

Fostering International Cinema: The Rotterdam Film Festival, CineMart, and the Hubert Bals Fund

By Daniel Steinhart

Hubert Bals, the late founding director of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), once said, “The future of cinematography is not to be expected from Europe or the United States, but all the more from lesser known film cultures.” Bals’ belief in the promise of developing film cultures has been one of the driving forces of the Rotterdam festival for 35 years. In addition to the *de rigueur* offering of Japanese J-horror, European art-house pictures, and American independent films, Rotterdam is known for turning cinephiles on to unsung work from the farthest reaches of the globe. The festival’s 2006 edition was no exception. *La perrera* from Uruguay, *Un matin bonne heure* from Guinea, and *Ahlaam* from Iraq all heralded budding talents and nascent, regional film activity. The IFFR has created its distinct identity in the overstuffed festival world not only by showcasing this kind of undiscovered work, but also by facilitating its production and by financing it.

What follows is an investigation of how the IFFR promotes international independent cinema from emerging film cultures as well as more developed filmmaking nations. I will briefly discuss how the festival’s programming events—the main competition, retrospectives, and sidebars—have brought attention to films that would otherwise be neglected. My aim here though is to focus less on the well-known public events of the festival and more on the festival’s professional activities. I will devote some attention to how CineMart, the festival’s international co-production market, has created the opportunity for hundreds of independent filmmakers to find multinational co-producers in order to bring their projects to fruition. Also, I will examine the festival’s film grant, the Hubert Bals Fund, which has been a quiet but vital force in fostering filmmaking in emergent film cultures.

An analysis of international co-productions and financing provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that few regional film activities are isolated or impervious to international influence. The films that have emerged out of CineMart and that have been supported by the Hubert Bals Fund show that the borders between nations and cultures are permeable and that any regional film practice is often an amalgamation of foreign influences. Ultimately, my aim here is to present a global perspective that situates regional film developments in an international context.

Rotterdammerung

The IFFR caters to both film lover and filmmaker. With no red carpets and no scene-stealing celebrities, the focus is entirely on cinema. That is not to say that there are no film luminaries, but at Rotterdam, the masters of the medium, such as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Jia Zhangke, are the stars. What Rotterdam lacks in glamour and glitz, it makes up in creative programming that is committed to the discovery of the new and a rethinking of the old.

Underscoring it all is a deep respect and curiosity for independent films from around the globe. In addition to the main Tiger Award competition for first or second features, the 2006 edition presented a dozen programs of sometimes *outré*, sometimes puzzling, and sometimes sublime work.

The Sturm und Drang section was dedicated to emerging talents, including Amat Escalante of Mexico, Andrew Bujalski of the US, and Fien Troch of Belgium, while Kings and Aces showcased the work of established *auteurs*, such as Ken Jacobs, Takeshi Kitano, Jan Svankmajer, and Seijun Suzuki. Ace programmer Gertjan Zuilhof put together a series entitled While Light that examined the connections between cinema and drugs. Works ranged from a trio of Philippe Garrel films to the Danish *Pusher* trilogy to an exhibition of psychedelic light shows. Filipino film critic Noel Vera curated a day of Philippine classics, including Lino Brocka's delirious shantytown melodrama *Insiang*. Neglected master Shunichi Nagasaki, the subject of a retrospective, opened the festival with his haunting infanticide film *Heart, Beating in the Dark*, a formally experimental work that managed to be both a sequel and a remake to his 1982 film of the same name. Rotterdam also presented the films of avant-garde filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin while the city's Boijmans Museum displayed the paintings and films of the festival's Artist in Focus Sarah Morris. Never shy to embrace new media, the IFFR rounded out its inclusive lineup with Exploding Television, a program of multimedia installations, productions from video art collectives, and live TV shows, all of which could be experienced in museum spaces, from your home TV set, or on your personal computer.



