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Paris Cinéma: Added Value through Repackaging and Subsidies¹

Dina Iordanova

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There is no better city than Paris for cinéphiles (knowing French helps). The city's three-hundred-plus screens reveal a perpetual abundance of new and re-mastered releases from every conceivable film tradition. Being in Paris means having access to a never-ending film festival. Here, one can see every recent film of importance and can gain exposure to every important director. The best of European cinema and American indies, the newest Asian and Latin American pictures, they all play here, alongside a rich selection of 'festival' series of selected classics programmed at the thirty-odd repertory cinemas that are committed to showcasing seventh art's heritage. Members of the respective diasporas get the chance to see all noteworthy new films from their countries of origin, be it Brazil, Russia or China; various cinemas engage in regular replays of classics from Argentina, Poland, and Japan. And then, there is the incredible *Cinémathèque* at Bercy, with its Frank Gehry-designed building, featuring thoroughly researched extensive panoramas of the work of directors, actors or producers, and with its long-standing strand called 'Permanent History of Cinema': in its programming, the *Cinémathèque* outshines most festivals that I know of. And then, there is the newly refurbished five-screen *Forum des Images*, an extravaganza of modern architecture, an oasis of cinematic calm amidst the crazed rush of Les Halles. In the summer of 2009 it

¹ Research for this piece was sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust as part of *Dynamics of World Cinema*. See <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/worldcinema>.

ran a 100-title strong panorama of revenge films, selected from a wealth of countries and periods.

Between one third and half of the cinemas in Paris (which would put the figure at between thirty to fifty sites) can be classed in the 'repertory' category and are committed to showing a selection of films that fit the artistic criteria of cinéphiles involved in running the cinema. Take *Le Brady*, for example, a cinema located in one of the roughest parts of the city and owned by maverick director Jean-Pierre Mocky, which this summer featured a Bollywood extravaganza alongside the French modern classic *Welcome* (2009) and the socially critical little-seen omnibus film *All the Invisible Children* (2005), which the cinema has been committed to screening once a week over a long period of time. One-screen cinemas like *Studio Galande* or *Denfert* play in-house programming which revolves around showing five different films every day (or thirty different films every week): visiting these cinemas is like going to a film festival. Last but not least, there are also the selections of films from the big festivals (Cannes, most importantly) that arrive in Paris soon after the festival closes and play, for the favor of those who have not made it to the festival, in a series of select screenings at *Cinema de cinéastes* or at the *Cinémathèque*. Thus, in Paris one can be *au courant* with the latest festival offerings without ever leaving the city.

One wonders why on earth someone would want to start a film festival here, given the idiosyncratic perpetual 'festival' that Parisian cinemas offer round the year?² Now in its seventh edition, *Paris Cinéma* has been in existence since 2003, financed

² Information about Paris Cinéma is available at <http://www.pariscinema.org/>.

primarily by the City of Paris and under the patronage of British-French actress Charlotte Rampling; it has benefited from the personal commitment of the city's industrious and energetic mayor, Bernard Delanoë, the man who brought to town the eco-friendly *vélib* scheme that makes bicycles available to all those who want to ride them around town. The festival runs over two weeks in July; lots of funds are poured into publicity activities meant to make their presence known on the overcrowded cultural horizon. The festival's logo is featured on the cover of *Pariscope*, the weekly culture guide, and on posters around town. While virtually unknown internationally, the festival enjoys decent coverage by the French media, due to the promotional campaign carried out by its staff consisting of experienced festival professionals (after all, with over 300 film festivals in France, Paris probably has the highest concentration of highly skilled festival practitioners).

Nonetheless, in the context of a city like Paris the festival remains of little consequence and notice; it is difficult to add more to a place that already has so much going on. Unlike the film festivals in Berlin, Toronto, Pusan or Karlovy Vary, *Paris Cinéma* does not delineate the city's cultural profile and it is unlikely that it would ever become an event of definitive importance. It seems then, that *Paris Cinéma* mostly adds value by providing a better 'frame' (*cadre*) to cinéphilia, by making access to cinema more affordable to audiences, and by subsidizing the exhibition sector.

City-linked festivals usually try to consolidate around a dedicated location and limit their geographical spread to sites that are close to each other and easy to commute in-between, so as to provide a manageable space for exchanges between the guests. *Paris Cinéma*, however, is stretched among venues that are scattered around half of the

city's twenty *arrondissements*, and even in two *banlieu* locations (Montreuil; Bobigny). The festival's impromptu headquarters (several stands with festival materials, served by interns) is at the *MK2 Bibliotheque* in the 13th, one of the largest and nicest cinema complexes in the city controlled by Marin Karmitz, a savvy businessman who knows how to bring together the best of both worlds (he would screen here the latest Hollywood hits while simultaneously providing exhibition space for French cinema and international indie features). Located in the vicinity of the Bercy Cinémathèque and the François Mitterrand National Library, the venue provides half of its fourteen screens to the festival, along with space for socializing, exhibitions, and film-related browsing (the site hosts stores for DVDs, film books, and memorabilia). On one of the last days of the festival, the square in front of the building was turned into a flea market for cinéphiles (*La brocante cinéma*). Yet, non-festival screenings keep going on at the same time, and many viewers come and go without realizing a film festival is taking place; even though large-size photo portraits of some of the featured guests are displayed in front, most of the passersby barely pay attention. One cannot feel much of the festival fever. Apart from those directly involved with it, the festival's presence is felt even less in other parts of town.

