

## Shaping Film Festivals in a Changing World



# Shaping Film Festivals in a Changing World

*Practice and Methods*

*Edited by*  
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# Introduction

*Dorota Ostrowska and Tamara L. Falicov*

## **Revolving Doors of the COVID-19 Pandemic: In-Person Symposium, Virtual Conference, and Open Access Publication.**

The genesis of this edited volume came out of a conference, “Contours of Film Festivals Research and Methodologies,” which was originally conceived to be a one day in-person gathering in London in March 2020 which turned out to be the day when the first COVID-19 lockdown was introduced in the UK. As airplane tickets, hotel bookings, and dinner reservations were being canceled we announced that the conference would be postponed until September 2020. In a swift gesture that felt quite radical at the time, we decided to embrace what was a new format for an academic event and deliver it as a virtual conference via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Almost immediately this format began to bear fruit as it allowed us to open up and expand the conference in new and unexpected directions. We were observing first-hand and by happenstance how any new format to produce and to disseminate knowledge is bound to create its own public which didn’t exist before (de Mourat, Ricci, and Latour 2020, 103). Firstly, we realized that we were able to include many more conference speakers than our original conference budget would ever have allowed us to do. Secondly, we noticed that the reach of our conference became much greater as with the virtual format we were able to attract audiences far beyond London and the UK, and not just from the Global North but also from the Global South. Our online conference included audience participants from the US, Europe, Canada, Tanzania, Chile, Pakistan, and other countries. Attending were not only film festival scholars who formed part of various networks such as FFRN (Film Festival Research Network), but also colleagues from NECS (European Network for Cinema and Media Studies), SCMS (Society for Cinema and Media Studies), and other scholarly associations. Thirdly, among the new roster of panelists and audience participants, there was a much higher proportion of film festival programmers of whom few would

have been able to attend the original in-person conference in London. They were film programmers, archivists, curators, film festival directors (former or current), or else faculty who could be considered “hybrid” scholars and practitioners (that is, faculty who also founded or ran a film festival, or film festival programmers who had graduate degrees in the arts who left academia for the film festival world). Their participation changed the character of the original event radically, and ultimately inspired the direction and format this edited volume eventually took. We focused our investigation on exploring practice-based research in relation to film festivals and decided to publish the work as open access.

With our hand forced by the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found ourselves critically engaging with and distancing ourselves from a typical in-person format of an academic conference. We did not realize at the time how rapidly this new online format would become the collective new normal for academic and other gatherings. For us, in the early days of the pandemic, the travel limitations and social distancing measures enabled a greater reach and impact of a conference which aimed to bring film festival scholars and practitioners together in order to chart new directions in methodological research of film festival cultures. For the online event we organized two film scholar panels and one film practitioner panel and asked the participants to prerecord short (between five to ten minutes) talks in advance so that participants could watch them prior to attending the discussion live, online with recorded discussions. This model allowed the audience and participants an asynchronous opportunity to view the short presentations at their convenience and then attend the panel discussion at an appointed time (that took time zones into account which was important as even we, as the conference organizers, were connecting from two different time zones located on two different continents). The topics ranged from how film festivals have moved online and how to study them, to decolonizing film festival studies (Global South focused), to big data analysis of film festivals, to the history and theory of film festivals, and film festival archives. The focus of different panels became themes around which we constructed this edited volume.

The conceptual opening that the virtual format of the conference created for us infused our entire research project with a new kind of intellectual and creative energy. We realized that we could not allow ourselves to lose the momentum and transnational audiences drawn to the project by the experience of the virtual conference. We decided that the best way to ensure the audience would continue to engage with our research findings was to publish the findings of the project as open access. Just like the virtual

conference, open access publishing constituted for us a “genuinely critical engagement with scholarly communication practices in the digital age” which were redefined by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic (Eve and Gray 2020, 7). Fundamentally, we realized that if we didn’t publish the book as open access there was a real danger that our research would remain the preserve of the academics and researchers in the Global North (Eve and Gray 2020, 8). We would lose not only our academic audiences in the Global South but also our professional public of film festival practitioners who only had very limited access to academic publications—even if they were based in the Global North.

For this reason, this open access volume, which required all our authors and us to contribute not only intellectually but also financially, feels like a real achievement. At the same time, we are painfully aware of the volume’s (and the conference’s) limitations and shortcomings. It is true that thanks to technological advances in digital publishing and online conferencing, our virtual conference and open access project did manage to offer greater access to film festival research and enabled wider participation on the part of practitioners and scholars from the Global South. Yet we also realize that in the volume we should have probably included more voices and contributions from scholars and practitioners from the Global South and from Asia. This would be a logical direction for the current project as presented in this volume to follow. Even though we don’t have as many contributions from Global South academics as we would like to, we did manage to engage with the work of practitioners from South and Central America and the Caribbean in ways that would feel new to the students of film festivals. We articulate this engagement by identifying practice as the key element of our methodological reflection on research within the area of film festival cultures. The engagement with practice has been singled out as an important element of creating decolonized film festival worlds, which in a modest way makes our book part of a wider decolonial project as defined by Dovey and Sendra (2023) to be scholarship understood as “informed activism that seeks to address and redress the complex, racialized legacies and ongoing institutionalized racism that is a result of the forced political, economic, and cultural domination of people of color (particularly black people) by white people over the past five centuries” (275).

## **The Untold Story of Practice in Film Festival Research**

Practice has always been an important element of film festival research. A substantial part of the scholarship in the area has been generated by

those who volunteered, managed, organized, set up, directed, programmed, curated, or otherwise participated in film festivals. They were invited as jury members, part of the press corps, or film industry participants. The impulse to develop film festivals as an area of academic research came from two directions. On the one hand, there was an articulation of the gap within film studies regarding the historical importance of film festivals (Elsaesser 2005; de Valck 2007). On the other hand, there was a realization that film festival practice was significant not only as a historical phenomenon but important also as a contemporary and living practice affecting and transforming our understanding and experience of film cultures as we knew them.

One of the many reasons why the study of the history of film festivals lagged behind the study of contemporary practices is that those who studied film festivals were very often involved in some form of practice. As an object of study and research, film festivals created many opportunities for regular academics, who were not film festival practitioners as such, to get involved with the film festival cultures, beyond participating as members of the public only, usually as film critics and film programmers. Other reasons behind foregrounding contemporary film festival practice in film festival research might have been related to the centrality of liveness and ephemerality of the film festival experience, time compression of the film festival event, and, until the COVID-19 pandemic, the spatial specificity and situatedness of that event (Harbord 2009). It was also likely, in response to the fact that many academics used to be or were practitioners themselves or had extensive contacts among practitioners in the film festival world, that much of existing research within film festival studies included voices of practitioners alongside those of academics. Publications such as the seminal *Film Festival Yearbooks* (Iordanova with Rhyne 2009; Iordanova and Cheung 2010; Iordanova and Cheung 2011; Iordanova and Torchin 2012; Marlow-Mann 2013; Iordanova and van de Peer 2014) as well as *Documentary Film Festivals* volumes 1 and 2 (Vallejo and Winton 2020) include extensive contributions from practitioners, and sections that were forms of film festival practice was a focus of a given volume, meticulously mapped with great care and much detail.

What is striking is that these contributions are presented in separate sections from those dedicated to academic research. It may seem like a trivial detail, but it was significant for the ways in which we were trying to reposition practice in this volume. For it was this presentation that began to raise for us important questions around conceptual challenges involved in weaving academic and practitioners' contributions in such a way that both are seen as creating new knowledge in the area of film festival

cultures whilst remaining in some form of dialogue with each other. What we were looking for in our edited collection was to develop a framework that would allow us to bridge more naturally the contributions of academics and practitioners and bring them closer together. We were also interested in finding out whether the type of knowledge generated in the context of non-academic practice on the one hand and academic research on the other could be considered on equal terms, even if the starting points leading to this knowledge being generated were quite different in the way academic and purely practice-oriented contexts were unlike each other.

As is often the case the kernel of the answer was already staring at us in the form of the methodology employed in the most recent work focused on film festivals which put practice at the center and conceptualized the research as practice-led (Colta 2019a and 2019b; Kamleitner 2020). The Contours conference was a way for us to identify other recent doctoral projects which were not as explicit about their practice-led identity as Colta's but whose numerous elements, for instance their collaborative aspects, pointed clearly in the direction of such research (Sendra 2018). In hindsight, it was the foregrounding of practice and its various constitutive elements in recent film festival research which helped us crystalize the aims of this edited collection, and enabled us to articulate our findings. We began to see practice as something which oriented and structured the way we thought about film festival research in this volume. Such focus required us to contextualize the book within the existing practice-research within arts and humanities.