Shunichi Nagasaki's *Heart, Beating in the Dark*

For intrepid cinephiles, Rotterdam provides the opportunity to sense where the tide is turning in world cinema. At other times, the festival offers the chance to witness challenging work that risks falling into obscurity. While some films will reach the cinema as a result of the attention they garner at the IFFR, many films disappear, making the Rotterdam festival experience something of a hunt for the most precious and ephemeral of cinema objects. It was here last year that festival-goers encountered the European premiere of Lav Diaz's epic *Evolution of a Filipino Family*, which, at 10 hours and 43 minutes, precludes its chances of success in any market. The festival can also present the Rotterdammer the occasion to discover filmmakers before they become famous. In 2002, film fans and distributors hit upon Mexican *enfant terrible* Carlos Reygadas, whose feature debut *Japón* made its world premiere at Rotterdam. Certainly, much of Takashi Miike's reputation in the West as both prolific filmmaker and master of cruelty rests on the unwavering support that Rotterdam has given him. The 2002 edition of the IFFR delivered no less than four Miike films while this year brought his "children's movie," *The Great Yokai War*.

While Rotterdam has grown over the years (with 358,000 admissions this year, it remains one of the biggest public festivals in the world), organizers have not lost sight of the fact that this event is aimed at the cinephile, not the publicist. However, the 2006 edition displayed a somewhat more scaled back program. Whereas previous years exhibited more than 300 titles, this year the number was closer to 250. Festival director Sandra den Hamer explains that the change is not a result of diminishing commitment, but rather “to give the films we do select the attention they need.” (quoted in Macnab 20 January 2006: 17) The change also served to ensure that Rotterdam remains a festival of discoveries for the international film industry. The Film Office, which acts as the liaison between the industry and the festival, worked with more than 200 buyers and sales agents throughout the festival in the hopes that more sales of finished films would occur. (Jensen 23) With approximately 250 festival programmers in attendance, the hope is that even if a film does not find distribution, it will travel to other festivals. “Showing a film in Rotterdam can lead to actual sales,” explains Film Office coordinator Rik Vermeulen, “but it will certainly result in invitations from other festivals, which again may be incentive for local distributors to pick it up.” (quoted in Jensen 23) While 2006 demonstrated increased efforts to support the sale of completed films from the festival’s programs, the majority of the festival’s business focused on works in progress at CineMart, the festival’s international co-production market.

Going Dutch

For five days during the IFFR, 800 industry representatives from around the world gather on the second floor of De Doelen Conference Center to discuss the projects that have been selected for this year’s CineMart. Around 50 numbered tables fill the vast conference hall bathed



CineMart Meeting

in a luminous glow from the bright winter light. At each table sits one to three producers, who represent a project. The producers meet with sales agents, distributors, and television buyers, who switch tables every half hour as if it were a giant ballroom dance. The goal of the producers repping the projects is to find financing partners and sales agents or to secure pre-sales. For the most part, they exchange ideas, established connections, and, in some instances, they make deals. The CineMart coordinators scheduled approximately 5,500 meetings. By the end, another 2,000 meetings were added.

Out of a total of 450 works-in-progress that were submitted to CineMart, 45 projects were selected, representing 31 countries, ranging from South Korea to Serbia. An advisory board committee of film professionals made a preliminary assessment of the projects while the final decision hinged on CineMart coordinators Marit van den Elshout and Bianca Taal and festival director Den Hamer. The most significant criterion for selection is artistic quality. A scan of this

year's projects reveals art pictures helmed by directors with a strong record of award-winning work. The coordinators also look for films with budgets of no more than € 5 million with most projects ranging from € 1-2.5 million. Coordinator Bianca Taal offers other financial considerations: "Is it a project that could find international partners? Is there some financing in place or the prospect of getting financing on board?" (Interview)ⁱ On average, this year's projects had 20% of their budget in place. In addition, the selection committee attempts to pick a variety of projects with varying themes and styles, from differing countries, and from a mix of renowned directors and up-and-coming talent. Projects from established directors included Guy Maddin's *Ghosting* and Jan Svankmajer's *Surviving Life*. Projects from newer filmmakers included *Dau* from Russian Ilya Khrzhanovsky, who created a stir with his 2005 Tiger Award winner *4*, and *Los Bastardos*, a highly sought-after project from Amat Escalante, a Mexican director, whose *Sangre* won the FIPRESCI prize at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival. In order to better understand what brought these producers and filmmakers to Rotterdam and why co-productions are making more sense in an increasingly global film market, I sat down and spoke with several CineMart participants in between their meetings.

