Bagatelle for Kino Otok and i 1000 Occhi

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Izola/Isola and Trieste/Trst are about twenty minutes by car apart, a border – of politico-historically confused as well as culturally vaguer character – has to be crossed on the way. Izola is a tiny fishing village, right next to Koper/Capo d’Istria, the main city on the forty kilometres of coastline belonging to the westernmost Slavic country, Slovenia. Trieste, however, is the easternmost major city of Italy, a true harbour town architecturally defined during the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In addition, both places belong to that part of the Adriatic where civilisations met and merged: officially, the region is bilingual – Italian and Slovene – with German as an unofficial third tongue. Reading Italo Svevo – a core Triestinian with a love for German – in the original will give you an idea of the region’s linguistic idiosyncrasies, its particular nature. At its most generous, it’s international – in ways ever rarer in our globalised era.

Both places also host film festivals of quite uncommon character: Izola Kino Otok (= Cinema Island), Trieste i 1000 occhi (= the thousand eyes). While Kino Otok is seemingly the only major cultural event in sleepy lovely Izola, i 1000 occhi is but one of about half a dozen film festivals which take place over the year in Trieste. Both are comparatively new adventures: i 1000 occhi was founded in 2002 by Sergio Grmek Germani and Mila Lazic, Kino Otok two years on by Vlado Skafar, who was succeeded by Koen van Daele. In their own ways, both are also very young festivals. And
rather small ones: Kino Otok takes place over the course of just five days in late May/early June, in three venues – one an improvised open-air cinema smack in the village’s centre – showing a total of something like thirty films or programmes; i 1000 occhi happens for eight days in late September, in just one venue, featuring give or take forty programmes. What’s remarkable in the case of Kino Otok is that (at least) parts of its programme are usually reprised just a day or so later in Ljubljana, the capital, which is roughly an hour by car away; keep in mind Slovenia is a tiny country with a small population and one would suspect that the screenings in Ljubljana might become a problem for the main event. But they don’t; Kino Otok is as much about the cinephile community by the beach as it is for the films that get shown.

That said, neither Kino Otok nor i 1000 occhi thinks of itself as small; they’re not Small Festivals, those passive-aggressive pests whose sense of self is defined mainly in negative terms, by not being big, not being important,
not featuring any major premieres, stars, what-have-you, by showing more or less only Small – instead of Big, Major, Important – films usually by ‘underappreciated’ or ‘over-looked’ directors, etc., and always, always with an emphasis on being for the audience, by which they mean the viewer as semi-refined consumer; festivals which define themself only in relationship to some status quo, happy in their little niche or corner, content with being an eternal, ankle-biting complementary attraction. Kino Otok and i 1000 occhi are nothing like that: each of them has a distinctive raison d’être and they’re not parasitic upon other festivals.

Both are also conscious experiments in co-dependence, Kino Otok in particular: it is part of an informal association of similarly interested and sized international festivals with which they sometimes share prints and travel expenses, occasionally develop programming ideas etc. Things here function on a solidarity basis. Programme-wise, both festivals stubbornly refuse facile pigeonholing: they reconsider and reinvent themselves edition by edition. Let’s say they’re developing festivals.

On the surface, Kino Otok looks like the more orthodox of the two: it mainly shows recent films yet unpremiered in Slovenia, with a focus on Asian, African, South-and-Central American, as well as Central-and-Eastern European cinemas – call it an adventure in de-othering; it even has a miniscule competition. Now, making the festival meant for all involved learning what kind of festival they actually wanted to make, and therewith what they wanted from cinema and therefore life. And what became ever clearer is that as far as the festival’s essence is concerned, soul has less to do with the origins of the films than with the attitude with which they’re made. Meaning Kino Otok is about that which Werner Herzog’s *The Wild Blue Yonder* (2005), Matthew Barney’s *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005), Lav Diaz’s *Heremias* (2006), Zelimir Zilnik’s *Evropa preko plota* (2005) and Wakamatsu Koji’s *17-sai no fukei – Shonen wa nani o mita no ka* (2004) have in common – that anarchistic freedom, sense of wonder, that desire to (be)come frame by frame, moment to moment, that existential need for intellectual/spiritual growth. Cinema as celebration.

Part of Kino Otok’s sense of self was always pedagogical: the event exemplifies, in as practical a manner as possible, what cinema can be. Since 2006, it even includes a (sort-of) school: a cycle of screenings and lectures
in memory of Silvan Furlan, the founder and first director of the Slovenian Cinematheque—nothing too formal, but done in such a way that people can actually learn something. The presence of older films and directors—always only a few, chosen/invited with great care and deliberation—feels therefore somewhat different here than at most other places: it's about handing on things.

