

Film festivals in the evolution of a common transnational identity

The 4th Annual Conference on 'Cultural Production in a Global Context: The Worldwide Film Industries', Grenoble Ecole de Management, Grenoble, France, June 3-5, 2010

Jérôme SEGAL, Senior Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Comparative Research in the Social Sciences

Film has a specific status among the arts because it is simultaneously an industry. Who would hit on the idea of speaking about the architecture, dancing or painting industry? This is probably the reason why a business school like this one here in Grenoble welcomes a conference on 'Cultural Production in a Global Context'. Thinking of film as a 'creative industry' reveals this business orientation. But there is a paradox with films: whereas the production of a film often comes to millions of Euros, its screening in a cinema or the organization of an international festival remain comparatively inexpensive. Having theatrical groups come over for a festival is much more expensive than a 35mm-film copy (and shipping costs can now even be reduced to zero in the case of digital techniques).

Nevertheless, even if film festivals can be staged without spending significant quantities of money, they have always played a major role for the film industry. In this respect, the relationship between Cannes and Hollywood constitutes a good example (Jungen 2009). The inception of international film festivals have usually resulted from a political agenda, but the commercial aspect has never gone unheeded. The Venice Film Festival, established in 1932, was, for instance, exploited by the Fascist regime. Seven years later, the Cannes Film Festival was clearly the response of the democratic world to Venice, but behind the scenes an important economic struggle was taking place between *Victorine Studio* in Nice and the *Cinecittà*, founded in 1937. In the same vein, when Colonel Marty of the US army of occupation in Berlin decided to establish the Berlinale, which effectively opened in 1951, a section of the programme was devoted to the rebirth of the German film industry.

Major international film festivals, like those in Cannes, Berlin and Venice, used to be considered launching pads for production and distribution companies. Nowadays, the configuration of these festivals with sidebars makes them more important for films with primarily artistic aspirations. As the veteran film critic Jon Jost put it, 'For commercial films, festivals are now a marginal matter, a little icing on the PR cake; but for non-commercial films they are almost the only matter.' (Jost 2010)

But besides these economic aspects, in a more sociological perspective, film festivals can also be considered as intense moments, as 'time out of time' in Falassi's sense, where a blending of cultures takes place and a new common identity emerges (Falassi 1987). Using a historical and sociological approach and supplemented by original field work at the three main festivals (Cannes, Venice and Berlin), this paper is based on work performed within the scope of the European project EURO-FESTIVAL (2008-2010) in the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission.

Cultural production and identity shaping

The development of the mass media has been one of the main characteristics of society since the beginning of the 20th century. Its relation to culture led Adorno and Horkheimer to coin the concept of 'cultural industry' in a chapter entitled 'The Cultural Industry - Enlightenment as Mass Deception' of their book *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, published in 1944. Most of their arguments can apply to the analysis of what we now call the 'creative industries', including television and film (Raunig 2007). Of course, these media have tremendous influence on people and often serve commercial interests. It is no wonder, for instance, that Patrick Le Lay, CEO of TF1, the main French TV-channel, has stated 'in principle, the job of TF1 is to help Coca-Cola sell its products. (...) And, in order that a commercial gets noticed, it is necessary for the viewer's brain to be accessible. Our programmes are designed to make it available: that is to say, to entertain, to relax, to prepare it between two messages. What we sell to Coca-Cola is available human brain time.'

'Creative industries' not only help to make brains 'available', they also shape them with their programmes. The main international film festivals are important to them because they offer a showcase of recent trends in the cinemas of the world. Deals are concluded during the informal discussions at the festivals and the associated film markets in Cannes and Berlin (it led Mark Peranson to a distinction between 'business' and 'audience' festivals, see Peranson 2008). At the same time, festivals are places where capital exchange takes place. The symbolic capital earned by festival awards, good critiques or even internet buzzes is transformed into economic capital (English 2008). Since films can also get bad publicity if they do not receive an award, those by established directors are sometimes shown 'out of competition', a choice often made by film producers.

Moreover, festivals are held over a relatively short period of time in a confined area that gathers an important cosmopolitan audience with tremendous press attendance. Many individuals or groups try to take advantage of this situation: some unemployed actors walk with t-shirts with 'Actor needs job' on their backs (PHOTO), minorities use the festival to demonstrate in a festive way (e.g. gays on

the *Croisette* in Cannes (PHOTO)), others just show off (PHOTO) and sometimes sects take the opportunity to entrap new members (PHOTO).

