# 17. Independent Film and the US Festival Circuit

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**Abstract:** This chapter considers the relationship of independent cinema to film festivals in the United States, and contextualises this question amidst the immediate pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and broader trends confronting the film industry. I begin from the premise that the rise of digital cinema was a turning point for festivals, heightening their role as an alternative distribution network for independent film in the United States. Their success in this role, I contend, was in the mutual interests of an otherwise disparate network of stakeholders. Yet the challenges of the pandemic have laid bare the struggle that confronts festivals in continuing to mediate between these groups, as interests that were formerly aligned may increasingly diverge.

**Keywords:** digital cinema, distribution, streaming, pandemic, casualised exhibition

This chapter considers the relationship of independent cinema to film festivals in the United States, contextualizing this question amidst the immediate pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and broader trends confronting the film industry. I begin from the premise that the rise of digital cinema was a turning point for American festivals, heightening their role as an alternative distribution network for independent and international film in the United States. Elsewhere, I have traced two countervailing trends over a two-decade long period: a surge in the number of independent films released into the market each year, and the consolidation of the motion picture exhibition business, reflected both in the decreased number of movie theaters operating in America and the greater concentration of revenues among the highest-grossing films in any given year (Kredell 2022).

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Backstopping these trends, of course, is a separate but intimately linked development: the rise of streaming media and the shifting consumption trends that attend to it. Taken altogether, American film festivals have served an important function within the broader media market as casualized exhibition intermediaries, increasingly representing the major opportunity for producers to screen their films to public audiences before release to the streaming/video-on-demand market. Festivals have been successful in these roles because it is within the mutual interests of an otherwise disparate network of stakeholders for them to do so. Yet the challenges of the pandemic have laid bare the struggle that confronts festivals in continuing to mediate between these groups, as interests that were formerly aligned may increasingly diverge.

With this essay, I explore what a sustainable future for the festival sector and casualized exhibition looks like in the United States beyond COVID-19. In particular, I want to focus on a question of quantity. If we imagine all festivals to serve some instrumental purpose in the larger media economy, we are left confounded: the American festival landscape is today defined by its plenitude, with thousands of events on the calendar. Of course, this assumption belies a category error—film festivals are not strictly analogous to trade shows. The logic that compels industry participants to gather at the Consumer Electronics Show or the North American International Auto Show also drives similar attendance at film events in Cannes and Toronto, which we call "festivals." That same name applies to tens of thousands of other film events each year, but very few festivals are sites of business activity; a reminder that selling cell phones or light-duty pickup trucks is fundamentally different from selling cinema. As we will see, the geographical dispersion of the US film festival landscape reflects the underlying precarity of the sector. Ultimately, I want to argue that the 1990s assimilation of independent film into the American mainstream (Holmlund and Wyatt 2005) and the major studio retrenchment of more recent decades has served to realign the map of American film festivals. A handful of high-profile festivals continue to serve as important points of intersection between independent filmmakers and the American commercial film industry. Beyond these, however, an entire system of festivals has developed to further support the distribution and exhibition of (non-Hollywood) American film. Understanding the durability and dispersion of this system requires a reorientation that takes into account both the unique relationships between American independent filmmakers and Hollywood, and also the methodological challenges posed by a system as vast and chaotic as the American festival landscape.

## Defining Our Terms: Festivals and the "Significant Other" Problem

Looked at from a global perspective, the phrase "American film festival" contains in itself something of an anachronism. The seminal film festivals were all clustered in Europe, and even as the festival movement spread globally, there remained a real sense in which, to use Thomas Elsaesser's expression, Hollywood cinema was both the "'significant other' and the 'bad object' of film festivals" (Elsaesser 2005, 100). He observes that:

> The boom in new film festivals, lest we forget, started in the 1970s. Many of the creative as well as critical impulses that drove festivals to devote themselves to non-commercial films, to the avant-garde and to independent filmmaking are owed to the post-'68 counter-culture of political protest and militant activism (2005, 100).

