

Memories of a Retired Film Programmer

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ABSTRACT

Based on his experience as artistic director of the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Film (BAFICI) from 2001 until 2004, Quintín reflects on the editorial criteria and programming politics of the festival during this period. These aimed at creating a series of complementary sections, that would potentiate each other and avoid unbalanced hierarchies, so that the festival didn't turn around an expected centre and an ignored periphery, but was rather organised as a diversity as compact as possible. The core idea of the festival was to showcase 'genre and avant-garde' film, as a way to exclude what was most common in this context: the films produced for the festivals. Furthermore the essay also elaborates on the changes produced by digital access to films over that period, and the ensuing transformations in international festivals and film criticism. Finally, the article focuses on Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998), as a perfect example of comparative cinema, and of a philosophy or thought on the relationship between cinema and the world.

KEYWORDS

Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Film (BAFICI), film festivals, programming criteria, spectator, comparative cinema, new Argentinian cinema, digital technology, Júlio Bressane, Jonas Mekas, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

From 2001 to 2004 I was the director of the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema (Bafici). It wasn't a difficult task. Our main problem since 2002 was one of funding, since Argentina was facing an extremely difficult financial situation. What was most complicated was to get international agents to grant us rights to screen their films for just a few dollars. Thankfully, however, from 1999 – when the festival was founded – until 2001 the voice was spread that it was an interesting venue and the covetous international agents looked at us sympathetically. So it was only a question of selecting the films and screening them there. We had a great advantage: there were a lot of film-makers whose work had never before been screened in Argentina. For instance, only one film by the Straub had been screened before that, which says it all. But the public was also eager, a bit tired of commercial premieres and nostalgic of original and more varied menus, as the ones that were common a few years back in Buenos Aires. To give an example: prior to my first edition as director of the festival, I had seen at the 'Quinzaine des Réalisateurs' in Cannes the *Werckmeister Harmonies* (*Werckmeister harmóniák*, Béla Tarr, 2000), which had interested me a great deal. A Dutch friend, critic Peter Van Bueren, had always told me about Tarr and I was very curious to see a film by him. Later on I discovered that Tarr had made a 7-hour film titled *Sátántangó* (Béla Tarr, 1994). I immediately realised that a film with such title, in black and white and with unending sequence-shots could not fail in a city like Buenos Aires. We programmed both the *Werckmeister Harmonies* and *Sátántangó* and they were a great success. *Sátántangó* was screened in a full house twice, spectators fought to get tickets and everyone left the screening completely mesmerised. Except for my mother, who was mysterious mistrust of hungarians. Until the day of her death, she reproached me for having shown that film. I can't refute it because I never saw *Sátántangó*, but I thought Béla was a charming chap.

As I say, that was very easy. It sufficed with a little intuition, being ready to run risks (which weren't too great) and use snobbery (without

which cultural endeavours are impossible) in our favour. What we had to offer was new, fresh, exotic. And was renewed every year. We had good international advisors, such as Mark Peranson, who is now the Programming Director at Locarno, or Olaf Möller, who always knew a lot of rare Filipino film-makers. It all went so well, that the local press asked us what was the next unknown genius we would introduce, rather than asking to bring certain celebrity film-makers. At that time, there weren't any internet downloads yet, nor classic and rare DVD editions, and to know the novelties one had to travel or wait until the next Bafici.

It is true that glamour always helps: in 2001 Jim Jarmusch came, which almost as having Mick Jagger. And Oliver Assayas came together with Maggie Cheung, his wife at the time. I remember all the staff, starting by the director, queuing to get their photo taken with Maggie. But we also had a Korean film showcase, just at the time when Korean film was coming back at its best. Lee Chan-dong was a member of the jury and we showed his films alongside those by Hong Sang-soo, Bong Jung-ho or Jang Sun-woo, which together with some of their films shown in previous occasions produced a few lovers of Korean cinema in Buenos Aires. Let me say that the winner of that year was Jia Zhangke with *Platform* (2001). Jia had already come to Buenos Aires in 1999 with *Xiao Wu* (1998), a film that dazzled me but wasn't awarded any prizes that year (it was shown in 16mm!); I was determined to repair that mistake and achieved to do so. We invited Jonathan Rosenbaum to be part of the jury, and thus do the job. The other members of the jury were Beatriz Sarlo, a prestigious Argentinian intellectual, Simon Field, director of the Rotterdam Film Festival and, although he cancelled his trip at the last minute, Roberto Bolaño also figures in the catalogue. Glamour, but glamour for connoisseurs.

