

SPECIALE Film Festival and the rhythm of social inclusivity

The Fluid Spaces of London Indian Film Festival and Florence Indian Film Festival

I did not embrace the culture of cinema as a cinephile but I shared an interest in films and television with my family, and particularly with my mother who, working at her sewing machine, would watch 1950s American musicals. The noise of her sewing machine punctuated by American songs wonderfully and accurately represents the viewing pleasures of my Italian suburban childhood. This mix of sounds, so different yet so distinguished, has shaped in my mind the rhythm of cinema viewing.

The interest I shared with my mother in watching 'other' cinema, the one from the other side of the ocean, evolved and allowed us to browse video stores and purchase VHS cassettes – awaiting the special issues of journals or magazines that would have 'other' cinema enclosed within them.

Much later, my craving for non-Italian cinema was satisfied when, as a student at the Università degli Studi di Bologna, I began visiting the international Festival del Cinema Ritrovato, where I remember watching restored German films with live music performances, and also the restored films of Charlie Chaplin, which are part of the larger work conducted by the Cineteca di Bologna on the work of the British director. Whilst at Bologna, although world cinema was scarcely studied and the approach was more Eurocentric, my imagination was absolutely captured when, at the Lumière cinema in Bologna, I could not miss the opportunity of going to watch world cinema. My first memory of genuine world cinema is *Sometime Happiness, Sometime Sadness (Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, 2001, Karan Johar)* a classic Bollywood family drama. I experienced it as an absolutely incomprehensible story, or rather as a story in a language very different from the European films I was used to watch, and certainly very different from the American musicals I grew up with. However, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* acted as a kind of initiation, where illogical superstition, unusual social concerns, and the extravagant and unusual acting style went hand in hand with the sheer fascination of the discovery of an unknown universe. This space, clearly, was speaking to me about the way in which dedicated places could socially and culturally connect with 'other' cinemas and cultures and convey filmic emotions.

My idealistic nomadic journey around the world in search of world cinema ended when in my personal life I encountered, connected and tied a knot with India and its cinematic industry. Much of my work looks at the social and cultural connections and disconnections of Indian cinema – and specifically the Bollywood industry, the popular Hindi cinema from Mumbai – with Italy and its entertainment industry. I have been intrigued by the way popular Hindi cinema, and also indie Indian cinema, found its ways globally. Whilst the Bollywood industry found its way and a worldwide spread through multiple media platforms¹, the attention shifted to observe the distribution and promotional avenues of indie Indian cinema. Thus, the film festival became the observation site of multiple discourses on the cinema industry and its distribution, but mostly of consumption. As a UK-based Italian scholar, my research tapped into realities logistically close to me. I worked on the study and analysis of the River to River Florence Indian Film Festival (RRFIFF) and the London Indian Film Festival (LIFF) – very different festivals with diverse organisational structures yet both exhibiting indie Indian cinema. In studying these two festivals, I have been interested in observing the way non-commercial cinema is consumed and I have also begun to observe the kind of ethnic and anthropologic discourses they were both raising. Both film festivals, embracing the decision to screen indie Indian films, those produced outside the infrastructure of the Bollywood industry, clearly made a statement in embracing and showcasing 'other' cinema from India. In this light, the two venues, by using their transnational connections and living somewhat in the show of the globalisation of Bollywood cinema, rather opportunistically put themselves on the map as pivotal cinema events showcasing 'other-than-Bollywood' Indian cinema.

As Marijke de Valk perfectly reminds us², studying film festivals requires 'a mobile line of enquiry'³. She

SPECIALE suggests that a researcher should be able to observe and record the state support of production deals, audience reception, global patterns of circulation and interference of the main world cinema industries. Where all these forces come together is where we have a film festival. Also, de Valk reminds that issues of nationality and political relationships are negotiated, economic profitability and sustainability are realised, and novel practices of cinephilia find a comfortable dwelling. Thus, film festivals have several responsibilities in many and diversified areas. These venues are able to accommodate geopolitical significance, global distribution, commerce and cultural matters. In the sheer of de Valk's remarks on the nature of film festivals and their ability to be read as geopolitical flexible spaces, this article intends to expand on this existing consideration. Thus, the scope is to place an accent on the study of film festivals to widen the discourse of festivals and their role as social and cultural forces.