The identity of a city is also marked by festivals. The Lido in Venice is commonly known as the venue of the *Mostra*, like the *Croisette* in Cannes. Both have become '*lieux de mémoire*' in the sense of Pierre Nora ('memory site'). In a section of her book on 'the *Mostra* and cultural Memory of Space', Marijke de Valck writes:

'Festival memories are lost time that go through a Proustian retrieval each year during the festival because the historical locations trigger the past. The vaporettis (sic) or water taxis between the Lido and the mainland, instantly remind of earlier festivals, as do the –lines of beach houses along the south shore of the island.' (Valck 2007, 138)

During the Venice Film Festival, a public transport service operates a special vaporetto line (PHOTO). In Cannes, it is the street furniture which is marked by the festival (PHOTO).

Overcoming the Tower of Babel

Film producers as well as directors are eager to find an entry to the festival circuit (Iordanova and Rhyne 2009).¹ This has led to an interesting debate as to whether some films are specifically designed for festivals or not. Some film specialists like Antoine de Baecque (both a historian and a film critic) think that festivals have had a 'perverse effect on cinema, characterized by the development of 'festival films' or even 'films for the Cannes festival'.² As Mark Peranson reports, 'the head of Wild Bunch [film production and international sales company] Vincent Maraval, goes so far to say he is in consultation with Frémaux [head of the Cannes Film Festival] as well as Venice's Marco Müller, throughout the year.' Possibly as a result of this form of lobbying, 'an amazing seven out of twenty titles were represented by Wild Bunch' at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 (in Porton 2009, 31-32). These festival films often take a local topic as the pretext for dealing with universal-values-that-anybody-can-understand. In this sense, festivals might cause academism, instead of stimulating the film industry by promoting new and original talents.

After a close look at the film selections during the last international film festivals, in the official selections and also in the sidebars, it appeared that a blend of cultures was clearly at the heart of many films. Migration is probably the topic which best illustrates the development of cosmopolitanism. The film *Welcome* (PHOTO), by Philippe Lioret, presented in the Panorama section of the Berlin Film Festival in 2009, was about the friendship between an Iraqi adolescent, who had illegally arrived in Calais in northern France in order to cross the channel and meet his girlfriend in

¹ On film festivals, see also among the recent literature, (Iordanova and Cheung 2010) and (Porton 2009).

² Interview by the author, 8 January 2009.

London, and a French life guard who would end up by teaching him how to swim long distances, so that he could cross the Channel to England. The film was very successful and sparked off a controversy regarding French migration policy. The minister of Immigration, Integration, National identity and Solidarity Development, Eric Besson, criticized the film because it revealed that French citizens who help illegal migrants can be fined or even put in jail.

Good Morning Aman (PHOTO), by Claudio Noce, shown during the Critics' Week of the last *Mostra*, treated the question of Somali immigrants to Italy through a similar friendship, this time between an Italian ex-boxer and a 20-year-old Somali boy. More generally, *Il Colore Delle Parole* by Marco Simon Puccioni in the *Orizzonti* section of the same festival similarly covered the issue of Africans in Italy (PHOTO).

How can a common Europe be constructed, if enormous economic and cultural differences still prevail? This topic was taken up in *Francesca*, by Bobby Paunescu, a film also shown in Venice, and dealing with a Romanian woman who wants to work in Italy (PHOTO). The film led to strong protests by Alessandra Mussolini, who tried to forbid the screening because she was mentioned in Paunescu's work as a 'whore', in reference to her 2007 declaration in which she stated stating that all Romanians in Italy were 'criminals'. Likewise, *Foxes*, by Mira Fornay, exemplified the difficulties of Slovak women in an Irish environment (PHOTO). These two films led the US magazine *Variety* to term the Venice selection as 'Eurocentric' (Vivarelli 2009).

Festivals also help multinational productions to emerge. *Honeymoons*, for instance, by Goran Paskaljevic, also in the lineup of the past *Mostra*, was the first co-production between Albania and Serbia. The film tells the story of two couples from these countries who try to emigrate to Italy or Austria and face a European fortress, before which they feel humiliated and powerless, the victims of authoritarian bureaucracy. It received warm applause from the critics and was later well distributed throughout European film festivals.

