



Critica e Cinefilia

From Inside a Festival: Investigating the Spaces of Cinephilia at the London Indian Film Festival 2012

Through a personal viewpoint (which is highlighted in the title of this article: “from inside a festival”), this paper chronicles my experience at the London Indian Film, having been part of a large moving audience. Feeling a genuine pleasure in film viewing and observing the audience crawling across the British capital city at the above mentioned Film Festival, held between the end of June and beginning of July 2012, are the premises for the consideration of new urban paths drawn by cinephilic pleasure, within a boundless film festival. Although it had been well advertised throughout the city, the festival this year was overshadowed by the euphoria for the London Olympics 2012 and its related posters and billboards. Before proceeding to read and investigate this exciting festival, the desire to welcome the readers to the intricate world of film festivals by sharing my experiences from the first one I attended over a decade ago is irresistible and intertwined with the intellectual backdrop of this paper. Memories of the Venice Film Festival of 1998 still constitute a vivid and emotional memory. The images of the films, the crowd and the atmosphere of fans expecting the arrival of their idols clad in sumptuous dresses, and the parallel live performances of journalists, and of showman/showgirl are all pieces of a wider mosaic of events that fit perfectly into the definition of “puzzle of events”. With a fellow student (now a film critic), we wandered snaking through the advertising stands and those who offered flyers and catalogues or photographs of the films screened that year at the festival with fascination.

A series of amateur images recorded by me at Venice Film Festival are now stored on a dusty old analogue Hi8 cassette, which not only contains the atmosphere and particulars of the space of the festival, but also the enthusiasm of being able to capture on camera film stars at the mythic beach of Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* to capture ~~on-camera~~. Together with the films screened, the sounds of the festival arena and the animated spirit of the event that year, upon our return to the hotel we would share our "personal" interpretation of the films we had watched during the day, are still alive in my memories. Those comedic reviews of the films watched and our fascination of the event are the premises which set the argument of this paper; the frames of our interpretations *a posteriori* perfectly encapsulates a sense of discovery of a mythic universe available only to a few. However, as this article intends to showcase, this is less true for the London Indian Film Festival, which was indeed an open event, wherein cinephilia was not suffocated within exclusive spaces of pleasure, but rather it stretched across the city of London. The cinephilic experience is here explored from inside the festival, positioning myself not only as an observer, but also as an elated participant of the crowd moving around London, overcoming the boundaries of film festival viewings and hence tracing what I call as the "cinephilic path". The aim was to move forward from the condition of in-between-ness specific to cinephilia, as pointed out by Betz¹. While, on one hand, it can be considered as something pertinent and a condition entrenched in academic studies, on the other hand, the overwhelming new technology has recorded that cinephilia has swerved away from previously privileged sites and forms of consumption (i.e. film theatres, 16 and 35 mm projections) highlighting new ways for thinking about cinephilia. With this distinction in mind, this work approaches cinephilia as experiential, or rather as being concerned with collective and individual practices of film viewings and pleasures associated to a film festival. The scope is to pinpoint how film viewing and its intrinsic pleasure cannot be merely associated to a static intellectual sphere, such as being confined to academic studies or debated within the discourses of new technologies, devices and languages, but rather, to demonstrate that cinephilic pleasure intersects other human spheres too, and in this case the urban space of London, through the "experiential" yet intellectual observation of the London Indian Film Festival 2012.

London Indian Film Festival (LIFF): The Festival for Many

Being a spectator, and a researcher, at the London Indian Film Festival was an extraordinary experience, as the rich programme not only took the audience into the interesting changes that cinema from India could offer, it also represented the opportunity to wander around the city of London. The important characteristic of this festival was the scattered screenings of films throughout the city. Being a spectator at this festival also allowed me to be a part of a multitude of experiences, which offered me an opportunity to engage not only with the films screened during the event, but also with the waiting time beforehand the film screenings spaced out by the rhythms of a city in trepidation for the Queen's Jubilee celebrations, and the imminent beginning of the Olympic games.