There have been several approaches to the study of film festivals and their cultural significance building on specific works that present a wider argument concerning international film festivals. As Nichols suggests, festivals are continuous, international arenas for the circulation of films and they promote image-culture, thus promoting "traffic in cinema"⁴. Iordanova and Cheung⁵ explore film festival venues and their relation to transnationalism, but also their formations in relation to the economics and politics of those film festivals that affirm and transcend nation-borders, hence promoting the circulation of films in the 'supranational sphere'⁶. These existing studies draw attention to the necessity for the harmonisation of the diverse scholarship regarding film festivals and social studies. On this necessary line of enquiry, this paper intends to update the field of film festival studies and sociological/geopolitical enquiry by raising awareness of the role of festivals in relation to ethnic awareness and inclusion. The scope is to provide a space for Thomas Elsaesser's⁷ concerns, who in his writing highlights the importance and role of certain festival venues in letting us think about various contingencies, such as the potential to add value and set multiple agendas. Thus, by introducing new awareness and conceptual social parameters to the study of film festivals, I hope that this article will provide a new perspective on these festivals as inherently linked to societal and cultural concerns.

Both festivals studied here, despite being different in form, are evidence of the uniqueness of different cultures and specific filmmakers and affirm the underlying qualities of indie Indian cinema and the obligation to think about its internationalisation. Also, both festivals foster the various 'narratives' of nationhood whilst also reconfiguring the supranational space, bridging the post-colonial nation, its transnational diaspora and ethnic identification.

In this light this paper comparatively observes these festivals and the exclusive mode they have to build discourses on ethnicity and ethnic inclusion. I will introduce the two festivals and their histories. Moreover, it is crucial to observe how the festivals respond to social and ethnic generalisation, and the way their aesthetics interlock with discourses of ethnic compartmentalisation and city spaces. Also, I seek to observe if and how these film festivals, transcending the idea of promoting 'traffic in cinema', are static social events or dynamic and flexible, able to initiate discourses on and engage with social concerns.

To begin this enquiry, I would like to start by recalling the perspective of 'vertical mosaic' elaborated by the sociologist John Porter, which Dina Iordanova invites us to do. Porter's analysis of Canadian society reveals that certain ethnic groups have a better and more organised societal infrastructure, which provides an enhanced income. Other groups analysed by the Canadian sociologist are more disadvantaged and socially marginalised. According to Porter, this arrangement is a vertical societal organisation, which also affects power and influences decision making⁸. Hence, a vertical mosaic is a medley of different ethnic, linguistic, regional and religious groupings that is vertical, and in that is reflected the privileged and less privileged access to economic, social and cultural power that these ethnic groupings have within the societal sphere. Iordanova reminds us in her writing on film festivals and imagined communities⁹ that the notion of vertical mosaic is very similar and applicable to the full array of film festivals, and specifically to

SPECIALE those that have sprung up in the context of contemporary multicultural societies.

Henceforth, by acknowledging the suggestion of Iordanova, this study of the LIFF and the Florence Indian Film Festival (FIFF) will advocate and insert the presence of these institutionalised festivals, into the discourse of a vertical mosaic. By looking at the way they choose to deal with indie Indian cinema and therefore with the creatively rich and geographically, artistically and historically diversified panorama of Indian cinema industries, these festivals are open arenas for artists to manifest all their unique voices and concerns against the standardised narratives of the well-established system of popular Hindi narration. These festival venues are spaces where non-mainstream films can find a dwelling to rise boldly and transnationally above the hegemonic mainstream cinema and unreservedly narrate stories around thorny topics poorly and haphazardly narrated within the cacophony of Bollywood cinema. Topics such as sexuality and pleasure, social exclusion, child prostitution, to mention a few, are cogent themes unreservedly narrated by these films, and are not censured the same way Bollywood films are. These festivals enable such films to have a vibrant and growing voice, otherwise muted within the Bollywood-driven society and the mechanism of its globalisation¹⁰.

