The first Tokyo International Film Festival

Canadian cinema's rising sun

by Camille Gueymard
From May 31 to June 9, Tokyo hosted its first international film festival.

For the occasion, Shibuya, the animated Tokyo neighborhood where the event took place, adopted a festive air— its streets were decorated with banners, posters and television sets displaying trailers of the films. Videotext terminals could be found at major intersections and provided moviegoers with programme and schedule information on the eight movie halls, each within walking distance of the others, where the different sections of the festival were screened. As the 30th Asian-Pacific Film Festival and the 8th Pia Film Festival were also held concurrently, several department stores also joined in presenting film-related events ranging from a Universal Studios festival to an Akira Kurosawa exhibition.

Organized around seven groupings of films, of which Young Cinema ’85 was the only competitive section, the first Tokyo International Film Festival (TIFF) concluded with a flourish for Canadians Jean Beaudry and François Bouvier, whose film Jacques et Novembre was screened in the Young Cinema ’85 section (and is now on to the Mannheim fest), were honoured with a special jury award. Presenting this award, British film producer David Puttnam, on behalf of the jury, saluted “two filmmakers whose brilliant movie helps span the bridge that exists between television and film.” Puttnam expressed his hopes for the next film by the Quebecois co-directors Beaudry and Bouvier, in a speech full of emotion, felt that the Young Cinema ’85 section had not really been competition but rather a place where friendship and respect among filmmakers strongly developed.

Eight of 16 entries were in final competition for $1.5 million (U.S.) in production financing towards a new project. The jury was composed of Raymond Chow, Joaquin Szabo, Bernardo Bertolucci, Sonia Braga, Adrienne Manca, Shoshei Imamura, and headed by Puttnam.

During the festival two films became ineligible: Nanni Moretti’s Bianca from Italy (the print had no English subtitles) and Neil Jordan’s Company of Wolves from Ireland (for winning an award at another festival and therefore no longer meeting the rules of TIFF). The films screened represented a wide range of production budgets and genres, from science-fiction to social dramas and comedies. The jury unanimously agreed on two special jury awards (to Jacques et Novembre) and the $1.5 million prize was divided among three participants.

In a moment of genuine internationalism, David Puttnam spoke of young cinema as essential to world film culture. He underlined the unique nature of the Tokyo fest’s Young Cinema competition since it will allow the recipients of the $1.5 million prize to produce their next film without “interference” from investors or other authorities. Speaking for the jury, Puttnam felt Young Cinema ’85 was “encouraging for the future of cinema around the world,” and expressed his gratitude to Shiro Sasaki, director of the competition, who had travelled around the world to select the films, adding that it was Sasaki’s love of cinema which really marked the “mood” of the competition.

The second special jury award was presented to Hector Babenco from Brazil (whose previous film Pixote distinguished itself the world over), for his extraordinary achievement on The Kiss of the Spider Woman. The director’s attempt to remove all barriers, be they sexual or political, was particularly praised by the jury Babenco in turn thanked the Japanese audience for their fantastic reception of a film that “literally comes from the other side of the world.”

Needless to say, the suspense built up as the awarding of the money prizes approached. Addressing the audience, Bernardo Bertolucci spoke of his reservations at creating yet another jury award. However, he said that, after six hours of deliberation by the jury and after he personally had gone to Kamakura to visit the grave of one of Japan’s most representative film directors, he felt there was no doubt there should be an Ozu Memorial award.

On behalf of the jury, Shohei Imamura presented the Ozu bronze statue to Ali Orgenturk from Turkey for his film At (English title: The Horse) Odyssey, in his acceptance speech said that the Festival had given him an incredible sense of film’s power to present other countries cultural ways. He added that before receiving the Ozu award he was still a ‘young’ cinema director but now felt he had become an “old” director.