Walking around with a big grin and an unopened bottle of wine, Malaysian director Ho Yuhang seems a little out of place in the CineMart conference area. Ho, who studied at Iowa State University and worked as an engineer before turning to film, is at CineMart to find pre-sales and funds for his film *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, which has half of its € 500,000 budget in place. But Ho is leaving negotiations to his producers Lorna Tee and Daniel Yu of Focus Films, so that as he admits—half-jokingly, I think—he can get drunk. (Later on I found him not in a bar, but attending the Q&A session with Hou Hsiao-hsien.) Ho makes clear that since his project is not a genre film, it is difficult to secure funding in his native country. "In Malaysia," he says, "there are three kinds of films that make money: horror, action, and comedy. And I don't make any of the three." (Interview) Indeed, his feature debut *Sanctuary*, which won a Tiger Award at the 2005 IFFR, sidesteps any genre formulas or crowd-pleasing tactics. *Film Comment*'s Chuck Stephens assesses this brother-sister tale and writes, "Though slow, Ho's film finds its feet and rewards those who stick with it, much the way many of its lengthy sequence shots are stingingly punctuated with startling bits of business in their final frames." (70) His newest project, about a middle-aged gambler who falls for a young female swindler, suggests a similar mode. With such art cinema aims, Ho has been forced to find co-producers and financing outside of Malaysia.

Jan Kallista cuts an imposing figure. Towering, clean-cut, and impeccably dressed, he looks more suited for trading stock than repping an old Czech surrealist master. But Kallista is in fact attending CineMart to hunt for co-producers and financing for Jan Svankmajer's "psychoanalytic comedy" *Surviving Life*, which has about half of its € 1,233,000 budget in place. Kallista explains that because Svankmajer's movies do not deliver much domestic box office revenue, it is difficult to secure funding from major film companies in the Czech Republic. As a result Kallista has to put together the film's budget through a variety of financiers. The film received support from Czech and Slovak state financing and the European Union's MEDIA Plus film grant. Coincidentally, during CineMart, the Czech Parliament approved of a revised film law that may increase the national Film Fund's annual budget from € 2 to € 15 million. (Macnab



(L-R) Producer Keith Griffiths, Jan Svankmajer, Jan Kallista, and Terry Gilliam at the 2006 IFFR

2 February 2006: 26) While that is good news for future Czech films and producers, Kallista still must involve another country in the project.

Robert Sauvey and Shawn Watson are adept at navigating cinema's increasingly global marketplace. They are from Canada, but they say they are international producers—though, like the director they are representing, they are proud of their Winnipeg roots. The producing partners came to CineMart to launch their project, Guy Maddin's *Ghosting*, a documentary about 1950s TV sensation Gisele MacKenzie, which has

secured € 69,609 of its € 556,879 budget. Their visit to CineMart is as much a marketing tactic as it is a chance to find co-producers and financiers. Watson explains, "We specifically have held on to *Ghosting* as we developed it over the last two years to launch it at CineMart, so that we can create a bit of buzz about the project and so that European parties would become interested all at once." (Interview) The reality is that few on-the-spot deals are signed at CineMart, but it is the place to first garner the interest of potential co-producers and financiers. (By the end of the festival, three projects—the Finnish production *She-Wolf*, the Serbian-German co-production *Love and Other Crimes*, and the South African-Canadian co-production *Leaving the Cape*—publicly reported that their total budgets were complete or near completion as a result of their CineMart meetings.)

