
Framed Space and Framing Spaces: 61st BFI London Film Festival in Review

By Mina Radovic

A film is being prepared. Red curtains drape in the cinema. Silence exudes through space. Meanwhile tourists stroll just a few feet away, through a quintessentially British lounge - perky, spacious, teeming cold-grays - of the Film Institute on the South Bank. A café flourishes with polemics among friends, the smell of grounded coffee filling the air, a modest attempt to induce the European into the wet sleepy London morning. At other times the café just stays empty. Perhaps it is not the film they came for. However, the films are the main event. Abbas Kiarostami's *24 Frames*, charged with the director's love for painting and photography, begins the proceedings in the main venue on the South Bank. Kiarostami is a name whose grip on Iranian cinema has long been felt: as some critics have pointed out, he is a bridge between the Iranian tradition that includes Dairush Mehrjui and Bahram Beyzai and the new (post-1990s) innovators, from the Makhmalbafs and Bahman Ghobadi to their contemporary heirs. His final film marks - historically - a quiet end to a fine oeuvre.

2017's 61st edition of the BFI London Film Festival screened an immense amount of world cinema in a host of diverse venues, scattered across, more or less, central London. These venues comprised a mix of West End and non-West End theatres, pulpy retro salas and post-modern halls, and some - like the Hackney Picturehouse - that appear old-fashioned on the outside but newfangled on the inside. Most cinemas are within relative walking distance of each other, with the exceptions of those like the Hackney, and the aptly-named Rich Mix, an off-beat kaleidoscopic-patterned cinema stationed near the British Library. While the South Bank is one of the primary venues for new talents, other cinemas do their part in the line-up. The neon-lit Curzon Soho, as well as its more distanced Curzon Chelsea and Mayfair, screen a handful of important new European cinema. Besides smaller, specialized venues, there are the giants in town. The Empire Haymarket and Odeon Leicester Square monoliths together house well over 2000 seats in a space shaped gallantly by classicist atriums. Although typically reserved for blockbuster fare, this festival they were places for showing rarely-seen treasures of world cinema. The 4K restoration of avant-garde Japanese *Funeral Parade of Roses*, directed by Toshio Matsumoto, took on the Empire. It also screened rather expectedly, although appropriately, at the Grecian Institute of Contemporary Arts. Both venues are appropriate for seeing a film which retains a taste of grungy artistic modernism and self-

aggrandizing scope. It is good to see a film that reached from formally breaking *Nuberu bagu* tradition in Japan to exerting influence on the other side of the globe, most considerably Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, back on the screen. The line-up of restorations continued with beautiful piece of British cinema *The L-Shaped Room* (Bryan Forbes, 1962) and stifling pieces of political cinema, including Mauritanian-French *Soleil O* (Med Hondo, 1967) and Cuban *Lucia* (Humberto Solás, 1968), screening in the South Bank. The restorations of diverse traditions meet their modern counterparts in venues that include: the Institute of Contemporary Arts, evocative of ancient tradition; the modern South Bank; and the giant Empire Haymarket.

The avant-garde is perhaps the most difficult of all types of film form to behold or interpret. The festival was not short on avant-garde, or films with pretense to that title, showcasing films that are in the very least experimental with form. Films like *Elegy* (Paul Bush, 2017), *Olly Olly Oxen Free* (Julia Dogra-Brazell, 2017), *Films to Break Projectors* (Ilobia, 2016), *Meridian Plain* (Laura Kraning, 2017) and *Buried in Light* (Gautam Valluri, 2016) all play with (meta) physicality of form, be it in: creating tension between light and darkness, electricity and cranking of machines, film reels, cuts and sparks; collapsing 35mm against 70mm and digital; or simply capturing empty palaces and dark tinted spaces of memory that invoke Robert Beavers. The meaning can often be hard to extract as most of the films rely on their sensory affect, which make some of them reach nearly all the way into one's subconscious, while lacking some of the freshness of touch, formal virility and dry wit that constitute the best of avant-garde cinema. Nonetheless, the stylistic blend of venues, from the gray futurisms (South Bank) to the ultra-modern screens housed within Victorian edifices (Hackney Picturehouse) in which the experimentalists premiered provide the perfect 'enclosure' for their projects. The large block-letter sign outside the Hackney reading 'CINEMA' may as well belong to a Peter Greenaway film, the avant-garde selections premiering within representing a step closer to this self-conscious identification of film and exhibition practice.

Finally, after all the venues and films, one major thing in festival reviews is forgotten: the importance of animation. This festival showed many animations, including endearing pieces from the Netherlands, Spain and Canada. However, two cinematic new-comers prove most perceptive. First, Eva Cvijanović, director of Croatian-Canadian *Hedgehog's Home* adapted a story of Yugoslav writer Branko Ćopić that attends to the quarrels of a hedgehog and a fox. Second, Dimitris Simou, director of the Greek-British *Maybe It's Me*, uses pixilated animation to envision the fragmented nature of memory and time in constituting the soulful relation of a boy and his grandfather.

In the former, the woolly light-shimmering animation of *Hedgehog's Home*, blended with morning-haze candlelight, details a hedgehog trying to preserve its small hut under threat from other animals, led by the fox in a Shakespearan linguistic to-and-fro. The film, however, most of all speaks to the integrity and peace of mind (precisely the Serbo-Croatian 'um') that one needs to guard carefully during times of peace and adversity alike. In other words, it is about 'Imati unustrasnji stav' (loosely translated as 'having an inner stance') which, once acquired, preserves you and those around you. The animation may too easily be compared with Wes Anderson; its semblance is far closer to the innovation, lightness-of-touch and existentiality of subject associated with the Zagreb School of Animation. It possesses a genuine filmmaking, bearing the flare of everyday life and breath of inspiration that needs to be all the more supported in today's industrialization of film form. I look forward to a feature from Cvijanovic, and I hope others get to see this film, along with her equally great personal-documentary *Baka Dana*. In the latter case, the splintering pixilated animation of *Maybe It's Me* brings to life the boy's memories from first and third person perspectives: the small house, the fresh food awaiting the boy, the sitting on the beach - the pain of thistles and sea objects digging into his foot. Chiaroscuro lights the boy's quests through the house of memory. A breakdown process occurs, as animation stops: a voiceover speaking of suffering is contrasted to a physical mouth being drawn, yet still unable to utter words. Pain is felt in the image. The boy has a final embrace with the grandfather whom he tries to retain in his memory, not to forget the inner importance of their relationship. The film represents a fine start in using fragmented animation to engage emotional turmoil. Using the virtues of animation more subtly to transform the end's coldness into warmth, exterior emotional turmoil into inner spiritual warfare, may help the director to build on the human condition painting began with this work.

Overall, the BFI Film Festival of 2017 fused the past with the present: restorations of tradition with the newcomers yet to build tradition. It bore a mix of social realist film, documentary, avant-garde, experimental and animation cinema, all housed within easily accessible, vibrant venues that range from houses of ancient tradition to those with a vital sense of modernity.

Notes on Contributor

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