The two major festival prizes went to Hungary and Japan. Time Stands Still director Peter Gotthäiss received $500,000 for the financing of his next project. Gotthäiss expressed his gratitude to the hospitality of the Tokyoites and Young Cinema ’85 staff Shunjir Sorai, director of Typhoon Club, was simply overwhelmed when he heard that he was the recipient of the $750,000 prize and the Governor of Tokyo award (in the form of the statue of a kirin, a mythical animal). During the Festival, he confessed he had spent most of his time sleeping in his hotel room, unable to afford to go out. This recognition and encouragement, Sorai added, would allow him to work again, to live again. “I feel out of this world!”

Typhoon Club, although it may seem disconcerting at first, becomes captivating as the film’s narrative structure reveals itself. Typhoons are common in Japan and they bring with them death and chaos,
The Fantastic Festival counted among its invitees Christopher Lee, Dario Argento (director of Phenomena), and Helma Sanders-Brahms (The事物 of Emily). The festival was noted for its thematic diversity, particularly in films reflecting Japan's own film history. The most popular sections were the Festival of Festivals which awarded films out of competition and a section devoted to the Akasaka Filmmaker's Cinema. All films were in their original language.

The TIFF not only opened the windows on numerous national cinemas but also reflected Japan's own film history, as seen in the screening of Tatsuo Hori's 1985 competition was selected from 300 entries from over 40 countries. Award winners were in competition against films as Michael Radford's 'Nineteen-Eighty-Four' (U.K.), Joel Coen's 'Blood Simple' (U.S.), Yim Ho's 'Homecoming' (Hong Kong), Marisa Silver's 'Old Enough' (U.S.), Victor Prohorov's 'Seraphon Polutobes and Other Inhabitants of Earth' (U.S.S.R.), Denis Dorne's 'Straight Through the Heart' (West Germany), Lina Barbarsh's 'Beyond the Walls' (Israel), Jean-Pierre Limosin's 'Faux-Fuyants' (France), and Michael Hoffman's 'Restless Natives' (U.K.).

Of the 136 films screened, the "known" co-existed with the "unknown." The main section was the Festival of Festivals which presented outstanding films out of competition. Atlantic City and Diary for My Children among others. This category also comprised films that recently attracted a lot of critical attention such as "Peris, Texas and Witness" and "Kurosawa's latest film, Ran." The 1985 competition was selected from 300 entries from over 40 countries. Award winners were in competition against films as Michael Radford's Nineteen-Eighty-Four (U.K.), Joel Coen's Blood Simple (U.S.), Yim Ho's Homecoming (Hong Kong), Marisa Silver's Old Enough (U.S.), Victor Prohorov's Seraphon Polutobes and Other Inhabitants of Earth (U.S.S.R.), Denis Dorne's Straight Through the Heart (West Germany), Lina Barbarsh's Beyond the Walls (Israel), Jean-Pierre Limosin's Faux-Fuyants (France), and Michael Hoffman's Restless Natives (U.K.).

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Among the film events running parallel to the festival, Saturdays and Sundays drew the highest attendance for the Animation Film Festival where 17 out of the 22 films shown were Japanese productions.

The Fantastic Film Festival sponsored by Takara Shuzo Co. Ltd, featured 23 films that ranged from science-fiction to horror and supernatural. A special all-night screening of Creepshow, Le dernier combat, A Nightmare on Elm Street and The Dead Zone was presented to a full house of fans. The Fantastic Festival counted among its invitees Christopher Lee, Dario Argento (director of Phenomena) and Canada's David Cronenberg (Dead Zone).

Nippon Telegraph and Telephone sponsored 30 Selected Films Around the World. This section was meant to promote better understanding as well as cultural exchanges through film screenings with countries whose productions rarely get shown in Japan. Canada was represented by The Grey Fox, Chris Owen's Tubiana (Papua, New Guinea), Souleymane Cisse's The Wind (Mali), and Jamjan Bantar's The Great Eagle (Mongolia) were probably among the most "exotic" films here.