This boom was by no means exclusively limited to Europe—indeed, Elsaesser's citation of Telluride as an example of the phenomenon underscores as much. But insofar as these festivals were borne of a set of convictions about film culture that were fundamentally in opposition to the dominant cinema of Hollywood, it is perhaps unsurprising that the film festival movement remained underrepresented in the United States long after it had taken root internationally.

Beginning in the 1980s, as individual festivals became increasingly "embedded," to use Marijke de Valck's term, within a larger global network, a distinctly American model of film festival began to take shape (de Valck 2007, 19). First and most successfully with Sundance, though replicated to some extent later by South by Southwest (SXSW) and Tribeca, this new breed of festival was notable for its proximity to Hollywood. As de Valck notes in her discussion of Sundance, these festivals are designed to serve—at least in part—as exposure and evaluation mechanisms to funnel talent into the media industries.[1] Through talent academies, production funds, and other mechanisms, a small handful of festivals have indeed served an important incubating function for the media

1 The US Film Festival, Sundance's predecessor, had been in existence since 1978. Not until the mid-1980s did the Sundance Institute take over its management, and it wasn't until 1991 that it took its current name. Similarly, the South by Southwest music festival began in the 1980s, but the first edition that also contained a film program didn't run until 1994. Tribeca is the most recent of the batch, with its first edition taking place in 2002.

industries ever since.[2] And yet, to speak of the culture of American festivals while focusing exclusively on Sundance or SXSW would be as if to limit a discussion of American cinema to *Titanic* or *The Avengers*. The outsized success of the few serves to obscure the durability of the many, and in turn makes the process of assessing their cultural impact that much more challenging.

In writing about American independent cinema, Sherry Ortner once observed that "the simplest place to start is to say that an independent film is defined–to varying degrees and in varying ways–as the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film" (Ortner 2012, 2). Her phrasing here is striking in its parallels to Elsaesser, and reminds us that Hollywood is the "significant other" not only for European art film, but for American independent film as well. Just as Elsaesser, de Valck, and others have chronicled the growth and evolution of the European festival circuit in response to this fundamental relationship, so too should we understand that the American festival circuit is in large part defined not in association to Hollywood, but in opposition to it. Certainly, there is a lot of "work," as academics like to say, being performed by Ortner's parenthetical clause ("to varying degrees and in varying ways"); an entire subfield exists to study the particular degrees and ways in which American independent film does or does not relate to Hollywood (Newman 2011; King 2009). For my purposes here, it should suffice to stipulate a certain set of facts.

## American Independents and Hollywood, 1999–2019

In the 1990s and 2000s, one often encountered references to "indie" films. Their defining feature, at least on the business side of the ledger, was their proximity to Hollywood. Disney's 1993 acquisition of Miramax, then a leading distributor of independent film in the United States, would come to symbolize this new hybridity—auteur films produced with an aesthetic descended from the American independent films of the 1980s, perhaps, but also with the financial imperatives and wherewithal of the major studios. During this time, it was commonplace for independently-produced films to be acquired at festivals and distributed by major studios, underscoring the centrality of market festivals like Sundance to the emerging model of

2 Sundance Institute, the most prominent of these institutions, counts amongst its alumni Wes Anderson (*Bottle Rocket*, 1993), Kimberly Peirce (*Boys Don't Cry*, 1997), Darren Aronofsky (*Requiem for a Dream*, 1999), and Ryan Coogler (*Fruitvale Station*, 2011).

