The first film festival I travelled far abroad to see was Rotterdam in 1997. I was a late starter at this game: 37 years old, and already a film critic for twenty years. For me, that edition of Rotterdam was a complete eye-opener, and a fulfilment of most of my cinephilic dreams: sitting in a front row inches from one of my heroes, Werner Schroeter, as he unfussily stood up to introduce his avant-garde opera film *Love’s Debris* (1996), was merely the cream on the cake of everything I was able to guzzle off the various screens (cinematic, televisual, museum and gallery) available that year.

I was there from before the first screening to after the last screening (something that – I would realise later – few professional critics actually do). But on that final day, reading the daily newspaper published by the festival, I received a rude shock: a ‘people’s choice’ listing, based on the polling of the event’s audiences, ordered from one to one hundred. The luckless title right down the bottom was a film I adored, and had critically defended (for, back in my country, it was briefly in danger of being altogether censored): David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (1996). And the film on top was one of the kind that, in my mind, I had fled precisely in order to come to Rotterdam: the disgustingly middlebrow, sentimental, ‘true life’, made-in-Australia hit *Shine* (1996). This was a ‘disconnect’, a true moment of dissociation that alerted me to the difference – alas, even in the Rotterdam of my dreams! – between the cinephile audience (which longed to stamp its taste on the entire event) and the ‘normal’
audience for this, and possibly almost every, film festival. And the normal audience in this case was, no doubt, comprised mainly of Dutch locals.

Those who are lucky or rich enough to be professional Film Festival-goers – whether as journalists, critics, programmers or film distributors – occasionally need to recall a time in their lives before they had the chance to travel internationally. For me, this recollection is easy: I have a vivid sense of what it once was to be a relatively home-bound local (since I remained one for an unnaturally long time), waiting for the Melbourne film festival to roll out its offerings each year.

This is a poignant (as well as exciting) situation which, I suspect, is at the origin of the cinephile passion for many people in many countries: the film festival is what – well beyond newspapers or magazines, radio or television, telephone or computer – gives the non-traveller his or her glimpse of a wide, rich world, so full of different sensibilities, visions and stories. The longing for world cinema stirred in this heady situation is, for a sedentary viewer, simultaneously a longing for the world itself. It is akin to the image of the melancholic young dweller of a small country town in Jacques Brel’s song...
ON FILM FESTIVALS

‘Mon enfance’ who gazes wistfully – exactly like, 34 years later, the characters of Jia Zhangke’s *Platform* (2000) – at the train that is slicing its way across the landscape to unseen territories beyond, the ‘train I have never caught’.

It is easy to overlook the reality that for many members – sometimes a majority – of a festival audience, the experience is local (and special) in just this sense. When seasoned critics and other well-travelled festival observers express (as they almost invariably do) their weariness or bitter disappointment at seeing, say, *The Five Obstructions* (2003) or the latest Claude Chabrol movie pop up at yet another event on their global itinerary, they overlook the fact that, for a sizeable number in the crowd, this may well be their one and only chance to see that film on a big screen, and in the company of like-minded others.

Festivals that contain this thrill of local experience are still with us; but what has, for the most part, vanished in many places are festivals that are *only* local, and tailored specifically to the characteristics of such a (usually grateful) reception of world cinema. A note of nostalgia inevitably creeps into discussion of these matters, as critic-programmer-historian Bruce Hodsdon noted in his account of the 2007 Brisbane film festival: ‘comparisons are often made between the film festivals [of the 1960s] and contemporary festivals, to the latter’s detriment’. Hodsdon evokes the days when festivals were ‘less complex beasts’, more contained in their programming and based on a stable community experience:

… a subscriber became part of what was in essence a captive audience. Once the decision was made to become a subscriber it was quite feasible to see every film on the programme at no additional cost. At the 1968 Sydney Film Festival (SFF), for example, there were a total of 28 sessions over 13 days on a single screen, less than one-tenth of the sessions and films screened at the SFF in 2007. Of the 26 features, 20 were of European or Soviet origin with a single feature length documentary in the programme. There was a greater sense of shared experience – a community of festival-goers in cinemas accommodating up to 2000 or more for a series of single screenings open simultaneously to all subscribers.¹

Nostalgia aside, what we are witnessing today is not merely the existence of two separate, very different audiences or constituencies (local and itinerant) attending film festivals, but the increasing gap between two kinds of Festivals
— or two kinds of festivals within the one festival. There are festivals that play to a home audience, and festivals that play to an international audience, a crowd of visitors with specialist interests (whether cultural or commercial or both) in global film culture — and now, festivals that try to play to both audiences at once, via the differential ‘streaming’ of its programme content.

To put it another way: many festivals now aspire — to the material and cultural extent that they can — to be like the major event of this kind on the film world’s calendar, namely Cannes. And however one might choose to describe Cannes, its nature is determined by the fact that it is absolutely not a local festival: its programme is not in any sense intended for or directed at inhabitants of the French Riviera. It is the very model of a cosmopolitan, international arts event that may be ‘hosted’ by a particular city or community, but whose entire audience is transported in from beyond it.

