

Asian Film Festivals, Translation and the International Film Festival Short Circuit

Abé Mark Nornes

Which film festivals matter? What constitutes an A-list festival? There is something commonsensical about it all. Naturally, sites like Sundance, Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Toronto are the most important venues.¹ And if one is interested in documentary, there's Amsterdam, Margaret Mead, Nyon and the venerable Flaherty.² These are the toughest festivals to enter. They produce the most valuable press and some of them are even graced by star actors or directors. The geography of that list above is as obvious as the list itself. Does this mean that festivals in other parts of the world don't matter as much, or in the same way?

As someone who frequents Asian festivals, and has even worked on one called Yamagata (www.yidff.jp), I have always been struck by the indifference to (or ignorance of) Asian venues among European and North American filmmakers and critics. This should hardly be surprising, since the international film festival world is embedded in geopolitical structures and epistemologies that grant Europe the status of subject. It's the 'first Europe, then elsewhere' structuring that discounts the importance of non-Western film cultures. We could call it the 'international film festival short circuit'.

This plays out in different ways. One sees it in the heart of Europe at the festival parties, where Asian festival visitors typically form isolated groups rather than mix with their local colleagues. At the A-list end of the spectrum, there is the somewhat embarrassing spectacle of the Tokyo International Film Festival (www.tiff-jp.net) desperately seeking recognition from Hollywood and Europe;

despite the kind of deep pockets that come with major governmental and industrial backing, that recognition was never forthcoming. Even the patently successful festival in Busan (www.piff.org) feels regional in the face of Berlin's global prestige, as if 'A' means something different in countries that don't use roman letters.

This is an old and enduring dynamic. It seems clear that the very first international festival in Asia was an attempt to create regional synergies and distribution networks in the face of European indifference to Asian film. This was the Southeast Asian Film Festival, which started in 1954. It continues today as the Asia-Pacific Film Festival, making it one of the oldest festivals in the world; it is certainly the oldest festival that no one has heard of. The Asia-Pacific Film Festival was something of a failure, if judged by its lofty goals. It was probably hobbled because it was the pet project of too few people. Still, its very existence evidences the European film festival short circuit.

The importance of various Asian film festivals has typically been judged by a utilitarian measure: a festival matters to the degree that it serves the programmers of Europe (construed here and below in the broader and more profound sense, following Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) suggestion to fold North America into the term). In the 1980s, the Hawaii International Film Festival (www.hiff.org) was the conduit for most information about Asian film. It was run out of the East-West Centre, had scholars working as programmers, and published thick, informative catalogues. The most important critics and programmers involved in selecting the latest crop of Asian films all went to Hawaii. However, 'waxing and waning' is another structure of the international film festival circuit, and it was not long before all those programmers left Hawaii for Hong Kong, and then for Pusan.

The situation today is far more complex. In retrospect, the importance of these festivals was deeply connected to issues of

translation. They served as 'conduits' because only a handful of European or American programmers could speak Asian languages; they were the people advising or visiting the festivals above. With the internet and the appearance of many programmers with Asian language expertise, festivals like Hawaii, Hong Kong and Pusan appear more like regional or even local affairs.

And this is precisely why they matter. Consider the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. Despite offering the largest cash prizes for documentaries, it is largely unknown among Euro-American filmmakers. However, Yamagata demonstrates the most hopeful aspects of film festival culture. It came out of nowhere in 1989, and was held in what would generally be considered the middle of nowhere, in the shadow of a volcano in the northern mountains of Japan. However, this was an interesting moment in Asia. Countries all over the region were coming out from under dictatorships, martial law and conflicts of various sizes. A rising middle class could afford increasingly cheap filmmaking equipment. Critics, filmmakers and scholars from across Asia came to Yamagata, where they shared information and films. At retrospectives they saw the canonical films they were reading about (this was pre-video distribution, let alone BitTorrent). They left all charged up, inspired, and returned to their respective countries to establish documentary film scenes. At the first festival in 1989, there were no films in the competition. This swiftly changed, and with every edition the Asian Programme became larger and more interesting. At the same time that programmers from Nyon and Amsterdam visited Yamagata to find the latest Asian offerings, programmers from places like Taiwan, Korea and India attended to learn lessons — and then return to establish documentary festivals in their own countries.

One could look to Hong Kong and Pusan and discover a similar energising dynamic. They may never sit comfortably on that 'A-List' of festivals, but they have helped transform the film cultures

both locally and regionally. The filmmakers smart enough to enter these festivals, and lucky enough to attend them, participate in these transformations whether they realise it or not.

Work Cited

Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000) *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Notes

- ¹ Official websites of these film festivals are as follows: Sundance (www.sundance.org/festival), Cannes (www.festival-cannes.com), Venice (www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/festival), Berlin (www.berlinale.de) and Toronto (www.tiff.net).
- ² Official websites of these film festivals are as follows: The International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (www.idfa.nl), Margaret Mead at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (www.amnh.org/programs/mead), Nyon (www.visionsdureel.ch), and the Flaherty (www.flahertyseminar.org).