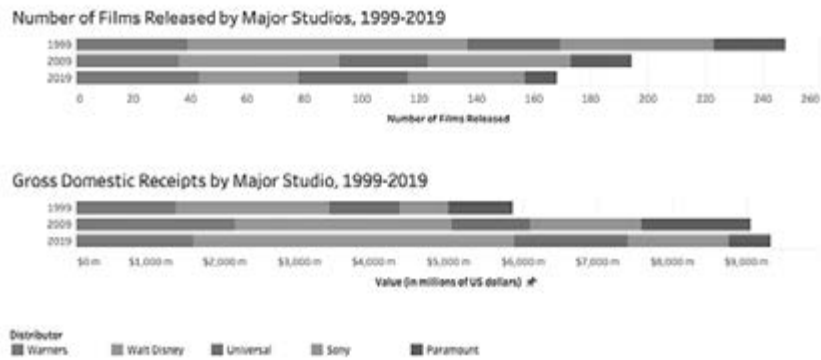


Figure 17.1 Releases and Gross Domestic Receipts by Major Studios, 1999–2019 (data courtesy *The Numbers*)

indie hybridity (Pierson 2003). However, Hollywood's major studios—Sony, Warners, Walt Disney, Universal, and Paramount as of this writing—have steadily turned away from this model during the twenty-first century. Looking from 1999 to 2019, the last year for which pre-COVID-19 data is available, the combined annual output of the majors decreased by one-third, during a time period when their combined revenues increased by 60 percent (figure 17.1).[3]

The change to make more from less is most clear when we focus on the corporate strategy at Disney, currently the largest of the studios. Disney completed its acquisition of Fox in 2019, shrinking the former Big Six to the Big Five. Between the two companies, they released forty-five films across their "indie" divisions (Fox Searchlight and Miramax) in 1999, accounting for 46 percent of the combined output of the two studios. By 2019, operating under the same corporate banner, indie output dwindled to nine films, or 25 percent of Disney's annual total. It is true that as the traditional studios have reoriented their focus, streaming video services have stepped into the breach, with Netflix and their competitors increasingly acquiring content directly for their platforms. While assessing the impact of this shift will take years and is outside the scope of this essay, my central point remains true: when we conceive of American film festivals as sites of acquisition—whether by Fox Searchlight or by Netflix—by necessity we focus almost exclusively

3 Accounting for inflation, Hollywood's growth was far less impressive: while the nominal increase in the combined box office—from $5.8 billion (1999) to $9.3 billion (2019)—sounds large, adjusted for inflation Hollywood only grew by approximately $300 million (in 2019 dollars) across that time period. All data herein taken from *The Numbers* unless otherwise referenced.

on a small subset of places where those deals are brokered, namely festivals like Sundance and Toronto.

The emphasis on these sites of transaction reflects something distinguishing about the American cinema landscape: compared to other developed countries, there are relatively few supports in place designed to support independent filmmaking in the United States, precisely because of the commercial dominance of Hollywood. Rather than the "quality-based" subsidy model used in many countries, state aid for film financing in the United States is typically expense-based, taking the form of tax credits, and therefore disproportionately benefits major Hollywood studios, who spend significantly more money on production costs (Ravid 2018). While some types of films are routinely underwritten by grant support—for instance, documentary and avant-garde films are eligible for financing through the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts—no single entity like Telefilm (Canada) or the CNC (France) exists in the United States to offer public support for films produced independently of the Hollywood system. In the absence of such an institution, major festivals like Sundance and Tribeca have historically provided important financial and logistical support, and professional development, to emerging filmmakers through platforms like the Sundance Institute and Tribeca Film Institute (Khaire and Kenyon 2011).[4]

But upon closer inspection, the landscape of American independent cinema has become increasingly important as it has grown and become more geographically disparate over the last twenty years. To begin to consider American film festivals as a research question, we first must understand what the landscape of those festivals looks like, and the set of conditions that enabled their proliferation. There are a variety of different ways to conceptualize that universe, and therefore a number of different answers to even the most basic of questions. Here, I attempt to marshal available cultural data on film festivals and their impacts to assess the geography of American independent film and US film festivals.