Both festivals not only allow the communities they represent (the South Asian community) to be visible and institutionalised but also provide an arena for the different sensitivities and creativities within the South Asian subcontinent to be known globally and to be more widely inserted into the globalisation of Indian cinema¹¹. Films such as *Delhi Belly* (Abhinay Deo, 2011), *Asshole* (*Gandu*, Qaushiq Mukherjee, 2010), *Lucia* (Pawan Kumar, 2013) and *The Land of Cards* (*Tasher Desh*, 2013, Qaushiq Mukherjee), among other titles, have clearly projected the understanding and composition of contemporary indie Indian cinema (across diasporic and indigenous communities) far beyond the borders of Bollywood cinematic standards. All four example mentioned above are complex filmic tiles from a growing filmic culture decentred from Mumbai's production and instead coming from Karnataka and Bengali, to mention a few.

Together with the acknowledgement of the clear emergence of a novel film culture in India¹², this paper also aims to offer a viewpoint on how these festivals connect with the city spaces, and where can they be positioned on the ideal stairs of the vertical mosaic as detailed by Iordanova's work.

In order to address the above issues, I would like to advocate Zigmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity¹³. Liquid modernity, Bauman suggests, is a condition that affects individuals and, with it, all their social and cultural activities, resulting in an increased feeling of uncertainty and the development of ambivalence¹⁴. However, liquid modernity, the Polish sociologist explains, is a continuation of a modernity in which a person can shift from one social position to another in a fluid manner. This fluidity involves cultural happenings, and nomadism becomes the general trait of such a fluid society. Traditional patterns are normally replaced by the chosen ones; a stance valid in many cultural contexts¹⁵. The pattern chosen here by the film festivals I have mentioned is to follow a flux of creativity that softly embraces a form of social activism.

To closely engage with both festivals and therefore with discourses on ethnic generalisation and marginalisation, the promotional videos of both festivals offer a valid source of visual information to tap into (<http://scaryideas.com/content/21021> – RRFIFF; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrdj9wuU74w> – LIFF) and reflect ethnicities, generalisations and social integration.

The promos, which have a sense of movement and the journey to reach the venues of the festival clearly embedded within their narration, articulate ethnicities throughout and engage with the mobilisation of people across the city space.

The ethnic composition articulated within the promo of the RRFIFF, an event which was conceived in Italy by film amateur Selvaggia Velo in 2001, showcases the multiplicity and complexity of Indian culture. Many of the ethnically identifiable facets of Indian culture are regionally identifiable, immediately suggesting and connecting with the multiplicities of Indian cinema. Ethnic specificities include images of

SPECIALE a woman with pots of water on her head – very characteristic of women in Gujarat and Rajasthan (Fig. 1);