And in case this wasn't enough, there was the 'nuevo cine', or Argentinian independent cinema, which was very trendy at the time. In

1999 Pablo Trapero had presented *Mundo grúa* (1999) at the Bafici, and went on to have great international exposure. From then onwards many programmers from international film festivals decided to come to Buenos Aires to try to catch something. This placed us in a complicated position, and the production that year wasn't particularly interesting, although it included *Sábado* (Juan Villegas, 2001) and *Balnearios* (Mariano Llinás, 2001). Until one day appeared a shy young man with long hair and a VCR. It was Lisandro Alonso, who came to ask if we might be interested in *La libertad* (*Freedom*, 2001). We were mesmerised and hugged each other as if we had signed Messi for the local football team, but in a few days he had been invited to Cannes. In the end, Thierry Frémaux allowed us to screen the film outside the competitive section. We got a draw of sorts. It was very difficult at the time to discover anything from Buenos Aires. Not even Lisandro Alonso. In the coming years, the colonialism of the festivals would become even more exacerbated thanks to the laboratories and grants to develop projects, the workshops at Sundance, the residency at Cannes: the film-makers of the future had their training centres in the *Masías* of the First World.¹

However programming is more than achieving worldwide premieres – a game played by all the major festivals but for peripheral venues such as the Bafici is completely absurd and also leads to lower the quality of the selection. If an Argentinian film-maker achieves to get some interest from Berlin or Locarno, let alone Cannes, he or she will very rarely present it at Buenos Aires. To get it right with a new discovery is a question of luck. And to seduce the audience is mostly to do with being astute. But even so there is a margin for inspiration and trade, and that margin is expanded when one understands that putting together a catalogue is not only about selecting a series of films based upon the personal taste of

the organisers. Anyone with a minimum degree of taste and experience as spectator can say yes or no with certain efficiency. I have some relatives who enjoy going to the cinema regularly and who wouldn't do a worst job than some of the film programmers I have known over the years, even if they are certain to have an exquisite taste and that they have to show it with each election.

Over recent years, even if the Bafici has remained a more than respectable festival, programmers' votations became the norm to decide on the selection of films. What a nonsense. This is not an activity that can benefit in any way from such democratic attitudes. I believe that this method was derogated only this years, under the directorship of Marcelo Panozzo – who was a programmer during my tenure. What did we do at the time then, since it is impossible for a team of four, as we were at the time, to agree in every decision? In the first instance, it is important to build an architecture, a series of sections that complement and strengthen each other, and that avoid creating unequal hierarchies so that the festival doesn't have an expected centre and an ignored periphery but rather a diversity which is as compact as possible (amongst the festivals that I have visited, only the one in Marseille came anywhere close to such compactness and coherence, even if not all the titles were worthwhile; but the programme is much smaller than the one at Bafici; Locarno, under Olivier Père also had something of that). The unknown film-makers and odd sections need to be sold more than anyone anything else, so that they become at least as attractive to the spectators as the competitive section, if not more – which should in any case be eliminated altogether, as the Viennale has managed to do. (Another merit of the Viennale is that it avoids being invaded by producers and film-makers looking for money in the work in progress sessions and other young talents competitions that I contributed to implement, alas, in Buenos Aires.)

1. Translator's note: The author establishes a comparison here with the training centre of the Football Club Barcelona, where Messi amongst other players was trained

since a young age and which is popularly known as 'la Masía' because its headquarters are in a traditional Catalan farmhouse.

