Staus Quo and Beyond: The Viennale, a Success Story

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0. Histories

In the last one-and-a-half decades, Vienna’s international film festival, the Viennale, has acquired an outstanding international reputation. It certainly is one of the better festivals of its kind around, but the effusive praise from certain quarters treating the Viennale as some kind of cinephile paradise is just as baffling to me as the damning frustration expressed by friends and acquaintances of all kinds (film critics and filmmakers – especially Austrian ones – as well as regular and casual cinema-goers); some of the criticism seems more than justified, and some of the praise as well. The issues (on both counts) raised in debates about the festival I’ve had through the years mostly seemed a matter of perspective – and this is not just a question of viewpoints tainted by personal experience or preferences of taste but the festival’s standing is also an indicator of a constantly shifting film culture and its blinders internationally, but with some Austrian touches. So I came to the logical conclusion that the best way to tackle this situation is to retrace my relationship to the festival taking place every October on my home turf (I moved to Vienna in 1991, so the period perfectly coincides with its international ‘rise’), first as a ‘normal’ cinephile, then as a professional critic (both periods of roughly equal length). Necessarily and inevitably, at different times the festival has meant different
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...things to me. But what emerges clearly is not just a story of dreams (fulfilled) or disappointments — but a chronicle of changing demands. One could also be tempted to christen this piece, ‘Viennese Histoire(s) du cinema’, but actually that would make it part of the problem, as we will see.

1. Memories

Try as I might, I cannot remember the first film I saw at Vienna’s film festival, although I like to think it was either Tod Browning’s immortal *Freaks* or Jean Rouch’s equally essential *Les maitres fous* — they might even have been on the same programme. Using the invaluable index of all films played at the festival — ‘Viennale – Internationale Filmfestwochen Wien 1960–1996 Registerband’ (published by the Festival in 1996; more on it in the second section of this article) — in an attempt to reconstruct my first festival experience, I mostly come up short as well I might; at this point I am an 18-year-old student that has arrived in Vienna a few weeks prior. Up to then, while residing in my small Upper Austrian hometown, my rabidly growing cinephilia had to be nourished mostly via television, certainly not the worst option at that time, when state-sponsored television still did offer programming with a certain cultural responsibility, and not just served up classics, but also stretched into certain margins (even the commercial channels of German-language TV in their early years yielded pleasures high- and lowbrow; with special fondness I remember a near-complete Russ Meyer retrospective productively challenging a Godard anniversary series on state TV in its montage mastery).

Since my hometown’s cinema was shuttered, monthly screenings by ‘cultural initiatives’ only furthered my filmic isolation amidst provincial circumstances (I was, on the one hand, not wowed by Jim Jarmusch’s jokes — and, on the other hand, one of the few viewers not appalled by Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers.*) Occasionally I could negotiate a drive to a nearby city (their cinema programming mostly wasn’t worth it anyway), and the video recorder came too late; it was only acquired months before I left for Vienna. You know you live in the sticks, when, on a very basic level, the move means that you actually might get to see something like *Goodfellas* upon its release.

So basically, in those first months, Vienna’s somewhat diverse cinema culture itself is a film festival for me, and it is more of a nice surprise that —
amidst adjusting my life as physics student and cinemagoer – I discover, only very shortly before it’s beginning, there is an actual film festival as well. Its two most important aspects back then: the Apollo, the small three-room-multiplex (two of the screens being very small), is close to my dormitory (I tend to get lost easily in the city in the first weeks), and one of my heroes, John Carpenter, is coming in person – he reacts professionally, but very nicely to my timid autograph request. His signature is long lost, like most of my impressions of the festival: I definitely did see some Carpenters on the big screen back then, and discovered Jon Jost, whom the other retrospective is devoted to, but I don’t think I watched even one new film (in retrospect it turns out there weren’t that many on offer). Most unforgivably, I do not even notice the big historical retrospective on Chinese cinema that is clearly the most sensational aspect of this edition. Glancing into papers, I do take note of some criticisms directed at the festival direction (Reinhard Pyrker and Werner Herzog – yes, the Werner Herzog), which sound reasonable enough (doing a Carpenter tribute, how can they omit his rare early western short?), but my concerns are mostly elsewhere.

