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16th Kolkata Film Festival
Kolkata, India, 10-17 November 2010

A Festival Report by Saayan Chattopadhyay, Baruipur College, Calcutta University

It was not really unexpected, when it was declared that the Kolkata Film Festival (KFF) would be subjected to downsizing. In fact, it is primarily a government-sponsored event and, in the present economic conditions, private companies are simply reluctant to invest lump sums in a film festival. The indispensable financial frugality that is taking place in virtually every sector has, naturally, started to creep into annual cultural programmes that largely depend on government funding, and the Kolkata Film Festival was no exception. Consequently, the festival's programme was significantly reduced: very few foreign delegates were present at the venue and the promotional campaign was negligible. The consensus among many critics and regular festival-goers is that this year's petit line-up has been too meagre for an annual international film festival organised by the State government. Neither the usual glittering spectacle of the West Bengal Film Centre, popularly known as Nandan, nor the international stars, nor the professional film market were there. But, for the local audiences, made dependent on pirated DVDs and downloads to see all but a handful of new foreign films every year, the festival remains a rare opportunity to see a wider range of contemporary foreign films on the big screen, no matter how particular the selection.

Now in its sixteenth year, KFF has long since established itself as one of the foremost venues for film lovers of this part of the world. This year too, the films—127 films from 38 countries—were categorised into a number of sections that included retrospectives on Akira Kurosawa, Alain Resnais, Costa Gavras, Liv Ullman, Debaki Kumar Bose, among others, and special sections on films based on works by Rabindranath Tagore and literary works by Nobel laureates.

It was the section entitled "Focus", showcasing films by John Jost (who was also present at the festival and took part in sessions with the audience) that received a particularly warm reception, especially among the film students. The local audience had hardly had the opportunity to watch his films previous to this occasion. The package included six films ranging from his early 1970s films to his most recent offering. In *The Bed You Sleep In* (1993), Jon Jost put together lingering, somewhat disaffected images of the almost deserted industrial town, tranquil long takes of the blossoming and picturesque north-western countryside, with elliptical and consciously fragmented episodes of a middle-aged, inconspicuous independent contractor's business and familial life to reveal the complex, often contradictory interlinks between self-reliance and survival, individualism and lawlessness, self-discipline and morality. The film ends with a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Every violation of the truth is not only a sort of suicide in the liar, but is a stab at the health of human society". This quotation effectively summarises the anxieties of *The Bed You Sleep In*,

which illustrates not only an infringement of filial relationships, but, more significantly, a continuing and allegedly incompatible disagreement between private industry and environmental protection to broadly connect the intricate issues of personal and global accountability and stability.

However, it was *All the Vermeers in New York* (1990) that engaged the local audience more than any other of Jon Jost's films. *All the Vermeers in New York* is an allegory of the slip-ups of life happening around a Vermeer portrait at the Metropolitan museum of art in late 1980s New York. Anna, a French actress studying in New York, accidentally bumps into a successful Wall Street stockbroker, Mark, standing before a Vermeer portrait at the museum. What follows is a curious relationship of ignored meanings and painful reality, with frequent asides to the cultural politics of the arts world and the stock market in the 1980s and, perhaps, somewhere in between all of these, love. However, I have to admit that the audience in this region, so used to the regular dose of popular mainstream Bollywood and Hollywood, with their features of pacing, editing and mise-en-scène, found the meditative quality of Jost's films quite tedious. Hence, although the auditorium was enthusiastically full at the beginning of his films, before long some members of the audience left the show, unable to bear what a fellow filmgoer described as, "an assault on your senses".

Nevertheless, the assorted collection of films in the contemporary world cinema section provided adequate excitement and, at times, pure entertainment that helped the audience to elude the melancholic and gloomy mood evoked by Jon Jost's films. While it was virtually impossible to watch all of the films or even all of the good ones, with such a long list of titles and venues scattered all around the city, in this report I will try to make my way through the programme by discussing the films I have been able to watch within particular (albeit loose) thematic clusters. Nonetheless, I must confess at the onset of my report, the official festival schedule did not provide such thematic subdivisions.

