Cinephilia and Film Festivals

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Cinephilia non grata

It may be perverse to wish that something you write will be made irrelevant in the course of time, but that is exactly what I wish for the following thoughts. The central problem with film festivals in the Anglo-American world – the universe to which this book is mainly addressed – is not so much a willingness to show bad films. Though that is an issue. It isn’t a paucity of films that connect with audiences, critics and the film community in general. Though this, too, can be a prickly matter. It isn’t even a dependence on world premieres as part of the never-ending race between festivals to score points on the competition. On the face of it, not a problem at all, but in fact a matter that can actually be corrosive to a festival’s health.

The most serious threat to the future of these festivals in these particular cultural climes, is another matter, seldom acknowledged in popular film journalism, in the trades, in industry accounts and (sadly) in cinema journals. It is their general and unexamined aversion to cinephilia, and an unwillingness to place cinephilia at the centre of festivals’ activities. Look at any number of well-meaning festivals in the English-speaking world and a clear pattern is firmly in place. Just as the proverbial ‘midnight madness’/‘extreme visions’/‘outer limits’ (imagine your own trendy section title) is given a ghettoised place in the room – essentially at the kiddies’ table while the adults are
munching on the competition and premieres – any films and projects with explicitly cinephilic goals, if they’re even given a slot at all, are usually either positioned at the outer fringes of the room, kept safely in the shadows or are placed in the festival’s equivalent of Off-off-off Broadway. And this goes far beyond the mere creation of a cinephilic section, such as a revival of recently restored, once-lost film, or the recovery of the work representing a major if neglected career. The heart of the matter is an informed philosophy of cinephilia, a practice, an essential way of being and approach to cinema that either imbues a festival’s programming, or doesn’t. The construction and selection of any section immediately declares itself as, first of all, a critical statement, for film festival programming is always and forever in its first phase an act of criticism, and along with this a declaration of values, comprising two equally important components: those films that are included, and those films that are left out. Given that few festivals are ever able to generally secure the films they actually want (arguably only four – Cannes, Toronto, Venice, Berlin), and granted that international sales companies handling films now exert greater control over a film’s travels than ever before (they are the new kingpins of festivals worldwide), a festival driven by serious cinephilia should still manage to get many of the films it wants on its radar. The question is if festivals in the Anglo-American world are primarily guided by these values, or simply use cinephilia as a sop, a sideshow, a marginalised event to please what they deem falsely to be a dwindling set of cinephiles.

This points to a first principle that, because it’s also seldom acknowledged yet glaringly obvious, is also easily ignored: any festival that matters has only one crucial task, and that is to defend cinema. It should be obvious for no better reason than no other entity in the contemporary film world, including the ranks of film critics (who habitually as a group feel besieged and marginalised, even when they’re not), is better equipped for such a defence. Given this, nothing else should come remotely close on the festival priority list. Not collecting a tasty basket of world premieres. Not enticing stars – meaning star directors, as much as star actors. Not appeasing sponsors (though sponsors are important, since they actually really do support the arts, and that is always and forever a good and beautiful thing). Certainly not satisfying the festival board of directors, who usually know little about cinema. All of these, some of them essential cogs in the festival
machinery, can also be distractions from the central purpose of exploring new cinema, rediscovering old cinema and challenging the audience to encounter and wrestle with both. The moment of birth and history – these are the twin compass poles that should guide a festival and, by definition, a genuinely cinephilic one. Cinephilia operates with double vision: radar directed forward to the new, binoculars pointed back to the past. This would be a kind of perfect fusion – and is that ever really found? No, it’s an act of finding history in the present moment, the encounter that finds Frederick S. Armitage’s vertiginous and sensorial image explosions in 1903 to be more astonishing than any CGI and also finds that a new Raya Martin film can be transformative as it reverentially acknowledges silent film. In the past is the new, in the new the past, and the intersection is the friction that cinephilia requires – and that only a festival can provide in a living form with an audience. Forgetting this, or marginalising its import, turns festivals into … into … something else.

