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A Year in 13 Film Festivals



Angry Indian Goddesses

by [Kaleem Aftab](#) in [Festivals & Events](#) on Jan 4, 2016

In 2015 I went to 13 film festivals, the year before it was 12, and what's interesting is how different my experiences were in '15 as compared to '14 at the same festivals, even when those festivals were at the same venues.

At a time when *Star Wars* seems like the only story in the mainstream cinema, it's interesting to also note a similarly blinkered view on the festival circuit, where only Sundance, Berlin, Cannes, Venice and Toronto seem to matter. It's a sign of limited freelance budgets and the desire by editors to only cover events certain to get online clicks. What this means for cinema is that there are fewer opportunities for new voices to be heard. Either they are locked out at heavily curated festivals, or they are drowned out at other festivals because of the noise created by the landing in town of the latest star. And, yet, look around and some festivals are doing amazing work, promoting local industries, getting new voices to meet industry figures.

As for the films in 2015, there has been a lot of quality, without one film being universally acclaimed. The end-of-year lists have brought out an eclectic mix of choices but also revealed that, for



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now, 2015 has yet to produce a universally accepted masterpiece. That will come, probably, in a decade's time, when one will be rediscovered.

If there is one thing I took from the festivals this year, it was a greater appreciation of the industry events that take place beyond the red carpet and the attempts by their organizers to ensure that a cinema away from blockbusters remains relevant and talked about.

Gothenburg — January 2015

Gothenburg takes place around the same time as the Sundance Film Festival. They share the same snowy weather conditions but not much else. While the Utah-based film festival looks forward to the year ahead in American independent film, the Swedish port city regales on allowing its citizens a chance to bask in the glories that have appeared at festivals over the past year. For example, it landed the Swedish premiere of the Venice Golden Lion winner, *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence*.

Nonetheless where Gothenburg excels is in its presentation of upcoming TV shows and films. The Swedish festival was one of the first to add a television arm to its offering, and the invite-only industry event is a must for anyone wanting to know what to look out for in upcoming Scandinavian television and film. I was allowed into the Nordic Market as long as I didn't report on what the participants said. The format saw participants screen 10 to 20 minutes of their film or television show and then either the producer or director would talk about the project and what they were looking for — finance, distribution, or a sales partner. It was intriguing to see directors forced to do sales talk, often out of their comfort zone, but also revealing a passion for their films that can sometimes be lacking after they've talked about them for six months on the festival circuit.

It was here that I caught my first glimpse of *Rams*, which went on to win Best Film in the Un Certain Regard section of Cannes, and also *Sparrows*, which won the top prize at San Sebastian.

Best Film: *Court*

The other highlight of the festival was seeing the Indian nomination for the Best Foreign Language Oscar, directed by Chaitanya Tamhane. It features a brilliant turn by Vivek Gomber as a lawyer asked to defend a musician accused of murder after someone committed suicide after listening to one of his songs.

Berlin Film Festival — February 2015

It says a lot about the dearth in quality at the Berlin Film Festival this year that my abiding memory was hearing Wieland Speck, the curator of the Panorama section, introduce a film by telling the audience, "Welcome to summer in Berlin." There was something disconcerting about not needing snow gear in Berlin in February, and my fears over global warming, were only outdone by my fears over the demise of German New Wave auteurs. Both Werner Herzog with *Queen of the Desert* and Wim Wenders with *Everything Will Be Fine* were so far below the standard set in their heyday that one suspected their names alone got them a berth.

Just as I was starting to wish that festival head honcho Dieter Kosslick hadn't been given an extended contract till 2019, another German filmmaker came to the rescue. Sebastian Schipper's

Victoria was a technical marvel. Also unveiled was *45 Years*, featuring brilliant performances of Charlotte Rampling and Tom Courtenay. The Golden Bear went to *Taxi*, a deserving award for a courageously made film and not just a sop to Jafar Panahi, the director “banned” from making films in Iran.

The moral: avoid big name cinema in Berlin to find the gems.