This year, a number of films dealt with the common theme of the uncertainties and anxieties that run parallel to the hopes and desires associated with migration. For a large number of people in the developing world, the West remains the "promised land", the "Eden"; eventually, they struggle to come to terms with the awareness of their delusion or, on the contrary, perhaps to effectively maintain their illusion. I was able to see two of such films; and, perhaps, the best two of the lot, as *She, a Chinese* (2009) and *Eden is West* (2009) were major draws. Already a much-acclaimed film on the festival circuit, *She, a Chinese*, by novelist and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo, was significantly popular among the festival audience. In a minimalist style, Guo tells the peculiarly spirited story of Li Mei, played by Lu Huang, a young woman who travels from an isolated Chinese town to the West and enchanting London, just to find it as exploitive and forbidding as the place she left. Guo has successfully rendered an uncanny visual and, in turn, ideological similarity between the remote Chinese village and the glitzy London neighbourhood, suggesting that it is all the same in the eyes of those living on the periphery.

Almost on the same theme, a more vibrant yet in no way less effective film was Costa-Gavras's *Eden is West*. Playfully combining the potentially troublesome blend of fairytale with social realism, *Eden is West* portrays the adventurous journey—by the illegal immigrant Elias, whose name is very interestingly mispronounced as "Alias"—from the Aegean coast to Paris, to find a magician who once promised him a better life. Elias turns out to be an instrument in other people's search for meaning, as each time he meets new people on his voyage to Paris he make a fresh start: he adopts a new identity and a new vision. The

camera closely pursues him, each movement is steeped in anticipation and angst, and through his eyes the modern world appears unpredictable yet utterly wonderful, almost magical.

A similarly bittersweet approach to life may be traced in a number of films included in the contemporary world cinema category. Directed by Sangeeta Dutta, *Life Goes On* (2010), loosely based on William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, tells the story of an affluent Bengali family in London and what happens when, one fine morning, the mother (played very elegantly by Sharmila Tagore) suddenly collapses on the kitchen floor and dies, leaving behind her husband and three daughters. *Life Goes On* portrays the suddenness of death and the act of mourning in snippets of sounds, images and dialogues. However, I found several scenes connecting the mother's memories to the present times to be predictable, and on occasion even artificial. Nonetheless, the film attains a polished look that is especially noteworthy for a debutant director, and is a tasteful and sensitive portrayal of mourning and of reconciliation with life.

A similarly poetic, but a lot more amusing, film was *Birds of the Nile* (1999), which belongs to a series of films by Magdy Ahmed Ali that tell the stories of middleclass Egyptians grappling to get hold of moments of happiness regardless of the difficulty they go through. *Birds of the Nile* is an ill-fated love story between Abdel Rehim, a naïve but high-spirited Egyptian, played with élan by Fathi Abdel Wahab, and a delightfully enigmatic femme fatale, Bassima, played by Abir Sabry. The two lovers constantly unite and then break up in different contexts, and then again meet after a fairly long time as two terminally ill patients in the same hospital. Through the romantic adventures of Abdel Rehim over a period of almost forty years, the narrative, with some truly hilarious moments, depicts the inner world of a middle-class Egyptian family living at the margins, and delicately renders the social and political reality that is continuously transforming itself around these clueless individuals.

At this stage, and on a lighter note, I have to mention *The Legend is Alive* (2009). Kolkata has always loved martial arts films, so *The Legend is Alive*, by that virtue alone, made its way to the upper half of the popular must-see list. Directed by Vietnamese director, Luu Huynh, *The Legend is Alive* is the story of a mentally challenged boy who learnt martial arts from his mother after failing in school. Following the death of his mother, he sets off on his own, ardently adhering to his mother's principle that fighting is bad and should only be a last resort for the sake of self-defence. But, when his newfound girlfriend is kidnapped by delinquents involved in illegal prostitution, his rigorous childhood training makes him a hard-hitting adversary for the organised crime, in spite of his weakness. In truth, *The Legend is Alive* was not a film to be debated over or commented on for hours after it was screened; but, it was perhaps a surprise entry into this year's film schedule and the packed-to-the-brim auditorium simply loved the film as they kept on applauding and rolling in laughter (even during the serious moments) throughout the film. Let us say, it was a welcome comic relief from the series of highbrow, intellectually demanding cinema screened at the festival.

