



SMALL FILMS AND BIG BUSINESS: GLOBAL MARKETING THROUGH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALS

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Abstract

Attending film festivals can be an awesome experience--seeing great new films on the big screen, walking the red carpet, and feeling the energy in the air can be inspirational to new and experienced filmmakers alike. But festivals serve another very important function for anyone in the industry--the networking opportunities at film festivals can make or break a career. In the fast-paced world of Hollywood, you never know who can help your career in the future. That fresh, new director you met at a small festival--she could turn out to be the next Scorsese, or the guy you were shooting the breeze with in the lobby could be the buyer for an international distributor. Film festivals may be the one opportunity you have to connect with the person that will give you your big break in the film industry. It's important to have great networking skills in order to make those connections and present yourself in the most professional and personable way possible. This paper looks at how small Tamil films taste success in local through marketing in global.

Keywords – Tamil Cinema, Distribution, Global Market, Funds, International Film Festivals.

Power of Film Festivals

Unsuccessful independent producers say that looking for a distributor is when you finally pay the price for your independence. And it's true that an indie film that no one wants to distribute is not even an orphan in the storm, since storms pay enough attention to smack you around. Orphan indies waste away in a desert of neglect. On the other hand, if the fruit of your independence is a film that a distributor covets, you can write your own ticket and use it to ride into festivals, general release and even a deal for your next movie. (Cindy H. Wong, 2011).

Business Matters: Industries, Distribution and Markets

Although film festivals' core business is screening films, many festivals also facilitate "the business" of cinema. Arguably, the big international film festivals – Cannes, Berlin, Toronto etc. – owe a great deal of their prestigious and influential position in the festival network to the success of their market activities and services for the industry. Art cinema, world cinema and independent cinema increasingly depend on the nodes of the festival network for financing, sales, promotion and traffic (Biskind 2004; Perren 2001). But even medium-sized and small (international) festivals can play important roles in national or regional industries, offering, for instance, networking opportunities for professionals, training for filmmakers and/or entry points into the transnational flows that define today's film culture.

Markets and Funds

The writings in this subcategory look at film festival markets and funds from a predominantly cultural perspective. Cultural diversity (instead of economic productivity and efficiency) is therefore at the heart of these reflections and analyses of the business side of festivals. Most authors display a concern for an inclusive cinema culture: stretching from first world national cinemas to cinema in developing countries, keeping standards of artistic quality high, and offering space for aesthetic experiments, adversary views or lifestyles, and marginal voices. Consequently, the hype and hustle surrounding the buying-and-selling at festivals, though considered inevitable, is more often than not discussed with a critical eye for its potentially corrupting effects of the festival ideal of fostering "true variety." Of particular interest are those studies that deal with film festivals' active role as *producer* of world cinema through programming and funding (Steinhart 2006).

Distribution of Films

When attempting to answer the question of why film festivals exist, discussions tend to gravitate to the problem of distribution. In a competitive market that is driven by commercial objectives and molded by the aggressive strategies of major film companies, it is difficult for non-mainstream films to find theatrical distribution. Film festivals provide several "answers" to this problem. Gideon Bachmann (2000) distinguishes between "wholesale" and "retail" events: the former act primarily as markets where sales agents sell films, the latter are essentially exhibitors (cf. also Mark Peranson's model of two kinds of festivals: business festivals and audience festivals [Peranson 2008, section 1.1]).

"Wholesale" festivals revolve around the business of niche cinema markets, which is risky, but potentially lucrative when sufficiently tuned into the specific needs of "quality" products (Biskind 2004; Perren 2001, section 5). "Retail" festivals, on the other hand, fulfill a local function, showing films not (yet) available in regular theaters to people from the region. With the increasing pressure on art house exhibition and simultaneous boom in mid-sized and smaller film festivals, festivals



themselves have become an alternative distribution method. Sales agents respond to the new situation by asking screening fees and revenues from ticket sales, putting added pressure on the low-budget festival organizations.

