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Busan Cinema Forum 2011

The Busan International Film Festival, based in the South Korean harbor city, is one of the biggest and most important film festivals in Asia and a powerful and innovative newcomer on the international film festival circuit.[1] Within only 15 years Busan has become a festival operating much like bigger festivals such as Berlinale and Cannes, featuring competitions, a national/regional showcase, a market (Asian Film Market), a co-production market (Asian Project Market/APM, formerly known as Pusan Promotion Plan/PPP), a film school component (Asian Film Academy), and a film fund (Asian Cinema Fund).

The 16th edition of the festival (6–14 October 2011) was marked by a number of important changes: a new name, new location, and new director. Following the revised Romanisation of the city's name, the festival traded a 'P' for a 'B' and is now called Busan International Film Festival (BIFF). With a newly-built cinémathèque (the Busan Cinema Center), BIFF is now a festival that can boast its own venue. Lee Yong-kwan, who previously co-directed the festival together with the famous Kim Dong-ho (also known as Mr. Kim), now holds the sole position of festival director.

There is yet another change at BIFF, one that interests us in particular for this report: Busan is the first film festival to add an academic component to the portfolio of festival activities – the Busan Cinema Forum. Lee's aim with this initiative is to reinvigorate film criticism. Talking to *Film Business Asia* reporter Patrick Frater, he is quoted as saying:

> 'If previously we were focused on the synergy of the festival, the industry and celebrities, it is about time we started thinking about adding the fourth factor: the academic discourse. Producing new dialogue about cinema and building the regional community of Asian cinema is the next significant task. Our desire for academic development encouraged us to launch the first Busan Cinema Forum this year, and I believe it will supplement the Busan International Film Festival's alleged intellectual weakness.'[2]

This exceptional move might have to do with the fact that the new director comes from the academic field himself and as such values the role of film theory and criticism beyond public relations. Before taking the post of festival (co-)director Lee worked for the Korean Film Council and was head of the Busan Cinémathèque; he is also holding a position as professor of film studies at Chung-Ang University. Last year's festival edition had already tested the waters with a half-day academic symposium that featured talks by Professor Thomas Elsaesser and Film Festival Research Network co-founder Marijke de Valck. As a result the 2011 Busan International Film Festival hosted the first Busan Cinema Forum, planned as an annual

conference dedicated to enhancing knowledge and support of the film industry and film aesthetics around the world.

The conference took place from 10-12 October in the Haeundae Grand Hotel, Busan. The event featured two keynote speeches and six panels organised by the following academic societies and journals: Film Studies Association of Korea (FISAK), *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference (ASEACC), Film Festival Research Network (FFRN), Association of East Asian Film Studies (AEAF), Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS). Situated within the setting of the Busan International Film Festival, the Busan Cinema Forum had a slightly different structure than regular academic conferences. Instead of a formal call for papers the program was put together by soliciting the participation of academic societies and journals, who then decided upon the content of their panel(s) in consultation with the forum staff. The theme for the inaugural Busan Cinema Forum was 'Seeking the Path of Asian Cinema in the 21st century: East Asia'.

Award-winning Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul opened the forum with a personal keynote address on 'superabundance' and the influence of digital developments on the future of filmmaking. He talked about piracy and privacy and posed the question whether new portable tools might not create uniformity rather than freedom. In relation to this, Weerasethakul discussed censorship as a complicated issue which is imposed by authorities who work like robots, but also an issue that feeds on our own conformity. He called upon the audience to differentiate themselves from the robots.

In the second keynote speech Dudley Andrew, Professor of Film and Comparative Literature at Yale University, tackled the topic of cinema's future vis-à-vis technological developments. He focused on two issues: geographical and temporal compression. The first can be understood as the homogenisation of humanity, which allows contemporary film viewers to identify more easily with 'the other' than what was possible in the classical period. The second issue has to do with new forms of storytelling that are moving beyond the single space-time continuum due to today's abundance of information. Drawing on the work of André Bazin, Andrew advocated a belief in cinema's ability to appropriate new forms to 'become itself'.

A recurring topic throughout the forum was the tension between globalism and localism/nationalism in Asian cinemas. The panels organized by FISAK, ASEACC, AEAF, and SCMS all explored aesthetic, thematic, or community aspects of the various Asian cinemas in the context of globalisation and/or regional distinctiveness. One of the main discussions revolved around what counts as Asian or (South) East Asian, from which perspective, and whether there is such a thing as an overarching Asian identity and cinema. Various issues of globalisation were discussed in relation to co-production and distribution trends. Fittingly, for the setting of the forum, several papers also considered the role of festivals for the acknowledge-

ment and distribution of Asian cinema(s) as art cinema within Europe and North America.