One of the requirements of participation in CineMart is that the project must be introduced in Rotterdam. Producers who launch their film at CineMart continue the dialogue with interested parties after the festival, often proceeding with negotiations at other film markets, such as the Berlinale Co-Production Market at the Berlin Film Festival and the Producers Network at Cannes, both of which were modeled on CineMart. In the end, being selected for CineMart can be a lucrative reward; 85% of the projects get made, with 75-80% within two years of participation in the market.

One of the key strategies of forming an international co-production is that it can open new markets for the film to play in. Often times, the very character of the project will demand foreign co-producers, as is the case with Maddin's documentary, which Sauvey and Watson hope will attract both European and US parties. Watson explains, "Guy Maddin has a great following in Europe with a very supportive audience and some very supportive distributors. This project obviously has an American element to it, specifically the story of early American television. That's a market we're after as well, so we're meeting many Americans and talking deals for US rights." (Interview) However, the challenge of working with a US financier is that the Canadian producers would forfeit the chance to apply for support from Telefilm Canada, the country's film fund. As with many countries, Canada has a set number of bilateral agreements with countries

that Canadian filmmakers can co-produce with and still receive state funding. Since many of these initiatives are set up to promote local productions in the face of Hollywood's dominance, the US does not qualify as one of the sanctioned co-production nations. But with a project like *Ghosting*, which clearly targets the US market, an attached American co-producer and distributor outweighs the financial incentives that state funding can offer.

Though rarely made explicit, the Goliath of Hollywood looms large in the international co-production marketplace. With Hollywood controlling much of the global film market, it has become more difficult for international independent producers to raise money and develop projects in isolation. Squeezed by both Hollywood and local productions aimed at a domestic audience, art films must come to fruition through international co-productions. Kallista argues that co-productions are the only way to make films now in Europe. He maintains, "The European film needs to somehow compete with American films. I don't mean in themes, but more in quality and that also means in the budget. So you then really need more co-production parties to become involved in the project." (Interview) Increasing cooperation amongst European producers is also reflected in the EU's creation of a pan-European film fund, MEDIA Plus and MEDIA Training, which operates on a budget of € 85.5 million (\$104.5 million) per year. (Mitchell 10) While the MEDIA program has had a major impact on the European film industry, its yearly budget is only about the average production cost of a single Hollywood blockbuster.

Such tactics to promote European filmmaking and challenge Hollywood's dominance bring to mind the Film Europe movement of the 1920s when European filmmaking nations attempted to stimulate continental film activities by pooling their resources and forging multinational distribution and production companies. As a result, trends, styles, and ideas spread and merged to form a new pan-European cinema. (see Higson and Maltby 1999; Thompson 1996) However, the difference is that now these multinational efforts extend beyond the borders of Europe. Through international co-production markets like CineMart and state-sanctioned bilateral film agreements, the film business has become truly global.

Hollywood Copycats, Europuddings, and Regional Films

In a film business that is becoming increasingly international and with multinational co-productions becoming the norm, what is the effect of foreign financing and producers on these films? Does a kind of internationalism infuse the films' form, style, and content? For Shawn Watson, this kind of debate starts early on in the development process. He insists, "It's something that producers, directors, and writers need to start talking about before you figure out what your project is going to be. Who's going to watch this project? Who's going to finance this project? There is a marriage there and a gelling of marketing that can start early on." (Interview) Some critics have worried that films aimed at the international market might result in the production of movies that differ little from those of Hollywood. In the British journal *Screen*, Wendy Everett writes, "There is surely no point in aping (in a far less professional manner), the formulaic narratives of mainstream Hollywood. In many of the arguments currently being put forward by the [British] Film Council and other funding bodies, we can trace this shift in favor of predictable, safe product that can be promoted by powerful and wealthy organizations." (103)