## **Practice-Research and Film Festival Cultures: Contexts and Continuities**

Research involving practice has been an important part of research involving arts, humanities, and social sciences for about two decades now. The growing number of studies focused on practice have also generated a lively debate about the parameters of this kind of research and competing definitions of practice-research dyad which was important but which also goes beyond the boundaries of this collection (Year 2022; Candy 2006; Smith and Dean 2009). For our purposes, we found it most helpful to follow the train of academic thought which drew a distinction between "practice-based" and "practice-led" research to create a way to weave together contributions by practitioners and academics. We see practice-based research as the one whereby "a creative artifact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge" and

practice-led as the one which “leads primarily to new understandings about practice” (Candy 2006, 1). Candy argues that, in practice-based research, original contributions to knowledge may be made by means of “creative outcomes in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances and exhibitions” (Candy 2006, 1). We found that we could extend this list by adding film festivals as well as all forms of practice they may involve—the most common one being the practice of programming and curating. Practice-led research is obviously closely related to practice-based, leading some thinkers to see the distinction as unimportant (Vear 2022). However, we aim to see practice-led research as separate from practice-based. Practice-led research is where “the main focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice” (Candy 2006, 1). Keeping practice-led and practice-based research apart allows us to establish two different but closely related categories to discuss the variety of “practices” we see in film festival research—coming from practitioners and academics alike.

Much of the effort to arrive at clearly defined categories of practice-based and practice-led research have to do with the academic context in which these categories and definitions were first generated. Candy’s piece, “Practice-based Research Guide,” is a useful illustration of this phenomenon. It aims at finding ways to enable the inclusion of practice as part of academic-based research whose boundaries must be clearly defined especially for the purposes of doctoral projects which need to be examined and defended in order to be admitted for the PhD degree. With our project we saw an opportunity to expand the definition of practice by the very gesture of opening the dialogue between practitioners and academics where both were treated as equal contributing partners in the joint endeavor which is this collection. All our contributors were aware of the academic framework which included a conference, and the edited collection focused on new directions and methods of studying and understanding film festivals. We were also very committed to the idea of interlacing the voices of practitioners and academics as much as possible. We invited film festival practitioners to use this project as an opportunity to reflect on their own film festival-related practice, pointing to challenges and opportunities. We asked the academic contributors to discuss their methods and approaches to the study of film festivals.

As a result of this exercise, we have managed to establish the practice of film festivals as a common denominator for an extensive part of academic research within film festivals and obviously for film festival practitioners. Importantly, we have also arrived at a much more extensive definition

of both practice and research within the area of film festivals. We have made some intriguing discoveries along the way which allowed us to argue that the knowledge ensuing from some forms of film festival practice, in which practitioners such as the curator Jonathan Ali were involved, was defendable as practice-based research. What Jonathan Ali shared with other contributors who were also practitioners, such as Juana Suárez, and whose practice demonstrated elements of practice-based research is that they were academics (Suárez), held postgraduate degrees (Ali), or whose depth of knowledge rooted in practice was on a par with professional researchers (Handling). Even though, for the purposes of our collection, they all were wearing their practitioners' hats, the degree to which they were consciously aiming at seeing film festival practice as a path to advance other forms of knowledge was striking. For Ali, the aim of film curatorial practice was to arrive at the redefinition of the Caribbean identity. For Suárez, it was redrawing our understanding of Latin American film heritage through understanding archival practices in the region, whilst for Handling it was about drafting a new map of film festivals which drew attention to the unknown, forgotten, or marginalized film festivals—the *terra incognita* (or perhaps more precisely *terra oblita*—forgotten lands) of film festival research. For these practitioners, film festival practice was not about some deeper understanding of any aspect of their practice but rather about demonstrating where this practice can take us and what new forms of knowledge it can enable and create. The equally inspiring and innovative work of other practitioners along with the work of numerous academics fell into the category of practice-led research (Colta; Sendra; Tabachnik; Delgado). It is important to underline the fact that as editors we deeply appreciated the opportunity to work so closely with all our contributors, especially the practitioners, who made us reconsider on numerous occasions the intended public for this volume. It was a fascinating process which helped us shape our thinking about film festival practice more generally and about the type of their individual practices in particular.

Among the central findings of this collection is a better understanding of the status of knowledge which is generated as a result of research in film festival studies, especially that involving some form of practice. Fundamentally, our reflection on film festival practice as a form of research allows us to postulate that practice within this area can lead to new types of knowledge. This could be knowledge which has an immediate bearing on the object which a film festival is, how it operates, and what its dynamics are. Importantly, this new knowledge arrived through practice-led research is complemented and enhanced by practice-based knowledge generated by

the film festival practitioners in the course of their film festival practice. Furthermore, practice-based research helps us identify gaps in the knowledge which is not related to film festivals as such but to film history, contemporary film practices, cultural or national identity, or a range of other subject areas. Thus, generated knowledge will not amount to a full-blown PhD but neither has it ever aimed to be so. It is important that it is given careful attention and consideration as it is likely to carry seeds of inspiration for projects which might be further developed in the academic context and with support of academic research funding.

Film festivals studies as an area of research where “knowledge can be partly advanced by means of practice” (Candy 2006, 4) is an important discovery whose implications are yet to be fully comprehended as they extend beyond research into areas such as experiential learning and teaching, among others. The framing of film festival research in a way which emphasizes practice leads to creating new forms of knowledge, allowing us to redefine our relationship with practitioners and film festivals as forms of practice and offering us a common language to converse in an academic context. But that’s not all, for the potential implications of a practice-research dyad extend beyond academia. Smith and Dean see the category “research-led practice” as complementing “practice-led research” and refer to the dynamic in which the two are interlocked as the “iterative cyclical web” (2009, 1-38). They are interested in the ways in which “academic research can impact positively on creative practice” (Smith and Dean 2009, 1). There is an important question here about the ways in which practice-led research can enhance practice. But there is also a question of setting up academic research projects in such a way that they will enhance artistic practice; in our case it could be practice related to film festivals themselves.

Smith and Dean made important observations regarding practice-led and research-led practice namely that it is collaborative (Smith and Dean 2009, 8). This characteristic of practice-led research in particular is emphasized by some contributors to this collection (Colta; Sendra). But it is worthwhile for us to think of the ways in which academic research may enhance and advance further knowledge generated by practitioners engaged in either research-led or research-based practice. It is possible for new collaborative projects to emerge if academic researchers and film festival practitioners are more in tune and have a better understanding of each other’s needs around practice. This edited volume underlines the importance of these conversations and ideally also provides some inspiration for future ones.

## Mapping Out the Book

### *Part 1: Archival Turn*

Film festival studies have always had an uneasy relationship with historical and archival research. The liveness of the film festival event, its ephemerality and cyclical temporality along with difficulties of archiving and preserving film festival practices were identified among reasons why those studying film festival cultures tended to be less interested in the past than the present. The two academic contributions in Part 1 and the two by practitioners focus squarely on the question of researching film festival histories while drawing on archives of queer and Latin American film festivals. Damiens examines archival practices around queer film festivals to write histories of forgotten and marginalized film festival events. Petrychyn's engagement with archival methodologies centers on the questions of affect, also in relation to queer film festivals. Handling, the former head of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), examines two models of film festival organization: the European state-funded model which he contrasts with the privately-funded North American one through institutional histories in what constitutes a comparative historical approach. Suárez's intervention is that of a film archivist and academic who examines the politics of archiving, memory, and preservation in the context of Latin American film festivals.

Handling's and Damiens's chapters, one written by a practitioner and the other by an academic researcher, resonate to a surprising degree as both authors identify the same gap in festival research (Damiens) and in the institutional memory of film festival cultures (Handling) regarding film festivals which were short-lived and are mostly forgotten or left no trace. Notwithstanding their size, the impact of these niche film festivals has been profound. In order to fully recognize their role it is necessary to put them at the heart of our engagement with the diverse histories of film festival cultures. For Handling and Damiens, marginalized and forgotten film festival cultures not only have their own history but their own archaeology. It is by uncovering the materials and traces of the festivals which are forgotten and undocumented that we may begin to write a more complete and honest history of film festival cultures. Handling and Damiens's plea resonates with Suárez's emphatic call to preserve both the film history and film festival heritage of Latin America. Suárez argues that film preservation shouldn't be an afterthought of the filmmaking process but an integral part of it which also recognizes the important role of film festivals in this process.

