

Interview

Alan Franey, Vancouver International Film Festival

For this issue, the Cinephile editors had a chance to sit down with the head of the Vancouver International Film Festival's Director of International Programming, Alan Franey, and ask him a few questions about the shifting nature of cinema and the necessity of film festival communities.

Through VIFF, how would you say current filmmakers are pushing boundaries and testing the limits of cinema?

I think it's important to say (in these days of so much hype about change and boundary-pushing and cinema changing), that I think the main part of cinema is actually not changing that much. I think people still have expectations to see a film on a big screen, with good sound and picture, and that's been established for decades. So, one question is: how people are watching films on other devices? But that doesn't interest me particularly. We at the film festival are trying to preserve the big-screen experience, and from that point of view, I think that cinema has been a mix of things right from the beginning. There's been the experimental tendency and the conservative tradition, and that doesn't mean good film and bad film. So it really depends, at a festival as large as this, on many different types of cinema. So, if you look at the most popular and best attended films, year after year they're usually fairly straightforward dramas.

How do you think personal digital video technologies (i.e. smartphone cameras, video calling, etc.) have informed film and filmmaking techniques and aesthetics?

I think that as we've seen the means of production become democratized through technology, as people are capable of shooting amazing quality videos on their phones, that has had a lot of influence on how films are made. Again, we need to

remember the longer perspective: there were mobile cameras and people doing mobile-style filmmaking since the dawn of cinema. Some people take advantage of it, some people prefer more stable cameras, etc. The Hollywood model is to spend a lot of money on the gear. You don't need to do that anymore. Whether all films suit that more improvised aesthetic is another question. I'm quite happy to see hand-held and complicated mise-en-scene since the syntax of film can be quite complicated now and people can follow it. So, yes, it's been very freeing. One thing, though, is that people on the inside probably care more about what cameras are used to shoot films than fans. However, art transcends these things. Most people don't care if things are shot digitally [rather than on film]....I think only a very trained eye can tell the difference. So, personally, I think it's a time of great possibility and great change, though somehow, people return to the basics. They want to be able to see a stable image that's got some poetry and beauty and meaning to it. And films that are too busy trying to be digital or informed by more complicated aesthetics sometimes aren't appreciated as much. So it's a very paradoxical situation in a way...I don't think stories are the most interesting things in a film. Most films interest me for their formal elements. But I don't think most people think about those things that much...they're more concerned about an engaging story.

Recently, many critics have discussed the incorporation of cinematic elements into videogames, and of videogame imagery into cinema--what do you make of this growing relationship between videogame aesthetics and cinema? Do you see this trend at work in VIFF films?

Yeah, to tell you the truth, I think that's really old hat. I think Hollywood films over the past 30 years have definitely been influenced by video games. I personally don't like many of those...you could say the same things about Hong Kong films being based on Kung Fu. It just gets really tedious after a while. I don't think the gaming experience, basically, when it informs film is that new or interesting. The films that are playing with other media more effectively are fewer and far between. The interesting thing, too, for me, is that a lot of the gaming experience is great because it's interactive, whereas that's a problematic thing in cinema. The interactive films that I have seen are few and far between, and the ones that are worth watching are even rarer. So...I think there's a very intentional qualitative difference between cinema and other forms of moving images. Obviously there's a lot of influence between the two, but I would argue that it's not something that's brand new or that I see a huge amount of promise in. I like the stability and poetry that comes along with standard cinema.

The concept of a “Canadian identity” is an ambiguous one--no real definition exists. How does this translate into Canadian cinema, as in VIFF’s True North program?

I think it’s refreshing to see Canadian films become a bit more like how we think of other, more advanced cinema cultures, where French films don’t necessarily have to be telling French stories. A lot of American films are set in other places and at other times. So I’m glad to see that Canadian cinema is more and more reflective of global realities and a very mixed cultural population. So the fact that one of the most popular Canadian films this year was set in China...I think that’s healthy. Canadian films are better appreciated at the festival than they once were. It used to be hard to pull audiences into Canadian films, even though there was a lot of interesting work being done. In my opinion, there are still too many Canadian films being made that are too screenplay-based, so it’s nice to see films that transcend that. Screenplays are important, but you don’t want to have a film that feels like a televisual experience.

As an international film festival, VIFF screens productions from all over the world. Could you speak to the experience of community-building these festivals bring about? Why do we still need film festivals?

Well, I think that the operative word there is not just “film,” but “festival.” People love events, and they love the opportunity to share experiences. Why do filmmakers make films in the first place? They’re trying to communicate, they’re trying to share. The film’s not really completed until it’s observed, seen, and shared by people. If you’re doing that communally, at a movie theatre, there’s a powerful opportunity there. We all watch things at home...that’s fine. But the great thing about seeing a film at a festival is the collective nature of it. First of all, it’s an opportunity to see a film with other people, and that can be quite a different experience. Laughter can be quite contagious...horror, moral outrage. Human emotion can all be amplified by how other people in the room are responding. It can sometimes be an alienating experience, but more often than not, it’s interesting to feel part of a group. The other thing is that, at a festival, the filmmakers are often there. So that, to me, is a big, big plus. Occasionally, the Q&As are as memorable as the movie, and really open your eyes to parts of the film you didn’t see.

It has to be said, too, that a lot of these films aren’t available elsewhere. A lot of good films are made that don’t get an opportunity to find an audience. We’re able to provide a place for them here.