## The Big Data Problem

FilmFreeway is the de facto clearing house for film festival listings in the United States, and as of this writing they list 4,850 different film festivals

4 An example of the precarity of relying on festivals to provide this kind of support: the Tribeca Film Institute suspended its operations during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic and laid off some of its staff. (Malkin and Donnelly 2020).

on their platform.[5] An immediate problem one must confront, then, is determining how to begin the research: with over 4,000 festivals to account for, where does one start? One common answer to this problem is to filter the set of festivals according to their discursive or industrial relevance. For reasons discussed above, scholars of film festivals must ask ourselves this: even if we can satisfactorily understand the relationship of the media industries to film festivals in the United States through careful analysis of three or four festivals, what are we to make of the thousands of others that take place each year? With enough time and enough money, it's a relatively simple matter to make the annual circuit of the major American festivals. But the most well-traveled (and well-funded) attendee could not hope to visit even a tenth of the festivals that happen in this country each year.

In recent years, we can see some evidence of decentering in scholarship on American festivals; I think here of work by scholars such as Erin Högerle on Asian-American film festivals (Högerle 2019), Antoine Damiens on queer film festivals (Damiens 2020), and Bernard Cook on documentary film festivals (Cook 2021), among many other examples. A common thread running through these otherwise divergent bodies of research is an emphasis upon the cultural work done by, in Damiens' phrase, "festivals that (did not) matter" (Damiens 2020, 39)—that is, by the myriad festivals that, by number, constitute the vast majority of the category, but which have historically been otherwise overlooked. What does a film festival studies approach to 4,850 different festivals look like? I am reminded here of Deb Verhoeven's eloquent description of big data:

> Big data might be understood as a collection of data that, in any given context, is so large that it is ungraspable and incomputable using conventional approaches to analysis. Big data is data that in some way defies our comprehension and exceeds our capacity to handle it (2016, 166).

The numbers we are talking about here are hardly big in computational terms. If we were to create a spreadsheet capturing the key details for each of these aforementioned festivals, the resulting file would be no larger than a couple of megabytes—that is, roughly the size of a single digital photo or song. And yet, framed differently, the scope of the American festival landscape is, indeed, beyond our comprehension. In human terms, the individual observer will never be able to attend even a fraction of the total number of film festivals in

5 This figure was current as of May 31, 2023, reflecting the total number of events on FilmFreeway that self-describe as film festivals and that are located in the United States.

the United States. How can we speak comprehensively of the system "American film festivals" when we begin from the awareness that no individual observer can know that system in its totality? Questions such as these are a consequence of what Verhoeven observes as a necessary implication of the shift to Big Data, an unsettling of both the epistemic and ontological order of things. Not only must we confront the limits of our own ability to know about film festivals (by virtue of our inability to be physically present at so many of them), but we also confront the necessity to change *how* we know about those festivals.

A consequence of this ontological unsettling is that many of the methods that have long prevailed in festival studies do not lend themselves to overarching analysis. The microscopic, anthropological approach—and particularly, the Geertzian "deep hanging out" that festival researchers have employed with great success in many different contexts—is poorly suited to questions that demand a macroscopic perspective. Festival researchers today confront this problem by developing longitudinal projects compiling and analyzing data on film festivals; I think here of work by scholars like Skadi Loist, Aida Vallejo, and María Paz Peirano, among others (Loist 2020; Vallejo and Peirano 2022). Taking a cue from this work, and from Damiens's question of how festivals "matter," I submit that we can think productively about US film festivals by considering the perspective of one of its primary constituents, the filmmakers who attend these festivals and screen their work. Loist has previously analyzed the importance of premiere status for films on the festival circuit (Loist 2016), and certainly this remains an important part of the calculus for independent filmmakers in deciding where to submit their films, as we shall see. But complicating matters further are matters ranging from the pocketbook (What is the submission fee? How much will it cost to travel?) to impact (What kinds of audiences will be able to see the film at this festival? Are there industry-oriented events planned for networking with other filmmakers?). Taken together, these factors form a complex and tangled web that filmmakers must negotiate when deciding how to allocate their scarce resources—time and money.