One year later, a new directorial duo (Wolfgang Ainberger and Alexander Horwath) clearly raises the stakes (with critical and audience success): The contemporary film programme is vastly expanded – as is my intake. It must be close to twenty films in ten days, which is more or less the maximum my studies (and finances) allow, although not nearly enough to form an opinion about the entire festival – not something I would think about then anyway. What is already certain, though, is that this bigger Viennale does have quite a few things on offer that appeal to me, especially in that expedient category slowly starting to take shape in my brain: films that otherwise will not show up in local cinemas. They include Tsukamoto Shinya’s remarkable Tetsuo films (successfully geared to the audience as instant cult discoveries), but also, more unexpectedly, films I would hardly characterise as offbeat, like Carl Franklin’s thriller One False Move, for whose regular release I wait for in vain, discovering that the ways of distribution do not necessarily make sense. (Cf. a similar case from that year’s line-up, Paul Schrader’s Light Sleeper, which will show up … quite a few years down the road. An invaluably helpful measure will long have been installed in the festival catalogue by then: an annotation on which films do have distribution.) Films that eventually
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will play cinemas soon enough (and I have no interest in seeing at the festival anyway) teach me another, quite universal lesson when I foolishly give them a chance during the commercial run: be wary of so-called ‘gala screenings’ (Sister Act, 1492). More insights beginning to dawn: just because some films in a retrospective are relatively easy to come by, other items may not be – a remarkable, big showcase of boxing films is a prime example; by then I am not yet savvy enough to realise that, say, Tod Browning’s The Iron Man may never show up again (still waiting), whereas the perceived singular opportunity to see Stanley Kubrick’s short Day of the Fight is misguided since the film proves to be far from a rare item. Similarly, I spend much time at the other retrospective dedicated to the austere art of Robert Bresson (surrounded by selected, ‘related’ films from Flaherty to Yanagimachi, Garrel and Pialat), assuming all these supposedly difficult works will rarely show up again – when I really should have gorged on the lively shorts featured in the tribute to Les Blank, which have continued to remain elusive.

By 1993, the grasp of film on my life has increased further: actually, starting to present special series throughout the rest of the year (Yugoslavian film, Cassavetes), the Viennale does its best to contribute, but the first time around things do not work out – the showcases take place too close to exam season which I still take very seriously. But during October, when the festival itself takes place, I can by now manage to reshuffle time (and funds) relatively easily, doubling the amount of films towards forty, which will remain constant throughout the next years. Both the festival and I have moved – as the Apollo is rebuilt to become a confusingly huge multiplex, the Viennale spreads around a manageable portion of the inner city (actually into those likeable five cinemas it is still using today). A surge of afternoon screenings helps to expand my selection and widen my interests, which used to tilt (with youthful enthusiasm) towards genre films, the thrillers and fantastic/horror films programmed in appropriate late-night slots. Horwath’s (his co-direction with Ainberger lasts till 1994, then he remains in charge alone for two more years) programming credo, tinged with a humorously Austrian tilt described as ‘From Arnold (Schwarzenegger) to (Martin) Arnold’, i.e. trying to reach from the mainstream to the margin, perfectly fits the bill for me, as I discover new areas. (For instance, the so-called ‘avant-garde’ has simply been unavailable to me in Upper Austria, save for about five films —
including Arnold’s *Pièce touchée* – on television; but Vienna has a strong experimental film culture, with regular screening opportunities, I try to catch up eagerly.) In the next few years, transcendence comes in all forms, from dream retrospectives of known quantities (finally, the complete works of Dario Argento or – small, but endless – Terrence Malick on the big screen in 1993) to hitherto unknown ones (a tribute to Iranian master Bahram Beyzai in 1995 also putting the then-emerging craze for Iranian cinema into perspective). I begin to appreciate the interplay of the old and the new and learn to accept that it can be meaningful by default (as in the Beyzai case) or sheer accident: Arthur Aristakisjan’s epic *Ladoni* literally leaves me speechless, as it is unlike anything I’ve ever seen – then again, so is another black-and-white mindfuck, Suzuki Seijun’s long-awaited classic *Branded to Kill*, finally making its way over here with Dutch subtitles only, with some slightly incomprehensible results that perfectly enhance its surrealism.
There are (and always have been and always will be) disappointments as well, but by now I’m beginning to develop a sense of perspective: it dawns on me that the idea of a festival cannot just be the discussion of a single film, which is the usual distraction when it comes down to classify a festival, whether in attack or defense – for in the end what is it worth to weigh the time wasted in, say, Hal Hartley’s *Amateur* against the ecstatic two hours of Kumashiro Tatsumi’s *Hard-Headed Fool*? The question rather has to be: what context is created for these two? (Are they surrounded by more waste or by more ecstasy?) The point of context is brought home painfully when the Viennale’s extraneous summer retrospective dedicated to Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and 1990s turns out to be a premiere-heavy revelation – yet the foreword to the programme bafflingly extols the films’ virtues as mostly no-brains entertainment. On the other hand, Horwath’s two big consecutive Viennale retrospectives in 1994 and 1995 – dedicated to innovative Hollywood cinema from 1960–68 and 1967–75 respectively – are like provocative seminars on the presentation of film history; being familiar with big parts of the selection from television, new perspectives arise not just from being able to finally revisit them on the big screen (and in original versions; after all TV is firmly in the hands of a sadly dubbed film culture), but also from rarer works surrounding them and encountered for the first time. That I agree on most, but not necessarily all of the selections, has instructive results: I must learn to formulate my objections within a broader system of ideas. (Of course it is still true that Roger Vadim’s *Barbarella* is plain ridiculous, but how does that ridiculousness fit into the proposed scheme of things?)