Another effect of targeting the global market results in what has pejoratively been dubbed “Europudding,” a film that panders to foreign financiers by creating a superficially pan-European flavor. However, there is nary a Hollywood copycat or Europudding film amongst the projects in CineMart since the coordinators opt for work that showcases an authentic regional identity. Interestingly, Van den Elshout suggests it is precisely this regional identity that gives these films their international appeal. Director Ho believes that his films reconcile the local with the universally intelligible. He claims, “I do think that my films have a very local flavor because you can’t run away from the language for me. For my audience back home, they can recognize this is how we speak. And they can recognize a certain kind of landscape: buildings and streets that are very familiar to them. But that is only part of my film. Because the other part deals more with people: the emotional possibilities of my characters.” (Interview). Like many of the CineMart projects, Ho’s films retain strong traits of national identity while also addressing universal themes. “What is important for film-makers,” argued an editorial in a September 2005 issue of *Screen International*, “is the human themes that find global resonance. The cultural specificity is not an end but a means.” (2) To be sure, the evolving global market poses new challenges to the narrow definitions of national film production.

Ultimately, the strategy at CineMart is not to tailor the film to potential co-producers and audiences, but to find the partners and markets that are right for the project. Sauvey says, “When a producer goes out onto the market, hopefully they’ve thought about where the film is going to make sense and who your co-producers should be. If you’re making a project about a certain topic, it may not make sense to work with these countries over here, but it may make more sense to work with those over there. [It’s] more of a directed approach of who you’re going to target in terms of bringing that financing and that co-producer.” (Interview) For Jan Kallista, the search for the right producer becomes even more difficult when there is no room for compromising artistic control. “Svankmajer is very specific in the way that he works,” he explains. “He needs a lot of time [to make his films]. He takes 230 days, which is not normal. We also have our own facilities, studios, and we edit films in the classical way. He makes the animation by himself. And he doesn’t let anyone influence his script. So we’re searching for a co-producer that can finance and not influence the project at all. We will not allow any compromises in the film.” (Interview) Such rigid restrictions would likely make the film a tough sell were it not for the cachet that the film’s director carries internationally.

CineMart stands up to its de facto slogan of “open minded, curious, and with a faithful passion for cinema.” The co-production market has been a vital fixture in the international independent cinema world; its strong track record demonstrates this. Not only are the projects’ success rate high, but some of last year’s most acclaimed films, such as the Oscar-



Paradise Now, a former CineMart project

nominated *Paradise Now* and Miranda July's crowd-pleasing *Me You and Everyone We Know*, first received exposure at CineMart. Significantly, the IFFR has done more than just support the co-productions of international cinema; it has also directly financed international cinema.

Films with Bals

The IFFR had been going strong for about 16 years when its founder Hubert Bals ran into Chen Kaige at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival. Bals was surprised to learn that Chen, the great Chinese director of *Yellow Earth*, had to earn a living by teaching New Yorkers to use chopsticks. When Bals returned to Holland, he intensified his ongoing efforts to find funds for independent filmmakers from developing countries, so that directors like Chen would not have to resort to such lowly acts. But by July of 1988, Bals passed away. Two months later, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs made monies available for a film fund aimed at work from emerging film cultures. The fund was originally intended to be called the Tarkovsky Fund, but in honor of Bals, who had always been committed to championing independent films, the fund was renamed the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF).

Today, the HBF has € 1.2 million at its disposal. The money still comes primarily from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs with additional support from the NCDO Culture Fund, the NPS Dutch public TV network, and the Stichting national lottery. The fund offers individual grants of up to € 10,000 for script and project development, € 30,000 for post-production, and € 15,000 for distribution in the film's country of origin. In 2005, over 700 projects applied for the fund. This record number of submissions reveals that the HBF is becoming well known around the world, but it also suggests that filmmakers from developing countries still face difficulties in financing their films. HBF head Marianne Bhalotra bemoans, "We don't have much more money and so we can't expand the amount of projects we can select. We are not going to cut up the cheese in smaller and smaller parts, because then we would be useless to the filmmakers." (quoted in Macnab 27 January 2006: 23) Last year, 76 films received HBF financing with additional money going towards the support of training workshops and emerging film festivals. The HBF's success has inspired the creation of other funds to support filmmakers from developing countries, including the Berlin Film Festival's World Cinema Fund and the Global Film Initiative based in New York City. (Hofman 4; Saperstein 14)