Film Festivals as Producers

While the creation of the Marche at Cannes in 1959 changed the business climate of festivals, the introduction of Rotterdam's Cinemart in 1984, followed by the Hubert Bals funds in 1988, Pusan PPP in 1997, and the other coproduction for a and funds from Locarna and Berlin to Buenos Aires and Hong Kong has meant that film festivals have started to control, at least indirectly, the business of film production. While festivals are not studios, through their markets and production and coproduction forums, they are becoming places where connections, negotiations and financing of films take place. They are increasingly a necessary destination for young film makers who work outside the commercial studio system. (Cindy H. Wong 2011).

Tamil Cinema and Global Marketing

One of the major gains for Tamil cinema in 2015 was the discovery of hitherto unexplored non-traditional foreign markets, especially for offbeat films. Manikandan's *Kaaka Muttai*, produced by Dhanush and Vetri Maaran, was a rage in the overseas markets. The film was marketed aggressively in India by Fox Star Studios, and went on to do twice the business it did in the international market. The trade buzz is that *Kaaka Muttai* collected nearly 1.5 million Hong Kong dollars (Rs. 1.30 crore), which no other Tamil film has done before in Hong Kong. This is significant, because Hong Kong has never been a good market for Tamil films, and even the star-driven films are screened there only during the weekends.

The route taken by *Kaaka Muttai*'s producers, of premiering the film at various festivals prior to its release in Tamil Nadu, paid off well. This trend was started by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, with his *Aaranya Kaandam*, which premiered in October 2010 at the South Asian International Film Festival, where it won the Grand Jury Award for Best Film, and later went on to win two National Awards in 2011. It released in theatres nearly a year after its world premiere, and by then, the accolades it had won had created a strong base in India. A Mumbai-based international film coordinator, who helps release niche films at festival circuits, says, "*Kaaka Muttai* premiered first on September 5, 2014, at the 39th Toronto International Film Festival, and got rave reviews. The Tamil Nadu theatrical release took place only on June 5, 2015, nine months after its Toronto premiere. Of course, promoting these films subsequently on social media gives an added push and brings in non-Tamil audiences too."

Now, the latest is that Dhanush and Vetri Maaran's new film *Visaranai*, directed by Vetri Maaran, is following the same route. The film premiered at the 72nd Venice International Film Festival in September 2015, and won the 'Amnesty International Italia Award'. The film is being distributed worldwide by the London-based Lyca Productions. Raju Mahalingam of Lyca says, "We are planning a big release for the film. It is one of the most talked about films in recent times. Everybody who saw it at festivals is raving about it. There is a large non-diaspora market ready to accept good Tamil content. I believe it has the right recipe for global box-office success."

The release strategy of an off-beat film is crucial. It has to be remembered that these films need to be screened in around 125 to 150 screens in Tamil Nadu, with smaller theatres being much preferred. As offbeat films rely largely on word of mouth publicity, they often get shifted to larger screens if received well, like in the case of *Kaaka Muttai*. Smaller films should also be marketed by strong distributors, who exercise some control over theatres like Sathyam Cinemas in Chennai, which has the most number of multiplex screens. Fox Star had distributed *Kaaka Muttai* through Sathyam, and now, *Visaranai* is being distributed by them again. But these films, despite a growing interest, don't quite perform well in places outside of Chennai and Coimbatore. As single screen theatres make up most of the film viewing in these places, smaller films struggle to fill up the theatre capacity. But with many single screens preferring to renovate with two or three smaller screens, the future looks bright for offbeat films.

It is also a time for Tamil cinema to look at non-conventional international markets. A film that has powerful content, made to suit international viewers, will drive business globally. The traditional Malaysia, UAE and Europe markets usually shun offbeat films; so smaller films generally try to appeal to markets such as Hong Kong, China, Iran and Korea, where good content with local language subtitling has an audience. A spokesperson of a Mumbai-based corporate says, "Tamil cinema is not just about Rajinikanth, Vijay or Ajith. Some of these low-budget films will strike a chord with non-Tamil viewers, depending on their subject and the treatment. But above all, it should also be supported by strong marketing muscle." (The Hindu dated 30 Jan, 2016).



Conclusion

The evolution of film festivals as sponsors of production in addition to exhibition and distribution is tied into multiple roles through which institutions, agencies and people of film festivals produce global film knowledge. Yet this support also embeds elements of national and international power into this creation and circulation of knowledge.

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