A key year comes in 1996: first, the retrospectives remind how the sense of film history is shaped by the status quo. Following up on his Hollywood excursions, Horwath concludes his tenure with a huge and hugely enjoyable series on 1930s films, ‘Before the Code’; much is to be discovered, but I also realise that I know a lot more here than I did from the big ‘Nouvelle Vague’ showcase in May (curated by Frieda Grafe); and I already knew a lot more of that, than I did of the cinema of Werner Hochbaum, an extraordinary, unsung director working in the 1930s, in Germany – and Austria. The Hochbaum retrospective (in March) is actually a reprise of a deserving Viennale programme from 1976, reinforcing the sense of how film history is shaped. After all, I have hardly heard of the major director working in my coun-
try at the same time as those Hollywood films were made, with whose (hi) stories and creators I’m so familiar. It would be interesting to have a similar perspective on the contemporary selection, I think, especially since Vienna’s film festival has found both audience success and international reputation under Horwath’s direction: for me his 1996 tribute selection – Olivier Assayas & André Téchiné, Mike Leigh & Ken Loach – is a welcome chance to delve into oeuvres so far only visible in spots (and with Assayas, for instance, only through the Viennale itself) in Austria. But given the acclaimed status of these directors as Euro-Giants, what does it mean internationally? Not to mention the contemporary selection, for which the frame of reference in those pre-internet-days is just a puny assortment of festival reports in the Austrian papers and articles from a handful of overpriced international film magazines. One would have to go to those festivals oneself, I conclude – but I go to Linz, to finish my diploma thesis in the Voest steel works. Horwath’s last gift before he hands the festival over to Hans Hurch (who is still in charge and will be at least a few more years) is a perfect **vade mecum** for more historical thought – the index of all Viennale editions up to then.

2. Fantasies

In those ten years I’ve spent with the Viennale index, my perspective on it has changed as well: back then it was full of mysterious names, with classics or at least established works thrown in for good measure. I have encountered quite a bit of once seemingly enigmatic works since, but the allure of the unknown remains. Of course, on paper, the potential of festivals is always greater – unencumbered by necessities or even simple scheduling conflicts the attractive stands out (a first look at a festival’s programme is always more promising than the final result) – and the eccentric is just charming. I haven’t counted the numbers, but for instance it seems that Italian animation artist Bruno Bozzetto may be the secret favorite of Viennale: the alphabetical order of the listings even twice brings up the intriguing progression Bozzetto; Bresson (followed by Michael Cacoyannis in 1971; by Claude Chabrol in 1974). Wedged in between, 1973 yields the second return to the festival programme for Loach, Ermanno Olmi and Ephraim Kishon. In short, the selection criteria remain intriguingly obscure. The first year of the Viennale
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gives a reasoning in its title (‘Films That Did Not Reach Us’), and character-
istically ranges from the great (Sergei Bondarchuck, Kurosawa Akira) to the
overrated (Camus’ Orfeu negro) to the forgotten and obscure (who is Gyula
Macskassy?) For a few years in the mid-1960s the Viennale reconceives itself
as a ‘Festival of exhilaration’, visibly favouring a certain amount of ‘qual-
ity’ comedies, but including – I randomly pick 1964 – a selection from Ozu
Yasujiro’s farewell to Vera Chytilova’s (feature) debut to arcane Bulgarian
works (one title, by Boika Mawrodinowa, is given in literal translation as
Pedagogic Poem). By 1968 there is a return to serious assignments, first repris-
ing the ‘Films That Did Not Reach Us’ moniker, but quickly upping the
didactic ante towards the likes of ‘Inconvenient Contemporaries’; remark-
able is the year 1970 (‘Society and Young Generation’) for its focus on ‘new
Austrian cinema’, including a big retrospective dedicated to the movement’s
tenth anniversary. Apart from two years in the late 1970s which have a spe-
cial sidebar (‘Cannes in Vienna’), the selection preferences, with or without
a moniker, seem stimulatingly inscrutable – is even most of it coming from
the big festivals, like so much is today? Various emphases throughout the
years (more Eastern Europe here, a Dutch Defilée there) seem to be traces
of personal preferences by the directors. A perfect starting point to consider
the Hurch era after noting two more facts, both still pertinent: from early
on the Viennale has striven to enrich its programme by historical retrospec-
tives, and that they have consistently grown over the years is certainly a
good thing. As is Hurch’s steadfast dedication to keeping the festival in the
inner city cinemas, which is an integral part of the festival’s distinct flair –
and which, as I discovered thanks to the index, was not a move in 1993,
but a return: all of the cinemas (and a few that no longer exist) had been
Viennale venues throughout its history, the Apollo was just an interlude
coinciding with my arrival.