Best Film: *Victoria*

The most incredible technical achievement in cinema this year, it's hugely ambitious, with great performances and the narrative of a Scorsese gangster pic.

Qumra — March 2015

I have written about the Qumra festival [elsewhere for Filmmaker](#), and it was an industry event that did an excellent job of connecting DFI fund grantees with the key figures on the film festival scene, including sales agents and financiers. It's not a festival as such, but a giant get together of the mover and shakers in the industry, and I just wished that I could have soaked in every single one of the hundreds of meetings that were taking place.

Best Film: *Timbuktu*

The great African filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako delivered one of the five screen talks and showed his latest film about Islamists who take over an African town, a tale that sadly seems to grow even more vital with each heinous acts of terrorism.

Cannes — May 2015

The nicest thing about Cannes this year was the number of films in competition that featured female principal protagonists. Yes, there are still not enough female directors, and the inaugural Women In Film series of lectures is, unfortunately, as vital as ever, but the festival definitely took a step in the right direction. There were so many good films — *Carol*, *Dheepan*, *Inside Out*, *The Assassin* and *Youth* — that in a year when many have commented on the lack of quality in the awards season, what they actually mean is that, mostly, American studios and filmmakers have failed to deliver this year.

Best Film — *Dheepan*

Everyone has been waiting for Jacques Audiard to win the Palme d'Or since his excellent *A Prophet* was overlooked. It made the backlash that greeted his win all the more remarkable. But for my money, *Dheepan* was the most exciting and relevant film in competition. Many had trouble with the ending, but confounding stereotypes was what gave this story of a Tamil Tiger forced to flee to France its power.

Sheffield Film Festival — June 2015

I was on the jury at the UK's preeminent film festival. The festival has a great policy of allowing jury members the opportunity to see many of the films before the festival so that their time there can be taken up with events and more leisurely film watching. There was, perhaps, a glimpse into the future of audio-visual entertainment in the virtual reality gallery. Again the industry events are the heart of the festival, most notably the pitching sessions.

The jury was a real pleasure to work with, comprising of director John Akomfrah, Danish producer Sigrid Dyekjær, Alexandra Hannibal of the Tribeca Institute and producer Ruby Chen. Listening to their wonderful insights into documentary filmmaking and analysis of film was so enlightening that by the end of a four-hour dinner and discussion I was wishing I could have them as a sounding board for every movie I needed to dissect.

Best Film — *A Syrian Love Story*

We awarded the film the top prize. I loved that this tale of a family ripped apart by being forced to flee Syria could have been watched without the sound and still retained its power. Sadly, weeks after seeing Sean McAllister's film, the Syrian refugee crisis became the biggest story of the summer.

New Horizons Film Festival — July, 2015

I went to the New Horizons film festival, which takes place in Wroclaw, Poland's fourth largest city, almost by accident. Admittedly, that statement sounds pompous, but it's almost true. I first said no to attending (everyone needs a home life), but then I was asked by the European Film Academy to mentor a group of fledging European film critics from across Europe for an event called "A Weekend in the Country." In a country house in Poland we would spend the weekend watching films, cooking meals, meeting filmmakers and discussing our reactions. It sounded like brilliant fun, so I agreed to go.

The weekend is attached to the New Horizons film festival, so directors who are showing films at the festival are those asked to attend the meals. The invitees were Magnus Von Horn, who made *The Here After*; Rania Attieh and Daniel Garcia, who made *H.*; and the flamboyant Khavn, with the imaginatively titled *Ruined Heart: Another Lovestory Between a Criminal and a Whore*.

The weekend was immense fun, and before it started I also managed to catch a couple of days at the New Horizons Festival. They show a lot of films straight out of Cannes, and they also host a lot of great events in the evening, so it's easy to keep yourself occupied.

Best Film: *Horizontes*

I'm friends with the director Eileen Hofer, a former journalist turned filmmaker, and when I landed in Poland, she had posted on Facebook to say that her film about the ballet scene in Cuba was starting in 45 minutes. I managed to check into hotel, blag myself into screening without a ticket and then discovered a unique potted history of Cuba's greatest dancer Alicia Alonso. Her shadow remains long, making it difficult for young dancers to progress.