The festival’s mainly for Slovenes, while foreigners are a more than welcomed part of it—they’ll find their way if they want to, and do so in ever greater numbers—the visitors as well as the crew are very young, somewhere in their late twenties. There’s a mess patio for all participants, right behind Kino Otok’s camping ground, close to Punta, a patch of meadow by the sea where the nights never grow old (just ask Lisandro Alonso). People constantly meet—Izola is tiny, all the festival spaces are close to each other—everything is relaxed, despite six screenings per day for the true cinephages.

And let’s not forget the football match, the one thing for which the hungriest movie muncher is willing to forget about films for an hour or two. Kino Otok-regulars talk about this months before the festival even begins. Legend has it that the festival was only founded for the football match (which is not true but a great story), and that sometimes the films are selected by their maker’s reputed skills with a ball (which does happen). Strange things were sighted on the pitch, like a Kazakh director storming with a water bottle in his hand. Asked long after the festival about his memories of Izola, Roger Gnoan M’Bala started to talk passionately about refereeing the first-ever Kino Otok-match. Wrists and knees got injured last time. It was worth it, certainly.

Usually the sun shines bright, and beauty rules. It’s an atmosphere where filmmakers are willing to talk for hours and people listen attentively, making Kino Otok into something like a symposium disguised as a film festival. The event is the community.

Something similar can be said about i 1000 occhi, its merry, little by little expanding band of brothers and sisters in cinema. Quite impossible to pigeonhole as it is, ‘format’-wise: it’s in no way about recent films but it doesn’t mind them, they happen and belong, although the majority of works shown are of earlier vintages; it’s not a festival of retrospectives even if they make up the major part of the programme. It’s not about looking...
back but about how one looks at them now, the instant of rememberance-recognition; and it's not about a particular genre or region or period, for everything can find its place here. Looking at i 1000 occhi’s inaugural edition, the auteurs in focus then – Jean Vigo, Jose Val del Omar, Victor Erice, Alexis Damianos and Massimo Troisi – all iconoclasts creating at their own pace – one might say that the festival is about cinema as a way of life which at times takes manifest stock in artistic deeds; some, like Jess Franco or Terence Fisher (later in the fifth edition) hemorrhage films while others just occasion them.

i 1000 occhi embodies an instantaneous way of writing film history, a process of on-going research into the nature of cinema, its development and all of its complex, perplexing vastness. The festival is guided by the spirit of neorealism as personified by Roberto Rossellini – the award the festival inaugurated three years ago honouring the life-time achievement of un cineasta del nostro tempo side-tracked by the discourses of these days – recepients in recent years include Mircea Daneliu, Werner Schroeter, Paulo Rocha – is named after the master’s last feature film, Anno uno.

Sergio Grmek Germani’s programming also shows that one doesn’t need to dig around in cinema’s stranger corners to come up with something surprising: it all depends on vision, which in Germani’s case is totally partisan – in days when the dominant discourse is that of collaborators, those who make do, and too often mere cowards and compromisers.

The history written here – better still, the presence defined – is a very personal one: it’s the cinema as seen, experienced, thought about, enjoyed, considered and reconsidered by Germani, as well as Mila Lazic. Their histories – as festival programmers and consultants, critics, students of cinema, and makers of films – are the driving force of i 1000 occhi. A good part of the festival’s programming is rooted in, and references, work already done – like the monumental retrospectives for Trieste’s Alpe Adria (Yugoslav Black Wave; a Croatian Cinema apart; a certain Romanian Cinema), or Torino (Stavros Tornes, and so forth), or Venice (for example Andrzej Munk) – also to old friendships, to visits and meetings and presents, to memories. Departed colleagues, teachers, inspirations are remembered, usually in surprising ways: when the critic Alberto Farassino, one of the kindest and most generous representatives of Italian film culture, died in 2003, i 1000 occhi
mourned this friend’s passing by showing an hour-long TV-essay in montage on Luis Buñuel – a life-long obsession of Farassino – which he assembled in 1980 together with Tatti Sanguinetti, plus Nando Cicero’s Ultimo tango a Zagarol (1973), a brusquely vulgar parody of Bertolucci’s wannabe classic of bourgeois pulp, satirising the falseness and pretentiousness in the characteristic Cicero manner. This combination perfectly encapsulated the ever-surprising inquisitive and iconoclastic spirit of Farassino, as well as the enthusiasm which made him such an indispensable component of i 1000 occhi. When Germani featured the recently deceased Paduan film collector and all-round cinephile Piero Tortolina as an artistic consultant for the sixth i 1000 occhi – mind: post mortem! – it was a beautiful and well chosen expression of gratitude, as well of how we live with the departed, their essences, lessons; and now contemplate the quiet genius of the films shown in memoriam: Giacomo Gentilomo’s Eco la radio! (1940), of which Tortolina owned the only existing print, flanked by a fuori orario-documentary about Gentilomo, arguably the most interesting filmmaker from Trieste, featuring a short appearance by Tortolina, and finally another Tortolina-rarity, a 16mm-print of the Italian dub of Jacques Becker’s Le Trou (1960) which is slightly different from the French original as well as the general Italian release version.