The self-made trap

What exactly? We can see it all around us, all the time, especially those of us – critics, programmers, filmgoers and the industry players who sell and buy films – who regularly attend festivals. I should be more exact in this case, and not call these other events ‘festivals’, even though that’s the common term. Call them, instead, ‘exhibitions’. In the North American world, these include Sundance, Toronto, South by Southwest, Seattle, Hamptons, Palm Springs and smaller, regional affairs ranging from Denver to Houston’s Worldfest, as well as those hobbled dowagers stumbling along like Serge Losique’s Montreal. They are generally well-funded and largely empty, generating considerable self-importance but only by a measure that gauges if the programmed films enter the distribution pipeline. (Some might add Tribeca, but Tribeca is too young, too nebulous to include in this group – albeit with the worrying signals that it may also become nothing more than an exhibition. Others might add New York, but that would be off the mark. The New York Film Festival is, simply, the New York Film Festival, and apparently always will be.) Seattle has been described as a kind of Wal-Mart of movies of any and all types that fit into some commercial category
(non-commercial films being effectively banned from this massive six-week exhibition). South by Southwest has become a market for indie product, and not the place where the next Reg Harkema or Jake Mahaffy will be found. (On the contrary: Harkema told me that when he took his last film, *Monkey Warfare*, to South by Southwest, it was booked and scheduled with such glaring disregard and ineptitude that nobody knew the film was even there. It didn’t help, as a side note, that Harkema is Canadian; South by Southwest is an unusually aggressive exhibition that privileges US filmmakers.)

And Sundance? Sundance has become, quite simply, a horror show for cinema: a place where more bad films can be seen under awful viewing conditions than any other festival, and yet which also paradoxically goes the extra mile to bother with a usually fascinating though small section for experimental and non- (or semi-) narrative film titled ‘New Frontier’ which is then scheduled in such a manner to ensure that as few people as possible will see it. The largest and most famous American film ‘festival’ has quite possibly damaged the cinema it was specifically designed to support – American indie film – more than any cluster of neglectful studios ever have, because it rejects cinephilia with cool (and in bad years, sub-freezing) disinterest. Nothing better exemplified this in recent years than in 2004, when Ray Carney unveiled Cassavetes’ nearly unseen original version of *Shadows* that Carney claimed (rather controversially) to have been found in some reel cans in the rear seat of a taxi. One might naturally assume that such a find would be first shown in the world’s biggest event designed to celebrate independent film. Instead, Carney found friendlier hosts in Rotterdam, where *Shadows* screened to excited Dutch audiences. A long list of such American re-discoveries ignored by Sundance runs on and on; my favourite is how the festival, founded over two decades ago by Robert Redford, known for his devotion to Native American causes, failed to show the restored print of Kent MacKenzie’s Los Angeles masterpiece, *The Exiles* – a film about young, aimless Native Americans in the city’s old, virtually extinct Bunker Hill district and by light years the best American film ever made about Native Americans living in the modern world.

In purely cinephilic terms, these items amount to crimes. But that would be off the mark, since Sundance isn’t about cinephilia; it’s a stark example of what Quintín describes elsewhere in this volume as the recent phenomenon
in which festivals have allowed themselves to become markets. Film mar-
kets, in and of themselves, are a necessary and fine thing, allowing the free
and rollicking exchange between buyers and sellers, sometimes in one of the
liveliest expressions of seat-of-the-pants capitalism this side of the Chicago
commodities exchanges. (Without these markets, stretching from Berlin to
Santa Monica, Cannes to Hong Kong, many foreign films would have oth-
otherwise floundered and never found their way to your city.) The markets, as
markets can often become, have proven so successful over the long term,
opening up countless doors to films that were previously shut out, that they
have proven too tempting to festivals that, by their nature, play a vitally
different game and serve a starkly different purpose. While the two animals
are indispensable to the overall international cinema world, they exist in
distinct systems that are better given as much separation as possible. The
success of one (markets), which is envied by the other (festivals), is merely
another phenomenon of ongoing globalisation processes, of which the cin-
ema – despite the militant anti-globalisation objections of many filmmakers
and (judging by several comments in programme notes) programmers – is a
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dramatic expression of its reality, power and potential. But as the Sundance experience demonstrates for the rest of the festival world, the effective overthrow of a festival’s purposes by buyers and sellers chasing hot world premieres is disastrous and corrosive to festival practice. Though a film’s festival success can, and sometimes does, lead to market openings and prospects, the one shouldn’t be allowed by the festival to bleed into the other. This, as any reader of many festival ‘dailies’ knows, is happily violated by some festivals as they regularly report on the sales of films in its programme. These become tacit admissions that the actual purpose of these exhibitions are sales markets under the culturally cool guise of a festival – marking the certain death of the festival as a whole, let alone the cinephilic festival.