While Damiens and Handling talk about erased and untraceable histories of some film festivals, Petrychyn shows us how this non-traceability and ephemerality is a constitutive part of a film festival event—buzz is a mobile and circulating affect of a film festival. Petrychyn postulates buzz as a kind of affect which can help us uncover unexpected and counterintuitive connections between various festivals as it “slips, slides, gathers, discards, and circulated promiscuously.” It is also an important element of the “archives of emotions” which is often the only film festival archive we have (Petrychyn). The importance of organizers of these festivals is for Damiens specifically curators, while for Handling it is a larger and more differentiated group including members of the film industry.

### *Part 2: Decolonizing Film Festival Studies: Practice-Based/Practice-Led and Collaborative Methodologies*

Questions of the positionality of a researcher and access to film festivals have always featured strongly in film festivals scholarship (Burgess and Kredell 2016). The five chapters constituting this section build on these debates to examine the impact of the positionality of the researcher when engaging in practice-led and practice-based research in relation to a wide spectrum of film festivals; these range from Senegalese (Sendra), Central American (Vanhaelemeesch), documentary human rights (Colta) to migrant (Johnson) and Caribbean (Ali). Being involved directly with the festival, and having a role in it, means that the issue of access is reconfigured whilst new ways of knowing and understanding film festivals are being created.

For Sendra, the decision to become an active, self-aware, and critical participant in the cultural life of Senegal in which she rooted the practice-led methodology of her research was a decolonizing gesture understood as an act of informed activism. As a journalist and filmmaker she became embedded in the Senegalese festival circles spanning music and film among others. These immersive research methods brought with them some fundamental ethical questions and revealed the amount of emotional labor practice-led research of film festivals entails.

Vanhaelemeesch's chapter explores a range of film industry and professional networks participating in Central American film festivals using ethnographic methods rooted in his position as an insider of local film festival cultures. Vanhaelemeesch critiques the still too Eurocentric nature of film festival studies focussed on the A-list film festival circuit. It aims to decenter film festival studies and focus our attention on smaller film festivals taking place on the margins and away from Europe.

Ali, the only practitioner in this section, discusses his efforts to program the Third Horizon Film Festival beyond the clichés with which the Caribbean has been commonly associated. Through his curatorial practice he attempts to realize the vision of Stuart Hall who saw cinema as the means through which the Caribbean identity could be articulated in the most authentic and complete way. In contrast to the work done by academic contributors to this section whose research is practice-led, that of Ali's could be better seen as practice-based—understood as “a principled approach to research by means of practice in which the research and the practice operate as interdependent and complementary processes leading to new and original forms of knowledge” (Year 2022, 2). Ali's curatorial practice is an attempt to shape an object which is a particular type of film festival whose aim is political and ideological, and is ultimately aimed at arriving at the decolonized view of the Caribbean audiovisual cultures.

Johnson proposes “thinking through migration” to transform our understanding of film festival cultures and practices and to create new film festival circuits. This chapter dialogues directly and builds on the ongoing debates in film festival scholarship which juxtapose the notion of a film festival circuit with that of an “archipelago.” Archipelagos of film festivals reveal a new map of film festivals no longer centered on the European A-list film festivals (Loist 2016; Neves 2012). Such radical redrawing of the film festival map and rebalancing the dynamics of film festival research which Johnson's chapter develops is a powerful decolonial gesture as migration itself is the historical result of the colonial past. This migration lens applied to the study of film festivals could be expressed through the modalities of slow motion, climate change, and movement regarding both film festival practices and films screened at film festivals.

Colta shares with Sendra a commitment to both the ethnographic method in film festival research and to practice-led research. Engaging in practice-led research as a festival curator Colta had an opportunity to actively challenge some of the practices of the Document Human Rights Film Festival by influencing the festival's programming choices. This curatorial work was also an opportunity to question and examine some assumptions present in film festival research regarding curating.

### *Part 3: Post-COVID-19 and Film Festival Cultures*

In March 2020 regions of Europe and China were on COVID-19 lockdown. This was the same month that the Contours of Film Festival Research Methodologies conference was to have taken place in London. We quickly realized

that we needed to cancel and figure out how to offer a virtual conference, which occurred in September 2020. Being forced to make rapid decisions to salvage a live event because of the onset of the pandemic was something that we realized that we shared with many film festival practitioners.

In the film festival world, South by Southwest (SXSW) was also scheduled to launch its 2020 edition around the same time. Given that SXSW's content was spanning not just film but also TV, music, and comedy meant that other festivals watched closely to see if the SXSW organizers would cancel the festival altogether, move it online, or come up with some combination of the two. SXSW was canceled at the last minute, as were the Telluride Film Festival in the US and, crucially, the Cannes Film Festival. COVID-19 wreaked havoc with the world of film festivals but not for long. As Hannah Strong notes, in April 2020 CPH:DOX and Visions du Réel were the first festivals to present virtual-only editions, thus finding a way to fill the void created by the cancellations of in-person editions. Montreal's Fantasia Film Festival followed suit that summer and it felt like we had entered a completely new world which took film festivals by storm and made them reinvent themselves online—to survive. (Strong 2021).

Film festival scholars Phil Hobbins-White and Brad Limov examined how, following the cancellation of an in-person event, SXSW decided to run a small online-only curated festival, sponsored by Amazon, for its 2020 edition (Hobbins-White and Limov, 2020). These authors as well as the practitioners featured in this section of the volume (Kolmar, Delgado, and Tabachnik), grappled with the question of what was lost and what was gained when film festivals pivoted online. How to recreate the festive atmosphere online? Were the filmmakers short-changed when they couldn't be at an in-person film festival? What was the silver lining when elite festivals such as Sundance (given the cost of visiting Park City and the festival passes) moved online? How many more participants from all over the world gained access to films and festival events they had never seen before? How many more viewers could attend recorded Q and A sessions with filmmakers compared to the typically smaller, more privileged group of *festivaliers* who could experience it in person? These were complex and difficult questions to address, questions which often delivered paradoxical answers and resulted in unexpected conclusions, as demonstrated by the contributions in this section.

In the ensuing months of the 2020, A-list film festivals got creative. Festivals such as Sundance and Berlinale learned how to shift screenings and events online and thus provided much-needed entertainment for audiences who now faced being at home on lockdown. For the first time in history,

large film festivals came together to offer joint programs to pool efforts. The most notable example was the 2020 We Are One: Global Film Festival drawing on the resources of major A-list film festivals. This act of solidarity showed how festivals could band together during hardship to ensure that there would be strength in numbers and they could persevere. But this act of solidarity was also startling for its austerity, sobriety, and almost humility which resonated strongly not only because of the context of the pandemic but also because of the aftershocks of the MeToo movement. Stripped down to its bare essentials We Are One felt like penance forced upon the festival community which many years back Bazin likened to a religious order because of its clothing codes, film viewing, partying, and dining protocols following the cult of star-based divinities (Bazin 2009). The MeToo movement revealed that something was deeply wrong with this secular order as it targeted the alcoholic consumption at lavish parties to be a staging ground for predatory characters the likes of powerful moguls such as Harvey Weinstein. But even though the celebrity press and media did not get their annual fix of red carpet extravaganza, and the film industry couldn't party the way it was used to, the real loss was elsewhere—in not bringing together people from all over the world to convene and share work, ideas, and form future collaborations.

In 2022, what are practitioners who lived through this period of film festival programming uncertainty saying about the post-COVID-19 film festival landscape? What do scholars believe are the effects that may have indelibly marked the in-person festival? Zielinski's key concern is about the carbon footprint of the hybrid and online-only film festivals. Ostrowska's focus is on the discourses around ethics and aesthetics of care which gained traction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, this global health crisis, which has still not abated during the time of writing (2022), forced film festivals to rethink how the system had worked previously and realize that adaptation was key to survival. For this reason, the pieces in this section should be read in the context of ongoing developments and initiatives which might end up reconfiguring the landscape of film festivals. For instance, already in 2020, a group of forty-one film festivals banded together under the auspices of FIAPF (Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films; International Federation of Film Producers Associations) in creating a joint paper highlighting the havoc that the pandemic had wreaked on film festival organizers, workers, and the film industry infrastructure. This proposal urges national and regional institutions (including the European Union) to adopt immediate relief measures, as film festivals are important economic vehicles that deserve to be supported during this difficult time (Rosser 2020).