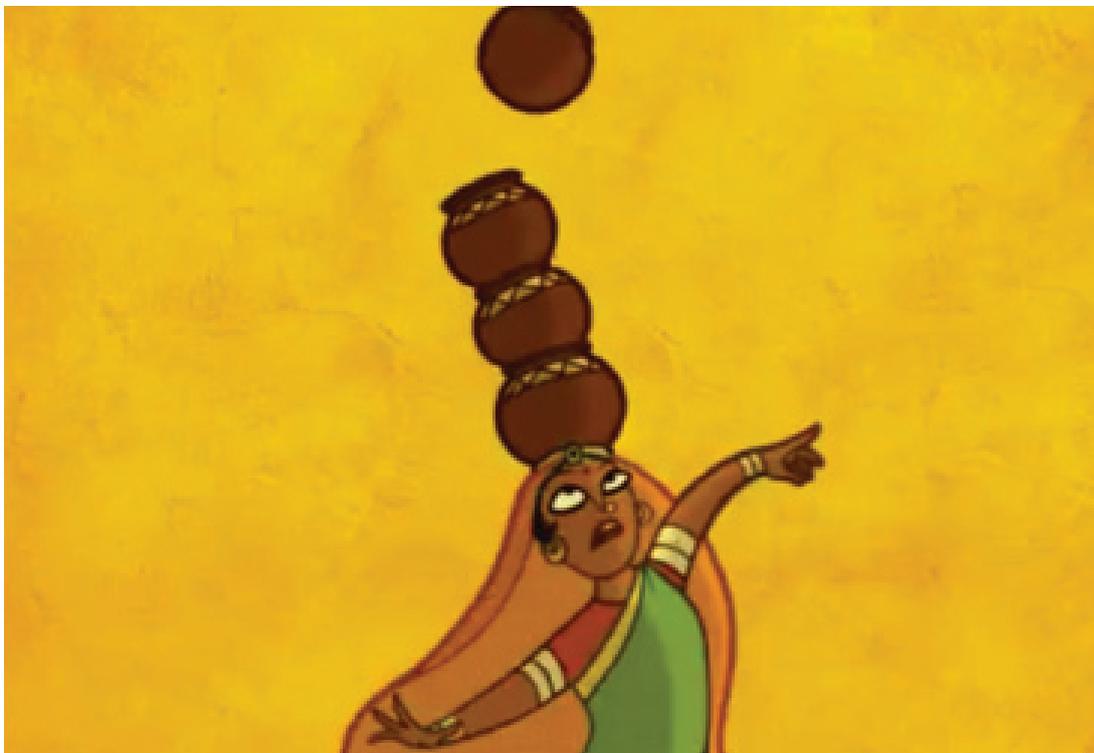


Fig. 1

the auto-rickshaw typically found throughout India, with a moustached driver wearing a cap typical of central and north India beside a hungry Bengal tiger (Fig. 2);



Fig. 2

SPECIALE the Hindi inscription *Jai Bholenath*, Bholenath being another name for Lord Shiva used mainly in northern India, on a sweet stall with a Punjabi man eating the sweets (Fig. 3);



Fig. 3

the Kathakali mask and dance, which are typical of Kerala in southern India, together with the percussionists and bhangra dancers from Punjab in northern India (Fig. 4);



Fig. 4

SPECIALE and the reference to the Dasara Festival in Mysore in southern India to mark the tenth day of the Hindu Navratri festivities, with the deity on an elephant here being replaced by a film reel (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5

With two large posters, one saying *Benvenuti* and the other the Hindi equivalent, *Su-swagatam*, the entire 'Made in India' cargo is catapulted on to the shores of the Florentine River Arno in Italy (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

SPECIALE The journey of this Noah's ark in the shape of a peacock, the national bird of India, is full of ethnic and cultural diversity and entertainment, above all cinematic. The ark, by docking on the other side of an imaginary river, metaphorically alluding to the name of the festival itself, reaches the core location of the festival since its inception, Odeon Cinema in central Florence. The promo for the FIFF is composed of cultural expansions and contractions and it draws continuous axes across the different areas (and cultures) of India; it also steadily connects, through an imaginary transnational journey, India with Italy. River to River, which until a few years ago mostly took place in just one venue, has undergone a few changes in the last few years. The film festival, which maintains the Odeon Cinema as the headquarters of its main event, expanded its screenings to other cinemas within the city. By approaching the first periphery of the city, the film festival stirred a centripetal occupation of the urban space in order to mobilise the event to other areas and interrupt the hegemonic centrality of film festivals. Hence, the current strategy of the festival is to create a renewed larger community surrounding the event. Since 2010, the FIFF has been metaphorically cruising rivers, starting from the Arno and moving into the Tiber, and the festival is now dropping anchor in Rome – River to River is now screening indie Indian cinema for two consecutive days in Rome. This festival, starting from Florence and engaging with the city via multiple and decentred venues, expands the spatiality and temporality of the festival by spreading the event across a week of screenings and talks; then, by setting a waiting time between the two events with notices and communication on the main website and on social networks, it provides a sense of permanence with continued notices before migrating to Rome for a second set of events.

The FIFF clearly suggests how the spaces of film festivals actively and fluidly aim at social expansion, providing the festival with a growing social dimension, almost rhizomatic to use Deleuzian terms, taking novel dimensions in motion¹⁶ and dressing the festival with a wider contingency agenda. The festival enables connections of 'any point to any other point'¹⁷, to quote Deleuze, through the processes of navigation and construction of spaces and city.

The second case study of this article is the LIFF, a relatively young festival directed by Cary Rajinder Sawhney, which opened its doors to the public in 2009. The festival is normally held in London in July. Before beginning an observation of this event, it should be mentioned that London is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, with a population close to 8.5 million, over 300 languages spoken and more than 50 non-indigenous communities with a population of more than 10,000¹⁸. There are many ethnic communities historically populating specific areas of the city, and are Greeks, Nigerians, Japanese and Chinese, but also Indians and Pakistanis.