In the United States, it is customary for filmmakers to pay submission fees in order to have their work considered for inclusion in festivals, and if selected they typically must pay travel costs to attend those festivals. Festival expenses can easily balloon into the thousands of dollars, representing a significant portion of the budget for microbudget films, and a substantial cost even for more expensive productions.[6] Against these costs,

6 For some films—especially documentaries—it has increasingly become the practice that grant funders will support "outreach campaigns" tied to the films. These funds can be used for

accounting for the revenues that these filmmakers might expect has always been fraught, and in recent years the diversification of potential revenue streams has only added to the complexity of this problem. Historically, regional festivals have often handpicked certain films for their programs after scouting them at other, larger festivals; these invited films could typically expect to receive screening fees for inclusion in the program. What limited public aggregate data we have suggests that the amount of the screening fee corresponds to the prestige of the festival at which the film premiered, with Sundance and SXSW films receiving the highest median screening fees (The Film Collaborative 2013). In more recent years, as streaming services entered the market and filmmakers have begun to monetize new forms of distribution like video on-demand, even more variance was introduced into this calculation of the potential return on investment. But the correlation between the prestige of the premiere festival and the downwind potential revenues remains critical. By 2017, for instance, Amazon had begun the practice of offering guaranteed distribution deals to films selected in competition at Sundance, SXSW, and Tribeca (Mundhra 2017).

Certainly, for an American independent filmmaker aspiring to get her work in front of the largest or most influential possible audience, or to maximize the potential earning potential of her film, selection at a festival like Sundance or SXSW or Toronto remains the preeminent goal. But acknowledging as much gets us no closer to an answer to the underlying question; after all, if it is so clear that the lion's share of revenues earned by festival-distributed films fall to those titles that premiere at one of a handful of festivals, then what to make of the robustness of the rest of the system? Producing festivals is costly and labor-intensive, and those festivals which are able to survive into a second and third season do so by identifying market niches, effectively targeting local audiences, and cultivating strong relationships with filmmakers. Likewise, as detailed above, bringing a film to festivals is a costly proposition for the filmmaker. Understood in this way, we should expect something of a natural cap on the number of sustainable film festivals that could exist at any one time: the scarcity of sponsorship dollars, available films and filmmakers, and audience attention should conspire to produce something of an equilibrium in the festival "market."

a variety of purposes, one of which is to cover the expenses of filmmakers' travel to present their work at festivals.

## Towards a Definition of Sustainability: The Film Festival Database

Of course, there is no consensus definition of what a "sustainable" film festival is, much less any clear calculation of how many there might be. Certainly that number is smaller than the total set of festivals operating at any one time—but how much smaller? To think about an answer to this problem, I turn to the Film Festival Database (FFDb) project, organized by Michael Forstein. A filmmaker with experience on the festival circuit himself, Forstein began the project in 2018 with a clear issue in mind:

> In 2015 I brought two films to festivals. In doing so I built a spreadsheet to track submission costs and deadlines, deliverables, etc. It occurred to me I probably wasn't the only filmmaker making something like this from scratch. A couple years later a colleague asked if I might be interested in starting a documentary festival in my hometown. My first thought was- that seems like a lot of work! My second thought: when would we do it? I wouldn't want to step on any other local festivals, or overlap with any major doc fests. I looked online for a film festival calendar – some kind of visual layout illustrating when festivals occur throughout the year – but I couldn't find one (2020).

His response was to develop the FFDb, perhaps the most comprehensive single gathering of information about American film festivals. Alternatives to it do exist: FilmFreeway itself maintains a list of the top 100 best-reviewed festivals on its platform, for instance. But Forstein himself makes the case for using the wide-angle lens when thinking about film festivals:

> Almost every beginning or developing filmmaker, myself included, has at some point relied upon these types of curated festival lists during their submission process. While I'm not endorsing any specific lists, I thought since so many people reference them, it would be useful to have all the info in one place.... My goal here isn't to solve the problem of festival curation or strategy – it's just to save time on one aspect of festival research (the part that involves blindly googling "what are the best film festivals?" and "what festivals should I submit to?") (2021).