### ***Part 4: Data Visualization and Film Festival Research and Practice***

The three chapters in this section represent the contribution of film festival research in the field of cultural analytics pioneered by Lev Manovich (2020) and the Cultural Analytics Lab. Cultural analytics aim at “using data science, data visualization and media theory” to advance critical understanding of contemporary culture (Cultural Analytics Lab) as well as digital transformations and renditions of historical productions, objects, and practices. Cultural analytics explore the potential of cultural data and of culture as data (Manovich 2022). The chapters present new ways of conceptualizing film festivals, their cultures and networks, as digital artifacts constituted by diverse, complex, overlapping, interlacing, and interacting data sets. Loist presents the design and execution of the research project “Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network and the Impact on Global Film Culture” which involved creating and analyzing large data sets to understand ways in which films circulate in the film festival network. Vallejo and Peirano discuss ways of generating and managing big data sets drawn from their study of Chilean and Basque film festivals. Kredell examines how independent filmmakers’ engagement with film festival databases creates new ways of understanding the film festivals’ landscape in the United States today. These chapters engage with key research questions of cultural analytics as they were formulated by the Cultural Analytics Lab, and all advance in different ways the possibility of computational film festival studies.

The chapters included in this section explore how “working with large cultural data help us question our stereotypes and assumptions about culture” (Cultural Analytics Lab). Vallejo and Peirano focus on “small cinemas” and “precarious cultures” and interrogate the role local film festivals play in these small cinemas’ professional and industry networks. Kredell’s examination broaches the question of independent American filmmakers and film festival cultures. Loist’s study demonstrates how moving away from case study to evidence-based and data-driven research within film festivals studies uncovers patterns of interaction between the industry and film festivals in the area of distribution and exhibition which are invisible otherwise.

The chapters also speak to another aspect of the cultural analytics research agenda namely “how to combine computational techniques with older methods in humanities, social sciences and media theory” (Cultural Analytics Lab). In the case of Vallejo and Peirano’s study, ethnographic

methods of research and analysis are foregrounded as complementary to the ones associated with data analytics, and finds the combination of the two very productive. At the same time Kredell's chapter questions the fusing of "older" and contemporary data-based methods. He sees "the shift to Big Data [as] unsettling of both the epistemic and ontological order of things" and he argues that "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."

The chapters also address another important question of "what would 'science of culture' that use computational and big data look like, and what would be its limitations?" (Cultural Analytics Lab). The authors in this volume answer this question in terms of the lack of funding and human resources, problems with continuing research, challenges posed by degrading technology underpinning the data-driven research, inadequate training which makes researchers rely on third parties, and importantly, a still incomplete understanding of how we can use data visualization for research. Their exploration can be usefully contrasted with other large-scale data analytics-driven projects in the area of film festivals (Loist 2017-2022; Zemaityte et al. 2022). These projects are either part of larger cultural analytics projects such as CUDAN Open Lab in Tallinn or are properly resourced through grant funding allowing their scale and ambition to be realized.

The research presented in this section, as well as that conducted elsewhere, offers us a taste of what computational film festival studies might look like and uncovers invisible, poorly understood, or simply unknown aspects of film festival cultures. To quote Kredell, working with big data sets relating to film festival cultures means not only that we "must 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) we must also confront the necessity to change *how* we know about those festivals."

Manovich argues that data visualization, which is an important aspect of cultural analytics, allows us to express something which cannot be captured in any other way, which is also something we are not yet able to articulate fully, and sometimes not at all (Manovich 2022). The chapters in this section could thus be beacons of completely new methodological approaches which will hopefully be honed in on as research in other corners of cultural analytics progresses—with computational film festival studies being part of it.

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# **Part 1**

Archival Turn



## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 1. The Red and the Black: The State and the Privateers, Different Approaches to Organizing Film Festivals

*Piers Handling*

**Abstract:** The state was the dominant force in the creation of the world's first major film festivals, the majority of which were European. State control and/or funding, enhanced by a symbiotic relationship with the Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films (FIAPF), ensured a similarity of purpose, regulation and structure. However, in the immediate postwar, a concurrent situation developed. Festivals grew from private initiatives and while some of them took on the characteristics of the FIAPF sanctioned events, many of them did not. These outliers included events in North and South America, Asia, and the British Isles. Forced to rely on individual initiative and creativity they evolved in different ways and brought significant change.

**Keywords:** state festivals, private festivals, 1932-2000

The state was the dominant force in the creation of the world's first major film festivals, the majority of which were European. State control and/or funding, enhanced by a symbiotic relationship with the Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films (FIAPF), ensured a similarity of purpose, regulation, and structure. However, in the immediate postwar, a concurrent situation developed. Festivals grew from private initiatives and while some of them took on the characteristics of the FIAPF sanctioned events, many of them did not. These outliers included

events in North and South America, Asia, and the British Isles. Forced to rely on individual initiative and creativity they evolved in different ways and brought significant change.

### THE RED—The State and the Creation of the First Major Festivals 1932–70s

In the beginning—of the film festival world—the state had its fingerprints on almost all of the first events that popped up in both the prewar and postwar world. Without delving into the subtleties, of which there were many including pressure from the tourist sector made up of hotel owners, virtually all of the first festivals were state-funded and state-organized affairs of one sort or another, from Venice, Moscow, and Cannes in the prewar years to Mariánské Lázne/Karlovy Vary, Berlin, Brussels, the International Film Festival of India in New Delhi, San Sebastián, and the revived postwar Moscow.

These state-organized events, designed in different ways to project national objectives, both cultural and diplomatic, were all essentially set up in the same way involving diplomatic channels. The awarding of prizes became central, although interestingly Venice and Berlin flirted with audience awards in their first years. They were, in almost every sense of the word, highly structured, quite formal projections of national prestige wrapped in solid, albeit standard, verbiage about the importance of film to further understanding etc. in the context of international relationships. Numerous diplomatic incidents ensued, the Soviets boycotted various years, and films were pulled as they offended various national sensibilities. Rubbing shoulders with the diplomatic were the more prosaic issues of tourism, an essential by-product of festivals whose importance cannot be underestimated nor overlooked.

To provide a postwar structure due to the proliferation of events, the producers, who were after all providing the films, revived a prewar institution, the *Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films* (FIAPF) in 1948. One of its key functions would be to regulate the growing world of film festivals, and the history of almost all of the festivals of the forties, fifties, and sixties who aspired to join the growing “club” is inextricably tied up with FIAPF. There would be a few exceptions.

One of the by-products of the rules and regulations imposed by FIAPF was a uniformity of purpose and structure. The various festivals all began to look and sound and act alike. Initially, they did not even control their own

selections; that was done by a variety of national selection committees, or by state bodies in the Soviet bloc countries. Although challenged in the fifties, this process would not effectively change until the sixties. That decade saw many changes—political, social, economic—which invariably was reflected in the world of arts, although the film festival world was stubbornly resistant, largely due to the power still wielded by the producers via FIAPF.

It was clear to many that the major state festivals needed a rethink, but institutions are famously slow to change, and their glacial response would result in well-documented fireworks around the Cannes and Venice editions of 1968, and Berlin 1970. To be fair Cannes had instituted the *Semaine de la critique* in 1962, an invaluable addition, as reference to its early programming will attest. But, in light of the crises that each of the so-called Big Three would eventually be forced to confront, all fiddled before fires threatened to burn down the city.

The other FIAPF-sanctioned festivals of the era experienced different challenges. Those who existed outside the Big Three were essentially consigned to the margins, and found it difficult to fill their competitions with quality films due to the restrictive rules of the game. Most who adopted the FIAPF model struggled: San Sebastián, Locarno, Punta del Este, Mar del Plata, San Francisco and, on into the future, Cairo, Tokyo, and Montreal.

There were two major innovations introduced by the major events in their early years that spoke to their split identities and dual purposes. Venice launched major historical retrospectives as early as 1948 via modest homages which developed into full-blown, impressive programs in the years that followed. This allowed some rebalancing towards the artistic standards that were their *raison d'être*. San Sebastián would also follow this lead. But, the most important development occurred when Cannes hosted its first *Exposition-Marché* as early as 1950, and established a more institutionalized Marché in 1959. Venice struggled with the idea in 1950, but the new MIFED (Il Mercato internazionale del film e del documentario/ International Film and Documentary Market, Milan) a decade later conveniently offered an excuse not to start their own, while Berlin added a formalized Film Fair in 1978, although market activity also went back to the fifties. Art and commerce had existed in uneasy tension since the first festivals, but the balance initially had undeniably rested with the former. The slow, but inevitable, growth of the market side of festivals pointed to a different recalibration, whereby financial transactions, deal-making, and the buying and selling of films would assume importance. Cannes and Berlin would embrace this development while Venice tore itself apart in the sixties trying to wrestle with this particular dilemma, ultimately rejecting it outright for decades.