That same year, at the Cannes Film Festival, a film by the French director Jacques Audiard exemplified the globalization characterizing Western society in a prison drama where multilingualism was at the core of the plot. As was written in the British daily *The Guardian*, 'A Prophet shows us a multilingual future for cinema – Most of us now live in a globalised, polyglot world, and Jacques Audiard's prison drama is a rare film that reflects that' (Hoad 2010). The main character of the film is an 18-year-old Arab, Malik, who has been sentenced to prison. In jail, he rapidly falls under the influence of a Corsican patriarch reigning over the local Corsican mob. Progressively, Malik manages to benefit from his ability to learn languages and cultures and switch between them. In this sense, the whole script can be considered a 'Bildungsroman' (German: educational novel), a coming-of-age

story describing the psychological, moral, and social development of the protagonist. The Corsican patriarch, for instance, tries to prevent him from sympathizing with the Islamists, named 'them with beards' because of their appearance:

'- So you're talkin' to the Corsicans and to them with beards?
- Yes, why?
- You're doing the splits, it's bad for your balls.'

Despite these threats, and the violence which is always predominant in the film, Malik succeeds in building up his own network. Interestingly, the film shows how cultural capital, in Bourdieu's sense, can be invested in social capital with the development of a complex social network. The Guardian journalist went on to write:

'The film catches the dark side of language – its relationship to power; it can be a badge of belonging and is used to exclude as well. And it understands it is not static, with mistakes, misunderstandings and incomprehension ready currency for smart operators such as Malik. The globalised world needs more linguist cinema like A Prophet – limber, alert and opportunistic. (...) Malik is left to forge his own destiny – a lesson for us all in an increasingly complicated world. He is almost a proxy for the fast-growing mixed-race and multilingual masses who are the next step on from old monocultures. They are the ones placed to thrive as the patterns of world power grow more enmeshed and hard to fathom. It is the hour of the bag-man, the intermediary, the ambassador, the middle manager (...). In other words: Malik is the future.'

Compared with other films where language plays an important role, he further commented:

'Linguistically speaking, Slumdog Millionaire wasn't revolutionary, but what was remarkable was that a film one-third in Hindi picked up so many Oscars. Quentin Tarantino – always a man with a sharp ear – took things one stage further in the summer. Inglourious Basterds' arch-linguist Colonel Hans Landa theatrically juggled English, French and his liebe Muttersprache like an SS music-hall compere. Even Hitler's rank-and-file grunts had progressed to comprehending orders in German – something which seems to have been beyond movie Nazis even relatively recently (like in the embarrassing Valkyrie). Tarantino knows that it is a multilingual world we live in now – virtually the only cutting-edge thing about his film.'

Towards a transnational history

Inglourious Basterds was shown in competition at the Cannes Film Festival the same year as *A Prophet*. It offers more than just a film in which one of the main actors, Christoph Waltz, juggles with languages (one of the reasons why he won the 2010 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor). Tarantino said it was a mark of our times that characters speak their own native languages, not just English, and the strength of Hans Landa, the SS officer played by Waltz, is to be able to switch between languages. Interestingly, people in the audience seem to have enjoyed the moments in which Waltz changed language. The scenes of violence, so typical of Tarantino's work, were also seen as expected codes that provoked laughter in the cinema.

But, apart from these aspects, Tarantino's film goes on to reveal a new way of dealing with history. At first viewing, the film, which is set in German-occupied France during the Second World War, might be disturbing because of the liberties it takes with historical facts. Hitler, Goebbels and

many other Nazi officials are killed in a cinema that the 'Basterds' wanted to blow up. Nevertheless, this form of historical revisionism did not lead to significant protests because, although the film was intended as a satire of war films and westerns, the sense of history was respected and no sympathy was shown towards the Nazis (Seeßlen 2009). Still, the renowned film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum found the film 'deeply offensive as well as profoundly stupid'. He felt that 'the film seem[ed] morally akin to Holocaust denial, even though it proudly claim[ed] to be the opposite of that', adding 'It's more than just the blindness to history that leaks out of every pore in this production (even when it's being most attentive to period details) or the infantile lust for revenge that's so obnoxious'.³

Asked about how he decided to diverge from history, Tarantino answered:

'I had no idea I was going to change the course of history until I came to that point in the movie. I started thinking "My characters don't "know" they're not a part of history. My characters don't "know" there are things they can't do. I've never had that kind of guiding principle on any of my characters, ever. And now was not the time to start. So there's a moment toward the end of the movie where history goes one way, and I go another. My take on that is my characters have changed the course of the war. That didn't actually happen, because my characters didn't exist. But if they "had" existed, everything that happens in the movie is quite possible.' (Rodriguez 2009)

