

DOHA FILM INSTITUTE

First Qumra Talk explores the power of online film distribution



Qumra Talks, a new initiative at the third edition of Qumra, the industry event by the Doha Film Institute, kicked off with the first session focusing on International Digital Distribution and Marketing. Pierre Alexandre Labelle, CEO of Under the Milky Way; Gianluca Chakra, Managing Director, Front Row Filmed Entertainment and Nader Sobhan, Iflix head of Middle East and North Africa, came together to give their take on the direction of digital film distribution and whether the potential power of online distribution for independent filmmakers had been hyped or is a much-needed reality.

Pierre Alexandre Labelle took attendees through the basics of Video on Demand (VOD), the role of the digital distributor and different models of digital distribution. Speaking of the value that digital distribution offers filmmakers, Labelle said: "Video on Demand is the present and future of entertainment. This is the way the industry is evolving. Packaged media, DVDs etc., are fast disappearing. Traditional distribution channels, such as movie theatres, give filmmakers a limited audience with the constraints of time and space while VOD allows for tens of thousands of films to be available all the time."

Discussing the way in which people watch entertainment now, Nader Sobhan added: "I can't remember the last time I ran home to watch TV. No one does this anymore. There's been a seismic shift to how we watch entertainment. We no longer have to wait, we can watch films and TV shows through a multitude of platforms and devices. Iflix gives people an all-you-can-eat entertainment platform where they can binge on the films and TV shows they want."

Adding to the argument for filmmakers to harness the power of digital distribution channels, Gianluca Chakra said: "Now that you have many different ways of distributing your film, you have more ways for people to see your film. Filmmakers can find new audiences, or indeed 'their' audience." The discussion also covered the marketing of film on digital distribution platforms, whose natural ally is social media. The panel highlighted platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, which allow distributors and producers to reach a highly targeted audience.

Organized in partnership with the Northwestern University in Qatar, Qumra Talks is a series of three specially curate discussions, open to the public. It brings together leaders from the film, TV, technology and online worlds to offer new perspectives into areas that are redefining the film and media ecosystem.



DOCUMENT HERITAGE OR RISK LOSING YOUR HISTORY, REMINDS QUMRA MASTER RITHY PANH

Cambodian-French filmmaker and Qumra Master Rithy Panh had a word of advice for emerging filmmakers. "If you do not document your story (your past and heritage), you will have no history," he told audiences, taking them on a sublime journey into his own tryst with filmmaking. Panh, the director of *The Missing Picture* (Cambodia, France/2013), nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, is acclaimed for his compelling documentaries that probe into the dark annals of Cambodia's history under the Khmer Rouge.

Panh was talking in his masterclass during Qumra, a Doha Film Institute initiative that seeks to provide mentorship, nurturing, and hands-on development for filmmakers from around the world. Qumra is taking place in Qatar from 3 through 8 March. At once personal and yet detached, his works including *The Rice People* (1994), *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2004) and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2012), set the framework for the Qumra Masterclass led by Richard Pe a, former programme director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the director of the New York Film Festival.

For Panh, each film has been intense excursions into his own life and soul. But for a filmmaker who sought catharsis in documenting the evil that men did, he believes that 'cinema cannot heal anything. Cinema cannot change life or the world but it gives you the possibility that you can change something. That is why cinema is relevant.'

He has opened the Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh to help rebuild the Cambodian film industry. It had a number of young Cambodians working in *First They Killed My Father*, Angelina Jolie's recent film adaptation of Loung Ung's memoir, with Bophana Productions as co-producer. "I don't ask my students to make films of the genocide," says Panh. "We train them and give possibility to making images and sounds." This is part of his mission to document his nation, which he says



is relevant to the region too "because documenting memory is important. So use the digital tools to express your feelings and sensitivity."

Powerful tool

His approach to filming is not to pan the camera on the subjects "but to be with them." That is why in making *S21*, which has one of the powerful single-shot sequences of a 'perpetuator' describing his deeds inside the prison, Panh refuses to take his camera into the cell.

"My camera stops at the door; if I enter it would be to step on the bodies of the prisoners who were there." Five falcons appeared out of nowhere during the shoot, an enigma, he says is often part of honest documentary making. Documentary is difficult than feature; there are a lot of forbidden things, and moral and ethical considerations, he adds. "But for me, documentary is important because it is a way to show people that you cannot destroy me. I am here, and I am capable of making poetry, and creating more than fiction."

Making film is not easy, he told the young filmmakers. "You do not have to sacrifice life for films; life is more precious.

But if you ask too many questions (on how and what to film) you will be paralyzed. Just go do it, and do it well." Panh took audiences through his early days in France, when he received a camera as a gift and shot his first 'film,' - "it made people laugh and I realized it was a powerful tool." He learnt the art of cinema, as much by attending film school, as by watching countless films. He went to Mali, worked with Souleymane Ciss, was arrested for filming, and the experience gave him "hope that cinema is not just entertainment but also memory, dignity, love, poetry and point of view."

His first film *The Rice People* was a tribute to his grandparents, which is underlined by his intense spirituality that "everybody has a soul; the house, the kitchen."

He also learnt during its making that in directing children it is best left to 'express feelings by themselves,' and which formed the foundation of his cinematic philosophy - 'you do not make film of people but with people.' And from his own experiences - through life and cinema - he has learnt that there is nothing called the 'banality of evil. There is only the choice you make - in anything.'