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Searching for a Feminist Voice: Negotiating the tension between expectation and intent

International Film Festivals play a vital role in shaping the careers of emerging filmmakers. This paper presents some initial findings from a Doctoral thesis in progress, researching the role played by international film festivals on emerging female directors from developing nations. The research investigates the arena of contemporary women's cinema at its intersection with the international film festival industry. Employing a feminist film theory lens the research draws on three interconnected elements: transnational film theory; film festival research; and emerging female filmmakers from developing nations.

The focus of the case studies is the Brisbane International Film Festival (2009, 2010) and the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2010, 2011). The Toronto International Film Festival (2010) will also be examined in the course of further research. It is anticipated that each of the case study festivals will provide different opportunities and levels of exposure for attending women filmmakers. Toronto and Rotterdam have prestigious reputations on the festival circuit, providing international recognition for films through festival competition and world premieres. Although less prestigious, Brisbane provides more intimate opportunities for filmmakers to interact with audiences and other invited festival guests. Participation in a smaller festival such as BIFF may also allow emerging filmmakers to be more visible in the programme through seminars, Q&A's and press opportunities.

The core method for the research is the close textual analysis of the particular emerging women filmmakers' films which are screened at the respective festivals. The research also utilises the qualitative research strategies of the case study and

the interview to “seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally” (Creswell, 2003, p9). The interviews and the participant observational data gathering provide a related context for understanding these films and their cultural meanings both personally for the filmmaker and transnationally across the festival circuit.

This paper will focus on interviews and observations conducted in the early stages of the research. I attended the Brisbane International Film Festival in 2009 and interviewed Hong Kong filmmaker Emily Tang (*Perfect Life*, 2008), and the festival’s Executive Director, Anne Demy-Geroe. In 2010, I attended the International Film Festival Rotterdam and interviewed five women filmmakers; Dima El-Horr (*Every Day is a Holiday*, 2009), Sophie Deraspe (*Vital Signs*, 2009), Brigitte Uttar Kornetzky (*God No Say So*, 2010), Mieke Bal (*Separations*, 2010) and Joanna Vasquez (*Sunday School*, 2010). During my observations at both festivals I attended films and question and answer sessions by women filmmakers, kept a festival journal of my observations and collected any press or media information about the filmmakers and their films. Further analysis of each festival to be completed as the project progresses will also include an examination of the placement of women’s films within each festival’s programme, further interviews with festival programmers/directors and observations of the film/filmmakers success after the festival.

International film festivals provide audiences, filmmakers and film critics worldwide with the opportunity to engage with what may be considered the most significant, cutting-edge films of the time, films that may not otherwise find mainstream exhibition. For any filmmaker, an invitation to a high profile film festival can dramatically increase the chances for a film’s box office success and critical recognition for the filmmaker. For audiences, film festivals present the opportunity to

see films from unfamiliar places, to engage in what Koven describes as an 'authentic cultural experience', all without leaving one's own city (2008, p3). The function of the film festival as an avenue of exhibition is widely acknowledged as being an integral part of the global film industry. However, little appears to be understood about how these festivals actually contribute to global film culture as a whole, and more specifically, to the careers of the filmmakers who participate. Although there has been a global proliferation of film festivals in particular in the last ten years, the field of film festivals is significantly under-researched. Research into the film festival phenomenon has only recently been addressed (Elsaesser, 2005; Stringer, 2001; Harbord, 2002; de Valck, 2007) through avenues like the Film Festival Research Network and publications such as the *Film Festival Yearbook* series (Iordanova and Rhyne, 2009; Iordanova and Cheung, 2010).

In an increasingly globalised film and media culture, attempts to situate an international filmmaker within the realms of a national cinema or cinemas can be problematic. Film festivals provide exposure for emerging cinemas and directors, as well as opportunities for networking and sourcing future funding. A key question for the research is to what extent do film festivals play a role in supporting emerging cinemas, particularly from developing nations within Africa, Asia, South America and the Middle East. Specifically, I am investigating how the film festivals, Brisbane International Film Festival (2009) and the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2010) can function as crucially significant platforms for the advancement of the careers of female directors and emerging women's cinema from developing nations.