Venice — August, 2015

With arguably the best line up in years, Artistic Director Alberto Barbera has done a great job in helping to give life back to the old lady of film festivals. It still has much to do. My dream is that the festival leaves the Lido, a place of bad food and closed hotels. The studios don't come because of the costs, so what Barbera has done is persuade those with excellent films that perhaps lack some star power, or are from countries not usually feted in the Western-oriented media, to launch at Venice. The selection of 80 odd films also means that there is not much room

for fat. So this year, Venice was the festival where I saw the best selection of films with the fewest misses. That's not been a statement I've been able to say for over a decade. There were Charlie Kaugman's excellent animation *Anomalisa*, Noah Baumbach's riveting documentary on Brian De Palma, and *The Club*, which was the best gangster film of the year.

Best Film: *As I Open My Eyes*

Director Leyla Bouzid is the daughter of the great Tunisian auteur Nouri Bouzid, and in her debut film she proves that the cinematic blood runs in her family. This is a vital and interesting look at life in Tunisia in the months before the Arab Spring, all done without addressing the impending revolution directly. Leyla Bouzid evokes the spirit of rebelliousness and change through the central character, underground pop singer Farah (Baya Medhaffer).

Toronto — September, 2015

I love Toronto, I hate Toronto. There are so many films to see — too many. If you have a smaller title, the only reason to launch here is an attempt to get industry deals, because much of the media is chasing Matt Damon to Mars.

This year I more or less gave in to seeing the “bigger” films (I have to pay my rent somehow), but there was one decision I was glad that I made, which was getting out of bed early to watch the adaptation of Martin Amis's *London Fields*. The press screening may be the first and last time the movie is ever seen, given that the screening was pulled over a dispute over authorship and the director complaining about the cut. (An Aretha Franklin doc was also pulled when the singer threatened to sue the producers.) So this was the festival of the disappearing films (if only another 150 or so films had the same problem it would have been wonderful). *London Fields* was proof, if I needed it, that sometimes you don't mind if a film is a car crash

Toronto is always filled with little moments that make the pain worth it. This year those included meeting the current owners of Charlie Hebdo, who sanctioned a documentary on the attacks on their offices. I left exhausted.

Best Film — *Demolition*

What is it with Jean Marc Vallee and launching films at Toronto? *Dallas Buyers Club* came and went at the festival only to be released to much fanfare and subsequent Oscar success, and my guess is that the same will happen to *Demolition*, a film that sees Jake Gyllenhaal play a bereaved man trying to cope with the tragic death of his wife.

Zurich — September, 2015

The film selection was pretty poor, but I will have fond memories of the festival for two reasons. The first is that it's another festival to add a television arm and so is where I was introduced to *Mr. Robot*, my favourite television show of the year. The second is that it provided the most beautiful location for an interview of the year, as I chatted to Sam Pressman on the bank of Lake Zurich. Pressman, foolishly, tried to follow in the footsteps of Werner Herzog with his film *Reconquest of the Useless*. Pressman had previously done the behind-the-scenes film on the set of *Bad Lieutenant*, and Herzog warned him off trying to recapture the

spirit of *Fitzcarlido*. The film is basically Pressman coming to that realisation, with some fun anecdotes.

Best Film: *Angry Indian Goddesses*

This was the last film I tried to watch in Toronto, but that devil called sleep got the better of me, and so I took the opportunity to watch it (with eyes open) in Zurich. The buzz was high, as this Indian film had come second in the Toronto audience award. The film starts off as a female buddy movie with a light tone, revolving around the announcement of a wedding in Goa, but then it morphs into something darker and takes a hard look at deep-rooted problems in Indian society.

