

## PLÁJÁS, Ildikó Zonga

### Curved Reflexion

#### — a Five-Day Experience of Cinematic Art from India —

*Indian Film Festival The Hague 2012 – 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*

Ladies of Miss India 2012 welcomed us as we entered the reception of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Indian Film Festival The Hague. Model cut girls in pseudo Indian clothes with sparkling details, pinkish and artificial inserts, and gimmicky smiles yet with an air of melodramatic seriousness. Films and festival, content and appearance shared the same ambivalence; the sometimes astonishing sometimes charming opposites which otherwise characterizes the whole Indian society and culture.



As the main page of the festivals' website appropriately states: 'The Indian Film Festival The Hague will take you on an unforgettable journey to India, an overwhelming country filled with contrast. The festival explores the changing identity of India through the eyes of film makers. [...] Five days of cinema, five days of eclectic and exciting programming, five days of mesmerizing India for all ages and all kinds. Whether you're a lover of art or a lover of nightlife the IndianFFTH has something for you.'

The festival took place between 3-7 October 2012 and during the 5 days of rich programming a total of 27 films were screened, more than half being Dutch premieres. The festival this year run on more locations and a number of additional screenings and events took place. A special educational program was connected to the screening of the children film *Chillar Party* (d. Nitesh Tiwari and Vikas Bahl) and a special Indian Ladies Night was organized where the audience could watch the longest-running film in the history of Indian cinema, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The lover will take the bride), a Bollywood classic from 1995.

This year the festival was enlarged with a Retrospective screening with five films of the director Shyam Benegal. Born in 1934 in Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) he started his career in Mumbai, and after the success of his first feature film, *Ankur*, in 1973, he directed more than another twenty feature films. Shyam Benegal is considered by many the father of Independent Cinema in India. The titles screened during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Film Festival The Hague were *Ankur* (1973), *Bhumika* (1976), *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (1993), *Sardari Begum* (1996) and *Zubeida* (2001).

The spectrum of the films screened during the Indian Film Festival was much larger than the previous year. The wide and ambitious collection constituted a real gratuity for the Dutch audience, yet the large numbers of films also carried the chances of making slip-ops. In one thing the festival was truly consistent, i.e. presenting the colorful diversity of the Indian film production. At the side of very specific Bollywood bestsellers, art-film productions and documentaries were also screened, representing a unique opportunity for taking a glance at the marvelous world of India from both an upper and a lower angle.



*Shaitan*

Right at the beginning, the festival was inaugurated with a bestseller. The *Shaitan* (d. Bejoy Nambiar) has everything, maybe even too much of what makes a film popular among a H(B)ollywood audience with modest film culture. A modern adaptation of filmic clichés applied on a Bollywood pattern: the decadent lifestyle of rich teenagers with music inserts realized like video clips, trimmed images and dashed editing. The plot is overcrowded too. One of the main characters is a psychologically unstable but lush teenage girl, symbolically the devil, who together with his friends is getting into increasingly dangerous troubles. All they are

seeking is innocent fun but when under the influence of alcohol and drugs they suffer a car accident killing somebody, the troubles are starting to get fatal. The additional stories are also platitudinous. A corrupt policeman finds out the truth and he asks a big amount of money in return for his silence. The youngsters in order to get the money are faking a kidnapping. While they are hiding they face the social problems of real India, sexual abuse, corruption, controlled media, poverty, illegal prostitution, etc. Finally the case is solved by a good cop who is also living his family drama.

As if all the plot wouldn't be enough, the film includes his story too. He (I mean the good policemen – and no need to worry if the story seems bit too diffuse, as at this point some of the audience also left the screening room) is getting divorced because on other man made a pass at his wife. He takes revenge but this almost costs his job. At the end, while looking for the kidnapped youngsters he still comes across a raped and killed German woman and kills two criminals. Meanwhile the youngsters are also going crazy and start killing each other, but all is well that ends well, the main character survives, the bad policeman gets his punishment and the good policeman gets back with his wife.

The films of the Indian Film Festival were very different in their character targeting the widest spectrum of audience. Those from the 'best of Bollywood' category sometimes were seeking recognition with abusing Bollywood clichés while low budget documentaries were delving into the deepest human misery. An astonishing contrast yet unquestionably belonging to the same reality called India and Indian film production.

Women are waiting hopeless for their husbands and sons in a remote area affected by war and poverty. The film entitled *Broken memory, shining dust* (d. Nilosree Biswas) starts slowly with strong, touching pictures and a staggeringly honest narration. While the topic of the film is *only* the struggles and hopes of a couple Kashmiri women, the strong subjective images and highly cinematic elaboration takes us into a deep and fascinating world of human endurance and hope, maybe one of the strongest cinematic experience one could have during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Film Festival The Hague.



*Broken Memory, Shining Dust*

The *Ahney Ghorhey Da Daan (Alms for a Blind Horse)* (d. Gurvinder Singh) was already screened in the Netherlands during the Rotterdam Film Festival this year, yet the film unquestionably has a place in the collection of Best of India. The struggle of a small community in the Punjab region is elaborated in a strongly visual language and the director with his special talent and great knowledge manages to raise his topic to a universal level. The marginalized and powerless villagers are fighting desperately their truth with the ferocious lord and social order, yet the film is not about

acts or personal stories but more about the feeling of vulnerability in the sluggish fog. Gurvinder Singh proves to be a master of depicting the space as well, as he turn is into the 'silent witness of events'. The cast of amateur authentic villagers and their minimalistic performance turn the film into a silent ballad communicating through its extraordinary images and an atmosphere which gives goose bumps during the entire screening.

*Alms for the Blind Horse*



Not only the film-genres but also the elaborated thematic showed a marvelous richness at the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Indian Film Festival The Hague. The topic of surrogate mothers and alternative birth clinics for example lately shows an increasing tendency, many films, be it fictions or non-fictions addressing the subject, nevertheless Indian women only appear exclusively in the roles of the surrogate mother. The documentary entitled *Mother India* (d. Raffaele Brunetti) gives an inside of the same story from a different perspective, whereas the beneficiaries are - or at least should be - a childless Indian couple. The film follows their bumpy journey seeking solution for their

fertility problem introducing meanwhile the spectator to a world sawed up by the gaps of social inequalities, impenetrable healthcare system, business and exploitation. Jhuma and Niladri live in Burdwan, West Bengal, and are married for 8 years. Their misfortune of not having kids is more than just a family drama as in India childless married woman are considered impure. What are the chances for a regular Indian family to fight the nature of their bodies and social prejudice?

India seen through the eyes of all these films remains the country of questions with multiple answers. A land full of contrasts: wealth versus poverty, tradition versus progression, social and cultural constraints versus the majesty of cultural heritage and faith, and nevertheless the contrast of films on the widest spectrum of quality, quantity, genre and value presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Film Festival The Hague.