It’s in these cases that the particular nature of i 1000 occhi’s catalogues comes most strongly to the fore: these ever-thicker publications are no mere one-movie-one/two-page-summary+cast-&-credits+director’s filmography-affairs but highly personal collections of pictures and essays – super partisan at times – adding depth and further heart to the festival’s general experience; just take the beautiful piece on certain treasures of Italian film history in dire need of digging out (again) – quite a few with a cine/real-politically ‘complex’ history – and on the necessity of providing adequate prints to present/preserve them, a propos La città dolente (1949) by Mario Bonnard (and Enrico Morelli) presented at the fourth i 1000 occhi; or, one edition later, a few choice thoughts a propos Mikhail Romm’s Obyknoven-nyi fashism (Ordinary Fascism,1965) and the films of Sergei Gerasimov – the cinema of a country, the Soviet Union, that no longer exists and the contradictory genius of directors who were able to combine ‘orthodoxy’ and freedom – simple observations, perhaps, although reflections of this kind sometimes have quite a liberating effect.
Continuity is one of the keys to i 1000 occhi: things here are rarely done with in one edition, they gestate; more often than not, names and titles appear and re-appear, finding ever-new meanings in ever-different contexts. The fifth i 1000 occhi, for example, offered the opportunity to see a double-feature of Rossellini’s Anima nera and Dino Risi’s Il sorpasso, both from 1962: the former something of a rarity considered a failure in its days, the latter an era-defining masterpiece; the films opened one right after the other in some cinemas. Anima nera went and Il sorpasso came; seen like this together (Il sorpasso’s melancholia, Anima nera’s sardonic grating) the two become a dyptich about the discontent and pain at the heart of the Italy of the economic miracle. Or take the third i 1000 occhi: alongside the mind-boggling double-bill of Saw Teong Hin’s Puteri gunung Ledang (2004) and Rossellini’s Un pilota
ritorna (1942) – programme title: da Rossellini a Rossellini – it takes some serious grace to think that one up. The festival, upping the ante some more, also presented Larisa Shepitko’s Kryl’ja (1966), as a teaser for the Shepitko retrospective, which was finally presented two years later: three films about the dream of flying; three distinct yet different relationships to time and history, between legend and propaganda and reality, nations and their (un) making; three essays on a possible essence of cinema.

Probably the drollest i 1000 occhi regular is Nando Cicero, the Straub of erotic comedies: he pops up every other year, in 2007 like a Jack-in-the-box on closing night when his debut Le scippo (1966) was shown as a farewell surprise film; what a marvelous obsession.

It takes guts to start a film festival that isn’t hellbent on being some mega-event or a new player on the market, a festival that doesn’t see itself as but another link in the exploitation chain, i 1000 occhi could have just as well been gone after its first year – the 2003 event was called Edizione di Emergenza – in Italian, as in English, the last word’s related to emergence – something which the festival’s masters and commanders were able to prevent through careful manoeuvring – while getting ever more radical in their programming.

Recently, because of the ever greater chaos in Slovene film culture after the last election, in which the right wing ascended to power, the very existence of Kino Otok became imperiled. The festival found itself under fire because of an increasingly absurd series of events. The National Film Board sent a letter to the festival with the grandiose statement that Kino Otok was an extremely important cultural event and therefore worthy of maximum subsidy – and then offered half the amount usually given to the festival. When Kino Otok pointed this out to the people in power, they duly received another letter which stated that, on second glance, the festival is actually irrelevant and won’t receive any grant money at all. The festival didn’t take place in 2008. Plans for 2009 – when this pernicious government will be, with any luck, finally ousted – have been made.

Presences like Kino Otok or i 1000 occhi, which insist on the importance of art for our development and growth as human beings, are beginning to seem increasingly unreal. Both exist in the constant shadow of extinction: they are infinitely expendable since the wealth they create is primarily cultural.