The key issue in this regard is how Sundance has influenced other, smaller festivals to follow its practice of loading up with world premieres and as much English-language work as possible, at the expense of films from the vaster non-English world that challenge conventional cinema language and modes, as well as the large, wide and deep ocean of past, neglected films. This itch for world premieres can never seem to be completely scratched; I can’t possibly count the number of North American directors and programmers who, when asked to justify top-loading their programmes with world (or continental, or national, or regional) premieres, regardless of quality, don’t resort to any fundamentally cinephilic explanations – which is at least sound, since there are none – but to extraneous yet financially relevant explanations. (1) Premiere-itis exists because festivals yearn to draw as much press as possible, and premiering films constitute news. (2) The closer a festival is to the major entertainment/media centres of New York and Los Angeles (which means Tribeca, Hamptons, Woodstock, even SilverDocs in train-adjacent Maryland on one coast, and Los Angeles, AFI Fest, Palm Springs and Santa Barbara on the other), the greater the urge to lure entertainment and media power brokers and taste-makers. (3) Festivals claiming premieres get their name on the premiering film’s publicity materials, constituting free advertising, translating in some crude respects into prestige. (4) The festival boards, particularly those in North America, tend to measure success partly on the metric of the number of premieres pulled off, and therefore pressure the director and programmers to come up with a sufficient quota of them for each edition, that quota varying from festival to festival. (5) The sheer
presence and fact of premieres becomes a selling point in itself to the local and regional public which the festival is drawing from for its audience, as well as to the press. (6) Finally, if a bit more obscurely, festivals of a certain scale (and all of the above festivals qualify) have talked themselves into thinking that presenting world premieres guarantees a review in Variety, for which I regularly contribute as a critic and which adheres to an editorial policy of reviewing films on or as close as possible to the world premiere screening date.

All of these are, taken separately, reasonable enough when not put under the magnifying glass. But taken together, they form a trap—a self-made trap where many Anglo-American festivals currently are, even if they’re unwilling to acknowledge it. Elsewhere in this volume, Mark Peranson refers to a ‘mythical fifty’ essential films that premiere somewhere in the world every year. It’s one way of saying that, even in an excellent year (and we have been having several of late, as a matter of fact), there’s always a finite number of new films that truly matter, new work that’s essential to see if you consider yourself a viewer of the most vital contemporary cinema. I would say that a year with more than sixty is extraordinary, and that under forty is closer to the norm. Moreover, this circle of films with few exceptions premieres in an elite group of festivals, led by Cannes and Venice, followed by Toronto, Vienna and Rotterdam, then by Berlin, then by Locarno. This is open to quibbling; some wouldn’t include Vienna or Locarno, since they perceive both as too off the mainstream—but they would be wrong; others might eliminate Rotterdam, since the trendy view is to deem that it’s best days are behind it—but that’s much too short-sighted. Some critics, as well, are ready to blast Berlin’s behemoth festival into outer space, with the hope that it will never return to Earth.1 One can’t honestly include Sundance in this group, which only rarely has something along the lines of Lance Hammer’s Ballast, key American films that are also key films. Besides, Sundance, for all its muscle to lay claim to premiering American indie films, increasingly has competition in the US as a launch pad for films of national (and possibly international) import, from Tribeca to South by Southwest to burgeoning Cinevegas, which happens to be run by Trevor Groth who also serves as a senior Sundance programmer and regularly manages to score as many or more artistically crucial films in any one year as the Monster from Park City, and
on a tiny fraction of its budget and in a much more compressed calendar. The essential point in all of this is that there are only so many crucial and necessary films to go around, and smaller festivals assuming that they can premiere important or even just quality films are generally deluding themselves. What they’re doing instead is showcasing dressed-up mediocrities that are here today, gone tomorrow.

This, to put it mildly, does not defend cinema. If festivals in the English-speaking world are interested in not driving themselves into a position in which they become marginalised for just about every conceivable kind of audience – and in the Anglo world, there are too many kinds to count, if judged by the proliferation of micro and niche festivals catering to every conceivable taste, from gay-lesbian to indie scenesters and across the ethnic rainbow – they would do well to study those festivals that retain and deepen their strains of cinephilia with each edition. There’s no good reason to simply duplicate their examples down to the details; after all, festivals as various as Amiens, PIA and BAFICI developed their own points of view on cinephilia, views that reflect the tremendous range of approaches that critical programming can take (all programming under the guise of cinephilia is criticism by other means). At the same time, while avoiding dumbed-down copycatting, the universe of festivals that has tended to avoid cinephilia or marginalise it out of some mistaken notion that such an approach proscribes the audience (which is to say, out of fear) can usefully study why cinephilic festivals succeed, and why they have become to be seen as crucial to film culture. The logic is simple: distinctive festivals have immeasurably value-added qualities, whereas festivals developed to mimic their big brother events inevitably see their value diminish in line with their similarity to each other.