As with CineMart, the most important criterion for the selection of films that receive HBF funding is artistic quality. The selection committee also considers a film's budget, which cannot exceed € 3 million, as the € 10-30,000 that the HBF can offer goes a lot further for a smaller budgeted project. While the hope is that the projects will travel in the international market, the support of a filmmaker's artistic vision supersedes the film's marketability. Bhalotra offers Wang Bing's monumental three-part documentary *Tie Xie Qu: West of the Tracks* as an example of the HBF's commitment to challenging work. "[Wang] sent us a three-hour tape," she remembers. "I looked at the film and thought it was so fantastic. It was a documentary on the steel industry in Northeast China, which was being dismantled. He himself had been working in those factories, so he was very close to the people working there. It became a nine-hour film when it was completed. We showed it twice during the festival—nobody walked out."

(Interview) The film was eventually released in Paris, landing in the number two spot of *Cahier du Cinema*'s top ten films of 2004.

The HBF has also been instrumental in getting the funded films out to the public through a variety of platforms. In return for financing a project's post-production, the fund asks for distribution rights to the Benelux countries. If the fund cannot secure a third-party distributor, it will release the film on its own. Also, every autumn, there is a touring series of three HBF films that

travels through Holland. Films are then released on DVD. Through its relationship with the NPS TV network, at least five HBF films are broadcast. Finally, through its partnership with the Internet and broadband company Tiscali, HBF films can be downloaded. Covering virtually every major platform, the distribution of the films becomes as structured as any studio release.



Wang Bing's *Tie Xie Qu: West of the Tracks*

As rare as it might be to find an art film from Sri Lanka or Iraq in European cinemas, it can be even more uncommon to find those films in their country of origin. In markets that are dominated by Hollywood fare or restricted by local censorship rules, the fund's coordinators in collaboration with the filmmakers often have to turn to alternative means of distribution. Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani*, for example, dealt with the controversial topics of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and a Hindu woman living in Pakistan, making it nearly impossible for distribution in Pakistan through traditional avenues. With the support of the HBF, members from the cast and crew traveled to villages throughout the country exhibiting the film. Bhalotra called it an "incredible success."

Local Roots, Universal Themes, and International Style



Manuel Nieto Zas' *La perrera* from Uruguay

In the 2006 Hubert Bals Fund catalogue, a brief profile of the fund explains, "The Hubert Bals Fund is designed to bring remarkable or urgent feature films and feature length creative documentaries by innovative and talented filmmakers from developing countries closer to fulfillment." PR hype aside, what makes the HBF projects remarkable? A glance at the application for the fund reveals some important details of the unique character of the financed films. The form states, "The entry should be

original, authentic and rooted in the culture of the applicant's country." So like the projects selected for CineMart, the HBF awards films with a strong local identity. A number of Latin American films supported by the HBF, and showcased in this year's festival, are exemplary of work that feels fixed in its time and place.

Co-winner of the IFFR's Tiger Award, Manuel Nieto Zas' *La perrera* is a film so entrenched in its locale's sleepy moods and rhythms that it makes its protagonist a prisoner of it. This Uruguayan film concerns David, a 25-year-old underachiever, who wiles away the late summer days in a resort town by smoking pot and sleeping. When his stern old man returns from holiday, David is forced into the Sisyphean task of building his own house with few supplies, little experience, and insufficient money to pay his co-workers. The film's careful interest in the labor of the house's shambolic construction suggests that David will achieve some sense of personal accomplishment by its completion. However, the film's project is more fatalistic; the raising of the house secures David's bonds to a place from which there will be no escape.

The Tiger competition's other South American slacker film, *Glue*, came from Argentina's Alexis Dos Santos. Whereas *La perrera*'s protagonist becomes trapped by his unforgiving environment, the aimless lead of *Glue* defies his dead-end Patagonian town by finding freedom in a freewheeling existence. 15-year-old Lucas sings in a crappy garage band, writing hilariously nonsensical lyrics. He breaks into his father's apartment and huffs model glue. At the apex of pubescent sexual discovery, he has a drunken three-way with his friends Nacho and Andrea. These episodic scenes mount to form a mosaic of teenaged wanderings through Argentina's end-of-the-earth landscape.