## THE BLACK—The Privateers and How They Reinvigorated the Festival World 1946–90s

As the postwar festivals were emerging, events appeared that did not fit the neat, tidy pattern of the state-sponsored film festivals. In 1946, virtually concurrent with Mariánské Lázne/Karlovy Vary's first edition, another new festival appeared, this time in Locarno, a private initiative prompted by a local exhibitor and a film distributor, working with a privately run tourism association. A year later, in August, Edinburgh mounted a very different kind of film festival—as did, over the following years, events in Melbourne (1952), Sydney (1954), the peripatetic Southeast Asian festival (1954), Stratford, Canada (1956), London (1957), San Francisco (1957), Vancouver (1958), Cartagena (1960), Montreal (1960), New York (1962), Chicago (1965), and assorted others—almost all of them private initiatives, free of state control, and for most, of state money.

Locarno, while private, leaned towards the competitive model and reached out for state and FIAPF support, while remaining a private corporation. Edinburgh would strike out on a quite different path. It began life as the Edinburgh International Festival of Documentary Films. Like Locarno, it was not created by the state, nor beholden to it. Thematically driven, a result of John Grierson pushing the documentary, and hence Britain, to the forefront of this new form of cinema, it had an agenda, somewhat political, but more social and educational in its shape, that captured the postwar mentality of Europe. Essentially the creation of two men, backstopped by the dynamic but financially strapped Edinburgh Film Guild, this was the first festival that stepped to one side of the FIAPF structure and model. Unlike Locarno, and the other major festivals, an official competition was not in its plans.

There are a number of things notable about this parallel wave of new festivals. They moved well beyond the traditional European core, touching North and South America, Asia, and the British Isles. Virtually all of them were the brainchildren of individuals, or small groups, who had no national state interests at heart. They were free of ideological rhetoric and diplomatic constraints. Driven by cinephilic instincts, these were the dreamers, motivated by the desire to bring the sparkling films of the postwar era to their various cities. All were essentially privately funded, dependent largely for their existence on the revenues generated by a paying public. Tourism, which was a prime concern of many of the state festivals, was almost entirely absent from their visions. Most were non-competitive (Melbourne, Sydney, Stratford, London, and New York), while the others invented a prize-giving system suited to their events. Commercial marketplaces for buying and selling films were virtually invisible. At first, their survival was precarious.

Almost all of them experienced financial crises of different magnitudes in their early years; a few fell by the wayside (Stratford, Vancouver, and Montreal) to be revived in different incarnations years later.

Some of the new festivals fell uneasily into the FIAPF orbit; in order to create legitimacy for their events in the eyes of local and international film suppliers their approval seemed an essential step. Sydney and Melbourne were driven to paroxysms of frustration in the sixties by the Paris-based association. San Francisco ran a FIAPF-sanctioned official competition in 1964, an attempt to create a Cannes or Venice in California, but dropped the idea after only one year, realizing it was a failure, and reverting to its former status. Chicago simply turned away all requests from FIAPF to join (as would most of the North American festivals).

It was clear by the sixties that the major state-run/financed festivals were undergoing a kind of mid-life crisis. A sclerosis was clearly visible. 1968 was a watershed year (but not for everyone as the North America festivals remained untouched). Cannes was forced to abandon half-way through, Venice was full of disruption and uproar. Berlin would escape the crisis until 1970 when their jury resigned, amidst controversy, awarding no prizes. Out of the chaos two new initiatives were born: the *Quinzaine des réalisateurs* in Cannes and the *Forum of Young Cinema* in Berlin. Venice underwent a different kind of calvary, abandoning its competition for a decade, skipping two editions during the seventies, and producing a variety of “screening programs” that sometimes did, and other times did not, resemble a traditional festival. While in no way denigrating the importance of the two new Cannes and Berlin sidebars—both barely tolerated by the institutions who “allowed” their births—the equally significant innovations of the decade, often predating the events of 1968, came from a variety of mostly new events, some avoiding the very use of the word “festival,” replacing it with “show,” “encounter,” “review,” or “days.” The key ones were based in Europe, the British Isles, Africa, and South America.

The innovations began in surprising places—in the fifties, documentary festivals in Leipzig and the SODRE event in Montevideo, and short film festivals especially in Oberhausen and Mannheim. In the early sixties there was a flurry of new events in Italy, all in reaction to the Mostra in Venice. The *Rassegna del cinema latino-americano* held five editions in Santa Margherita Ligure, Sestri Levante, and Genoa between 1960 and 1965; the *Mostra internazionale del cinema libero* in Porretta Terme began in 1960; and the *Incontri del cinema* in Sorrento followed three years later. But the most influential would be the *Mostra internazionale del nuevo cinema* held in Pesaro, formed in 1965. These “festivals,” along with Edinburgh (having by now long abandoned its documentary moniker), all upended the status quo, and for a short period,

they changed the face of the festival world. Pesaro, led by a film critic and academic, set out to be an anti-Venice (i.e., anti-FIAPF) event. Edinburgh hired a number of young, bratty, cinephiles in 1968. All these events were engaged, committed, and political in every sense of that word, advocating for new, independent voices and overlooked cinemas, consciously avoiding the trappings of the competitive events. They embraced the theoretical debates of the period, themed their annual conferences ("For a New Critical Conscience of Cinematic Language," Pesaro 1966; "History/Production/Memory," Edinburgh 1977) to feature rigorous debates and discussions, with some supported by impressive publications. Edinburgh pivoted towards the brash and the disruptive (Roger Corman, Sam Fuller, the New Hollywood cinema), and programmed a seminal Women's Event in 1972, while Pesaro rounded out its annual festivals with groundbreaking national cinema programmes. They deliberately set out to be the polar opposite of the state-funded traditional festivals, who had wrapped their increasingly commercial events in a veneer of paparazzi, glamor, parties, black tie, and starlets.

At the same time other festivals of note emerged, in Africa—the Festival international des journées cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC), first held in 1966, and the Festival du cinéma Africain de Ouagadougou (1969), and in South America—Viña del Mar, renowned for two editions in 1967 and 1969, and the Muestra del cine documental Latinoamericano in Mérida which presented three events (1968, 1970, and 1977). To these can be added the transgressive *Marcha* festivals in Montevideo of the late sixties. These "militant" festivals marked a new development: their agendas were as political as they were aesthetic.

The African festivals were totally state-run. They decided to give prizes but quickly narrowed their competitive focus to the region. To avoid FIAPF's rules, their competitions would only allow African productions, a first for the global film festival circuit. This flew in the face of the international assumptions that had underpinned the entire notion of what a film festival should be; but its transnational goals were entirely defensible when it came to creating a profile for their emerging, financially challenged, post-colonial cinemas. Viña del Mar, sadly short-lived at this point (it would not be revived until 2001), born out of a film club, and Mérida, presented by the Universidad de los Andes, were also regionally focused, becoming magnets for Latin American filmmakers dedicated to making their own, often highly politicized, indigenous cinema. Decades later, the South Korean tiger-festival situated in Pusan, inspired by this model, would focus entirely on Asian cinema, giving it a laser-sharp mission that its older rival in Tokyo, trapped into the international FIAPF competitive model, lacked.

The seventies saw a further explosion. New major events arrived almost annually, among them: LA Filmex (1971), Rotterdam (1972), Tehran (1972), Telluride (1974), Toronto (1976), Cairo (1976), Festival du monde, Montreal (1977), Utah (1978, renamed Sundance in 1984), Hong Kong (1976), and Havana (1979). Tehran, Cairo, and Montreal would become FIAPF competitive festivals while others (Havana, Sundance) would adopt a hybrid model. All of them, except Tehran, Hong Kong, and Havana, were privately organized, started by individuals or small groups. They had to be creative or risk failure. Amongst this group some would finally arise to challenge the hegemonic power of the European festivals.

Edinburgh, largely overlooked in the academic literature, cast an emulative shadow. It, as well as London and the British Film Institute, acted as aspirational models for many: New York, Filmex, Hong Kong, Toronto, even Telluride. The competitive model of the Big Three was consciously avoided, and indeed entirely upended—no prizes, no jury, no market, no black-tie—to become audience, not industry events.