Festivals with voices

Given all the above, it would be wrong to leave the impression that there are no cinephilic festivals in the Anglo world. In North America, look no further than Vancouver and Telluride for two utterly distinct festivals, ones that indefatigably possess particular voices. Vancouver’s stems from its unique geographic-cultural position, in a city perched on the very southwest corner of Canada, able to gaze at a sober distance across the vast expanse of its own
country (and far from the madding crowds and noise of the Toronto-Quebec-Ottawa corridor that tends to dominate so much of Canadian culture) while looking east to Asia as a key Pacific Rim city. With the ‘Dragons & Tigers’ section (including its 16-year-old competition of new work by young Asian filmmakers) forged by programmer-critic Tony Rayns (and now co-programmed by critic and Chinese cinema expert Shelly Kraicer), Vancouver has been able to build a section without peer and parallel outside of Asia itself. The visitor to Vancouver will immediately note the unabashed radical nature of many of the ‘Dragons & Tigers’ films: recent winners such as John Torres’ Todo Todo Teros, Robin Weng’s Fujian Blue and Zhang Yuedong’s Mid-Afternoon Barks attest to this. The selection is guided by a generally rigorous concern for new forms of cinematic expression; that is, work that extends and tests the boundaries of what’s possible within cinema, all underlying a programming philosophy (generally extending in principle to the larger festival) that never betrays a concern for appeasing audiences – a key point and one that Anglo festivals must take to heart. Just as key is this: the audience, almost entirely local, shows up, frequently in droves, and for the whole range of work, whether it’s the Western unveiling of Bong Joon-ho’s Memories of Murder or the Korean documentaries of Zero Chou and Hoho Liu. This kind of commitment – and the results – helps Vancouver stand out not just from the Canadian fall festival circuit (Montreal, Toronto, Atlantic), but also from the rest of the continent. It’s instructive to consider, for example, that no generalist North American and Anglo festival has picked up on the ‘Dragons & Tigers’ idea and created a similar programme/competition with a focus on other zones such as Latin America or Eastern Europe, two areas bursting with interesting new cinema.

Telluride may not be news to many, given the lavish coverage it steadily receives in the mainstream American press. But its position as a fall festival launching pad by mini-major studios and quasi-independent distributors for their awards season product line – the ongoing scourge of North American and UK fall festivals from Toronto to London – has managed, through no fault of the festival but entirely through the fault of many of the American critics covering it, to distract from its important role as a presenter of archival discoveries of the most rarified kind. The efforts and victories in presenting the widest possible range of archival discoveries must be regarded as an es-
sential contribution to world cinephilia. One example among many is Tom Luddy’s hunt for and discovery in Moscow of the extant print of Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I Am Cuba*, shown at Telluride before it became a durable legend as the strangest and most Gothic cultural example of the odd and inevitably doomed Cuban-Soviet collaboration of the 1960s. Another is certainly the now-legendary 1998 screening of the best possible existing ‘version’ by Rick Schmidlin of Erich Von Stroheim’s *Greed*. And much as *I Am Cuba* has gone on to enjoy a healthy life in, first, video and then DVD, other Telluride recovery projects of immense importance have been widely screened and distributed, led by Abel Gance’s *Napoleon*. The Telluride example, joined by Pordenone, demonstrates that silent films, when presented with the proper amount of élan and event status, can have a vital life with contemporary audiences. Indeed, part of the ongoing cinephiliic success of festivals like Telluride and Pordenone with their abiding concern for silent cinema (as well as the work of major film archives) is partly due to the commercial market that the DVD format has created for older silent and early sound films.