This quality of statelessness that is characteristic (to varying degrees) of many modern festivals is both a commercial situation (festival as marketplace, both for distributors buying films and filmmakers hoping to raise finance on projects), and a social experience (festival as jet-setting lifestyle) which can be deeply attractive (and even addictive) to those who taste it. When the Buenos Aires festival (known as BAFICI), for example, in the early years of the new century, declared itself semi-officially to be a ‘festival for critics’, it was consciously styling itself as a more intellectual and avant-garde, but no less cosmopolitan, version of Cannes. But this plan or dream — as history has shown — often conflicts with other agendas driving festivals, especially those we might label national or nationalist: a festival as showcase for national production for the local audience and industry, as well as for any important or influential visitors from abroad. This tension has been evident, for instance, in the history of the Rotterdam festival over the past decade: the appointment of Simon Field as its Director for eight years was a triumph for cultural cosmopolitanism of a cutting-edge type, but led to unrest among those who felt that the event’s local character as a festival by and for the Dutch was slipping away or being swiftly marginalised.

Of course, festivals around the world have tended inexorably to fragment in other ways and directions as well, further detonating the once-upon-a-time ‘local community’ experience. In the place of the small, focused event
of old, the contemporary festival (as Hodsdon notes) ‘is now a segmented programme spread across a number of venues aimed more often than not at niche audiences’.\textsuperscript{2} We are all familiar with what this means in practice: there is a stream of Asian genre films for their devoted fans; comfortable comedy-dramas of middle-class life set in exotic locales for the more mainstream crowd; documentaries (usually either about politics or music) for those who prefer a bigger-than-TV non-fiction experience; and token sidebars of experimental cinema, animation, short films, dance films, whatever…

The cinephile can welcome and enjoy this sort of fragmentation – for the individual, it increases the delirious range of choices at the largest ‘smorgasbord’ festivals, after all – but also, inevitably, enters into battle with it. What happened to the festival as a ‘film culture’ event, as an opportunity for mass pedagogy? The niche-oriented festival merely confirms spectators – or rather, gangs of spectators – in the already-established prison-house of their frequently rigid, exclusive tastes; as a general rule, audience members who follow the marketing cues designed precisely to ‘target’ them do not wander over and cross the lines of starkly diverse types of cinema. Where can the fervent dream of cinema as transformative experience – which is, from a certain angle, the very heart of the cinephile passion, and cinephile culture – go in this kind of segregated landscape? Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet may have (as Australian legend has it) looked aghast upon the photo of the interior of the enormous State Theatre when the then-Director of the Sydney film festival showed it to them, inadvertently inciting their demand that their films play in a much smaller and more ‘just’ space – but, still today, cinephiles tend to swoon at the thought of vast picture palaces (even of the contemporary multiplex variety) filling up with mass bodies curious to taste an Abbas Kiarostami, Béla Tarr, Chantal Akerman or James Benning.

It is fascinating, today, to look back at two major Australian think-pieces of the early 1980s that reflected on these difficult issues of what film festivals are, have been, and should be – and began the kind of institutional study of festivals that has only recently come back onto the university cinema studies agenda. Unlike most festival reviews or reports – there is surely no genre of film criticism that is more ephemeral, or of less ‘general interest’, save to those who were themselves there, or who have a professional stake in monitoring their reception\textsuperscript{3} – ‘The Triumph of Taste’, written by Kathe
Boehringer and Stephen Crofts in 1980, is a wide-ranging critique of a certain kind of festival dominant in that period. To them, the Sydney film festival typifies the consumerist spectacle of a comfortable, unchallenging humanism. Festivals have always been praised for their efforts (explicit or incidental) that have aided the cause of multiculturalism, but such a show can readily become a sham when all the world’s diverse cultures are ground down and homogenised into the one, universal ‘human spirit’ story of suffering, resilience, triumph, hope… The entire apparatus of a film festival exists, in this sense, to simultaneously present cultural difference (the ‘window on the world’ line so popular in festival promotion) and erase it. The lack of (in many cases) any extensive background contextual information on the films – via notes, essays, introductions, in-depth seminars, and the like – aggravates this myopia. All we get (in the immortal words of this piece) is:

… the Anglo-Saxon Film Critical Newspeak of hand-me-down literary critical discourse peppered with tasteful superlatives and silvertail art-amateur clichés […] infinite permutations of beautifully/handsomely/flawlessly/faultlessly/superbly/sumptuously made/rendered/realised/executed/handled-photographed/acted.⁵