The LIFF appears to embrace the dynamics of an international film festival functioning as spaces in which the audience is invited to experience films by moving away from the engrossing popular Hindi industry – Bollywood – towards independent and still enchanting films from India. Besides, it is the occasion for these films to be screened and to fully serve their purpose: to produce significance and pleasure².

As the director of the festival Cary Rajinder Sawhney takes care to mention, this festival had been dedicated to the scouting and screening of independent high quality films from India, which is aimed at people who “think India as a state of mind, with its huge spectrum of identities, its admirers, its neighbours and the vast number of people around the world who connect to it including British Asians” (<http://www.londonindianfilmfestival.co.uk/>).

As highlighted by the growing literature on film festivals, there is a scarce consensus on what an international film festival should be, or actually is, despite the common understanding highlighted in *Dekalog 3 On Film festival* as follows:

[International film festivals are] an alternative distribution network... providing audiences with opportunities to enjoy commercially unviable films projected in a communal space – films that most communities, even the most cosmopolitan, otherwise would not have the opportunity to see³.

Similarly, the work of Jonathan Rosenbaum draws attention to the terminology of a “film festival” as being problematic *per se*, and writes as follows:

Mainly a pejorative term in the film business...it generally refers to a film destined to be seen by professionals, specialists, or cultists but not by the general public, because some of these professionals decide it won't or can't be sufficiently profitable to warrant distribution⁴.

However, LIFF attempts to reframe these perspectives. By being a spectator at this festival for two consecutive years, it has been possible to affirm that the programmes encourage the audience to be a part of a concentrated yet intense traffic of Indian films that strongly portray the desire to be regarded as the product of a globalised aesthetic: thematically, textually and conceptually. These films are the epitome of changing India, which is becoming less and less self-referential. The reels are attempting to reach a wider arena promoting a larger cinephilic consensus. For a few years, the independent new wave from India has been the focus of academic criticism that emphasised the necessity for innovation of the cinematographic language “made in India” on one hand, and on the other, critics have highlighted that these films jeopardise the largely discussed Globalization of Bollywood cinema⁵.

The variety of films screened such as *Delhi Belly* (Abhinay Deo, Akshat Verma, 2011) from last year's edition or *Gandu Circus* (Q, 2010) (<http://vimeo.com/41081560>) from India's most radical director Q, *Delhi in a Day* (Prashant Nair, 2011), *Arjun and Alison* (Sidharth Sharma, 2011) and *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (David Atkins, 2011) are only few of the titles that have shaken the screens of India and abroad, embodying the evident rejection of the shimmering glamour of Bollywood aesthetics. As Andrew Buncombe wrote, these films deal with “real life themes”

(<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/indian-cinema-reveals-a-dark-side-2026767.html>). As confirmed by the director of the festival, there have been a deliberate attempt to challenge the stereotype of what films from India could be; he added: “We are trying to push down the barriers”⁶. The special screening pattern that has the same feel as a travelling show creates the perfect atmosphere for all the screenings to expand and move beyond the festival dates to produce a logic cinephilic continuation of pleasure among its

audience. Cinephilia, at the LIFF appears to perfectly embrace the logic of discovery⁷ of the cultural economy of film production as being the knot and the propeller across a temporal shift. Thus, this film festival appears to assert a uniform unfolding of time⁸, space and new practice of film viewing.

Shifting Cinephilia: From Being a Privilege of a Few, to Being a Privilege of Many