3. Realities

My arrival at Hurch’s Viennale is just two prolonged weekends out of the
Voest, mostly well spent at the tribute to Albert Brooks and the big retro-
spective of Roberto Rossellini. So, in 1997, I have little reason to join in
with many complaints that the Viennale is hardly a festival of exhilaration
anymore, despite continuing audience success: Hurch follows the established formula, which has made the Viennale a cultural event (also meaning many attend without really caring what they see; as always – but that is true with every festival – prestige productions, scheduled to open soon are always sold out first). That Hurch’s proclivities lie somewhere else is showing throughout the years: Francophilia, but especially a preference for documentary (and realist) modes tip the scales, while the mainstream balance feels rather more dutiful than enthusiastic – and the selection of genre films has been, to say it politely, erratic. (I sometimes ask myself how my younger self, that responded so enthusiastically once, would react a mere decade later; certainly with more indifference.) The director’s penchant for antagonising helps little, even if after a few years press coverage goes the way of the Austrian solution, mainly – much ballyhoo in advance, hardly any stocktaking afterwards; at one press conference Hurch announces that if he would really make a festival for himself he would play ten movies at most, which overplays the ‘inconvenient contemporary’ card to the point of disdain for the audience. His often contentious relationship to Austrian cinema has been an issue as well: at another press conference (they are beginning to sound a lot more interesting than they are) he pointed out that the meagre two Austrian fiction features he selected were actually quite bad. Although the Austro-numbers have somewhat increased (albeit still far below what Horwath presented), the residual resentment of the local film community is understandable, especially since there would be an easy solution at hand – i.e. freeing Austrian films from the Viennale regulation that new films have to be Austrian premieres (many of which premier earlier that year at the Austrian film festival in Graz – but some of the best do not make it to Vienna’s screens).

Yet these are problems that matter little to the international standing of the Viennale, and in part that is understandable; I certainly lived through a similar period of disillusionment after starting to write on film more or less professionally shortly after my return to Vienna in 1998 and soon starting to travel to other festivals. If previously, the Viennale had been my most important, in some cases only chance to see certain films, now I could easily catch up with those elsewhere – or had already seen them in advance. (Meanwhile other festivals, like Torino before its 2007 takeover, served as
replacement to gorge on really heady programming.) It would be easy to bicker about this or that selection, but that would mostly just be gamesmanship. However, it is worth noting that as a self-proclaimed audience festival, the small amount of what you could classify as excellent genre filmmaking, or at least good entertainment, is somewhat frustrating. And, alas, the festival has mostly moved away from presenting premieres (ah, to think of Eiichi Kudo’s towering goodbye *Gunro no keifu* in 1998), with haphazard, even clumsy attempts to compensate with strict festival filler (*Double Vision*), while ignoring even circuit-approved masters like Takashi Miike (save, alas again, for *One Last Call*), and dare I even mention non-approved ones ones like Cheang Soi-pou?