What has emerged as most interesting in the initial stages of research are the filmmakers' responses to the label of 'woman filmmaker'. Some filmmakers showcased at festivals actively privilege the voices of women in their films as a

means of commenting on pressing cultural and political issues. Ironically, other filmmakers do not subscribe to the label of 'feminist' or 'woman filmmaker', even if their respective films represent a strongly coded woman's point of view. Tensions also inevitably arise when scrutinising women filmmakers from developing nations within a first world film festival context. The expectations of the researcher, the festival, film critics and audiences inevitably must negotiate with the original intentions of the filmmaker. Although a film may foreground the stories or position of women, the intentions of the filmmaker may not necessarily have been to create a 'women's film'.

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of searching for a female voice in women's films lies in demonstrating whether there is in fact still a need to do so. It can be challenging to justify the need for a feminist approach to analysing women's films when on a superficial level, it can appear as though we have moved far beyond formative feminist issues like the need to create positive images of women on screen. Kaplan takes up this challenge, arguing that:

Although now, as a result of generations of feminist theorising and practices, women have so many new positions to occupy, some kind of "feminist" stance – however hard to define, is still essential... different generations of women may understand "feminism" differently, both because the constraints women endure are different and because prior generations of feminists provided new perspectives that enabled women to see differently. We need to better understand each other's positions, while agreeing that there is still much to achieve in terms of gender and racial parity.

(Kaplan, 2003, pp25-26)

Indeed, Kaplan's assertion that feminism is understood differently by women of all generations, cultures and ethnicities have been affirmed in the interviews to date. As emerging filmmakers, several of the women interviewed explained that they did not set out to create a film with a political agenda or to tell a story explicitly about women. Rather, it was important to focus on a story or character that had personal resonance with their own experiences as a woman. Angela Martin suggests that instead of talking about women's films as having a feminist aesthetic or a woman's voice that it can be more productive to look instead at films in terms of a female or feminist authorship. Martin explains that "...female or feminist authorship tends to be sought in what can be identifiably linked to the filmmaker (as woman)" (Martin in Raoul, V., Plessis, J., and Levitin, J. 2003, p34). According to Martin, feminist authorship can be found in a film's autobiographical reference, a filmmaker's actual presence in the film and in evidence of a female voice within the narrative (2003, p34).

Certainly, examining and understanding the autobiographical voices of the women filmmakers present at Brisbane and Rotterdam will form part of the following discussion. The comments and opinions of the filmmakers, as expressed in the interviews, will be used in order to discuss evidence of a female voice within their film and to examine any tensions between the intent of the filmmakers and the purpose of the festival as well as what contributes to why a particular woman's film is chosen by the organisers of a particular festival, and how it is packaged, marketed and displayed within the festival, and the impacts this has on the filmmaker herself.

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Brisbane International Film Festival

The international film festival circuit can be considered as a distinctive cultural arena that facilitates the interweaving of film cultures, filmmakers, critics and audiences from all over the world. As festivals continue to strive to be prestigious global events, it is the local and the specific that become important in distinguishing between them. Film festivals such as those in Rotterdam, Toronto and Brisbane place importance on creating a particular 'festival image' for which they are known. Julian Stringer states that the "little festivals handle specialized audiences and create new opportunities, while big festivals... attract tried and tested talent and appeal to a much wider market" (2001, p141). The Brisbane International Film Festival is held annually in Queensland and although it is not a unique festival within the context of film festivals across Australia, it serves a very specific function within Brisbane's film community and culture. Each year the festival features a specific theme and focus, but the basic structure of BIFF remains the same. Each festival is headlined by successful feature films on opening and closing nights, as well as two or three showcases. The programme also includes significant sections showcasing current trends in World Cinema, Asia Pacific Cinema, Australian Cinema and Indigenous Cinema.