While attempting to understand cinephilia, the initial question is to comprehend how this concept is currently framed and debated by recent scholarly accounts. Does cinephilia include a feeling of melancholic attachment to moving images? Does it include the definition of an elitist relationship between the observer and the art form, still deliberately non-commercial? Is there a new form of cinephilia springing out from the fast-growing technology? As Thomas Elsaesser has pointed out, cinephilia has been defined with a multitude of acceptations such as being a pejorative term, and even a “dismissive sobriquet in the politicised 1970s”⁹, besides being associated to a certain cosmopolitan snobbery, or to a demonstration of loyalty for filmgoers of all ages and tastes. Discourses on cinephilia and new (or old) “spaces” of cinephilic pleasure are mushrooming across current academic discourses. As de Valck indicates, empowering the discussion that this article intends to take forward, cinephilia can nowadays be considered as an umbrella term for a variety of differentiated “affective engagement[s] with the moving image”¹⁰. Indeed, this article intends to highlight, the “classical” understanding of the pleasure or joy that the spectator (and the cinephile) experiences whilst sitting in the darkness and staring at the flickering screen, appears to shift from the canonical framing of cinephilia, to a newly reborn (following the death of cinema as conjectured by Susan Sontag)¹¹ manner of watching films.

In this instance, the need is to move away from the orthodoxy of the French theorisation of cinephilia, as it has been widely suggested by de Valck¹², to step into the post *Cahiers du Cinéma* era and reflect on cinephilia and its ontological space, as being a widened, open and a collective place of pleasure. Cinephilia is envisaging a theoretical and critical repositioning among the academic community and it is constantly under debate. The way a film is watched, and especially the way it is experienced was a reason of concern among the recent debate held at Bologna during the Festival del Cinema Ritrovato (2012). Regarding

the state of cinephilia today, scholars from across the world are attempting to answer the universal questions on the existence (or not) of a pure and real film experience, besides questioning if the impact of technology – particularly internet, but in more general the digital era – had jeopardised the standardised understanding of cinephilia. As Elsaesser foresaw, the “emotion that... has been seductive to a happy few, while proving beneficial to the film culture”¹³ appears to enact a comeback. The rewriting of this pleasure requires a diversification between first generation and second generation of *cinèphiles*. Specifically, the second generation of *cinèphiles* is formed by two well distinct categories: the one that has held connections with a certain authorship and with the film-on-film image, and the second one that has found pleasure in watching films, in rather unconventional formats such as DVD, BluRay, mobile phones, tablets and digital technology at its best. This last clause is well explicated by Ian Christie’s position at one of the round table discussions on cinephilia, pointing it out as follows:

The web has created extraordinary opportunity to link people and to develop a new kind of cinephilia which is related to the old cinephilia, through the web, now people are more connected and develop this kind of culture very specific to the era of the web, no less passionate and eccentric all consuming than the old cinephilia was, I think this is an interesting argument. The web then, it is not just critical for people to exchange their point of view, messages and discourses but also is a way to give an access to film and the all business of being hunt down on the web, on DVD, VHS etc. or you can just download them has given a new impetus to cinephilia... cinephilia is in its classic form, into its new reborn form, it is not about film classics, not about the great films, it is about the deliberate cultivation of the marginal, the obscure, the esoteric... hunting things out, being attuned with the name of trashy film-makers, often despised.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX98zxmV1Nc>)

On the contrary, Susan Sontag writes that a movie image can capture the audience through the utter enormity of the screen size: “You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie... [and] to be overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image... To be kidnapped, you

have to be in a movie theatre, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers”¹⁴. Similarly, Adrian Martin too pointed out that “immersion in the film itself” is a prerequisite for the cinephiliac experience to happen¹⁵.

As a vast literature on film festivals have been debating in the last decade or so, these “alternative venues”¹⁶ of the film festival pertain to spaces in which old forms of first-generation cinephilia (the only place where a film could be appreciated and loved was the cinema theatre) and contemporary forms of cinephilia, clearly elucidated by Ian Christie’s intervention, circumvent the cinema going experience altogether. As argued by Malte Hagener and Marijke de Valck: “One of the most ‘classical’ of contemporary cinéophile practices is the festival visit”¹⁷.