More generally frustrating is a strange lack of consequence: not diligently following up on filmmakers (for example, Jacques Rivette, Aoyama Shinji) who have received tributes or have been the subject of retrospectives, although the Viennale screening would clearly be the only chance of Austrian exposure. Hurch may have complaints about Rivette’s *Histoire de Marie et Julien* (I can’t comment, as its no-show at Viennale is one of the reasons I still haven’t seen it), but can it be much inferior to Rivette’s incredibly overrated *Va savoir*, the preceding film from the year that warranted the retrospective? Locally, Hurch’s dedication to the work of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub has been the butt of many jokes, but I find it touching not just because it is deserved, but precisely because it goes to such ridiculous lengths as showing an undistinguished TV biography of Fritz Lang ostensibly just because Straub utters a few sentences in it. Yet the only other person warranting this sort of enshrinement is Jean-Luc Godard – and here I see, in a nutshell, the embodiment of the international reputation of the festival: Godard is the official icon, with Straub doubling as his doppleganger for the more radically predisposed – the last stand of film as we know it. This is the emblematic status quo of a serious cinephilia behind which lurks a 1960s/1970s conception of cinema that is, often unwittingly, idolised today, and the Viennale caters to it – certainly not cynically, I’m sure, but by predisposition. Actually most of the tributes carry the stamp of that era, whether it’s rediscoveries *du jour* (Peter Whitehead, Danny Williams) or eternal wisdom (Hartmut Bitomsky, Emile de Antonio). Indeed, even the documentary selection the Viennale prides itself for tends to reflect...
a bias for TV fodder once a music or film icon from the era is involved as a subject. Even though usually leavened by a welcome tribute to a current art-house filmmaker of interest (Koreeda Hirokazu, Pedro Costa) and a tribute to Hollywood greats (from Dean Martin to Fay Wray or Lauren Bacall – the latter two even brought a different kind of glamour to the festival) that mitigates the dearth of entertainment, it all seems quite predictable, right down to the mediocrity of the Chinese selection and discoveries from American avant-garde circles that include Viennale mainstays James Benning, Thom Andersen, and John Gianvito. The latter may even be the year’s best (Los Angeles Plays Itself, Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind), along with some retrospectives (especially since the film archive has joined in with bigger series from Paul Fejos to proletarian cinema in the last years), but overall there is a lack of surprise – no threat that, even despite its quotes from experimental filmmaking, something like the crypto-CalArts porn Art School Sluts might be juxtaposed with the school’s own work, or Nando Cicero, the demented Straub of Italian sex comedy, might be programmed alongside the ‘sane’, serious Straub. There have been some enjoyable nutty ideas recently – a showcase for Buenos Aires on film in a moving gesture of solidarity for just-fired Buenos Aires film fest director Quintín, a random selection of ‘jungle’ movies – but a feeling remains that all the excellence, whether past or present, is not really challenged by the truly innovative. Of course, these choices doubtless makes the Viennale easier to like – in addition to the fact that its programme is still vastly better than that of most comparable festivals and does show a personal touch.

Hurch even seems to occasionally acknowledge his weaknesses by making an effort to outsource showcases with outstanding results; recent examples include a midnight movies selection by Munich specialists of the ‘Werkstattkino’, the rich retrospectives on ‘Blacklisted’ films curated by Thom Andersen and Noel Burch, Roland Domenig’s survey of Japan’s ‘Art Theatre Guild’ and – most recently – Jean-Pierre Gorin’s selection of ‘essay films’. Yet 2007 also drove home some of the festival’s limitations: instead of an actress of old Hollywood along came another 1960s/1970s icon, Jane Fonda, to professionally spread glamour and wow the nostalgists. Unfortunately, the tribute films added little of note to the overall quality of the programming (beyond an opportunity to see the rarity Introduction to the En-
emy), the strain of Fonda’s ‘committed’ projects actually quite the opposite of the (no less committed) effortless entertainments that starred honorees like Maureen O’Hara or Olivia de Havilland (just contrast Coming Home with This Land is Mine or Barefoot in the Park with The Strawberry Blonde; also, no contrast needed: Barbarella again). More intriguingly and tellingly, Gorin’s mostly delectable selection ranged through the whole of cinema—but the basis of its argument again marked a reversion to the myths of the 1960s, in this case the idea of cinéma vérité as orthodox interpretation of the documentary form; only in relation to this aesthetic filter could some films be elevated (mostly from the documentary genre) to the status of essays. But as with most of the programming, the spectator had to make the effort to be challenged. As at other noteworthy festivals, critical thinking and creative ferment is possible at the Viennale although the event does not require viewers to adopt a critical stance per se.