For young and emerging filmmakers, involvement in the festival is paramount; not only for the networking opportunities but also for the opportunity to be exposed to the sorts of films other emerging filmmakers are producing. As the festival is often the only exhibition opportunity for many filmmakers, it can become a crucial testing ground for the appeal of a film. BIFF's former Executive Director of eighteen years, Anne Demy-Geroe, discussed the benefits of festival exposure in a recent interview. She explained that often Distributors would contact the festival after a screening to

enquire about the audiences' reception of a particular film. BIFF's three Jury awards, Fipresci, Netpac and Interfaith, also afford nominated films extra prestige, publicity and credibility on the film festival circuit:

Filmmakers often talk about the fact that it's really important for them because once a film is screened at certain festivals then people tend to buy it... it's a very important role for festivals to bring together filmmakers from different places.

(Personal Interview, 2009)

Importantly, the film festival circuit functions to showcase and garner attention for films from audiences, critics and film scholars. The term 'critical capital' as applied to festival films by Liz Czach (2004, p82) refers to the "value that a film accrues through its success in the festival circuit. Through approval of the tastemakers – festival programmers and critics – the film attains a level of distinction above its unselected peers". It is this propensity to gain critical capital on the festival circuit that makes festival participation so crucial to the success of young and emerging filmmakers.

The decision of where to place a film within the programme and how it will be packaged is often a decision that occurs organically, according to Demy-Geroe. Films may be selected to fill a certain place in the programme for a range of reasons, including common themes, country of origin, aesthetic qualities or social political content. Many of the films included in the programme will also only be accessible to the public through the festival setting. The limited cinema release strategy in Australia means that film festivals often provide the only opportunities to see a diverse range of contemporary cinema.

Demy-Geroe asserts that the festival acts ostensibly as a kind of neutral environment in which films espousing all of kinds of social, political and cultural views can be expressed and discussed. Certainly, each year the programme delves into exploring new arenas of cinema that can be confronting to Western audiences. Demy-Geroe expressed that:

...I think the programme's quite political and I have very definite thoughts in mind, and so do most of the other people when we screen films, but I think it's very important that you remain very neutral about that so that people feel they can come... and see it there and not feel that they're going to be pigeon holed into a position.

(Personal Interview, 2009)

Regardless of the audiences' perspective on the so-called neutrality of the programming, it is undeniable that film festivals, including BIFF, are most certainly subject to broader programming politics. In the recent publication, *Film Festival Yearbook 2*, editors Iordanova and Cheung (2010) note that many of the Yearbook's contributors highlight the "impact that the programmer's personal preferences, political stance and priorities have on the shape and success of the festivals". Many other factors including relationships with distributors, other festivals, press coverage of contentious films and the status of a festival within the broader festival network influence the quality and range of films that end up in a festival programme.

Emily Tang, one of China's foremost contemporary filmmakers, attended BIFF as a guest this year for the screening of her second feature film, *Perfect Life* (2008).

Tang's first feature film, *Conjugation* (2001) was the first Chinese film to openly address the Tiananmen Square democracy movement and was a prize winner at the

2001 Locarno International Film Festival. I conducted a short interview with Emily Tang at BIFF in 2009 and she commented on the continuing success of *Conjugation*, stating that each year she still receives several invitations from festivals worldwide, requesting to permission to screen the film. *Perfect Life* debuted as an official selection in August 2008 at the Venice International Film festival and went on to win the Dragons and Tigers Award at the September 2008 Vancouver International Film Festival. *Perfect Life* also received post-production funding from the Hubert Baals Fund, an integral part of the International Film Festival Rotterdam. The film observes the parallel stories of two women in a style that is part fictional and part documentary. Li Yueying is a young woman struggling to cope through a bitter winter in Shenyang. Li is seemingly responsible for her younger brother with whom she lives, though she seems confused about the rest of her family. Li's delusions and capacity for self-invention become clearer to the audience as the first narrative thread progresses.