The project was actively developed for two years until interrupted by COVID-19, although the resource remains available on the web until present at filmfestivaldatabase.com. Forstein and his team gathered a variety of data

about 1,022 different festivals: contact and submission information, dates and deadlines, locations, special programming emphases, and critical and community recognition.

In doing so, Forstein and his team remind us that the question of how to sort through the great mass of film festivals and establish hierarchies amongst them is not simply an academic concern. Filmmakers are making decisions about allocating their scarce time and resources in an environment where thousands of festivals are competing for their attention. Consequently, cost-benefit calculations are present from the outset. Cognizant of this, festivals themselves are careful to cultivate their reputations as filmmaker-friendly. As an example, the BendFilm Festival (Bend, Oregon) describes itself on its FilmFreeway page as "one of the 'Top 25 Coolest Film Festivals in the World'" and a near-constant fixture of MovieMaker magazine's "50 Film Festivals Worth the Entry Fee."[7] Similar announcements are displayed prominently across the submission pages of the Indie Grits Film Festival (Columbia, South Carolina), Sound Unseen (Minneapolis), and the Milwaukee Film Festival, among many others. In an environment so saturated with festivals, those that succeed need to demonstrate to filmmakers that they provide some value for them: a scenic locale, professional development, a receptive audience for their films (and hopefully all three). To that end, festivals regularly describe themselves in terms of their past selections, their past jurors, and the reviews of past attendees, all in an effort to frame themselves in the best possible light for filmmakers deciding which festivals to submit to.

The FFDb database includes fields designating whether the festival had been recognized in industry-wide "Best Festivals" lists published by MovieMaker magazine and Raindance over the time period 2013–20.[8] At the time the project ceased active development, the master list of festivals included 1,022 festivals, of which 298 were included on the "Curated Film Festivals List," reflecting selection in at least one of the MovieMaker/Raindance lists over the preceding decade. For my analysis here, the subset of these festivals located in the United States—165 out of 298—constitute my corpus. A geographic analysis of these festivals reveals a surprising portrait of a festival landscape far more varied and diverse than we might otherwise be

7 https://filmfreeway.com/BendFilm

8 Specifically, the FFDb curated list is drawn from three separate publications: MovieMaker Magazine's "50 Film Festivals Worth the Entry Fee" (published annually each spring) and "25 Coolest Film Festivals in the World" (published annually each summer) lists, and the Raindance Essential 100 Film Festivals (initially published in 2013 and revised annually since then).

Figure 17.2 Film Festivals Represented on the "Curated List," Film Festival Database (2019)

led to expect, given the outsized attention on a mere handful of festivals within that group.

The geographic dispersion of America's best film festivals is remarkable in itself: forty of the fifty US states (and the District of Columbia) are included on the list. Outside of the upper reaches of the Great Plains, there are few places in America where audiences are not at least somewhat close to a well-regarded independent film festival. When we consider these festivals as the sites of American independent cinema, the map that emerges is an all-encompassing one, stretching from Camden (Maine) in the east to Honolulu in the west, from Seattle in the north to New Orleans in the south. For 2020, the last year for which comprehensive data is available, these festivals were scheduled for 350 days of the year. (Even the festival world takes a break at the end of December and beginning of January.) For the sake of clarity, I have removed the names of the festivals from the following map, but even from their data points alone, a clear picture of geographic dispersal emerges.

We might take this group of 165 to roughly approximate the number of "sustainable" film festivals presently in operation in the United States. These are festivals that have received industry or critical recognition for the strength of their programming, have a demonstrated track record of providing strong programming, and have managed to weather the various storms of uncertainty to continue producing new editions year after year. It isn't clear that any one kind of festival predominates. Some focus especially on independent cinema (e.g., Santa Fe Independent Film Festival), while others are international film festivals that also feature the work of American