The surge of international film festival networks suggests that cinephilia does not seem to be dead. As enunciated by Susan Sontag, the death of cinema as noted by Liz Czach, might be reframed as the death of a preferred viewing space – the big screen; Czach, also reminds that this is an era of the decline of single-screen movie theatres concomitant with the naissance of overwhelming multiplexes and megaplexes. The film festival, both intellectually and spatially, provides a privileged area for cinephilic pleasure to take place. However, I argue that with this assumption, cinephilia remains intellectually enclosed within the safe, essentialised and so far hegemonic area of a film festival. Czach writes: “It is no surprise that film festivals emerge as one of the last refuges for the cinephile”¹⁸. In accordance with this consideration with this consideration, the flourishing literature on the topic must be noticed, as Catherine Russell reminds, “[c]inephilia is in many ways alive and well, continuing to flourish in the hundreds of film festivals that take place every year around the world”¹⁹. Similarly, echoing Russell’s point of view, Elsaesser writes that the place where cinephilia happens are “the film festival and the film museum, whose increasingly international circuits the cinephile, critic, programmer, or distributor frequents as *flâneur*, prospector, and explorer”²⁰. Nevertheless, the discussion on cinephilia is still open with several contrasting points of view and since the origins of its observation, the cinephilic pleasure is somewhat associated with a specific type of audience and space.

However, through the instance of the London Indian Film Festival earlier mentioned, it has emerged that the pleasure of film viewing cannot be regarded uniquely to the so called

experts, to the academics or to what Elsaesser calls *flâneur*; the social function of a film ought to be taken into account and deserves a new-fangled reference. This intellectual extremism exemplifies and showcases a kind of snobbism to the “rehearsal” (if it can be so called) of loving films, loving the darkness of a cinema theatre and the togetherness around the filmic event. De Valck writes that “the film experience evoke[s] particular sensations of intense pleasure resulting in a strongly felt connection with the cinema, often described as a relation of love”²¹. This point must help to overcome the politicized position of certain intellectuals regarding the life of a film on and off the screens. The way in which the audience connects with a film, with its history and its context is universal. There appears to be a kind of connection that embraces the spectator and the film being screened, and it seems too naive to attempt a definition or an identification of cinephilia merely as a pleasure for a few. The way this love is expressed by the spectator is individual, as much as the way in which it is elaborated. Academics have to step down from the tower of Babel and recognise that cinephilic pleasure is not only an essentialised event, or for a select few. The pleasure for a film and the conundrum of collateral experiences (sensorial, mental, visual and experiential) ought to be acknowledged as being communitarian, attuned with de Valck’s thinking of it as a “universal phenomenon”²². Czach reminds the reader that: “With the decline of other screening opportunities and venues, the film festival has emerged as a privileged site for big-screen... cinephilia”²³; wherein, the London Indian Film festival and its organic structure appears to expand the geographies of this pleasure. As highlighted by Czach, the fear of Stars dominating and stealing all the attention at festivals over the cinephilic public sphere does not affect the LIFF (at this stage), which by moving away from the appreciation of certain marginal cinema (as Jim Hoberman has pointed out in a conversation with Ian Christie), has the scope for a wider divulgation of New Indian cinema, whose emergence is congruent with the process of economic globalization and post-liberalization from the Mumbai Industry (1991-present). In this light, Shekhar Kapur’s statement regarding the changing face of Indian cinema is important. The Indian director, who rose to popularity with his film *Bandit Queen* (1994), firmly suggests that the cinema from India is changing in its core, not by being “less Indian”, but rather moving away from, what he calls, “Planet Bollywood” (<http://www.londonindianfilmfestival.co.uk/programme.htm>), thus embracing a new-fangled modern identity. London is the city that is encompassing this emerging *Indien Nouvelle Vague*, which is now coming to terms with its globalization. The

appreciation of independent and low budgets films – yet not marginal although being independent – happens across the city, wherein spatial centrality of the festival location is reframed. As De Valck suggests, international festivals are firstly defined by their spatial qualities²⁴. The screening of films at LIFF does not happen in a constrained elitist space, but rather through a network of cinema theatres, which are located throughout London. From Waterman cinemas just besides the Hounslow area (highly populated by South Asian communities), to Cinemaworld O₂ in North Greenwich, East London, and the more central ICA, Cinemaworld Haymarket, Shaftesbury avenue and BFI Southbank, the London Indian Film Festival encouraged the participation of a large audience promoting the re-mapping of a too stagnant geography of film festivals, and with it endorsing an urban amplification of cinephilic pleasure. This ideological and structural shift, which happens not only on a textual level, where the *Indien Nouvelle Vague* moves conceptually, aesthetically and thematically away from its bigger cousin Bollywood, but also actually the audience too crisscross the city, thereby mobilizing the cinephilic pleasure of watching a film out the “box” of intellectual borders. With the LIFF, the multitude of audience living and crossing the different areas of the city, are encouraged to be part of a festival. Cinephilic appreciation loses its intellectual and geographical leadership, through a relocation of spaces and events. In addition, the mobility of cinephilia, from being a niche marginal phenomenon and having a privileged (for a few) position has come to assume a new privileged (for many) position, which connects with the pleasure of larger masses of spectators.

This re-discovered cinephilia answers the issue raised by Ian Christie, who, in response to a comment on film culture becoming richer and historically self aware, mentioned:

Film Culture has become richer but, also people coming to this festival (Festival del Cinema Ritrovato). Nobody knows what to do with all these discoveries, there is a real problem. I have seen discoveries at Pordenone, landmarks, 10 years later they are forgotten. How much has the history of cinema being changed by these discoveries. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX98zxmV1Nc>)

The novel image of India provided by the films screened at the festival, and the diffusion of this image for a large appreciation, does break the concerning rigidity raised by Christie.

The emerging films presented at the LIFF are a convincing agglomeration of films, for a differently educated audience, experiencing the re-birth of an (inter)national cinema, and being the embodiments of a new cinephilic pleasure. Love for films, and the recognition of cogent changes in the panorama of Indian cinema abroad, is what determines the success of this festival, which is attuned with both the cinephilic pleasure and its different affective engagements with the moving image, breaking the canons of what cinema from India is regarded as. LIFF, by endorsing the viewing of films across the city and engaging with a wider spectatorship, triggers a novel way reading cinephilic pleasure, which broaden its ontological space of signification.

At the Festival del Cinema Ritrovato 2012, another probing point of view on cinephilia was raised through the intervention of the so-called New Brigades, who presented a radical reading of contemporary changes in cinephilia. Despite being quite radical, this group of young intellectuals highlighted two important concerns. The first of these two points is recorded as follows:

As new *cinéphiles*, we like to watch films as much as possible, as much a variety as possible, trying to be knowledgeable about these films and try to share this enthusiasm about these things. And more and more we find that the things that we like to watch are slowly becoming inaccessible because, there is no way for us to see films that we enjoy... we are still the generation that used to watch films on films for the most part. We are very familiar with that experience and we don't want to see that it goes away very soon. People are prognosticating that we will not be able to enjoy films of films... there are only a few canonical films on which a few people agree, and that we will be able to see, and that is it. (<http://vimeo.com/44858239>)

Attuned with this extreme perspective, the emerging independent Indian cinema finds a way to emerge through the festival (the intellectual and pleasurable arena *par excellence*) to the big-screen partially leaving behind its surfacing via digital products, which cannot substitute the original: the film artefact. The LIFF's way of screening films in multiple cinema theatres across the city, provides the space for the second point of concern: the digital culture as substitution. The development of a film screened across a network of

cinemas, in principle, asserts the end of a digital dictatorship in favour of a “purist” access to the films: via the darkness of the theatre. Indeed, the “canonical” way of watching a film as seen in film print, is strongly promoted by the LIFF, which weaves cinephilia with the social and cultural history of an original film viewing space, without renouncing totally to *La Grand illusion*.