London is divided into areas with clear ethnic demography. Each area is easily defined by ethnicities. Harrow, Hounslow and part of Barnet are the renowned Indian areas and within them further characterisation is played by the provenance of their inhabitants which are mostly from Gujarat, Punjab respectively. There is also the Arab area of Earls Court, near Hammersmith, the black Caribbean community in Lambeth and Southwark, and the list goes on. In spite of London being a city that is well connected throughout its diverse areas by an extensive underground network, the ethnic compartmentalisation and ethnic recognisability of areas appear to be socially concerning and to reinforce social divisions across the city. This characterisation of the city and the division in areas evidently form an ethnic geographical and cultural compartmentalisation, which the LIFF seems to criticize through its spread-out programme (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).

To access the festival's screenings it is necessary travel to different quarters of the city, consequently abandoning the centrality of the urban space and enabling peripheries to be essential parts of the event. In this way, the journey towards the central and peripheral venues of the festival creates a centrifugal and centripetal flux from and to the centre, Haymarket. These journeys challenge the static nature and exclusivity of numerous festivals and enable the city to be the venue of the festival. The cinema chain Cineworld hosts the film festival and its venues are spread throughout the city. Specifically, the theatres utilised by the festival are situated in Lambeth (densely populated by Irish, black Caribbean and black

SPECIALE Africans), Wembley (populated by Indians, mainly Punjabis), Cineworld O2 in east London (populated by black Africans), Wood Green in Barnet (densely populated by Irish, Chinese and black African and Caribbean), Wandsworth (populated by a mix of Muslim Indian and Pakistani), and Shaftsbury Avenue at Piccadilly Circus and BFI Southbank in central London. This centrifugal – from the centre towards the peripheries – and centripetal mobilisation – from the peripheries to the centre – is part of the strategic planning and approach of the festival, which not only deliberately condemns ethnic compartmentalisation and promotes discourses on inclusion but also rejuvenates the social spatiality and temporality of a film festival venue. The LIFF expands the spaces of fruition to the peripheries and to a wider public than just specialists.

HANK AND ASHA | EUROPEAN PREMIERE | Cert U



FILM INFO
English language | 73 Mins | USA | Dir James E. Duff | with Andrew Pastides, Mahira Kakkar.

[▶ PLAY TRAILER](#) [▶ FILM WEBSITE](#)

11 JULY 18:30 ICA	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO
12 JULY 20:00 CINEWORLD WEMBLEY	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO
12 JULY 20:20 ICA	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO
13 JULY 18:00 CINEWORLD O2	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO

Fig. 7

BAREFOOT TO GOA | EUROPEAN PREMIERE | Cert U



FILM INFO
Hindi with English subtitles | 80 mins | India | Dir. Praveen Morchhale | with Purva Parag, Farrukh Jaffar, Saara Nahar.

[▶ PLAY TRAILER](#) [▶ FILM WEBSITE](#)

11 JULY 19:00 CINEWORLD WANDSWORTH	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO
12 JULY 18:00 CINEWORLD WEMBLEY	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO
13 JULY 15:00 ICA	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO
14 JULY 19:00 CINEWORLD WOOD GREEN	▶ LOCATION MAP	▶ BOOKING INFO

Fig. 8

SPECIALE By placing the LIFF and the FIFF side by side, it is unmistakable that both festivals seem to set social concerns within their cultural, artistic and aesthetic agendas. By moving beyond the established hegemonic and centralising structures of many film festivals and engaging with the wider audience by spreading the festival to multiple spaces across the city; these venues complicate the reading of film festivals and corroborate the loose belongingness of film festival studies to any specific discipline¹⁹. Like a rhizomatic connection – where a rhizome can connect to any other – into a fluid cultural space, the importance of such festivals in the construction of a vertical mosaic resides in the emergence of their nomadic nature, in their radial approach and inclusion, and specifically in the way they construct spatial stratifications. Their enriched agenda enhances these venues as social activist players. The events in London and Florence modify the essentialist notion of community and problematise Iordanova's assumption that certain film festivals struggle to interact with their respective ethnic groups²⁰. Rather, both festivals mentioned here, in different ways, destabilise the idea of multiculturalism as a fragmented social phenomenon and empowers the festival to be a cultural force able to establish a conceptual framework that embraces nomadism and fluidity, both expressions of a rhizomatic society, thus giving rise to an emergent series of readings. Deleuze reminds us that it is inherent for an emergent space to change in nature²¹. In this light, then, it is possible to acknowledge that a film festival is able to 'deterritorialise' the centrality of the event and promote an experiential inclusive ethnic and cultural process. Both festivals bring about a cultural revolution of the spaces. They draw a map that transcends disparate public spheres of certain contemporary multicultural contexts²² and establish one made of connectivity, reversibility, expansions and contractions with multiple entranceways and exits and its own act on ethnic inclusion.