London Film Festival — October, 2015

I managed to have great fun at the London Film Festival this year. The program is dominated with films that are soon to be released in the UK, and having seen many of them, I just decided that I would go to the festival and watch films that I'd heard good buzz about. As such the hit rate was great. I saw *Bang Gang (A Modern Love Story)*; the Walter Salles documentary, *Jia Zhangke: A Guy from Fenyang*; *The Measure of a Man*; *Brand (A Second Coming)*; *Aferim!*; *The Wave*; and *Valley of Love*. All with merits.

Best Film: *Frame by Frame*

Alexandria Bombach and Mo Scarpelli are filmmakers to look out for. They travelled to Afghanistan and in focusing in on war photographers looking at the war, they managed to provide a completely different look at Afghanistan to that usually trotted out.

Carthage Film Festival — November, 2015

The first edition of the Carthage film festival took place in 1968. As such, it is Africa's oldest festival. The competition concentrates on films from north Africa and the Middle East, and there is also a panorama section looking at the best films from around the world. None of which I saw. In the time it took me to fly from London to Tunis, the landscape of the festival completely changed when a suicide-bomber killed 12 members of the Tunisian Presidential Guard on a bus. I landed in a city under curfew and with tensions running high. Amazingly, and with admirable spirit, the festival organizers rewrote the timetable of the festival so that they could continue screening films outside the hours of curfew. It was a great show of defiance, a victory for art and freedom of speech. As such I didn't manage to see many films at the festival, but I did get to feed off a tremendous spirit and an occasion where cinema really felt like it had value.

Best Film: *Much Loved*

I don't know if I've ever been to a screening which felt as much like a political statement. The *Much Loved* screening was already going to be an event, even before the bomb, as the film about prostitutes working in Morocco had been banned from its homeland following its Cannes screening. Tunis was to be the first and only African country to show the film. After the bomb, attending the film became a symbol of defiance.

Ajyal Film Festival — November, 2015

Ajyal is a festival aimed at families that takes place in Doha. It opened with *The Idol*, the new film from Hany Abu-Assad, who

made the excellent *Paradise Now* and the Oscar-nominated *Omar*. This is his first "feel good" movie, and arguably the most anticipated Arab film made in recent times, being about the much feted winner of Arab Idol Mohammed Assaf. It's a well crafted film but, having seen the film in Toronto and London, for me it was something I'd already been excited about and had got over by the time I got to the festival. Last year the festival opened with the world premiere of *Speed Sisters*, and this year it felt as though opening night was programmed with the local audience primarily in mind. But perhaps this was festival fatigue setting in.

Best Film: *Very Big Shot*

The debut film from Mir-Jean Bou Chaaya is dressed up as a gangster movie, but is actually a satire on spin. It's a lot of fun even with its slightly perplexing ending. The performance of Alain Saadeh is especially noteworthy. The film went on to win the top prize at the Marrakech Film Festival

Marrakech Film Festival — December, 2015

My final festival of the year and one that is immensely enjoyable. I'm always amazed by the Marrakech Film Festival; the organization is superb, the jury members are always fantastic, and this is all despite a competition line-up that is often sub-par.

But the festival is always worth going to because you can bump into Bill Murray at the magnificent Mamounia hotel, there is time to chin wag with Mitch Glazer for an hour and you get to have the great Sunday brunch by the swimming pool with Fatih Akin and Anurag Kashyap, while Anton Corbijn and Naomie Kawase cover over to say hello. I stayed for four days, soaked up the sun, conducted some interviews and watched only a couple of movies. It was how I imagine Cannes was like in the 1950s.

Best Film: *Black*

Showing out of competition, this Belgium film about gang violence won the discovery award at Toronto. Co-directors Adil El Arbi and Bilal Fallah have made a visually arresting film, with a vibrant hip-hop soundtrack. The film's look at disenfranchised communities in Belgium sadly took on added significance after the Paris attacks.

10 Best Films seen at film festivals this year (alphabetical order)

A Syrian Love Story

Anomalisa

Angry Indian Goddesses

Court

Dheepan

Inside Out

Open Your Eyes

Room

Taxi Tehran

Victoria