Then there is the important problem of the editorial line. There must be one, even if provisional, because the ones looking for films must have a fixed direction and not wander around festivals going to any screening room, when we now know that the probability that a film picked up randomly in Toronto, Rotterdam or San Sebastián is any good is extremely low. One knows that the programming criteria of most festivals are so aberrant that one can only trust the selection in an inverted mode (if they included that film, it means that something must be wrong with it). If there is anything I feel proud of from my tenure at Bafici is that from the second year the team of programmers (my companion, Flavia de la Fuente, Panozzo and Luciano Monteagudo) knew what we were looking for. And what were we looking for? Films that were alive and that were as removed as possible from the festival *mainstream*, characterised by academicism, youthfulness, gruesomeness and exoticism. We even had certain secret rules, such as not showing films about terminal illness, or too much scriptwriting, or too much production. We preferred genre films or sloppy attempts and we even realised that we had to flee from the ‘creative documentaries’, those monstrosities created for European television, and that it was much more worthwhile to show films than to inform about something. What we chose might have been difficult or demanding, but not in a predictable manner. Our aim was that nothing shown tasted like old, mellow wine. If spectators enjoyed those years of the Bafici is because they entered in the spiderweb that we weaved for them without even realising it. Once we showed a film titled *Chicken Rice War* (Chee Kong Cheah, 2000), a Romeo and Juliette of sorts set in Singapur. A charming jerk, just like the one about a gay Thai volley team, whose title I have forgotten. Such films were considered unworthy of the most prestigious festivals, and that made them the more interesting. It was a great pleasure to combine a retrospective of Hou Hsiao-Hsien with a melodrama set amongst clandestine racing car drivers in Rome, of which a high-brow jury even asked if we were forced to show it because of a commercial commitment. I still laugh today.

Panozzo seems to remember that the motto we used at the time as ‘genre and avant-garde’, as a way of excluding what was in the middle: those films made to wander from one festival to the next. We didn’t always get it right, we didn’t always have the courage to reject questionable or dishonest films. And we were (naturally) concessive with Argentinian films. But in some way we managed to make films dialogue with each other, and we managed to make a festival that was interesting because of the selection of films and their relationship with each other. Or, at least, I would like to think so. If something characterises programming for festivals is that they don’t leave tangible traces. It is all gone once produced and it one doesn’t get much out of conducting an autopsy to the catalogue: as years go by, many films become unknown and is not possible either to detect the omissions of the programmers or the reasons of certain presences and absences.

But it all changed a lot from 2004 until the present time. Over these years digital technology has made possible another way of circulating films. To the internet downloads – legal and illegal – one must add DVD launches that allow the work of more or less hidden film-makers to be recuperated. Festivals have lost their charisma because they are no longer the exclusive heart of cinephilia. I have just read a tweet which reads: ‘Yûzô Kawashima’s *Bakumatsu taiyôden* (1957) will be soon released in Blu-ray! One of Japanese cinema’s hidden gems!’ I am not sure what this man is talking about, but in 2001 Twitter didn’t exist, nor did Blu-ray, and there weren’t as many films available in circulation so that this man could say something like this. These changes have brought about an increasing number of film experts across the world, and the festivals lose symbolic power and charisma. To be deeply surprised is less usual nowadays – and surprises seem to be increasingly isolated. Let me give some examples. I remember seeing a retrospective of Pere Portabella at a recent Bafici (after my tenure), a film-maker relatively unknown, even in Spain. Almost by chance, a few of us were dazzled by the first film screened, and we ended up carrying

more and more spectators to the next ones. But I am not sure with which contemporary cinema do Portabella's films dialogue, even if they are themselves very current. Another instance was the exceptional film *Mafrouza* (Emmanuelle Demoris, 2007), which I had the chance to award as a member of the jury of Locarno in 2010. That film anticipated in some way the Egyptian revolution, or rather visualised its breeding ground. No one thought about that film in historical terms, the importance and depth of its perspective weren't evident either. *Mafrouza* doesn't dialogue with the 'political cinema' made today, so full of certainty and evidence as it was fifty years back. It is another isolated film, which had a lot of trouble to circulate in festivals and didn't find there a great audience either. A third example is that of Júlio Bressane, one of the most atypical film-makers, whose aesthetic project seems to go against the grain of anything else being made today. I saw the first film by Bressane in Turin (*Days of Nietzsche in Turin* [Júlio Bressane, 2001], precisely). I didn't understand it. Years later, in 2010, I bumped into Bressane and some of his films in Valdivia. Only there did I begin to understand that I was in front of a film-maker who was not only very valuable but also unique. This year the Bafici has announced a Bressane retrospective. Perhaps he will manage to dazzle a few spectators, and this would be enough of a reward for the festival. But I don't think that Bressane's cinema resonates with the films shown at the festivals nowadays, nor that there are many critics interested in giving him the attention he deserves. Although there is always a PhD student looking for an understudied topic.