Alexis Dos Santos' *Glue* from Argentina

In the Cinema of the Future: Sturm und Drang program, Carlos Reygadas' *Batalla en el cielo* and Amat Escalante's *Sangre*



Amat Escalante's *Sangre* from Mexico

examined Mexican culture with the dual goal of provocation and transcendence. If Reygadas' Hubert Bals-funded debut *Japón* was a tribute to the quiet, rugged beauty of Mexico's mountainous landscape then his follow-up serves as a celebration of the savage jungle of Mexico City. With an Arbus-like fascination in the uncanny nature of the

commonplace and a penchant for stylistic flourishes, the film follows the guilt-ridden wanderings of Marcos, a chauffer whose botched kidnapping scheme leads him to confess his crime to his boss' prostitute daughter. Amat Escalante's *Sangre*, on the other hand, plays out with more restraint. Shot in static, widescreen long-takes, the film captures the quotidian life of a middle-aged doorman and his wife. Living in a culture that encourages routine, the characters work, eat, and have sex with perfunctory effort. Like Reygadas, Escalante allows his leading character redemption even after the most barbaric of acts.

Even though these films are steeped in local flavor, much like the CineMart projects, they deal with universal themes. *La perrera* questions the demands of adulthood while *Glue* celebrates teenage rebellion, and both *Batalla en el cielo* and *Sangre* are interested in the existential crisis of the common man. And what of these films' form and style? Some of the films exhibit similar aesthetic strategies, but they do not adhere to any kind of regional filmmaking style. *La perrera* and *Glue* best fit the characteristics of social realism: elliptical narrative, hand-held camerawork, an objective presentation of character, and, consequently, a use of external reality to present a character's interior life. However, both films are tempered with impressionistic moments. In *La perrera*, color saturation and "close-up" sounds heighten a psilocybin head-trip while in *Glue*, super 8 sequences and voice-over render the characters' subjectivity. *Sangre* and in particular *Batalla en el cielo* are fashioned in the tradition of European art cinema. The latter film's use of shifting subjectivities, elaborate camera movements, and rich soundscapes asks audiences to pay attention less to the story than to the way it is told. Like many of the HBF films, these Latin American movies deliver culturally specific stories that address universal themes with an eclectic style that primarily draws from international art cinema.



Carlos Reygadas' *Batalla en el cielo* from Mexico

However, less the mark of a certain type of cinema, the HBF serves as a kind of seal of approval to ensure excellence. Argentine producer-director Daniel Burman, who received support from the fund for his film *Esperando al mesías*, says, "The Hubert Bals Fund played an important role in encouraging the new wave of Argentinean cinema. It's not just the money—receiving their support is a sign of quality for distributors. It makes people take notice of your film." (quoted in Hofmann 4)

Fortunately for filmmakers around the world, the HBF is expanding its activities. The 2006 IFFR marked the unveiling of the Hubert Bals Fund Plus, an initiative that will make € 200,000 available to Dutch producers who co-produce HBF-backed projects. Granted by the Netherlands' Film Fund, the money will likely be shared between four new projects, as producers can apply for a maximum of € 50,000 each. (Macnab 27 January 2006: 23) Bhalotra explains, "We want to encourage Dutch producers to look beyond Dutch borders. There are quite

a few co-productions taking place in Europe, but very few outside of Europe. So we want to encourage Dutch co-producers to look beyond the borders.” (Interview) This global enterprise reflects the Netherlands’ long history of international interests. From its formidable merchant fleet that controlled many of the world’s trade routes throughout the 17th century to being at the forefront of contemporary international peace and justice initiatives, the Dutch have consistently thought globally.