To conclude I would like to draw a line back to Bauman's discourse on fluidity, which perfectly substantiates the layering of film festivals' complexities via fluidity; these festivals set a new de facto normative fluid attitude with emphasis on shifting spaces rather than staying central and circumscribed. In so doing, they facilitate the understanding of entertainment spaces as flexible in lieu of permanent (or solid) arrangements.

Monia Acciari

Acknowledgement

This article could not have been possible without the support of my husband Sridhar, who constantly inspires me, and with whom watching Indian cinema in its multiple forms and in multiple locations, does have an incredibly different 'taste'. I would also like to thank Dr. Rajinder Dudrah at the University of Manchester, who always gives me 'tough love' and does not stop teaching me the wonders and complications of being an academic. Last but not least, my gratitude goes to Prof. Roy Menarini, a 'lost and found' colleague and friend, who by being an exceptional, sensitive and professional scholar made the experience of such a joint-venture a pleasurable one.

Notes

1. Derek Bose, *Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order*, London, Sage 2006; Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar, *Global Bollywood*, New York, New York University Press 2008.
2. Marijke De Valk, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2007.
3. Marijke De Valk, op. cit., p.16.
4. Bill Nichols, 'Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism', *East-West Film Journal*, 8 (n. 1), 1994, pp. 84–67.

- SPECIALE** 5. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, *Film Festival Year Book 2*, St Andrews Film Studies, St Andrews 2010.
6. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, *op. cit.*, 1.
7. Thomas Elsaesser, *Cinephilia and the Uses of Disenchantment*, in , Marijke De Valk and Malte Hagener (eds) *Cinephilia and the Uses of Disenchantment*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 27–44.
8. John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic*, University of Toronto, Toronto 1965.
9. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, *op. cit.*, 16.
10. For Further information, please see my interview with Film festival director Selvaggia Velo, also included in this issue.
11. Dina Iordanova, Juan Goytisolo, Gajendra K. Sing, Radha Sesić, Asuman Suner, Viola Shafik and P.A. Skantze, 'Indian Cinema's Global Reach', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 4 (n. 2), 2006, pp. 113–140; Monia Acciari, 'The Italianization of Bollywood Cinema: Ad Hoc Films', *Studies in European Cinema*, 1 (n. 1), 2014, pp. 1–13; Rajinder Dudrah, *Bollywood Travels: Culture, Diaspora and Border Crossings in Popular Hindi Cinema*, Routledge, New York 2012; Rajesh K. Pillania, 'The Globalization of Indian Hindi Movie Industry', *Management*, 3 (n. 2), 2008, pp. 115–123; David J. Schaefer and Kavita Karan, *Bollywood and Globalization: The Global Power of Popular Hindi Cinema*, Routledge, New York 2012;
12. Priya Joshi and Rajinder Dudra, *The 1970s and its Legacies in India's Cinemas*, Routledge, New York 2013; Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, British Film Institute, London 2008.
13. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013.
14. Zygmunt Bauman, *op. cit.*, 23.
15. *Ibidem*.
16. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Continuum, London 1987.
17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *op.cit.*, 12.
18. Leo Benedictus, *Almost every race, colour, nation and religion on earth*, in *The Guardian*, 25/05/2005, London.
19. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, *op. cit.*, 3.
20. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, *op. cit.*, 15.
21. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *op.cit.*, 18.
22. Tamar Liebes and James Curran, *Media, Ritual and Identity*, Routledge, London 1998.