And speaking of Pordenone’s Giornate del cinema muto ... as a silent nirvana, it’s the paragon of a festival with a voice. The fact that it has a mission, to present the latest finds in silent cinephilia, is in part what distinguishes it. Telluride pulls together some of its programming from Pordenone’s work (currently run by David Robinson), though it remains an unanswered oddity that Telluride should remain just about the only major Anglo-American festival to sustain such dedication, and that others don’t simply piggyback onto the Pordenone bandwagon – not, in itself, a difficult thing to do. In the UK, for instance, there are outposts such as the British Silent Cinema festival in Nottingham, but its programming – frequently in collaboration with the BFI – is strictly national in scope. The Pordenone model, by contrast, is aggressively global.

The other lesson of Pordenone to other festivals: find an unexplored pocket – or, in this case, chasm – of cinema, and seek to become dedicated to it. One of two key premises of festival cinephilia is that our current knowledge of films and filmmakers is growing but still limited; that there remain numerous filmmakers, actors, technicians and countries in which archival study and awareness have only started to produce results. (The other premise is that there’s much recent and contemporary cinema to discover.)
By burrowing into the three-plus decades of silent film, where so much remains to be found and seen, Pordenone has been instrumental in the general rediscovery process that defines this wing of cinephilia. One aspect of this is historical, and actually biographical. For several years running, the festival’s ‘The Griffith Project’ has surveyed D. W. Griffith’s career, but in a novel way: instead of organising by theme or style, each year of Griffith’s career is looked at in separate chronological blocks of time. (The 2007 edition, for instance, surveyed years 1921–24.) Selections from major archives and studios are regularly profiled, to underline the basic truth that a local archive or production house is often the most likely source – and restorer – for the work of that nation’s filmmakers; the Danish Film Institute’s magnificent efforts in the cause of Dreyer is a truly glorious instance of this, and Shochiku’s archiving and restoration of 33 of Ozu’s films during the 2003 centennial celebration demonstrates how the rediscovery-restoration project can extend beyond archives to producing studios – a lesson that’s been seriously taken to heart in Hollywood by only one major studio, and that would be Sony.

**History, with a difference**

Pordenone shows that there’s more than one way of teaching film history to audiences. Yet just as exciting as the Pordenone model are other festival projects that work to understand the depths of filmmaking careers and the companies that produced them. The former had, for some time, been a specialty of Rotterdam: pick a handful of interesting filmmakers, and put their opus on screen. My first year at Rotterdam turned out to be a case in which I was completely distracted from the new films and drawn to the flames of Raúl Ruiz, Ken Jacobs, Isaac Julien and Tunde Kelani – with very few exceptions, filmmakers who had been routinely ignored by US festivals. Such concentrated programmes, though difficult to manage inside the hubbub of a festival, effectively force the viewer into a state of total absorption: you will see the body of work, and you will see it now. (Because it’ll be gone tomorrow.) As a concept, the Rotterdam model of career cinephilia is simplicity itself – which doesn’t diminish the fact that organising it is anything but simple.
So it’s an interesting but mysterious fact of the current festival circuit that North American viewers must now travel to Mexico City or Buenos Aires if they’d rather not cross the Atlantic or Pacific to visit other festivals with careerist programming ambitions. BAFICI (or as it used to be officially known, the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema) is covered in depth and with a unique personal perspective elsewhere in this volume by former director Quintín. But it’s worth emphasising the festival’s astonishing devotion to career surveys as a cinephilic pathway, particularly if it’s viewed as a means of telling film history from a critical perspective. (BAFICI has been run since the Quintín era by film critics, a species whom most Anglo-American festivals are content to let loose during the actual festival run but would never in a million years be allowed to actually be in charge.) The selected careers include the dead (Hugo Fregonesi, Frank Zappa) and the living, often superb, frequently neglected filmmakers, or filmmakers whose work is just beginning to be felt on the world scene, even though they may have already made several films; recent notable non-dead cases include Pere Portabella, Jem Cohen, Luc Moullet, Peter Whitehead, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Nicolas Klotz and Kobayashi Masahiro. Not only does BAFICI programme up to as many as fifteen career surveys per edition – that would be roughly fourteen more per annum than most festivals in the world consider doing – but they’re done comprehensively; this means, in the case of Whitehead, including nearly a dozen clips and promo shorts he made during his fecund 1960s period, as well as his seminal swinging London films and beyond – in other words, the complete works.