The session organised by *Cahiers du Cinéma* focused on the historical role of critics (particularly those critics affiliated with the renowned French journal itself) in assessing new Asian waves as well as discovering auteurs and guiding the world through new trends. The panel then continued with a discussion between Korean film critics on the status of contemporary Korean film and concluded with a grand finale in which three Asian directors participated: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Hong Sang-soo, and Bong Joon-ho.

Apart from the aesthetic and regional discussions taking place at the Busan Cinema Forum, the Film Festival Research Network added another dimension by addressing the festival as an event in itself rather than a platform for content. Professor Dina Iordanova's presentation considered the recent rise and success of Asian film festivals while the authors of this report tackled the specific topic of festivals' industry relations and the arising tension between their artistic commitments and wishes to facilitate industry needs.

BIFF provides figures for forum participation and attendance in the final report for this 16th edition: 38 speakers, 502 accreditations, and an accumulated total of 830 section participants. The inaugural keynote by Weerasethakul, with an audience of 200 people, counted as the most popular event.[3] The *Cahiers* session boasted 160 attendees while the second keynote drew 130. The seminar sessions were well-attended with 30 to 80 participants each. For an inaugural event these numbers are quite impressive, considering the forum charged a fee and issued a separate badge.

The initiative of the first Busan Cinema Forum shows a lot of potential; its greatest strength lies in an ability to bring together the academic world, film criticism, and (festival) professionals. While it seems obvious that film scholars, journalists, filmmakers, and other professionals have something to gain by increasing their awareness of each other's work, these various worlds tend to operate autonomously and as a result remain oblivious to certain insights and realities from outside their own sphere. The setting of a film festival such as BIFF provides an excellent opportunity for these various parties to meet, interact, and learn from each other. Historically there have been other film festivals that sparked fruitful collaborations between the worlds of theory and practice, for example Edinburgh or Pesaro. It would be a welcome turn if BIFF was to restart this trend among major festivals.

A few observations regarding the festival might explain why more interaction between film professionals and academics has not yet been achieved. Contributing factors include time constraints, distant locales, and separate badge systems. Regarding time constraints, even though the forum badge offered a complimentary four screening tickets per day, sadly there was hardly time to catch any screenings. One reason for this was the unfortunate timing. The forum had rather comfortable

time slots with keynotes starting at 11 in the morning and sessions going from 2.00-5.30 in the afternoon. After a full day at the forum there were not enough late screenings one could attend. Furthermore, with the new Busan Cinema Center the main activity of the festival has moved from the Haeundae area to the center of the city. As a result most of the screenings are held at the new cinémathèque and surrounding multiplexes. The forum was hosted at a nice location at the Haeundae Grand Hotel but, though connected by shuttle busses, it felt a bit secluded. The incidental advantage was that one could easily attend industry receptions held in various Haeundae locations. The proximity to such events is particularly import when considering that Busan aims to be what Mark Peranson calls a 'business festival'.[4] Thus, industry parties are not mere fun activities but extended business events; the opportunity to mingle with the accredited festival folk there, beyond the secluded academic forum, provided contact between the different groups that is otherwise lacking. Finally, the multiple-badge system also proved to be challenging (similar to the Berlinale Talent campus). This resulted in a disconnect in which guests with a 'regular' festival badge had little idea about the forum and what it was.

The forum was organised with great attention to detail by a group of dedicated and hard-working young Korean professionals. Simultaneous translation into Korean, English, Japanese, and French was provided for all panels. Manuscripts of the panel presentations were made available in a conference catalogue given to all registered participants. In addition, after the forum an edited catalogue addendum containing transcribed Q&A sessions was distributed.

One potential qualm was the general theme of the forum. Just as BIFF holds a position as an important festival for the region, the forum seemed mainly interested in positioning Asian cinema. From a more specific angle, the lack of academic seniority within the forum staff resulted in a somewhat scattered thematic that left ample room for interesting contributions but failed to set a clear overall agenda. Accordingly, in the final round-table discussion, participants offered suggestions for future topics such as new media influences, comparative studies, and research on global trends. Furthermore, a desire was expressed to actively bridge the gap between industry and academia. In this way a conference such as the Busan Cinema Forum could make the best use of the environment of an annual film festival, which sets it apart from regular film studies conferences and offers a unique potential for fascinating intellectual transactions.

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