What, in this account, has changed today? On the one hand, the multicultural ‘world cinema’ package has – married to the soundtrack of the similar phenomenon of ‘world music’ at its most superficial – largely moved from the big screens of festivals to the little screens of subscription TV (such as Australia’s ‘World Movies’ channel) and DVD. On another hand, turning to the standard films which, in 1980, greased the wheels of complacent multiculturalism, Boehringer and Crofts give the ‘cosmopolitan vs local’ conflict a particular, and today surprising, inflection: for them, the films expressly made for the then-burgeoning international art film market (such as Volker Schlöndorff’s *The Tin Drum*, 1979) are not local films at all, not made for (or arising from) what the Australian film critic John Hinde once called the ‘seminal’ audience of any given nation.⁶ They are stateless, rootless films, and damned as such by Boehringer and Crofts: a strange judgement to re-encounter in a time when the work of Olivier Assayas, or the recent forays of Hou Hsiao-hsien into Japan or France, are praised precisely for their speedy, moody, ‘border crossing’ cosmopolitanism.
The second notable article from the archives of Australian film criticism is by Lesley Stern, discussing the Melbourne film festival of 1981. Like Boehringer and Crofts, Stern finds the facile sorting of films by country, genre or auteur unengaging; she calls for a more suggestive grouping or networking of the films – of the kind actualised in a merry rhizomatic map handed out to the public of the Ljubljana film festival in 2007. Stern calls this mode of (hopeful) experience ‘the festival as a moveable feast’; she makes great play with culinary and digestive metaphors, trying to salvage the image of a festival as an all-over smorgasbord, thus turning the pessimistic Debordian critique of the festival as ‘spectacle of consumption’ into a perversely enjoyable ‘consumptive spectacle’ – one in which the excess and slippage of the spectator from film to film (and from stream to stream in the programme) is not merely given free rein but also mobilised in a specific intellectual direction. ‘There is a certain exhilaration to be derived from the glut of a festival diet, an excitement in the air and an energy which can be harnessed to make some intervention, to politicise the cultural.’

The tension in Stern’s piece between a fondness for the unprogrammable freedom of the spectator and, all the same, the desire to nudge that spectator in some way, to some extent, is palpable – and it is eloquent of the different directions in which contemporary festivals, then as now, inexorably pull. (Of the Australian festivals, it is Brisbane that does the best, most progressive job of steering a path between these conflicting tendencies of the ‘free marketplace’ and the ‘cultural experience’.) Stern wisely sees in the pedagogic, community-forming dream of the festival-watching cinephile – which usually expresses itself in a frustrated critique of the festivals we have as hotbeds of compromise and mediocrity – a certain kind of overdetermination or over-investment, arising precisely from the ‘here and elsewhere’ mentality so constitutive of social life in Australia:

Much of this railing seems to me to be indicative of the poverty of film culture in Australia, and the isolation experienced here, the sense of exclusion from overseas developments. The festival assumes undue importance as a target, we demand that it be, not all things to all people, but that it should be the acme of a radical film culture, representing all that is lacking elsewhere – i.e., it should be challenging of the status quo, uncompromisingly committed to alternative film practices, dedi-
cated to the cultivation of political and theoretical issues, and disengaged from marketing practices.9

The reading, by an Australian cinephile in 2008, of this entirely reasonable account has, however, a grimly ironic pay-off: Stern ends her train of thought here by suggesting that ‘such demands should be addressed, and more appropriately, to bodies such as the Australian Film Institute’ 10 – a relentlessly mainstream organisation that has, in recent years, rather like the British Film Institute, systematically divested itself of most of its cultural functions (maintaining a library, distributing and exhibiting independent local films, enabling publications and seminars) in order to identify itself more closely with ‘the industry’. More than ever, film festivals can come to seem like Utopias arriving from the Great Elsewhere, like the three-ring circus come to a small town…

Has the audience – any audience – slipped through the cracks of all these momentous, paradoxical, contradictory changes in the nature of festivals? There is, indeed, one further, still more insidious cultural turn to record. What we have witnessed, in the larger circuit of international film culture, is a new sort of disconnection or dissociation: between the arthouse chains and the festivals. For a long time, the two existed in symbiosis, and even moved in lockstep: arthouse distributors would preview their latest acquisitions at a high-profile festival screening (such as Opening or Closing Night), and then go on to shop around for new product among the programme offerings. This relationship often indeed became rather too close for comfort, with certain festivals coming to increasingly resemble vast, compliant ‘showcases’ for upcoming arthouse product. Today, however, there is a growing, yawning autonomy between these two realms of arthouse and festival – summed up in the recent creation of a truly hideous term: the ‘festival film’, which is apparently the name for a film whose destiny, nowadays, is only to play (on the big screen, at least) on the international festival circuit.

What this means, in practice, is that, in many countries, the films prized by progressive cinephiles – the films of Philippe Garrel, Pedro Costa, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and many others – are branded, virtually from the outset of their public life, as unfit for general (or even moderately specialised) distribution and exhibition. Another delicious anecdote marks,
for me, the beginning of this historic transformation: the tale of certain arthouse buyers who had skipped (as ‘not their kind of thing’) the screening of the Dardennes’ *Rosetta* at Cannes in 1999, and were then shocked when the main jury (headed by Cronenberg) gave it two major prizes. This kind of wilful blindness to vast portions of world cinema – and many modes of filmmaking – is increasingly evident everywhere.

In this rather ominous context, the festival audience – cinephile or otherwise – may yet again find itself transformed into a community that is ‘all in this together’, huddled around those ephemeral, magical ‘festival films’ that manage to squeeze themselves through our narrowing cultural portals.

Notes


2 Ibid.


5 Ibid.: 75.


8 Ibid.: 7.


10 Ibid.: 7.
III.

MEMOIRS AND CASE STUDIES