On a more serious note, being organised in a state that has been under a thirty-four-year-long communist regime, KFF has always featured a number of films on historical oppressions and revolutions. But, this year, when a strong wind of political transformation is blowing, the films on people's uprising and revolt perhaps took on a different meaning altogether for the local audience. Directed by Miguel Littin, *Dawson Island 10* (2009) is based on the autobiographical book, *Isla 10* by a former Allende cabinet minister who, subsequent to the 1973 Pinochet military coup, was banished to an isolated concentration

camp on the austere, menacing tundra region of Dawson Island. Once the prisoners stepped into the camp, they were identified only by the name of their barracks and a number, with former mining minister Sergio Bitar obtaining the titular "Dawson Island 10". Benjamin Vicuna gives a powerful performance as Sergio Bitar, whose writings supplied the details of his confinement. Littin skilfully portrays the confusion and fretfulness of the prisoners with frequent use of black and white, a washed-out look and a handheld camera that mostly stays near to the characters. Definitely, *Dawson Island 10* has a documentary feel to it, which can be a little alienating for some; however, Littin successfully made the film a harrowingly realistic account of people's suffering and a celebration of their undying spirit.

All That I Love (2009) was a festival favourite this year, and the prolonged applause at the end of the film proved that beyond doubt. While the autobiographical third feature by Jacek Borcuch has an apparently clichéd narrative, which tells the story of Janek, a young man living in the Communist Bloc in 1980s Poland, it stands out in many respects, from Borcuch's directorial work and an incredible performance by Mateusz Kościukiewicz, who plays Janek, to a wonderful score by Daniel Bloom. None of these elements make seem like a cliché the film, which otherwise narrates a predictable coming-of-age story of a teenage boy in times of social change, who finds an outlet through his music in a punk band he sets up with his friends. While his girlfriend, a leading intellectual, admires his musical rebellion, his father, an officer in the military, accepts it with affable bewilderment. Eventually, as the Solidarity Party grows in power and Poland is on the verge of declaring martial law, it becomes more difficult for Janek to disregard the outside world. What really works for the film is its sheer rawness that gives a truly emotional sense of how a creative act may become a catalyst for transformation, for freedom, and for compassion; and, in this sense, *All That I Love* appears an invigorating manifesto.

This year at KFF, a number of films dealt in a painfully realistic manner with the everydayness of trauma and with fears that each one of us encounters or is afraid to encounter. Simone Horrocks's debut feature, *After the Waterfall* (2010), is one such forceful, bold and poignant film that tells the story of a missing child and a traumatised family and community. Similarly, *Leo's Room* (2009), directed by Enrique Buchichio, empathetically portrays the anxiety of discovering one's own identity and sexuality. *Leo's Room* is a simple story, told with honesty and compassion. However, it was an Israeli film, *Phobidilia* (2009), which became my personal favourite. Directed by Yoav and Doron Paz, popularly known as the Paz Brothers, it tells the story of a young computer programmer, Wainblum, who decides to live his entire life locked up inside his rented flat, watching television, eating take-away food, chatting on the internet and masturbating while talking with his virtual "girlfriend" Jessica through a webcam. Peculiar it may sound, but his life is a happy one. "Phobidilia" is a blend of "phobia" and "idyll", as Wainblum is too scared to live in the outside world, but is able to create his own, personal paradise, where he can live a "safe and secure" life. The film compellingly asks some pressing questions about the ways technology gradually destroys our relationships by minimising traditional human interactions and, perhaps more importantly, about how our "real" identity is ultimately unreal. *Phobidilia* also tries to bring to light the question of gender with all its constructedness, and hints at the generational confrontation among the young Israelis, who look at life in a completely different manner.

Like always, a number of activities and programmes relating to cinema were arranged every day of this seven-day festival. Regular open forums and seminars discussed diverse issues ranging from politics, censorship and the impact of modern technology on cinema to the issue of film criticism and the condition of contemporary regional cinema. Press

conferences on a daily basis brought face-to-face those directors who were present at the festival, like Jon Jost, Lenka Kny and filmmakers from Bangladesh, along with Indian directors, film scholars and local cinephiles. There is no question that the number of foreign delegates was much less than in previous years, owing to the state government's decision to curtail the budget; however, most of the interactive sessions, where I was able to be present, were engaging enough.

The logistical problems, a common complaint against KFF every year, were unfortunately not polished off as a number of films were imperfectly projected: there were often problems with sound, and interruptions were frequent. To top it all off, there were several last-minute changes in the schedule this year, resulting in confusion and, often, public squabble. Arguably, however, today more than ever, what is very badly needed is to find sites and events, no matter how shoddy and imperfect, where the cinema can be subtracted from its instrumental role as a mere consumer good. Even though the films selected were not as compelling as in the previous years, it was certainly a great joy to get involved in the earnest and intense film culture here in Kolkata, if only for a few days.

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