Berlin film festival 2000

Although the chill grey of Berlin in February can't quite compete with the glamour of Cannes and its palm trees, the Berlin Film Festival also draws its share of world-famous actors and directors.

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Unlike many other film festivals, the prestigious Berlinale has throughout most of its fifty-year history provided interpretation for many of the films screened, as well as for a number of press conferences. Interpretation is also available for meetings of the international jury that meets to discuss which film is to win the coveted Golden Bear and to award a host of other prizes.

Throughout the Cold War, the Berlinale reflected its desire to provide a forum for film-makers from Central and Eastern Europe by offering interpretation not only into French, German, English, and Spanish, but also into Russian, for example for all the films showing in the Competition section. Two years ago, Russian was dropped as a core language, but is still used for press conferences or discussions with the director if a Russian-language film is screening. This year there will be interpretation into Spanish for the morning press screenings and into Chinese for the evening screenings (as this year the head of the jury is Chinese). A number of other languages are also used on an ad hoc basis.

Part of the challenge of organising interpretation for the Berlinale is where on earth to find an interpreter for a rare language at extremely short notice. The film business being what it is, it is often not clear until the very last minute precisely which stars and film-makers will be attending the press conferences. This was the case last year at a press conference for "Three Seasons" with Harvey Keitel. Although a Hollywood movie, it was shot almost entirely in Vietnamese. On the day before the press conference it suddenly transpired that the director would be making an unscheduled appearance-and that he spoke only that language.

Most of the interpreters working in the main sections of the Festival-Panorama and Competition-are full-time conference interpreters and members of AIIC.

Interpreting films is an art unto itself, especially when one does not understand the language spoken in the film and must rely on subtitles, reading, for example, German subtitles so as to interpret a Japanese film into English. Although a text is usually given to the interpreters to read through beforehand, this is not a script with an indication of scene changes and who is speaking when. Rather, it is a "dialogue list", in essence a bare-bones transcript of the subtitles.

Subtitles, of course, can vary tremendously in quality, in terms of both accuracy and completeness, as anyone who watches subtitled films knows. That means you can get quite a few surprises in the booth, such as when you realise that the subtitles are rather out of synch with the mood of what's up on the screen, requiring some rapid revamping if the interpretation isn't to sound completely ridiculous.
Then there is the challenge of getting the timing right, especially in rapid-fire exchanges, or simply keeping up and not losing the place in your script in very wordy (usually French!) films.

The other big question is whether to deliver the lines coolly, and risk sounding like one of those Central European TV films dubbed with just one voice in a flat monotone, or instead to inject a bit of emotion and risk hitting the wrong note. Finding just the right term can also be a challenge, particularly in slangy registers not usually encountered in the booth.

If one of the films turns out to be a literary adaptation, for example of one of Shakespeare's plays, the midnight oil will be burning across Berlin as colleagues compare their dialogue lists with the original work. Unfortunately it's usually not simply a case of getting your hands on the opus before heading for the booth, since you will need to find all the right sections at the right time, and the film will almost inevitably not follow the exact sequence of the original.

This is not a job for colleagues with a weak stomach either, although if the blood and guts really become intolerable, it is just about possible to judiciously position your dialogue list so as to see only the subtitles and blot out the rest!

Nor are the press conferences a piece of cake. Just like any other specialised conference, they can be strewn with technical vocabulary. No matter how well prepared you might be, you could well find yourself interpreting an unexpected and detailed account of the background of the film or the technicalities of its shooting.

The Internet, however, is a great help in digging up background information, such as all the titles of every film Jeanne Moreau ever made-especially useful as film titles can vary so dramatically from language to language. Would you know at the drop of a hat that "Denn Sie wissen nicht was Sie tun" is actually "Rebel Without A Cause"?

Slowly but surely, you acquire the terminology and learn not to mix up post-production and the executive producer. Another bonus is that you can spend the rest of the year feeling virtuous every time you go to the movies and pay attention during the credits...

All of these unusual twists make the festival enormous fun but also a great challenge. It's a welcome change of style from the usual technical and political conferences, and the shift in pace can also be enjoyable, if at times exhausting. A typical day at the Berlinale might look something like this:

- **9.00**: press screening. Depending on the language of the film, this is the easy bit; i.e., if it is in English, the English interpreters at least can settle back with a cup of coffee and simply enjoy the film in preparation for the press conference-at least until it begins to draw to a close and it's time to gather up hats and coats to be ready to whiz off to the press centre and be in the booth before the journalists arrive.
- **11.00**: press conference.
- **13.00**: pick up background material from the co-ordination office and find out if there are any last-minute changes to the interpreting schedule.
- **14.00**: interpret one of the meetings of the international jury.
- Next, grab a bite to eat while reading through information about the late screening in the evening.
- **19.00**: interpret film.
- **22.00**: watch film in the Panorama section, and interpret discussion with the director after the film.

Interpreting films following a heavy schedule like this can change your whole perspective on the cinema. When you're in the booth, you can come to really appreciate Asian films with very little text (and great photography), whilst dreading French movies with endless dialogue-not to mention how...
fascinating it can be to see the same film three times in the course of a couple of days.

Working as an interpreter is a great way to see a festival. You needn't wade through all the programme information, as the decisions are taken for you, and you might well wind up seeing surprising and fascinating films it would never have occurred to you to go and see yourself.

A few dictionary recommendations

- "Film Talk" (German-English), ISBN 3-929631-00-8
- "Glossary of Filmographic Terms" (EN/FR/DE/IT/SP/PO/HU/NL/P/SV/CZ/BU with helpful explanations of terms), ISBN 92-9094-004-2
- "Lexique Cinéma et Vidéo" (French-English), ISBN 2-85608-074-X
- "Dictionary of Cinematographic Terms" (Italian-English), ISBN 88-85095-05-4
- "Complete Film Dictionary" (English definitions), ISBN 0-670-10009-9

Recommended citation format: