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2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15162>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Acciari, Monia: River-to-River Florence Indian Film Festival: The Italian response to Bollywood cinema. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 3 (2014), Nr. 2, S. 231–237. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15162>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2014.2.ACCI>

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River-to-River Florence Indian Film Festival: The Italian response to Bollywood cinema

Monia Acciari

Indie Indian films have gained exponential attention from the academic community since 2011 when *Delhi Belly* (Abhinay Deo, 2011), a thought-provoking film produced by the Bollywood star Aamir Khan, was screened at the London Indian Film Festival. Prior to this upsurge the River-to-River Florence Indian Film Festival has strenuously promoted the value of 'other' Indian productions, parallel to mainstream Bollywood cinema,¹ also called the New Wave or Indie Indian Cinema.² These kinds of parallel productions are financed by small regional productions companies and by crowd-funding experiments. The films are characterised by breaking the all-singing, all-dancing stereotype of Bollywood via offbeat styles and edgier subject matter.³ As Mohar Basu explains, 'there is an emerging genre of independent cinema which essentially tries to defy shackles of Bollywood and create unique cinema beyond it'.⁴ This article intends to bring attention to the role that Italy is playing in revealing the trajectories of these independent productions in the global context; it will also aim to present a rationale of the relationships between the River-to-River programme, correlated events, and cultural orientation.

The origins

I will be analysing the diverse aspects that has made the River-to-River Florence Indian Film Festival one of the oldest and more established festivals in Europe showcasing indie cinema from the South Asian subcontinent. Under the direction of Ms Selvaggia Velo, Mr Luca Marziali, and co-organised by the cultural organisation BdjMedia, the festival aimed to establish a cultural connection between India and Italy. Velo, who is currently the sole director of the festival, confirmed a passion for the New Wave of Indian cinema and declared the importance for these films to find a gateway into the global arena.⁵

The first edition of the festival was a dual and transversal event: BdjMedia simultaneously organised a festival of Italian cinema in India and a festival of Indian cinema in Italy. The kind of films selected and screened in Italy were from the New Wave of Indian cinema. In a period where the extravagant aesthetics of popular Hindi cinema were reaching a high level of visibility in Europe,⁶ River-to-River was turning its gaze to the 'other' cinema from India.

Velo explained in a personal interview that

River-to-River is not thought to be an alternative to the spreading of Bollywood culture in Europe and globally. This festival, on the wave of Bollywood, seeks to spread the knowledge of films, which are away from the mainstream.⁷

This approach contributed to the decelerated acknowledgement of Bollywood in Italy⁸ and positioned the country as an atypical arena for mainstream Indian cinema to emerge. It also made other films from South Asia available to the Italian audience and promoted a certain degree of cinephilia.⁹ However, this choice persistently placed Italy behind other European countries in presenting Bollywood cinema. As I write elsewhere, Italy needs a more comprehensive inclusion of Indian cinema and a better awareness of it, which should exclude the circulation of abruptly altered versions of Bollywood films.¹⁰ However, by calling indie Indian films *di qualità* ('of quality')¹¹ and excluding Bollywood film productions from its programming the festival firmly sets its priorities.

Cinephilic pleasure: Cultural mobilisation

Among Velo's ambitions since the inception of this festival was the desire to establish a continuous cultural exchange between Italy and India via parallel cinematographic events. Transnationalism and mobilisation of culture was at the core of the festival. The Florence Indian Film Festival is, as I will attempt to explain, a space in which, to cite Marijke De Valck, 'complex spatial and temporal dimensions are essential to the channelling of the various flows in contemporary cinemas'.¹²

The journey of Indian cinema into Italy allowed River-to-River to present a collection of films from the secluded yet rich world of independent production. Thus, the first edition of the festival, held within Palazzo Vecchio in Florence in conjunction with the Indian fine art exhibition entitled 'The Art of Senses', aimed at exploring and exposing eight films that were expressions of contemporary India. The point of departure for the success of such a festival was the screening of Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* at the Venice Film Festival in 2002. Indo-Canadian director Mira Nair stated that with *Monsoon Wedding* the aim was to represent part of her world, free from visual extravaganza and on a low budget. The triumph of her film at the Venice Film Festival provided further cultural weight to the idea behind River-to-River.



Courtesy of Valentina Manduchi.

Simultaneously, BdJMedia together with the Italian Embassy in Delhi, the 34th International Film Festival of India, the 6th International Film Festival of Mumbai, the 8th Kolkata Film Festival, and the 8th International Film Festival of Kerala, organised the River-to-River New Italian Eyes travelling event. The aim of this event was to run in parallel screenings that would showcase the new Italian wave. During this travelling event at Kolkata and Mumbai, River-to-River New Italian Eyes not only screened seven Italian films highlighted as representing the changing phase of Italian cinema but also hosted a workshop on screenwriting to renew the dialogue between authors from the two industries.¹³

River-to-River New Italian Eyes was largely characterised by a climate of co-operation and aspired to optimise the creative and cultural resources between the two countries. This process began setting up pathways for transnational creativity. The festival reconfigured its ambitious plans with time. The exciting connection established between the two countries was interrupted when the parallel project

of screening Italian cinema in India faded away. However, BdfMedia continued planning the annual River-to-River Florence Indian Film Festival. The festival perpetrated the research of South Asian auteurs and films that until recent years had a limited voice due to the flamboyance of popular Hindi cinema. The festival also aimed to renew the cultural dialogue between the two countries and hosted a section dedicated to Italian directors who filmed aspects of Indian culture. The festival has not only worked to promote non-mainstream South Asian films but has also pursued the research and screening of films that would have ideally continued through the cultural dialogue initiated by the transversal festival screening Italian cinema in India. Although the dialogue between India and Italy is currently more complex and critical than ever,¹⁴ independent films from the subcontinent find a gateway to be screened via the diverse editions of the festival year after year.

Looking at the programme

The screenings of the festival in 2001 – its first edition – were characterised by a selection of films that narrated the journeys that this festival underwent. Since its inception the festival has had the purpose of hosting a variety of auteurs who have defined a branch of Indian cinema; names such as Shyam Benegal and Satyajit Ray were placed beside the cutting-edge styles of less well-known contemporary filmmakers. The first self-produced film screened at the festival was *Dejavú* (2001) by Biju Viswanath, a psychological thriller shot in the UK and India in which unusual camera angles and the enchanting colours of sunrise – unlike the bold colours of Bollywood cinema – frame the story of a lighthouse keeper living in solitude on the shores of an isolated land. He finds a bruised stranger washed ashore whom he mistakes for a killer. This opening film powerfully suggests the journey that the festival intends to embrace, offering an invitation to ‘cruise’ around, moving metaphorically between the waters of ‘other’ prolific and engaging Indian film industries.

Over the years the festival has presented films such as *A Very Silent Film* (Manish Jha, 2002), *The Terrorist* (Santosh Sivan, 2000), *Chokher Bali* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2003), *Chameli* (Sudhir Mishra & Anant Balani, 2003), *15 Park Avenue* (Aparna Sen, 2005), *Modern Day Arranged Marriage* (Rehana Mirza, 2005), *Bioscope* (K. M Madhusudhanan, 2008), *Gangs of Wasseypur 1 & 2* (Anurag Kashyap, 2012), *Black* (Sanjay Leela Bansali, 2005), *Chittagong* (Bedabrato Pain, 2012), *Tau Seru* (Rodd Rathjen, 2013), *The Coffin Maker* (Veena Bakshi, 2013), and *Beyond Bollywood* (Adam Dow and Ruchika Muchhala). It should also be mentioned that River-to-River is an arena for films by non-South Asian directors that express

India's social, historical, and cultural complexities. This includes titles such as *I Baffi del Rajpur* (Alessandro Ferrara, 2004) – which narrates the habits of a cast of warriors of Rajputs in Rajasthan, who live in the memory of their own glorious past, with their moustaches standing out as their principal characteristic – and the American *Gandhi at the Bat* (Stephanie Argy and Alec Boehm, 2006), a newsreel-style account of the totally fictional incident that saw Gandhi pinch-hit for the New York Yankees in 1933.

As discussed, throughout its history, River-to-River has screened works that have built the foundation and an ample doorway for regional and self-produced Indian films. As Ketan Mehta stated, the current new wave is encapsulated

within a world beyond Satyajit Ray and Bollywood. New Indian cinema is exciting, adventurous and volatile, like the country itself.¹⁵

In this light, by taking advantage of the varied, energetic, and creative world of a volatile India as defined by Mehta, the festival challenged the 'intervallic' Bollywood cinema, which is often composed of sudden explosions of song and dance sequences, half-time intermissions, heavy traces of censorship, and many narrative interruptions.¹⁶ Rather, River-to-River actively seeks to be the platform for less global Indian cinema to obtain the global attention it deserves. The event aspires to be the stage for a cinema without interruption, a cinema of the parallel industry, hence offering unaltered narratives.

Conclusion

Velo and Marziali stated at the beginning of the festival that, in spite of the parallel Indian cinema finding marginal attention through screenings of established auteurs such as Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Goutam Ghose, and Ritwik Ghatak across universities and a few festivals in Europe, River-to-River is the first European festival to be entirely dedicated to 'other' cinema from India. Therefore, I argue that it was this Italian festival that created a solid cultural orientation in Europe which inspired the mushrooming of other international events, for example the Indisches Film festival Stuttgart in Germany, the more recent London Indian Film Festival in the UK, and the Extravagant India! International Indian Film festival in France. Furthermore, in spite of the poor history of the Italian and Indian cinema industries working together¹⁷ – when compared with the tradition that links Bollywood to Switzerland or to Britain, for example – the Florence Indian Film Festival strives to build a solid alliance.

Velo, in her dedication to provide an arena for non-Bollywood cinema to be

seen and appreciated away from the South Asian subcontinent, established a clear ideology behind this event. The festival seeks to define and illustrate the cultural, social, and historical complexities within the Indian subcontinent, highlighting self-identity, interpersonal relationships, and novel forms of visual communication. It has set a trend in cultural awareness and has influenced other Indian film festivals in Europe, often through networking initiatives.¹⁸ As mentioned by Velo, River-to-River created a counter initiative, acting as a bridge for other festivals to take place and develop venues to promote the proliferation and mobilisation of non-commercial cinema from India within global circuits as an alternative to the hegemony of Bollywood narratives.

Notes

1. As mentioned by Tejaswini Ganti, 'Bollywood' is a tongue-in-cheek term which was created by the English-language press in India in the late 1970s. This has now become the dominant global designation to refer to the commercial film industry in Hindi. The Oxford English Dictionary has had an entry for Bollywood since 2001. The term is often substituted with 'popular Hindi cinema', which is currently used interchangeably among scholars.
2. Basu 2012.
3. Ibid.
4. Desai 2004.
5. Please see the essay on River to River Florence Indian Film Festival in my text (Acciari 2012).
6. I have highlighted the questionable cultural and social choices that this festival has made in marginalising popular Hindi cinema since its inception in my text (Acciari 2012). See also Dudrah 2006.
7. Acciari 2012.
8. Acciari 2012b.
9. Acciari 2014.
10. Acciari 2012, pp 212-234.
11. Marziali & Velo 2001.
12. De Valck 2007, p. 18.
13. Marziali & Velo 2001.
14. This is an example that exemplifies the current tension between Italy and India: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/10/italy-india-anti-piracy-law-marines>.
15. Ketan Mehta on the Volatility of Indie Indian Cinema: <http://www.londonindianfilm-festival.co.uk/>, in Marziali & Velo 2001.
16. Gopalan 2003.
17. Acciari 2012.
18. For further information please see my interview with Velo in the forthcoming issue of *Cinergie.it* (Acciari 2014b).

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