Inglourious Basterds could be compared with a much more controversial film which was screened during the last Berlin Film Festival, *Jud Süß—Rise and Fall* (*Jud Süß: Film ohne Gewissen*) by director Oskar Roehler. First of all, *Jud Süß* was the title of a short novel by Wilhelm Hauff published in 1827 on the rise and fall of a Jewish banker and financial strategist Joseph Süß Oppenheimer. In 1939, Joseph Goebbels decided to use the plot in a new cinema version, and the resulting film, directed by Veit Harlan, was the main propaganda film of the Nazi era, seen by more than 20 million people, including soldiers at the front. In the 2010 film, Oskar Roehler put the actor Veit Harlan at the centre of the plot. He portrays a man who is forced to accept Joseph Süß' role and, in order to make the character more agreeable, the script re-writes history: his wife becomes 'half-Jewish' and Harlan hides a Jewish gardener. The whole film depicts the Nazis as being obsessed with sex and parties. The film was booed in Berlin, and during the press conference that followed the first screening, Roehler justified himself by saying he had made a fictional film, not a documentary. The press reactions were unanimous and in this case the revisionist-act was considered a way of legitimizing holocaust deniers and other abusers of history.

Tarantino took much more liberty with history than Roehler, but he did not try to make likeable a character such as Harlan, who sympathized with the Nazis. Two other films dealing with history earned kudos at international festivals for their transnational character. The first was *The White Ribbon*, by the Austrian director Michael Haneke, awarded the 'Palme d'or' at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. The plot is set in a Protestant German village between 1913 and 1914. The children are

³ See the comments in *Film Quarterly* (Walters 2009, 19), and for the German reception, (Ehlent 2009).

victims of a patriarchal society in which religion has ruined human relationships and impeded individual development. Many Europeans saw the film as more than a 'German story', as was suggested by the complete title of the film, *Das weiße Band, Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte* (The White Ribbon, A Children's Story). Besides its wonderful black and white photography, the film illustrates the conditions that give birth to Fascism. The proto-Fascist society portrayed has many common traits with contemporary societies in terms of the instruments of oppression, violence and coercion.

Whereas *The White Ribbon*, which is a co-production between four European countries (Germany, Austria, France and Italy), was considered as dealing with a European topic, *Lebanon*, directed by the Israeli Samuel Maoz, was more clearly anchored in its context: the 1982 war in Lebanon. The success of the film (awarded the Golden Lion) probably resides, technically, in the fact that almost everything we see on the screen is viewed through the eyes of the four-man crew of an Israeli tank. Regarding the contents of the film, the portrayal of some soldiers as humane did not prevent the director from mentioning that the Israeli army violated Arms Conventions by using, for instance, phosphorus ammunition against civilians. Even if some critics deplored the complete absence of Arab views on the conflict, obviously due to the director's choice of perspective, the general meaning remains a message of peace, comparable to that of *Paths of Glory*, by Stanley Kubrick (1957).

Festivals in the distribution of films... and ideas.

In the press conference to present his selection in 2006, the director of the Venice Film Festival, Marco Müller (PHOTO), drew on his cinephilia and his extensive experience as a director of other films festivals (Rotterdam, Locarno and Pesaro) to assess the role of international film festivals for the film industry, which always combines art with business:

'The pessimism of reason should lead us to declare that the time for festivals is coming to an end. Whether we like it or not, we must accept the fact that we will see many festivals continuing to brood over their own touristic and promotional original sin, that of being a window display and launch pad for the most visible, often most showy part of film-making. A sin to be remitted by providing a temporary surrogate for lacunae, for the lacks in the distribution and information circuits. The optimism of willingness, on the other hand, leads us to focus on a fracture, which in the past has perhaps been knowingly overlooked, among the most usual idea-festivals and the philosophy in movement (it should constantly be undergoing redefinition) of an (international) Festival of (cinematographic) Art. Not all the attempts at renewal are destined to fail: without hypothesising a palingenesis (it is not yet time for that), this "non-festival" of ours, the Venice Festival, might finally find some autonomous space, ephemeral perhaps but truly autonomous, a moment marking a break with the balances crystallized by conformity, vested interests (and lack of), and by the vice of habit. A point of breakage of customs, a starting point for knowledge and investigation, the vision and discussion of manifestations of bradeyism [slow-

*earthquake], stirrings and ferments which still, at irregular intervals, manage to invest the various ways of making films to the North, South, East and West.*⁴

This remarkable lucidity on the role of film festivals, threatened by various economic interests (tourism and the commercialization of cinema), could have caused chaos at a time when the renewal of the director's mandate was becoming an issue. The local correspondent of *Variety* wrote the following year: 'Though not impossible, a second mandate would be a feat unprecedented in Venice's recent history, which, since the 1970s, has seen Italy's revolving-door governments and their pork-barrel pois tap a long list of bosses to head the Lido's parent org, the Venice Biennale. Each Biennale prexy has, in turn, appointed a different Venice fest topper' (Vivarelli 2007, A2).