In Mexico City, FICCO (Mexico City International Contemporary Film Festival) emerged five years ago as a fresh cinephile outpost in a country badly in need of one since, up until then, the long-running Guadalajara festival had had to service every kind of imaginable constituency as the key platform for new Mexican film production, from the buyers and sellers at the festival’s thriving market, to visiting critics and local audiences. FICCO did precisely what no North American festival has done before or since, which is to follow the BAFICI model and to adapt it to local circumstances. Flagrantly international and non-Mexican in its focus (though with a fascinating component for new Mexican digital production, the site of most
of the country’s most exciting work), FICCO delves into careers with BAFICI’s brand of comprehensive seriousness. A recent survey of the complete work of Maurice Pialat is a typical case, allowing the North American visitor just about the first opportunity outside of France to explore what’s arguably the most rewarding oeuvre in recent French film history, and one that, in retrospect, is without imitators. An important aspect of the career studies in both BAFICI and FICCO are the introductory (and bilingual) essays included in the festivals’ generously thick catalogues, usually written by critic-programmers with great sensitivity and depth, as well as brevity. These essays are also an extension of a larger project carried on by many non-Anglo-American festivals – namely, book publication. Locarno, for example, publishes volumes in conjunction with Cahiers du Cinéma, while BAFICI usually issues two volumes per festival edition (one on a particular filmmaker, another on a tendency in that year’s programming). For the cinephilic festival, such publishing is a routine matter, an understood part of what goes into the festival’s content – as essential to the festival as the films or panel discussion. These books extend the festival’s cinephilia in two ways: first, as a permanent record of a topic explored in the festival’s edition and as a means of furthering film history by a non-academic route, and second, as a way to reinforce the idea that festivals are affairs in criticism.

A fine example that combines publication with exploring film history, with a difference, is the Amiens film festival. Since there are countless ways of telling history – and since history is made by the historians – Amiens, under the creative direction of Jean-Pierre Garcia, devotes a portion of its programming to a global tour of, as their literature terms it, the great studios of the world. The most recent study centered on Nikkatsu Studio, home at one time or another to such disparate filmmakers as Mizoguchi Kenji and Suzuki Seijun. Garcia has organised past overviews of a range of studios from Babelsberg, Churubusco and the Shaw Brothers to Hammer Films and Armenia’s Armenfilms, while, looking forward, he’s planning a study of a Mumbai studio. In each case, an accompanying book, typically around a hundred pages, fleshes out the background and provides further critical study into the selected studio films. No other festival, to my knowledge, surveys film history from such an angle.
Festival cinephilia now

Festival cinephilia for new work has been largely misunderstood, certainly in North American circles, where the post-summer pressures to play awards season films, as well as the increasing power wielded by sales companies to screen their new slates, tends to overwhelm the sensibilities of even the most acute and intelligent programmers. It hardly helps when the trades deliver a resounding vote of no-confidence to those festivals which are bound and determined to explore the far reaches of new cinema, whether it be in Locarno, Vienna, BAFICI, PIA, Rotterdam or Vancouver. A programming philosophy based on aesthetic selection amounts to an argument for a certain kind of cinema that may run counter to what’s perceived as ‘commercial’ (a term so loosely and frivolously used that it’s ceased to have meaning), but which generates a larger and more generous art form. The developing acceptance in Western festivals of the recent Filipino film movement provides an especially gratifying illustration of how festivals, their cultural antennae built to take in signals from long distances, are able to affect filmmaking practice. It’s by now widely accepted that without Rotterdam’s Hubert Bals Fund and its mission to fund and support film artists in the ‘Third’ and developing worlds, a significant number in the global ‘margins’ would have been unable to make films at all, and the case of the Philippines – I especially have in mind Lav Diaz, Raya Martin, Khavn, John Torres and Brillante Mendoza – would have been one of dashed hopes. There’s no doubt that the sheer radical libertarianism of film practice, in which these young directors make any kind of film at all, using any means at their disposal, free of government support (since there’s none to offer in the first place, which has turned out to be their blessing), would have still resulted in an astonishing flow of films. But with Rotterdam, Vienna, BAFICI and Vancouver being particularly instrumental as early adopters of the new Filipino cinema (with Toronto as a special case, exhibiting Lav Diaz), I’d argue that this is a particular test-case for contemporary cinephilia: finding radical new work that punches holes through the walls of cinema’s supposed peripheral limits, and then taking the brave decision to show it to audiences. Only with such an act, a necessary one that’s steadily showered with cat-calls and derision from various corners of the industry and press – not including those corners blissfully ignorant that such movements of new cinema exist
at all – is contemporary cinema able to exist. The pressures against this work are palpable in the English-speaking world only because the festivals located there have failed to develop their audiences for the films. The only means by which Pedro Costa’s filmography was finally able to be theatrically presented in major North American cities was in a touring show in 2007, after most significant festivals on the continent had failed to screen even one of his features, including *Colossal Youth*. This repeated a similar pattern that previously applied to Abbas Kiarostami and Hou Hsiao-hsien: only with touring career retrospectives were their films finally shown, in most cases long after they had screened in cinephilic festivals. That these touring shows draw considerable crowds – and they have, consistently, throughout the continent – definitively proves the short-sightedness of festivals failing to learn from festivals with adventurous programming. Or let’s put this another way: there was a day in Mexico City when films like Hugo Vieira Da Silva’s *Body Rice* or Pere Portabella’s *Die Stille vor Bach* might not have had a chance to screen at all, not even at the city’s respected Cineteca. But with an audience still being developed by FICCO for such remarkable pieces of new cinema, the opportunity now exists, and a fresh outpost for cinema’s future has been established. The opportunity awaits for the next festival to step up, and take the chance.