A renegade, freewheeling “cowboy” attitude appeared. Rotterdam, Pesaro, Edinburgh, the Quinzaine, and Berlin’s Forum set up a rival organization to challenge FIAPF, the Fédération internationale des festivals indépendants. This breakaway attempt was short-lived but illustrative of a desire to challenge the status-quo. Other initiatives the “privateers” introduced would dominate the next decades of explosive growth around the world. San Francisco hosted extensive on-stage interviews with major directors and stars that inspired early Telluride; thematic programming accompanied by publications became a standard part of not just Edinburgh and Pesaro but also Hong Kong, Toronto, and Pusan; women’s programming began to appear, prompted by Edinburgh’s 1972 initiative, resulting in amongst other things the creation of the women’s festival in Creteil; women were appointed festival directors of a number of key events around the world (Edinburgh, Toronto, London, Rotterdam, Melbourne, Sydney, Locarno, Sundance), notably never emulated in the FIAPF sanctioned competitive events of Cannes, Venice, Berlin, San Sebastián; video was added to Sundance and Toronto; LA Filmex staged massive movie marathons, some lasting fifty hours, celebrating genre cinema; production funds were created (Rotterdam’s Hubert Bals Fund being the first and most famous); organic, non-official but highly effective sales markets emerged in Toronto and Sundance; Rotterdam started its groundbreaking pre-production CineMart emulated by Pusan and Hong Kong; Toronto shifted the focus away from juried prizes with its prestigious Audience Award, prompting many others to follow; Chicago and LA Filmex introduced eye-catching, modern marketing methods to attract audiences; and production and training labs in many festivals followed Sundance’s lead.

Amidst these innovations was the transformation of the financial model. While the European festivals essentially remained wards of the state, relying for virtually all their funding on a combination of municipal, regional, or national governments, the North American and Australian festivals relied on self-generated income, earned revenues from box office income, occasional donations from wealthy benefactors, and finally, funding from private corporations.

These different financial models had repercussions. The government-funded organizations built their festivals around a somewhat different set of imperatives: national prestige, cultural showcases, mixed in with commercial trading. Increasingly, the media played an outsized role, titillated initially by the Silva/Mitchum scandal in Cannes 1954, and Bardot; more recently amplified by the arrival of the red carpet. For the privateers, the audience drove the bottom line and, if one identifies a split between the elitist, high art idea of a film festival and its populist, commercial counterpart, herein lies its origins. But public box office revenues were not enough to feed the growing appetites and ambitions of many festivals. The shift towards corporate fundraising, and its consequences, was perhaps the most significant evolution that the privateers, especially in North America, brought to the table.

If the early history of film festivals witnessed the Europeans establishing the rules—competition, prizes, juries, state funding—these codes were challenged almost immediately, eventually reaching a tipping point in the sixties and seventies, a period of flux, innovation, and change. Informality, experimentation, flexibility, and disruption became the norm, ultimately affecting the future structures of the competitive festivals. The privateer's needs for different revenue streams brought money into their operating budgets that came with different sets of demands. The public wanted to be challenged, but also entertained. Corporations invested for commercial results, not for reasons of philanthropy. Walking this tightrope would provide a growing challenge for festival directors of all stripes committed to an innovative, independent, and diverse cinema.

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## About the Author

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## 2. Archival Research and Festival Studies' Historiographical Narratives

*Antoine Damiens*

**Abstract:** As I was doing archival research on LGBTQ film festivals, I stumbled upon various ephemeral traces of events which have been forgotten in historical accounts of LGBTQ festivals. These forgotten festivals forced me to think about the diversity of the festival phenomenon and the state of festival research – about why some festivals ended up being archived and why others were forgotten and/or overlooked. In examining both the principles of organisation of archives and the historiographical project of festival studies, this chapter aims to unpack a series of epistemological questions: Which festivals do we centre in our historical and theoretical endeavours? How do festival studies' theoretical concepts and methodological apparatus orient us toward particular types of festivals? What does this marginalisation of some festivals say about knowledge production institutions?

**Keywords:** archives, queer, historiography, methodology, epistemology

From 2014 to 2017 I consulted around a dozen archival collections, primarily located in France, Canada, and the United States, with the intention of writing a book on the history of queer film festivals. I was hoping to find a sizable number of documents on large, established LGBTQ film festivals. Instead, I unearthed an impressive quantity of flyers, posters, and articles corresponding to small, ephemeral LGBTQ cinematic events which have been forgotten in historical accounts of LGBTQ film festivals.<sup>1</sup> These archival

<sup>1</sup> The archival collections I consulted rarely contained films or videos. Unfortunately, a lot of the films and videos screened at these festivals no longer exist: they are not distributed and were not properly archived. The textual traces I analyze in this chapter (festivals' catalogs,

traces forced me to reassess my theoretical framework: instead of writing a book *about* LGBTQ film festivals, I decided to do a *queering* of festival studies.

My book, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (Damiens 2020b), argues that the theoretical and methodological apparatus of festival studies does not adequately account for smaller and/or ephemeral festivals. As such, the concepts that defined the field (for instance, the notions of festival circuits, cultural and economic capitals, and stakeholders) are designed to capture a specific form of festivals: festivals that happened several times (emphasizing longevity over ephemerality), that are organized by independent institutions (often neglecting events organized by businesses or by anonymous collectives), and that adhere to a specific format (five to ten days of screenings organized in discrete units). My goal, then, was both to reveal how the theoretical and methodological apparatuses of festival studies shape our research and to invite scholars to take seriously these smaller and/or ephemeral festivals.

This chapter aims to provide an overview of some of the methodological issues I faced doing archival research on festivals. Building upon my research on queer cinematic events, it argues for an expanded conception of festivals that does justice to the vital work of community curators. Indeed, these ephemeral events reveal the *exceptional* nature of established, recurring, and long-lasting festivals: as events relying mostly on volunteer cultural workers, festivals are by definition organized under precarious labor conditions. Ephemeral events resituate “failure” as an integral part of festival organizing and enable us to think about other forms of festivals (including festivals that do not belong to a clearly defined circuit and events that do not adopt the traditional format of a festival).

## **Forgotten Festivals: On the Diversity of LGBTQ Cinematic Events**

Throughout my archival fieldwork, I stumbled upon various traces of events that do not fit neatly with existing research on queer film festivals which generally focuses on big, established international events (see for instance Loist 2013; Loist and Zielinski 2012; Rhyne 2007; Richards 2017). These ephemeral events offer alternative models for thinking about festival cultures: they enable us to envision other uses of the festival format.

flyers, and press releases) are often the only historical sources on these films and videos: they can be thought of as an archival device in and of itself.

From 1975 to the mid-1980s for instance, the French gay liberation movement organized over a dozen festivals in small cities outside of Paris. Predating San Francisco's 1977 Gay Film Fest (which became Frameline, the oldest LGBTQ festival still in existence), these events mobilized the festival format to screen films that could otherwise not be shown in theaters; as filmmaker, festival organizer, and activist Lionel Soukaz explains, screening these films within the context of a festival enabled filmmakers to "avoid the threat of an X rating, censorship, or ban" as such screenings did "not require the approval of the censorship commission" (Soukaz 1978, my translation). Furthermore, these festivals were conceived as an occasion to collectively reflect upon some of the orientations taken by the gay liberation movement: films were organized in clusters corresponding to potentially controversial issues (such as age of consent legislation and intergenerational relationships) and were followed with intense discussion sessions (Isarte 2017). Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to know how many festivals took place in the decade, as official archives at best only mention these events. Only one festival organized by the French gay liberation movement was properly documented: the 1978 Festival homosexual de la Pagode in Paris, which was the victim of both State censorship and homophobic violence. Thomas Waugh recalls that:

five people, including the event's chairperson and one of the participating filmmakers, had to be hospitalized after an attack on the theater by members of the French neo-fascist group, Jeune Nation.... All of this took place under the benign observation of Paris police officers, who were in the theater at the time to see if the films were offensive.... Gay leaders presenting a petition to the Minister of Culture were carted off for four-hour identity checks. The petition had been signed by Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Arrabal. (1978, 36).

This example, of a festival that *was* archived, exemplifies a major issue for scholars doing research on community-based festivals: these festivals are rarely deemed to be historically significant—unless festival organizers were the victims of (physical) violence. These festivals were rarely discussed in the press: as such, there are almost no secondary sources.<sup>2</sup> Tellingly, the 1978 festival is often described as "the first homosexual film festival" organized

<sup>2</sup> Archival collections on LGBTQ topics often chronicle homophobic violence. It is no surprise that most collections were started at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: queer cultural life became historically significant when gay men were dying en masse (see Cvetkovich 2003).

in Paris, de facto participating in the erasure of other gay liberation film festivals (see, for example, Rémès 1994).<sup>3</sup>

Another striking use of the festival format comes from adult theaters. These events typically mobilized the festival format as a way to bring patrons into the theater—creating an event that served as a marketing tool. For instance, Los Angeles's Park Theater organized A Most Unusual Film Festival in June 1968: described by the organizers as one of the first gay film festivals, the event included both avant-garde experimental films (Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Shirley Clarke) and adult, softcore cinema (most of them directed by adult star Pat Rocco). The festival was so successful that the theater decided to organize various cinematic events that pushed the boundaries of censorship legislation, including three festivals dedicated to Pat Rocco: The Original Pat Rocco Male Film Festival in July 1968, A Festival of New Male Nude Films by Pat Rocco! in August 1968, and Pat Rocco Presents in 1969 (Wuest 2017; Strub 2012; Slide 2000, 94). Unfortunately, most of these events were not properly archived as they dealt with potentially illicit materials. As such, adult theaters aimed to stay below the radar: they only advertised in select publications and did not necessarily preserve their own history.