All in all, the venues of *Paris Cinéma* seemed to be doing their usual thing. Take *Le Balzac*, for example, one of the most renowned Parisian film exhibition establishments.³ Just off the Champs Elysees, the cinema has been hosting its famed series of ciné-concerts since 2005, a cinematic delight where rare silent films are

³ See my profile of the cinema, *Le Balzac, rue Balzac, 8^{eme}, Paris* at *DinaView*, 28 October 2008, Available: <http://www.dinaview.com/?p=85>. For archival listing of all ciné-concerts since 2005, see <http://www.cinemabalzac.com/public/musique/cineconcerts.php>.

screened accompanied by live music. Since 2008 the ciné-concert of July has been taking place 'in the context' (*dans le cadre*) of *Paris Cinéma*. In 2009, it presented three early features by Kenji Mizoguchi, a rare treat. As with all other ciné-concerts, owner Jean-Jacques Schpoliansky was in the foyer welcoming guests. And, as with the other ciné-concerts, the musicians involved were those who are already engaged by the cinema: Japanese pianist Eri Kozaki, Maghrébin percussionist Aidje Tafial, and so on. The screening that I attended (featuring Mizoguchi's 1929 *Tokyo koshin-kyoku/ Tokyo March* and the 1935 melodrama *Orizuru Osen/ The Downfall of Osen*) was a truly wonderful experience of the highest quality, an excellent event, like all other ciné-concerts. I wonder, however, if it would not have happened without the auspices of the Festival, *dehors le cadre*, so to say?

Other venues were, likewise, doing more of their own thing, only now in festival packaging. *Le Nouveau Latina* in Marais, for example, is specialized in showing mostly films from Italy and Spanish-speaking countries. 'In the frame' of the festival, the cinema played a number of films by directors from these countries (in a series which features films that have already been purchased for distribution and are to be released later in the year); it also hosted an homage to Catalan producer Lluís Miñarro. The one-screen *Studio des Ursulines* in the 5th is well renowned for its commitment to scheduling programs for younger audiences. No wonder then that the festival's series for children, *CinéMômes*, was mostly confined to this cinema: the films that screened this summer were shown here in the context of the cinema's traditional showcasing of children's films and animation from around the globe; the event dedicated to three key animation studios from Japan (Toei, Ghibli and Mad House) would have probably taken place at *Des Ursulines* anyhow; now it was packaged as part of the festival.

The same pattern could be discovered in the other sections: country focus, retrospectives and re-releases:

- Every year France's cultural ministry undertakes to highlight the culture of a certain nation, and in 2009 the country in focus happens to be Turkey. *Paris Cinéma*, no wonder, featured a series of screenings and events dedicated to Turkish cinema – with a coordinated release of a *Cahiers du Cinéma* booklet on Turkish film, a masterclass by Nuri Bilge Ceylan and visits by other distinguished Turkish filmmakers, as well as a series of popular super-hero Turkish titles, which screened at *Max Linder Panorama*, a cinema located in the vicinity of the Turkish ethnic neighborhood.⁴

- The retrospective of iconic French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud ran at *Reflét Medici*, a cinema that organizes similar panoramas and specialized series all year round. In August, for example, soon after the closure of *Paris Cinéma*, *Reflét Medici* held further retrospectives of directors René Allio and Claude Goretta.

- A strand in the festival program was dedicated to re-releases, where Parisians are treated to newly re-mastered classical films, shown on the big screen. A range of superb re-releases featured as part of the festival. Many of them, however, continued screening at the same sites after the end of the festival: Ettore Scola's *Brutti, sporchi e cattivi* (1976) and Pietro Germi's *Signore e Signori* (1965) were at *Le Latina* throughout July and into August. Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) played at the festival while simultaneously

⁴ Another large cultural event that took place in Lille in the summer of 2009, *Lille3000*, also featured an extensive Turkish presence.

showing at *MacMahon*, a cinema that was not a festival venue. In contrast, the most hyped re-release of July 2009, Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (1953), played at a number of cinemas around Paris during the festival, but was not part of the festival's 'package'.

The logical question seems, then, what is the added value of a festival that, unlike others that celebrate cinematic art by bringing unavailable films to local audiences, seems mostly to serve as a wrapper for films and events that would be available to Parisians anyhow? *Paris Cinéma* 'frames' things that are already bound to happen, it repackages by bringing events under its 'umbrella'. Apparently, this is the way in which it adds value. Probably, and more importantly, it has come up with an elegant way to subsidize the participating venues. The full ticket price at these cinemas at *MK2* *Bibliothèque* is €9.80, at *Le Balzac* it is €9, at *Reflét Medici*, €8.90, at *Studio des Ursulines*, €7.60, and so on. In contrast, the entry price for all screenings and events at *Paris Cinéma* is set at €5, and an unlimited pass costs only €25. By way of comparison, at *Berlinale* tickets for public screenings cost between €7 and €11, the festival sells no passes, and those accredited need to pay a fee of €50 to be able to access screenings. At Rotterdam, the tickets cost €9 and the price is reduced to €6 for those who have purchased the *Tijgerpas* for €15.⁵ Even subsidy-receiving festivals, like the one in Douarnenez, Brittany, which use public halls or screen in open air at the central square of town, charge €6. A heavily subsidized festival of human rights films at *Des Ursulines* in June 2009 could not lower the prices below €6. By all standards, then, *Paris Cinéma* seems to be the most affordable film festival in France. Or, rather, Paris seems to be the

⁵ Both *Berlinale* and Rotterdam are heavily subsidized.

city that is most conscious of the need to keep its cinemas alive and well, by creating a pretext to subsidize the wonderful cinéphilia that its brave exhibitors are already involved with, by packaging it all as a 'festival'.

Contributor details

Dina Iordanova edits *The Film Festival Yearbook* and directs the Centre for Film Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland's oldest University.

Contact details

Prof. Dina Iordanova
Film Studies, University of St. Andrews
99 North Street, St. Andrews, Fife
KY16 9AD, Scotland, UK
di1@st-andrews.ac.uk