The main reason of the isolation I perceive in these examples is that, in my opinion, a paradigm of cinema for festivals has been established, a paradigm that unifies at the same time that excludes, and that brings together a couple of recent trends in contemporary cinema: on the one hand, there is an increasing search for young talent, whose films are overseen by the funders that co-produce them. These films are mostly based on the script, and are very premeditated in their length, effects

and folkloric colour. On the other hand, there are the new masters, those belonging to the generation that has emerged over recent years, increasingly veering towards fine art formats and undertaking installations and curated projects for museums. Add to this the films made with the big awards in mind. Cannes can award an academic and wighty film-maker such as Haneke, as much as a light and inspired one such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, but in the end there is not much difference between one and the other, because they are both part of the establishment, of the glamour. Eventhough there are more and more films being made, the invisibility of the great majority is incerasingly exacerbated. The festivals and their relatives, the cinémathèques, are more and more professionalised, critics are more savvy, but this only reverberates in a small minority of initiated, those who are able to manage large volumes of information.

I will end by discussing Godard and Jonas Mekas. Whom can one otherwise mention in relation to these subjects? Mekas always defended the small forms in cinema, the films made for one's friends, and outside the history of art. Those films are decidedly not in the festivals, and until they are not there, cinema will get lost in the frivolity of its huge apparatus, an apparatus that is not only industrial but also mediatic and academic, and which only professionals can decodify and use. The films made by the people for which Mekas sings require an audience made of people and not experts. Godard speaks instead of the dialogue between films, of criticising a film with another one, of the possibility of comparing shots, photograms and structures, something that the digital era has made accessible to everyone. At the times of Henri Langlois, this was only made possible by spending one's days at the Cinémathèque and even so, one ran the risk of producing accurate impressions. Godard spoke of comparing films many years back and gave us the *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1988–98), the greatest lecture of comparative cinema ever. But even if Godard might have founded an academic discipline, his aim was never to ask

questions that could be answered by the students in an exam, such as: How many shots does Fritz Land use in comparison to Murnau? What does Godard compare then? Let me please make a last detour.

A few years back, and shortly before his death, I met critic and film-maker Jean-André Fieschi in Viena and asked him about his years at *Cahiers du cinéma*, in the early 60s. We commented upon passing a film about the *Cahiers* made by Edgardo Cozarinsky and which has the particularity of having irritated both the *cahierists* and their enemies (Fieschi didn't like it either). Frédéric Bonnaud appears at some point in the film and pronounces a simple but conclusive sentence: 'The *Cahiers* won'. I reminded this to Fieschi and he answered: 'If the *Cahiers* had won, we wouldn't be as we are.' Fieschi didn't refer to the journal here, or to film criticism, but to the state of the world in general. Now I go back to Godard. There is a moment in the *Histoire(s) du cinéma* that

I deem extremely important. It is when Jean-Paul Sartre appears speaking of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and we hear him saying: 'This is not our path.' *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is, amongst many other things, a refutation of that sentence. Or, in other words, a way of saying that during a certain period of time, a group of young critics, later film-makers – drawing on the work of a crazy film programmer (Langlois), a catholic intellectual (Bazin) and the work of a handful of European and American film-makers – understood that the *philosophie indépassable de notre temps* was not marxism, but cinema. *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is, in my opinion, the history of that moment, the only one when cinema truly worked as a medium through which to look beyond cinema in a convincing and revolutionary way. Thus the comparison that comparative cinema was able to make then – and that Godard has been making all along – was not amongst films, but between the cinema and the world. This is also missing nowadays. ●

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