In conclusion, walking across the streets of London moving with the crowd through the various metro stations and bus stops to reach the sites of film screenings, provided me with the possibility of reasoning on the expansion and the understanding that spaces of cinephilia are ought to be unchained from the orthodoxy of academicism and embrace a wider social-urban (perhaps more popular) traits. By observing the organic body of the LIFF from inside, bestowed me with the unique opportunity of experiencing how the changing economic status of a country such as India, echoes across the different spectrum of its culture²⁵. Independent films, through the means of an international festival, come to terms with a new experience of geographical and cinephilic temporality, and conforms to Iordanova’s auspices that “with the ongoing shift of cultural consumption into the ‘Long Tail domain’ [...] it is possible that festival[s] will be reinvented in some new viable alternative forms”²⁶. Perhaps, this is already happening?

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- ¹ Mark Betz, (ed.), “In Focus: Cinephilia”, *Cinema Journal*, n.2, Winter 2010, pp. 130-132.
- ² Graeme Turner, *Film as a Social Practice*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 49.
- ³ Richard Porton, *Dekalog 3: On Film Festival*, London, Wallflower, 2009, p. 23.
- ⁴ Jonathan Rosebaum, “Sampling in Rotterdam”, in Rosebaum Jonathan and Adrian Martin, *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia*, London, British Film Institute, p. 54.
- ⁵ This was largely discussed during the conference entitled “What’s New? The Changing Face of Indian Cinema” held at the University of Westminster, on the 8th and 9th of July 2011. Several scholars have addressed this problem, wherein two distinct schools of thoughts were formed. Particularly, the implication of a film such as *Delhi Belly* (Abhinay Deo, Akshat Verma, 2011) within the growing panorama of Indian cinema across the world was largely debated.
- ⁶ Stated at the opening of the LIFF 2012.
- ⁷ Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2007.
- ⁸ Janet Harbord, “Film Festival-Time-Event”, in Dina Iordanova and Regan Rhyne, *Film Festival Yearbook I: The Festival Circuit*, St Andrews, St. Andrews Film Studies, 2009.
- ⁹ Thomas Elsaesser, “Cinephilia and the Uses of Disenchantment”, in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener *Cinephilia Movies, Love and Memory*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2005, p. 27, and pp. 27-44.
- ¹⁰ Marijke de Valck, Malte Hagener *Cinephilia Movies, Love and Memory*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2005.
- ¹¹ Susan Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema”, *New York Time Magazine*, February 25, 1996, pp. 60-61.
- ¹² M. de Valck, M. Hagener, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-26.
- ¹³ T. Elsaesser, *op.cit.*, p. 32.
- ¹⁴ S. Sontag, *op.cit.*, p. 60.
- ¹⁵ Adrian Martin, “No Flowers for the Cinéophile: The Fates of Cultural Populism 1960-1988”, in Paul Foss, *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Cinema*, Sidney, Pluto Press, p. 117.
- ¹⁶ D. Iordanova, *op.cit*, p. 25.
- ¹⁷ M. de Valck, M. Hagener *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- ¹⁸ Liz Czach, “Cinephilia, Stars and Film Festival”, *Cinema Journal*, n. 2, Winter 2010, pp. 139-145.
- ¹⁹ Catherine Russell, *Cinephilia in Schirmer*, in Barry Keith Grant, *Encyclopedia of Film*, Vol.1, New York, Schirmer Reference, p. 302.
- ²⁰ T. Elsaesser, *op.cit.*, p. 36.
- ²¹ M. de Valck M. Hagener *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- ²² *Ibidem*.
- ²³ Liz Czach, “Cinephilia, Stars and Film Festival”, *Cinema Journal*, n. 2, Winter 2010, pp. 139-145.
- ²⁴ M. de Valck, *op.cit.*, p. 38.
- ²⁵ Regarding the way cultural artefacts – specifically films – have been affected by the changing economy of India see the following texts: Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations. Marriage and Forms in New Bollywood Cinema*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2011; Ashish Rajyadaksha, *Indian Cinema in the time of Celluloid: From Bollywood cinema to Emergency*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009; Kearney A.K., *The New Economics of Indian Film Industry: Creativity and transformation*, 2008. The report can be purchased on-line at http://cii.in/documents/Publications_List_May2009.pdf.
- ²⁶ D. Iordanova, *op.cit*, p. 36.