The second, documentary thread of the film is introduced in alternating segments. Jenny, a real woman living in Hong Kong with her two young daughters, is struggling through a messy divorce. Tang introduces Jenny's story in short segments at first, documenting various aspects of her life, including her job as a dancer for hire in a tacky Hong Kong dance club. At first Li's story is the most prominent but later Jenny's story dominates the narrative. Tang differentiates between the two stories through her distinct cinematographic choices. The decision to interweave the two stories proves quite effective, with the audience coming to imagine the two women's lives as existing within one common 'story space'. The audience is left to ponder the relation between the two women, whose paths cross fleetingly on a street corner once toward the end of the film.

As an emerging, independent filmmaker, Tang acknowledges the important role that film festivals have played in her career so far, particularly with regard to screening her films to a wide audience. She explained that one of her favourite aspects of screening her films at a film festival was the opportunity to interact with her audience in the form of a question and answer session (Q&A). She stated that “There is no Q&A in the commercial, theatrical theatres, but in the film festival... you can share the opinion for the film and for the life with different audiences from all over the world. That is very important for me” (Personal Interview, 2009). Certainly, the advantages of the Q&A are much greater than simply just giving the audience an opportunity to ask the filmmaker questions. These sessions also provide the filmmaker with a chance to explain her personal motivations behind making the film and to observe the impact her film has had on the audience.

It became apparent during the interview that Tang’s participation in film festivals all over the world gave her the special opportunity to observe how International audiences were able to relate to her film’s story, which was distinctively Chinese. She explained that;

...I think can understand more about different countries from different film festivals. The different countries film festivals have different characteristics for me because you can feel the city’s taste, the audience’s tastes, because of the culture of the city or that country. So you can understand more from a film out of a film festival. Which for me is amazing.

(Personal Interview, 2009)

The importance of the film festival then for Tang, therefore, lay in its ability to act as a platform that facilitated the cross cultural discussion of stories, knowledge and understanding.

What was particularly revealing in interviewing Emily Tang was her reaction to being questioned about being a woman filmmaker. Despite *Perfect Life's* central focus on the stories of lower class Chinese/Hong Kong women, Tang flatly rejected the notion of her being a 'women's filmmaker'. To clarify, she did not see herself as a 'feminist' filmmaker, in that, in her view, she did not deliberately make films that fore-grounded gender politics or focused specifically on social and cultural issues pertaining to women. She explained that;

I don't think the film will have some difference if it is made by a woman director...for me I never think I love this story because I am a woman. I just think, oh, this is a story I like because it shows social problems or something like this that I like and I want to talk about. So I don't think I have some special story because I am a woman.

(Personal Interview, 2009)

Although Tang seemed ambivalent about the importance of privileging women's stories on screen, she did concede that the personal experiences of a woman came into play when pursuing a career as a filmmaker;

I think that I take for granted that there is some difference for women directors, because the woman has to be a mother sometimes... after *Conjugation* (2001) when I was thirty, I have to give birth to my son... and it took me five years to care for him. That is to say during those five years, I

haven't worked. So I think this is one of difficulties of the woman director, that you have to spend some time for your personal things...

(Personal Interview, 2009)

It is therefore important to acknowledge that notions of 'feminism' and 'feminist' approaches to filmmaking can have very different meanings for different women. Emily Tang's *Perfect Life* centres on the lives of two lower-class women in China and Hong Kong, yet ironically she firmly rejects the notion of being seen or labelled as a 'women's filmmaker' and was quite ambivalent about whether there was even a need to be talking about women filmmakers as a special category in isolation from men.

The International Film Festival Rotterdam

The International Film Festival Rotterdam, held annually in late January, attracts one of the largest audiences of any film festival worldwide. IFFR showcases promising new talent in its *Bright Futures* programme, the films of acclaimed auteurs in *Spectrum* and explores new directions in cinema in *Signals*. The festival actively supports the realization of auteur cinema and the expertise of independent filmmakers, producers and film criticism through its co-production outfit CineMart and through the financial support of the Hubert Baals Fund (IFFR Website, 2010). I attended the festival from the 27 January to 7 February 2010, as an accredited press guest and had the great opportunity to interview five women filmmakers; Dima El-Horr (*Every Day is a Holiday*, 2009), Sophie Deraspe (*Vital Signs*, 2009), Brigitte Uttar Kornetzky (*God No Say So*, 2010), Mieke Bal (*Separations*, 2010) and Joanna Vasquez (*Sunday School*, 2010). These filmmakers all had very different

perspectives on the positioning of women in their films and of their perspectives as women filmmakers.

