



Festival Review: TIFF 2013, The Neoliberal Labyrinth of Cinema

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Abstract

"TIFF's history coincides with the rise of national cinema in Canada. Since its foundation in 1976, it has played a large role in promoting homegrown talents and introducing them to international markets. Although it's difficult to talk about the binding principles that define the Canadianness in Canadian films, we can still conclude that the "Canadian film canon has been predominantly bicultural" (Czach 1994: 81). This dual-cinemas tradition, (Anglo-Canadian and Quebecois), challenges the classic notion of national cinemas, where a cultural and/or national unity and homogeneity are the defining norms. But where do festivals like TIFF come into play?"

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International film festivals are places to discover unfamiliar cultures, tastes and visions embedded within select films, lectures and events from around the world. One steps into a concentrated world of cinema, able to choose from a myriad of films, directors and schedules laid before us. For a first-timer, a festival like TIFF might be a daunting experience, as there were 372 films (288 feature-length) from 70 different countries to watch within 10 days. Considering 93% of the films were having their World, North American or Canadian Premieres, it would have been frustrating to chase the screenings without a neatly worked-out schedule.

TIFF 2013 employed around 2500 volunteers to coordinate the event and used 28 screens for a total of 31,362 minutes of film (TIFF Fact Sheet). TIFF's volunteer system is the backbone of the festival's organizational success, as this kind of manpower enables the river of people to flow into beds of auditoriums smoothly, without getting lost in the busy streets of downtown Toronto. This laborious duty is acknowledged with loud applause each time the volunteer teaser is screened before every film.

International Film Festivals like TIFF endeavor to turn the strange into the familiar, and the distant into the local at least for the duration of the festival. Through its style, language, content and storytelling, the filmic text becomes a dialogical tool, with the audience as the willing participant. By "strange", I do not necessarily mean the cultural or the social impact on the audiences; film festivals can be shelters from the hegemony of mainstream cinema, which dominates our everyday life, be it on TV, or in printed media. Therefore, apart from the language of characters within a certain film, there's the language of cinema that is part of the filmgoer's experience.

Bill Nichols defines this experience in the following way:

“Like the tourist we hope to go behind appearances, to grasp the meaning of things as those who present them would, step outside our (inescapable) status as outsiders and diagnosticians to attain a more intimate, more authentic form

of experience. Festivals, like museums and tourist sites, foster and accommodate such desire. A festival allows us a “back region” glimpse into another culture through the filmmakers and actors it presents in person.” (Nichols 1994: 19)

According to Nichols, every film establishes two types of dialogue, one with the content through the actors and the subject matter; and the second, with the filmmaker through the film language and his/her stylistic choices. We also have to include here a third party for the purpose of understanding the film festival, and that’s the programmer, who decides on the exclusion or the inclusion of the films.

TIFF’s position within the Cinema Ecosystem.

TIFF’s history coincides with the rise of national cinema in Canada. Since its foundation in 1976, it has played a large role in promoting homegrown talents and introducing them to international markets. Although it’s difficult to talk about the binding principles that define the Canadianness in Canadian films, we can still conclude that the “Canadian film canon has been predominantly bicultural” (Czach 1994: 81). This dual-cinemas tradition, (Anglo-Canadian and Quebecois), challenges the classic notion of national cinemas, where a cultural and/or national unity and homogeneity are the defining norms. But where do festivals like TIFF come into play?

Charles Acland in his 2002 article states that “the long history of the US presence is perhaps the most visible manifestation of cultural absence in Canadian film. Our cinema missing in action from traditional commercial exhibition channels, occupies only two to three percent of the theatrical market.” (Ackland 2002:2) Ackland stresses two absences; one is the lack of cultural components in Canadian film and the other is the lack of theatres showing Canadian films. Therefore since its establishment in 1976, TIFF has “played a key role in attempting to build a distinctively Canadian cinema” (Czach 1994: 82) By the inclusion of more homegrown talents growing in number, the festival serves as a meeting point for critics, academics and filmmakers. The talks and lectures during the festival provide a venue for the valuable input of new talent in Canadian cinema. Though we can’t easily define the exact contribution of TIFF in forming the Canadian Film canon, one conclusion we can safely reach is that it has become a major hub for Canadian films to be encountered not only by an international audience but also the Canadian public. The total submission of Canadian films, this year, was 1042, (up

from 952 in 2012) which was one fifth of the total number of 4,892 submissions. And this year's TIFF has exhibited 31 Canadian features (24 World Premieres) and 42 Canadian shorts. Therefore, 73 films out of 372 were Canadian.

Another important factor that defines the TIFF experience is the screening spaces, primarily located in two giant multiplexes, which Ackland calls 'shrunk amusement parks'. As of 2010, with the opening of the TIFF Bell Lightbox building, TIFF has settled permanently into the Entertainment District, one of the busiest neighborhoods in Toronto. This change of locale from Yorkville to the city center combined with the employment of multiplex movie theatres have changed the experience of TIFF. Although multiplexes have been a growing trend since the 90's, their definitive hegemony started in the 2000's. Today, the two main spaces where TIFF exhibits its films, are the TIFF Bell Lightbox and ScotiaBank Theatre, which host 18 of the 23 screens during the festival. This means that a regular TIFF-goer would spend 78% of his/her time in one of the two multiplex cinemas located within the entertainment district.

These mall-like entities are now part of cinema culture, where the festival experience resembles the act of shopping. Moving from one small auditorium to another you're forced to experience these neoliberal structures. Within this bizarre universe the street and the cinema become distant strangers, where the dark hallways, shop-like screening rooms, and giant walls define the setting of your festival experience. Therefore since its move from less crowded Yorkville to downtown Toronto, the TIFF experience has become part of a more global trend of isolation. One of the filmgoers I talked to, explained the situation with the following words: "We use to know each other in Yorkville, had time to sit in a café on the street and chat about films, now we just pass each other in hectic labyrinths".

TIFF, with its giant multiplexes located in downtown Toronto, is the city's pride and joy, according to the Artistic Director of TIFF, Cameron Bailey: "In Toronto, size affords diversity. By global standards, we're not a huge city but we're big enough to accommodate some of the world's largest immigrant communities from China, India, Italy, Jamaica, Tibet and many other locales. There are 140 languages and dialects spoken daily in Toronto. There's one of the world's largest Pride parades. That's what big gets you." (Official Film Schedule, TIFF 2013). By equating quality to size, and diversity to numbers, we end up with

an age-old puzzle: Can the film experience be measured in figures? Can we call a film festival an “experience of diversity”, when they are encapsulated into giant malls? This and similar questions will prevail as film festivals accommodate the global world of cinema. However, for the old-fashioned filmgoer, the experience certainly changed a long time ago.

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