Some LGBTQ film festivals were also organized on university campuses. Festivals organized by gay student-run organizations, such as UCLA's 1977 Gay Awareness Week Film Festival (Gay Student Union 1977) and 1979 Projecting Stereotypes (Gay Student Union 1979), New York University's 1983 Abuse (National Association for Lesbian and Gay Filmmakers 1983), or University of Minnesota's 1987–1989 Lavender Images (Lavender Images—A Lesbian and Gay Film Retrospective 1987; Lavender Images II 1988; Lavender Images III 1989), often strived to create a debate around gay rights. They typically aimed to reach the student population (gay and straight) and included several sessions with prestigious guest speakers. For instance, the 1977 Gay Awareness Week Film Festival aimed to “examine and evaluate the treatment of this minority by cinema” (Gay Student Union 1977). It targeted the gay community on campus, but also more largely aimed to educate the student

This is quite ironic, given that archives' erasure of queer subjects is in and of itself a form of institutional violence.

3 The fact that the 1978 festival was well documented is partly a consequence of the circulation of a petition signed by leading left-leaning intellectuals: as such, the physical violence enacted against festival organizers was seen as symptomatic of the oppression of queer people. This alliance between public intellectuals and activists/festival organizers notably led to the creation of *Masques*, a journal published by a group of well-known gay and lesbian intellectuals that aimed to theorize the censorship of queer artistic expressions (Masques 1979).

body. The films projected—a mix of shorts and feature films—aimed to spark a debate, and prestigious activists and scholars (such as Gay Media Task Force's Newt Dieter or film critic Vito Russo) introduced the films so as to better "frame" them for a large audience. While this type of festival seems to have been quite common, they were rarely documented as most universities do not archive the documents created by student organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Festivals were also organized by then-emerging film scholars and critics. These events were often conceived as an integral part of the research process: they enabled a scholar or critic to see the films they wanted to write about and to present early versions of their research. Here, it is important to remember that these festivals were largely organized before the popularization of video: scholars wanting to write about a film needed to find a way of watching it, which often meant finding a film print and screening it in a theater or on campus. For instance, Richard Dyer put together the 1977 festival *Images of Homosexuality on the Screen* at the National Film Theatre in London. This event led to the publication of *Gays and Film* (Dyer 1977)—one of the first books on homosexuality and cinema. Similarly, Thomas Waugh organized several screening series and festivals in Montreal, such as a 1977 series of small festivals at Concordia University (in partnership with the Lesbian and Gay Friends of Concordia collective) and the 1982 festival *Sans Popcorn* (documented in Waugh 1982). Vito Russo organized around twenty festivals and screening cycles in the late 1970s–early 1980s. He typically used the festival format to present early versions of his book *The Celluloid Closet* (first published in 1981). These festivals were conceived first and foremost as a research method; they were not necessarily publicized to a large audience and rarely led to archivable documentations (Damiens 2020a; 2020b, chap. 3).

These three examples—festivals organized by activists, by adult theaters, and on campuses—point to alternative uses of the festival format that have yet to be theorized by scholars. Furthermore, these forms of screenings seem to have been quite common: the archival collections I consulted abound with traces of forgotten festivals. Most of them are, however, quite enigmatic: often, I could only find flyers, without any names or dates. This poses a serious methodological issue as it is often impossible to determine who organized a festival, when, or whether these events actually took place.

<sup>4</sup> While universities do sometimes archive the activities of their student organizations, they often only preserve administrative documents. Furthermore, these festivals are early in the chronology of LGBTQ activism on campus. Significantly, some of the university archives I consulted do not contain any documents on the events organized on campus by student activists.

Ger Zielinski's description of Toronto's 1980 First International Gay Film Festival is here particularly instructive:

I found a piece of ephemera, a simple flyer that announced the 1980 "First International Gay Film Festival" in Toronto, but could not find any source to confirm that the event ever took place. There is no record of it in any newspapers of the period. Its postal address is now a parking lot at the south end of the village. This of course does not mean that it did not take place, but rather that as an event it is left indeterminate, namely it may have taken place (2008, 144n114).

As Zielinski makes clear, it is often impossible to find detailed information on these smaller festivals: these flyers rarely contain any names, which means other methods (such as oral history interviews) are often unavailable to the researcher. José Esteban Muñoz argues that this experience—finding fleeting traces of events that cannot be fully historicized—is a defining feature of minoritized histories. Indeed, these festivals did not necessarily aim to be well advertised; they often catered to a small community and remained under the radar. As Muñoz reminds us, "leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere" (Muñoz 1996, 6). Secrecy—not leaving (archival) traces—was often a matter of safety.

### **There's a Gap in the Archive: Archival Traces as *Exceptional* Documents**

While some festivals only exist as traces, others are highly conscious of the importance of archiving and narrating their own history: they constituted their own archives.<sup>5</sup> Preserving and representing one's history can reinforce one's position in the festival circuit. It can also be a consequence of a festival's history. MIX New York (formerly New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental

<sup>5</sup> As this chapter makes clear, festivals rarely create their own archives. Most often, documents related to a festival ended up in archival collections by happenstance. There are, however, a few festivals that not only preserved but also sought to properly archive their own histories. To that end, the MIX New York collection at the Fales Library stands out as one of the only archives dedicated to a single festival.

Film Festival, 1987–ongoing) is here an interesting example. The festival was created in 1988 by experimental filmmaker Jim Hubbard and author Sarah Schulman—both of whom were involved in the HIV/AIDS movement. The festival largely reflects a commitment to archiving and documenting the lives of those who were dying. Schulman and Hubbard preserved everything—catalogs, press releases, lunch receipts, rejection letters, meeting minutes, and train tickets. These documents were given in 2006 to the Fales Archives and Special Collections at NYU, an institution created in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Cvetkovich 2003; Eichhorn 2013; Kirste 2007). The festival is thus well documented and has been the subject of numerous articles (Chin 1992; Gamson 1996; Wong 2011; Schoonover and Galt 2016).<sup>6</sup> Here, I aim to point to festivals' complex relationship to the economy of knowledge production: not every festival wants to be archived or has connections to knowledge producers. As scholars, we thus need to think about why some festivals preserve their own history, why others fell through the cracks of archival institutions, and how our own circuits and networks (defined by our location in specific geographic and linguistic contexts and the relationships we cultivate with some festival stakeholders) shape our research.

To some extent, the fact that most festival histories aren't preserved by archives should not be surprising: after all, the festival format is not particularly conducive to archival work. As Janet Harbord argues, festivals are ephemeral by design: they are live events that cannot be reproduced at a later date (2009, 2016). While scholars working on international and/or established festivals can often count on governmental archives, this is not necessarily the case for smaller, community-oriented festivals. Scholars working on these events mostly rely on oral history interviews (when possible) and festival ephemera—on the documents edited by festival organizers see (Dayan 2000).<sup>7</sup> This focus on ephemera creates specific issues for researchers: flyers, posters, and catalogs generally end up in unsorted boxes of documents. These boxes can take a lot of space; festival organizers may not be able to keep such a huge amount of paper (Armatage 2009, 83). Given that this sort of ephemera have little value to festival organizers, documents are often thrown away after each festival's edition (Zielinski

6 Furthermore, the festival was attended by several film scholars. It was particularly proactive in recruiting amateur historians—including me. I attended the festival in 2015, as a simple, anonymous, film enthusiast. During a casual conversation with fellow attendees, I mentioned in passing my interest in the history of LGBTQ festivals and received, the next day, a full set of the festival's catalogs.

7 Unfortunately, I was unable to conduct oral history interviews as the events I uncovered rarely list the names of festival organizers.

2016). Furthermore, festival organizers rarely have access to the sort of material and human resources that would be needed to preserve their history. Most events are run by volunteers or underpaid workers (Loist 2011) who have other priorities: organizing a festival's *next* edition in the context of ever-shrinking resources and budgets.