In 2009, Müller denounced 'market censorship' and challenged the very idea of a festival:

'Why continue to believe stubbornly in festivals, given that the formulas for these have so often taken the form of outdated concepts? They reduce, in essence, to only two options: the defense of whatever film-making would exist, for which the festival is window and launch-pad; or alternatively, the possibility of continuing (eternally?) to supply a willing surrogate for what is needed in the distribution-information circuit as a response to an even stronger market censorship.' (Müller 2009, 13)

Besides this function, festivals offer a unique cosmopolitan stage for the reception of films. This is particularly important for young directors. Jean-Christophe Berjon, who heads the Critics' Week in Cannes (where only first and second films are shown), stated a few weeks ago, when the recent Cannes Film Festival opened, that filmmakers often experience their first public screening on this occasion, an event that they will remember all their lives.

At a time when films are easily copied and distributed online, festivals definitely have a role to play, as a vector of value and trends that configure the field, and also in the shaping of identities.

Acknowledgment: This article was completed in the framework of research Grant No. 215747 of the 7FP Social Sciences and Humanities Programme of the European Communities for the project 'Art Festivals and the European Public Culture'.

Bibliography:

- Armocida, Pedro (2006) 'Alla Mostra dei nuovi mondi c'è la riscoperta dell'America.' *il Giornale*, July 28.
- Ehlent, Peter (2009) 'Bowling for Hitler - Über Tarantinos Film Inglourious Basterds und seine deutschen Fans.' *prodomo*, no. 12: 56-61.
- English, James F. (2008) *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural*

⁴ Parts of this speech were reproduced in a newspaper article (Armocida 2006) and completely translated into English on a website (<http://www.carnivalofvenice.com/argomento.asp?cat=135>).

- Value*. Harvard University Press, December 15.
- Falassi, Alessandro (1987) *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, April.
- Hoad, Phil (2010) 'A Prophet shows us a multilingual future for cinema.' *The Guardian*, January 28. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/jan/28/jacques-audiard-a-prophet>.
- Iordanova, Dina, and Ruby Cheung (2010) *Film Festival Yearbook 2: Film Festivals and Imagined Communities*. St Andrews Film Studies.
- Iordanova, Dina, and Ragan Rhyne (2009) *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*. St Andrews Film Studies (with College Gate Press), May 30.
- Jost, Jon (2010) 'The Big Circus.' *undercurrent* 6. http://www.fipresci.org/undercurrent/issue_0609/jost_circus.htm.
- Jungen, Christian (2009) *Hollywood in Cannes: Die Geschichte einer Hassliebe, 1939-2008*. Schüren Verlag, April.
- Müller, Marco (2009) 'Back to the future.' *Schnitt*, no. 54 (February): 13-15.
- Peranson, Mark (2008) 'First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals.' *Cineaste - America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema* 33, no. 3: 37-43.
- Porton, Richard (2009) *Dekalog 03: On Film Festivals*. Wallflower Press, April 1.
- Raunig, Gerald (2007) 'Creative Industries as Mass Deception.' *Framework: The Finnish Art Review. A Critique of Creative Industries* 6 (January): 8-12.
- Rodriguez, Rene (2009) 'With 'Inglorious Basterds,' Tarantino answers critics.' *Miami Herald*, August 21. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/tools/print/109973>.
- Seeßlen, Georg (2009) *Quentin Tarantino gegen die Nazis: Alles über INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS*. 1er ed. Bertz + Fischer, August 17.
- Valck, Marijke de (2007) *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Vivarelli, Nick (2007) 'Movie Maestro Keeps 'Em Guessing.' *Variety* 408, no. 2 (August 27): A2,A8.
- (2009) 'Venice Days unveils 15 premieres - Lineup includes Paskaljevic, Miller pics.' *Variety* (July 28).
- Walters, Ben (2009) 'Debating Inglourious Basterds.' *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (12): 19-22.