's something you must discover on your own. Because everyone sees things differently. I always say, you get to know yourself as a filmmaker through practice. You discover yourself through this process. Critics or wise minds can point things out, but it's you who has to discover what is valuable.

This is something that develops slowly through practice. But what's important is not to be afraid, to have the courage to say, 'It will be okay.' I know what I want, and even if it doesn't work out, I've learned something from it. Just keep moving forward.

So, don't be afraid of chaos. There's a Portuguese writer—I'm not sure who his name is—he said something like, 'Chaos is something waiting to be decoded.' In other words, there's no real chaos; it's just another kind of order. The question is whether you can see through it. So, even if I feel helpless in the Chaos, let's see what can be found there. And what interests me in there. I'll just trust in that.

You say you discover yourself through filmmaking. Can you explain that?

I think it's similar to what Spielberg once said in an interview: what you truly want is a very quiet voice. You have to listen carefully to it. I think it's similar when you do things intuitively and without external pressure; that's when things happen that you don't simply replicate.

There are artists who say they want to paint like a child again, without thinking, to let their inner spirit run free. That takes courage, and the chance to create something no one else has done. That's when you realize: this is interesting, this is truly mine, even if it's similar to someone else's work.

That's how you find your own voice. It's a process you must do on your own, or with the help of honest critics who truly engage with your work and say: 'This is interesting, we haven't seen this before.'

Or sometimes, a connection happens that you never intended. What's also interesting is that through collaboration with the team, things emerge that are crucial. For example, in my films, I always mention the editor Andreas, the composer Eckart and the mixer Tobias. This collaboration at every stage brings in external inputs that aren't yours. They create their own dynamic.

Eventually, the film takes on a life of its own, and you just have to follow. You can't force anything. It's not about saying, 'I want it this way,' but rather, 'What does the film want?' This openness doesn't come only from you, but from your team—your collaborators in editing, cinematography, music, and all the other departments. It's not just about you; it's about the team.

You don't need to be the biggest. You recognize good ideas, even if they're not yours, and you figure out how they can enrich the film and your vision for it. You have to understand that, because the team can offer suggestions, but they can't really know what fits. For instance, Eckhardt might offer me music pieces, and sometimes I'll have to say, 'This isn't really working,' and he'll have to understand. But he doesn't know for sure. He's a composer, but it's my role as the director to make that decision. Sometimes, the team members clash. I remember the story from *Titanic (1997)* with that song at the end by the singer, which made her world-famous. She was already famous, but that song made her even more iconic.

And that song became an icon of the film.

However, James Cameron didn't want the song at all. He thought it was awful and cheesy. But the composer begged and pleaded, and in the end, Cameron reluctantly agreed. It's interesting because Cameron didn't realize it at the time. It was only later, through the success of the film and the reactions from the audience, that he understood. He saw that the composer had been right. It really added something extraordinary to the film.

Maybe Titanic would have still been a great film without that song, but it's fascinating to see how an element that the director didn't initially recognize could push the project and give it an entirely new dimension.

What do you wish you had known before or when you started working professionally in film?

Maybe if someone had shown me the reality back then —telling me it's nice and all to love arthouse cinema but that's not the real world you'll live in or make a living from. The reality is much tougher.

I'd recommend confronting the realities of the film industry early instead of living in this dream world. Stay practical, shoot as often as you can, and don't stress too much. Accept opportunities as they come, or let them go, but know that eventually, you'll find time for your own projects.

It's also fascinating how many outsiders succeed in the industry.

Do you think the film and television industries still run on luck and connections, as often naively said?

Partially, yes, but you also have to work for your luck. It doesn't just happen. You have to try different things, meet people, and share your work.

All the recognition and awards are important and nice, but how many people actually watch my films? Is what I've

created valuable to people beyond just me, my friends, or my colleagues? Are there people out there who think, 'Yes, it was worth watching that'? I think it's important to keep that in mind because it helps you maintain a connection to society and to people.
Of course, it's vital for individual artists to create provocative content and to try out completely new and unconventional ideas. But at the same time, it's equally important to stay close to people and to what's happening in society. Otherwise, you risk drifting too far away from what's really going on in the world. That's what I believe — as a filmmaker, as an artist.

Why did you decide to work in documentary filmmaking?

I discovered documentary filmmaking by chance during my studies. The first year of my program focused on documentaries, and through that, I realized how much you can convey with documentary footage.
At my school, the camera department had a strong tradition of documentary filmmaking, heavily influenced by DEFA filmmakers who often taught there. This left a lasting impression on me. I started watching more documentaries and found them deeply inspiring.
For my diploma project, I wanted to bring my own idea to life. Typically, you'd work with a directing student,
but I proposed doing it myself. I had an idea I wanted to execute independently—shooting a film in Bangladesh.
The professors were surprised and asked, 'Can you manage this on your own?' I prepared thoroughly, presented my concept, and eventually got approval. That's how I created my first film, *Sand and Water (2002)*. It marked the beginning of my journey into documentary filmmaking.

Why do you think you make films, Shaheen?

Because it's something I do with passion, and fortunately, I've been able to make a living from it so far.
That's why I do it — because I can't do anything else.

"My greatest inspiration? Seeing first-hand how people are able to bridge the gap between cultures and traditions."

That's the simple answer. But I can imagine doing something else if I also have fun doing it and, above all, think that it benefits others.
That's important to me. I don't want to do something that only brings me joy, but something that others can benefit from. And why I make such films, I think it's something that developed over time. It's something I discovered piece by piece within myself, which is visible in the films. That's why the films are the way they are. But as I said, it's also the input of a team that collaborates. We are actually walking this path together.
And the signature that is recognized is not just mine, it's from the team. I may be a big part of it being visible, but I believe that if I had made the films completely on my own, they would look very different from how they are now. That's definitely the case.

Would you like to share anything with young people who love films?

I would strongly recommend that young people who love films, those who are passionate about movies, get rid of the illusion that films, as we know them now, will always exist in the same form. It will definitely become less. There's frustration in the industry because
the general public doesn't really find films important anymore. Film no longer holds the significance it did 20 or 30 years ago.
Recently, someone told me, 'We're working on a program in Bangladesh.' The government wants to produce something, it's the Ministry of Culture, and they said we're producing Visual Contents, not films — Visual Contents. It could be a film, but they want to keep it open so anyone can decide what format or genre they want to work with. It's essentially audiovisual content. And I believe this will be a very strong reality in the future: you might not really watch films in the cinema or see the films you love in the same
format. They'll probably be broken down into smaller parts or made into VR projects or exhibitions. But I don't think that's a reason to panic or be afraid. I would say, embrace it, see if it's really as bad as it sounds, or if there are things you can still do that are important to people, that you enjoy, and that you can discover for yourself. The advantage is that, if we put it simply, how many people can I reach through a smartphone, and how many people do I reach through the big screen? It's obvious. With this device, you reach way more people.
But you can say what you want. Most people shoot for themselves anyway and they shoot vertically —
and not horizontal. You have to approach this confrontation with reason, not emotionally. Start by saying, 'Okay, this is how it is. Arguing doesn't help us. I want to make cinema, but why not try something new? Maybe I'll discover something about myself in this new format.' This is something that will always happen— no matter what you do, you're still the same person, and then you will be felt somewhere.

Dieses Interview wurde im November 2024 für die erste Ausgabe der CINEMATE geführt. Dort ist es in einer gekürzten Version erschienen.
Die vorliegende Version beinhaltet das komplette Interview.