Notes

1 Sundance is hardly the only major festival that has been critically examined and found seriously wanting, as I sought to explain in my analysis of the 2008 edition. (‘All Bushed Out’, *Cinema Scope*, Spring 2008, Issue 34, 56-59) Olaf Möller also delivered perhaps the toughest and most thoroughgoing of several attacks on Berlin 2008, when he noted that ‘it seems as if those responsible for the Berlinale dream of a festival without films: just celebrities, the industry and a handful of good intentions, without any pesky movies distracting attention, posing awkward questions, and generally causing trouble.’ (See Möller, ‘Lowering the Bar’, *Film Comment*, May–June 2008, Volume 44, Issue 3, 56-59)

2 For the sort of overview typical in the middlebrow press, see the chapter ‘Telluride’ in Kenneth Turan (2002) *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made*. Berkeley: University of California Press. At least, Turan’s extremely flawed
and thinly conceived exploration of world festivals groups Telluride with Pordenone, another small-scaled festival with a single-minded commitment to silent film. But Turan’s chapter and annual Telluride reports for the Los Angeles Times typically relegate the genuinely cinephilic discoveries at Telluride to the bottom of his stories, with the lead weighted toward high-profile fall awards season releases. A similar pattern can be seen at work in Roger Ebert’s Telluride reports, with major cinephile events commonly given passing mention, or provided as colour to dress up the main thrust of the story, which is describing Telluride as a platform/launchpad for the fall season. This effectively distorts Telluride’s place in cinephilia, while disguising the distortion. For a telling example, see Ebert (2004) ‘Telluride: Three Very Different Looks at Sex’, Chicago Sun-Times, http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040906/FILMFESTIVALS02/409060301: Accessed 1 April, 2008.

3 The work involved in rescuing the film from obscurity has been obscured itself, in part due to the abysmal failure of filmmaker Vicente Ferraz to credit Luddy and his detective work in his documentary, ‘The Siberian Mammoth’, on the making of I Am Cuba.

4 I place the term ‘version’ in quotes only because a good deal of Schmidlin’s pains-taking work featured the careful selection of stills to stand in for missing footage.


6 As with so many other aspects of cinephilia in the US and Canada – and to a certain degree in the UK, Ireland and Australia – the heavy lifting of putting together career retrospectives typically falls to well-endowed cinematheques and archives. This was true in the specific case of Ruiz, who was given a modest touring retrospective over a decade-and-a-half ago that I saw at the UCLA Film and Television Archive.

7 There are several fine examples, making it difficult to select just one, so I’ll mention two. See ‘Juguetes peligrosos’ by Javier Porta Fouz and Diego Trerotola for a fine summa on the strange career of Oku Shutaro, in the catalogue for the ninth edition of BAFICI. See also ‘La esencia de la realidad’ by Jorge Garcia for as excellent a brief overview of Pialat’s work as can be found in any language, in the catalogue for the fifth edition of FICCO.

8 Or, such as in the case of a new 2008 book on Jose Luis Guerin, a platform to launch the book. Carlos Losilla and Jaime Pena, eds., Algunos paseos por la ciu-
dad de Sylvia: Un cuaderno de notas. Buenos Aires and Gijon: Buenos Aires Independent International Film Festival and Gijon International Film Festival, 2008. This was one of two books co-published or solely published by BAFICI in advance of its 2008 edition, a practice that the festival has maintained since close to its founding in 1998.