Lebanese filmmaker Dima El-Horr attended IFFR to promote her debut feature film, *Every Day is a Holiday* (Chaque jour est une fête, 2009). *Every Day is a Holiday* had its world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival in 2009 and has had further screenings in Rome, Dubai and New York. The film follows three women who board a bus on the Lebanese Day of Liberation to visit their husbands in jail. When the bus is stopped by a stray bullet, the women form an unlikely friendship as they are left to find their own way to the jail through the harsh desert. In our recent interview, El-Horr explained that that film is a personal story, drawn from her own experiences growing up during the war in Lebanon. The three main female characters are based on women she knows and portrayed as wilful and independent. It was important to El-Horr to depict strong women in this situation, as she explains, “I wanted to get away from the serious side of women, women who are always shown as weak, and under the control of men – which for me is not true. You have a lot of women who fight for their rights, you know?” (Personal Interview, 2010). She went on to explain that the Middle East, often portrayed on screen as a place of deaths and men absent from their families, forgot to recognise the strength of the Arab woman. El-Horr therefore describes her characters as “extremely strong, but they’re fragile at the same time... they dream of love, they dream of renewal, they refuse the stagnation, and they are passionate” (Personal Interview, 2010).

When questioned about the importance of screening women’s stories, El-Horr explained that it was very important for her debut film to depict a positive representation of Lebanese women because it is such a personal story. As a director at the start of her career, El-Horr felt strongly about telling stories to which she could

relate, but did not feel that women filmmakers should necessarily focus on telling women's stories, rather that they should be sincere and honest in whatever subject matter they portrayed.

As an emerging filmmaker, El-Horr's participation in International Film Festivals is vital to the film's success. *Every Day is a Holiday* was screened three times during the festival, with an early morning, midday and evening screening. El-Horr explained that if she did not make the festival circuit, her film would not be shown, because in Lebanon there was no financial support available to directors and so far no interest in screening the film there. The reception of her film in Rotterdam was quite successful, with two sold-out sessions and close to a full house on a Monday morning. She stated that "I'm not going to forget this – my screening was at 9.30am on Monday, and as you saw the theatre was full and this means a lot... you feel that there is a big tradition, and people have confidence in what Rotterdam is offering" (Personal Interview, 2010). As a result of its screening at Rotterdam, the film was selected by the Hubert Bals Fund for distribution funding.

In the course of the research so far it has become evident that searching for a female voice or perspective within a film text requires careful negotiation and cultural sensitivity. My position as a researcher, speaking from a white, middle class, western, feminist perspective can be seen at odds with the filmmakers I am interviewing. Through a focus on emerging women filmmakers from developing nations, I am predominantly speaking to filmmakers from diverse ethnic and social-cultural backgrounds, with different religious, political and feminist understandings. It is important to acknowledge this tension as researcher, as Kaplan surmises in her section on *Speaking for the Other*, in *Women Filmmakers Refocusing* (2003). Discussing the work of theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, she states that

“White filmmakers and critics have learned the necessity of positioning themselves in relation to their representations of the ‘Other’, and to attempt to see from the Other place, as part of a reconciliation process” (Kaplan, 2003, p21). Kaplan particularly reiterates the importance of asking “who can speak for whom, under what conditions and for what purposes” (2003, p21). Understanding my position and perspective as researcher in the manner that Kaplan describes has helped greatly in approaching both the textual analysis and interview components of data gathering for this study. Already in the initial stages of my research it has become clear that there are interesting tensions and challenging re-negotiations occurring between current feminist film theory, the programming of women’s films at festivals, and the heartfelt opinions and personal/political positioning of women filmmakers themselves.

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