directors (e.g., Heartland International Film Festival in Indianapolis, IN). Others are genre- (e.g., Fantastic Fest in Austin, TX), or identity-specific festivals (e.g., American Black Film Festival in Miami, FL). Included amongst this list are some of America's oldest film festivals, like the San Francisco International Film Festival (since 1957) and New York Film Festival (since 1962), but also many of much more recent vintage. This latter point is worth stressing, because it highlights how the festival system itself is so precarious and fluid. The Citizen Jane Film Festival was founded in 2008 by students at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, with the mission of showcasing women in cinema by exclusively programming films with female directors. It quickly grew in size and national attention, to the point that it earned inclusion on MovieMaker's year-end lists for the years 2016–18 consecutively, a recognition it shared with fewer than twenty other festivals in the world. Unfortunately, the 2019 edition of the festival would prove the last, as the college pulled its support for the festival (Lewis and McGartland 2019). Yet the lifecycle of Citizen Jane—from student initiative to national significance in less than a decade—is a reminder that the film festival system is rapidly evolving and unstable. According to FilmFreeway data, fewer than half of American festivals manage to make it to their fifth edition.[9]

Amidst this instability, the FFDb dataset also offers us another way of conceptualizing what the top tier of American film festivals looks like. Understood as an economic question, as discussed at the outset of this essay, this seems a simple question: those festivals which ensure filmmakers the best opportunity at maximizing revenues that their film can earn occupy the top tier, and the rest can be sorted accordingly. But there are more considerations than simply return on investment to consider. Which festivals are filmmakers choosing to attend? Why do filmmakers choose to travel to the same festivals? Certain economic opportunity is a key reason, but other factors such as professional development opportunities, festival reputation, audience sizes, tourism qualities, and more come into play. One advantage of the FFDb corpus is that if we assume that there's some validity to MovieMaker listing a festival as "worth the entry fee"—or, at least, that there are enough filmmakers allowing those listings to inform their decisions—then the FFDb list serves as a proxy for these kinds of aggregate decision-making preferences.

To conclude, I want to suggest another way of thinking about defining a "top tier" of American film festivals, one driven by the kind of filmmaker

9 Of the 4,850 festivals listed on FilmFreeway as of May 31, 2023, only 46 percent were in operation in 2019.


Figure 17.3 Most Frequently Recognized Film Festivals (2013–2020), Film Festival Database

preferences purportedly indexed by the FFDb. As mentioned above, the dataset covers an eight-year period, from 2013–20. Only one festival—the New Orleans Film Festival—was featured every year on one of those lists; thirty-four festivals were named at least five times across an eight-year span. That group represents many of the mainstays of the independent film circuit in the United States. Some of the country's best documentary film festivals are represented here, like the Big Sky Documentary Festival (Missoula, MT) and True/False Film Festival (Columbia, MO). Others are large urban film festivals, like the Seattle International, Nashville, and Atlanta Film Festivals.

Many of the festivals—including all of the ones just listed—also serve as "Academy-qualifying" events, which is to say that winning awards at those festivals serves as qualification for one of the Academy Awards given to short films (narrative, documentary, animation). Given the fractured political landscape of contemporary America, and the reputation of the film industry as a "coastal" economy, the geographic dispersion is even more striking. There is true regional parity across the United States—a sentence which does not aptly describe much else in American culture at the present. Among these thirty-four festivals, there are roughly equal numbers of film festivals in the Northeast, South, Southwest, and Northwest.

None of this is to dispute the supremacy of Sundance. However, what I hope to have made clear is that by focusing our attention so carefully, we have lost sight of a film festival landscape characterized as much by dispersal and variety as it is by the runaway successes of its most visible participants. Here I have attempted to view the system from the position

of its filmmakers, but this approach lends itself to considering the perspectives of a variety of different stakeholders: the network of arts and culture workers who run these festivals, for instance, or the philanthropies and funding agencies that underwrite them. I would expect such inquiries to point in the same general direction as the conclusion I arrive at here: the durability of the American film festival system is a function of its geographic and programmatic diversity, and festival scholars would do well to consider how we might adapt our existing approaches to accommodate its evolution.

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