

CINEFAN 2007

By Gönül Dönmez-Colin

Fall 2007 Issue of KINEMA

OSIAN'S CINEFAN - FESTIVAL OF ASIAN AND ARAB CINEMA

Celebrating its ninth birthday, Osian's Cinefan (New Delhi, 20-29 July 2007) once again confirmed its status as the most important film festival of India with its comprehensive program, select guest list and stimulating conferences and seminars.

The festival, which started as a showcase of Asian cinema has already added a section of Arab cinema to its program a few years ago. This year, Arab films that do not come from the Asian countries were also allowed to enter the competition, which brought a more colorful quality to the program. The fact that a Tunisian filmmaker would share the same concerns with his or her Taiwanese counterpart was another confirmation of the fact that the world was becoming smaller each day and the problems of one country would unavoidably have repercussions on another country, even miles away.

The opening film of the festival was a rare co-production between Iran and Azerbaijan. Although these two countries share a border and many Iranians seem to have an Azeri cousin or a grandfather, co-production had not been on the agenda until now, especially because of the restrictions imposed on cinema in Iran such as the obligation for women to cover their hair on screen regardless of the role they play, or the taboo of touching someone of the opposite sex even though playing the roles of mother and son.

However, the benefit of co-production with Iran is evident for Azerbaijan where filmmaking practically came to a halt after Independence. Babak Shirinsefat, the director of *Raami* was born in Tabriz in Iran, but the subject he deals with in his film is the war of Qarah Bagh that has left deep scars on the population of Azerbaijan. Azeri actor Kamran Younes plays the lead role in this Romeo and Juliet story (equivalent of which is Karam and Asli in the region) about the tragic love between an Azeri man and Armenian woman.

The closing film was *Qas Wi Lazk (Cut and Paste)*, the first feature of a young woman filmmaker from Egypt, Hala Khalil who told the adventures of an unusual couple with ambitions to immigrate to New Zealand. The film was a skillful satire on the economy of the country as well as the age old customs and traditions that are threatened by modernity.

In the competition, the films that left an impression on the jury were also the films liked by the public. Iranian Saeed Ebrahimifar who gained international success with his first film, *Nar o Nay (The Pomegranate and the Cane)*, but was not successful in making another film for many years, finally completed his *Tak-Derakhtha (Lonesome Trees)*, a film that questions the role and conscience of the artist. A parallel theme of the sufferings of the families split apart by immigration brings the film more down to earth. The camera work is exceptional and the flaming 'nar' (pomegranate), which was the essential motive of his first film is also present here as an insignia. The film shared the Special Jury Prize with *Akher Film (Making Of)* by Nouri Bouzid from Tunisia, a film within a film.

Brillante Mendoza from the Philippines who was awarded at the Locarno Film Festival some years ago with *The Masseur* drew attention with *Foster Child* about low income families taking care of unwanted children for pay until a suitable home is found for them. The protagonist Thelma lives a very modest life with her husband Dado and her two sons, therefore she regularly takes in a foster child, however this time she gets attached to the boy more than usual and suffers loss when a rich American couple comes along to adopt him. Just like *The Masseur*, which uses the story of young men who do favors to other men for money, *Foster Child* also is a social commentary on modern life in the Philippines. The exceptional camera work adjusts its pace to the intensity of the events, nervous and swift in the slum scenes reflecting the hustle and bustle of existence, but languid in the scenes taking place around the skyscraper hotels. Cherry Pie Picache, a popular actor of her country was very successful as the foster mother well deserving the Best Actress award of the festival. The Best Actor award was received by the charismatic young actor of *Making of*, Lotfi Dziri.

Pen-ek Ratanaruang from Thailand who made his name in the West with *Fun Bar Karaoke* dealt with husband-wife relations in a rather unusual way in *The Ploy* by imprisoning three characters in a hotel room to investigate how far the feeling of jealousy would go. FIPRESCI chose this film as the best film of the festival for its successful dealing with the subjects of sexuality, risk and renewal in a contemporary urban environment.

The Best Film award of the festival went to Chinese Zhang Lu's *Desert Dream*, which took place in a small village on the border of Mongolia and dealt with human relations focusing on a handful of people who are left behind when most families who are tired of fighting daily with the forces of nature, migrate.

In the first films section, *Woven Stories of the Other* by Sheraad Anthony Sanchez from the Philippines was chosen as the Best First Film for mixing documentary with fiction to narrate the socio-political problems of the country.

Among the Indian films, the Best Film award was given to Ameer Sultan's *Paruthiveeran* for its strong narrative and plastic qualities. Shivajee Chandrabhushan's first venture *Frozen*, which he shot in black and white in Ladakh in the Himalayas received the Special Jury prize, perhaps more for its stunning photography as the script was rather weak and included several loopholes.

In the Frescos section, Kim Ki-Duk's *Time* questioned the obsessions of the modern person with appearances at the expense of human values in a rather macabre story of a young woman who decides to change her face by operation to seduce her boyfriend once again.

A special section was devoted to Japanese cinema as this is the year of Japan in India. Tado Sato, one of the most estimable Japanese film scholars received an award for lifetime achievement while the cinema of Kenji Mizoguchi was honoured with a retrospective. A modern *benshi*, Yuko Saito narrated to the audience Mizoguchi's 1933 film *Water Magician*, which was an unforgettable experience.

The seminar on the beginnings of Asian cinema brought together scholars from Turkey to the Philippines. It was revelatory to exchange information about early filmmaking and amazing to find out that, whether colonized or not, most national film industries began with heavy French monopoly. The issue of archiving seems to be a major problem in all countries. For instance, among all the films made in Japan prior to 1930, only 70 still exist. Another issue that was brought to attention was ownership. For instance, *Laila Majnun* was made in Singapore by an Indian. Would it be an Indian film? Which country would put it in its archives? India or Singapore? Since the copy of the film was lost, the conflict was resolved by itself. According to the Iranian speaker, the history of Iranian cinema was more tragic than an Indian melodrama.

The exposition of posters was another attraction for the guests of this festival that stretched over nine days. Japanese posters of the films from the West, particularly those showing sex idols like Marilyn Monroe in her classic poses but with Japanese captions were particularly delightful.

Author Information

Gönül DÖNMEZ-COLIN is an independent researcher and writer whose publications include *Women, Islam and Cinema*, *Cinemas of the Other: A personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia*, *Cinema of North Africa and the Middle East* (ed.); *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (Reaktion Books), and *Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema* (2014).