New Challenges

As supportive as the IFFR is of challenging films and unproven talent, many of the films that play at the festival and that come out of CineMart and the HBF rarely find a wide audience, even if they secure distribution. The HBF-supported *Batalla en el cielo*, which is being distributed in the US by Tartan Films, has struggled to find an audience, with grosses falling under \$100,000. (Kaufman) The current global market presents new challenges for the promotion of this kind of cinema. A January 2006 *Screen International* editorial assessed the foundering of non-English films in the international film market in 2005 and pointed out, “The box-office figures seem to suggest that the only products really working are big Hollywood blockbusters and local movies that can, and do, only work in their home territories.” (2) In addition, with increased competition in the specialty market and a slowing growth in the number of movie screens in developed countries, the squeeze on the kinds of art films that the IFFR promotes is tightening. (see Rodier, Tartaglione-Vialatte, and Mitchell 4-6)

Nevertheless, international independent art cinema has much to be optimistic about. In the fall of 2005, the United Nations’ cultural body UNESCO adopted a convention that preserves a nation’s right to put culture before trade, which served as a major victory for local film industries around the world and a blow to Hollywood. (Gubbins and Tartaglione-Vialatte 8-10) In addition, the European Union is showing greater cooperation as demonstrated by the MEDIA program. As a result, the strength of the European market is attracting more co-productions from beyond the continent. Co-production treaties with parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin American offer significant potential. The global industry can only expand as developing nations within these regions stabilize politically. Finally, technology provides the promise of future changes in the way films will be distributed, which could increase the distribution of art films. Always on the forefront of cinema, the IFFR is facing head-on the challenges of this ever-growing global film marketplace. So if we are to look at lesser-known film cultures for the future of cinema, as Hubert Bals once suggested, we should pay close attention to Rotterdam’s activities for the future of how these films will be made and distributed.

Special thanks to Marit van den Elshout and Bianca Taal of CineMart and Marianne Bhalotra of the Hubert Bals Fund for their diligence and patience. Also a hearty bedankt to Bert-Jan Zoet and Gert-Jan Bleeker of the IFFR Press Office for their support and good cheer.

Daniel Steinhart is a graduate student in the Critical Studies division of UCLA’s Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media. He is also a freelance film journalist and participant in the 2006 IFFR Trainee Project for Young Film Critics

Works Cited

- Everett, Wendy. "Images on the move: reframing the cinemas of Europe." *Screen* 46:1 (Spring 2005): 97-105.
- Gubbins, Michael and Nancy Tartaglione-Vialatte. "The Cultural Divide." *Screen International* (28 October 2005): 8-10.
- Higson, Andrew and Richard Maltby. *"Film Europe" and "Film America": Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999.
- Hofmann, Katja. "Fest funds team up to boost world cinema." *Variety* (7 February 2005): 4.
- Jensen, Jørn Rossing. "The Unusual Suspects." *Daily Tiger* 3 (28 January 2006): 23.
- Kaufman, Anthony. "Viva El Cine: Will Mexico and Spain Spur a Spanish-Language Revival?" *indieWIRE.com* (21 March 2006).
- Macnab, Geoffrey. "The Shock of the New." *Screen International* (20 January 2006): 17-19.
- . "HBF: Going Dutch." *Daily Tiger* 2 (27 January 2006): 23.
- . "Blank Czech for Film Production." *Daily Tiger* 8 (2 February 2006): 23.
- Mitchell, Wendy. "'Can we have some more?'" *Screen International* (9 September 2005): 10-12.
- Rodier, Melanie, Nancy Tartaglione-Vialatte, and Robert Mitchell. "Divided by Language," *Screen International* (27 January 2006): 4-6.
- Saperstein, Pat. "Global fund selects pix." *Variety* (15 December 2003): 14.
- Stephens, Chuck. "Now and For-IFFR." *Film Comment* (March-April 2005): 69-70.
- Thompson, Kristin. "National or international films? The European debate during the 1920s." *Film History* 8.3 (1996): 281-296.
- "Culture Clash." *Screen International* (23 September 2005): 2.
- "Grasp the Potential." *Screen International* (27 January 2006): 2.

ⁱ All interviews were conducted at the 2006 International Film Festival Rotterdam, January 25 – February 5, 2006.