Thus far, I have argued that most small and/or community-oriented festivals aren't properly archived. It is, however, also necessary to consider what happens when festivals *are* archived: archives do not merely preserve documents; they also *order* them, thus shaping how we access research materials. As Dagmar Brunow reminds us,

Archives are not only storehouses of neutral material but play a crucial role in the construction of "historical sources," of documents through selection, classification and categorization, for instance through meta-data. Thus, the archive itself is an agent in its own right. It entails a performative dimension in constructing documents and sources and, as a consequence, in creating the grounds from which history is written (2015, 40).

In that context, it is crucial to consider the history of archives and their guiding ideology. For instance, archives dealing with LGBTQ history can be divided into two groups: archives constituted by and for the community (such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives) and institutional archives containing one or several LGBTQ collections (the New York Public Library Gay and Lesbian Collections). These two types of archives do not preserve the same type of documents and do not order knowledge in the same way. The former tends to be managed by amateur, volunteer historians who often preserve everything; as such, they are not bound by professional archival standards, but by a commitment to their community. They often contain documents that may be particularly valuable to the researcher, such as festival ephemera. However, these archives are run by volunteers who may not have cataloged their holdings and/or who may not be available. Institutional archives, such as public libraries, tend to be more easily accessible. They order knowledge in a standardized, professional way. While it is easier to understand their principle of organization and thus to find documents, they tend to only include materials that are deemed important by archivists: they typically prioritize administrative and legal documents and may not preserve ephemera.

Furthermore, one must consider how the principles of organization of an archival collection may participate in the marginalization of ephemeral and/or smaller festivals. Archives are often organized in one of two ways:

organizational collections (each folder or box corresponds to an organization) or subject files (each folder or box corresponds to a specific theme, oftentimes using headings created by the Library of Congress).<sup>8</sup> These two ways of ordering documents are mechanisms of knowledge production that fundamentally shape how researchers can find information. Organizational collections are concerned with big, established institutions; they ignore smaller festivals. Subject files depend on how archivists understand a document: smaller festivals tend to be classified in boxes such as “ephemera diverse”—set apart from other forms of festival documents (for an overview of the differences between community archives and institutional collections see, Cvetkovich 2003; Eichhorn 2013; Jornet Benito and Grailles 2020).

In that context, it is necessary to think about archives as institutions that simultaneously legitimize and conceal histories; as Joan W. Scott reminds us, documents should not be understood as mere *evidence* that would simply need to be rediscovered, but rather as traces selectively made historical and legitimized by archival processes (1991). In other words, the existence of an archival collection on a festival points to the cultural status of this festival: it was deemed important enough to be archived. Conversely, the fact that some of the festivals I examined in this chapter *were* archived is nothing short of a miracle; these documents often ended up in an archival collection by chance and happenstance. These traces of gay and lesbian cinematic life constitute what Cvetkovich aptly calls a “problem archive”; they act not only as rare indexical proofs of a forgotten past but also as paradoxical reminders that something is missing from the archives: a multiplicity of other ephemeral festivals whose history we will never be able to reconstruct (2003, 133).

## Developmentalist History and Festival Studies' Disciplinary Unconscious

These methodological issues condition how researchers access historical materials. This partly explains why scholars working on festival histories are often limited to big, established events (in the case of LGBTQ festivals, see Loist 2013; Loist and Zielinski 2012; Rhyne 2007). Despite uncovering a

8 This may vary depending on the geographic context considered: archives may adopt different conventions outside of North America. Furthermore, one needs to consider the material resources allocated to various archives: archives may not always have the resources needed to preserve documents (i.e., the documents may be deteriorating). This is particularly the case in non-Western contexts or with archives facing austerity measures.

wide variety of archival traces documenting ephemeral festivals, I could not write an alternative history of LGBTQ film festivals: archival traces contain too little information; they resist any definitive claim to evidence and proof. As traces that cannot easily be pinpointed or analyzed, they only operate “through the surplus they represent [as] they seem to tell us something is missing” (Muñoz 2009, 99).

Tellingly, most of the scholarship draws a *developmentalist* history of LGBTQ film festivals. These projects are interested in the development of the festival phenomenon: they delimit various historical phases that correspond to the emergence of major, established festivals and to shifts in the cultural economy of the queer film industry. Put another way, they are concerned with the creation and transformation of established festivals within an ever-shifting political and economic context. Developmentalist historiography enables us to explain how big, established LGBTQ festivals came to constitute a coherent circuit and how the rise of corporate sponsorship changed the exhibition of queer films (Rhyne 2007; Loist 2013; Loist and Zielinski 2012).

While this type of historical project is particularly helpful for understanding global trends in queer filmmaking, it may have several unintended effects. Among others, developmentalist historiography isn’t particularly interested in smaller and/or ephemeral festivals: it may ignore festivals that do not fit with their time, or which are organized outside of the circuit. For instance, developmentalist history may foreclose an examination of the ephemeral festivals that were organized, in any given city, before the creation of events that still exist today. While there is a significant number of publications on Image+Nation Montreal (1988–ongoing), there is almost nothing on its predecessors—the 1977 *Images of Homosexuality on the Screen*, the 1980 *Semaine du cinéma gai à Montréal*, the 1982 *Sans popcorn: Images lesbiennes et gaies*, and the 1986 *Gais à l'écran*. Similarly, most of the literature on French LGBTQ film festivals discuss *Chéries-Chéris* (Paris, 1994–ongoing) without mentioning the numerous gay liberation festivals of the 1970s.

This erasure of earlier festivals exemplifies one of the issues with developmentalist history: it places the emphasis on longevity. A festival’s success is measured by its continued existence and by its place on the circuit. Focusing on these alternative histories and forgotten potentialities enables us to reveal and question the regime of values at the core of festival studies’ conceptual apparatus: festivals that “matter” in our theoretical endeavors typically participate in the economy of film and last several years. This does not, however, mean that these forgotten, smaller and/or ephemeral festivals were not *important* for instance, the gay liberation festivals I described earlier in

this chapter created a debate around censorship and were instrumental in mobilizing the gay movement against restrictive age of consent legislation. Similarly, the festivals organized by film scholars and critics in the 1970s were central in defining “sexuality and cinema” as a legitimate academic area of inquiry predating the development of gay film studies.

In the larger version of this project, I argue that this focus on big, established festivals is partly a consequence of both the methodological tools and the political project of festival studies. In particular, I examine how the “disciplinary unconscious” of festival studies—the “domain of critical interpellation through which practitioners learn to pursue particular objects, protocols, methods of study, and interpretative vocabularies as the means for expressing and inhabiting their belonging to the field” (Wiegman 2011, 14)—conditions how scholars understand festivals. Drawing on feminist epistemologies and historiography, I analyze how the constitution of the field led to the prioritizing of particular methods and theoretical apparatuses.

While this analysis clearly exceeds the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that the field’s main concepts are derived from an analysis of A-list film festivals. For instance, festival studies quickly cohered around the notion of a circuit or on the notions of symbolic and economic capitals. As Papagena Robbins and Viviane Saglier make clear,

systematic endeavors to understand how film festivals are connected have persisted and become constitutive of the first steps towards a field of film festival studies... [The notion of the festival circuit as an alternative to traditional modes of exhibition and distribution] has...been included within the very conceptualization of film festivals as a given, and has remained largely unquestioned. (2015, 2–3)

These concepts, originally designed to capture a specific form of festival, quickly became transposed to other forms of events. Tellingly, the first anthology on the topic, the *Film Festival Yearbook 1*, centered on the notion of a festival circuit (Iordanova with Rhyne 2009). This volume was quickly followed by other anthologies focusing on various types of festivals, often (but not always) defined as separate but interlocking circuits (see for instance Iordanova and Cheung 2011; Iordanova and Torchin 2012; Iordanova and van de Peer 2014; Marlow-Mann 2013; Tascón and Wils 2016, Vallejo and Winton 2020a and 2020b).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, knowledge in festival studies relies on

<sup>9</sup> These volumes, and in particular the *Film Festival Yearbook* series, often contain individual chapters that question the notion of a festival circuit or the coherence of festival typologies.

a typological impulse; scholars have thought to adapt and transpose its key theoretical concepts to account for other types of festivals. This lateral move—using notions derived from A-list festivals to analyze other forms of cinematic events—can at times presuppose a particular definition of festivals: belonging to a circuit, not ephemeral, and participating in the economy of film. In turn, this orientation towards established festivals assumes particular regimes of value against which the success or relevance of an event is measured—be it size, longevity, or cultural influence.

This emphasis on big, established festivals is also a consequence of the field's quest for academic legitimacy. As an interdisciplinary domain of research primarily located within film and media studies, festival studies sits in an uneasy position. We are often tasked with explaining why festivals matter within our disciplines—therefore defining which festivals matter.<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on defining a field of research and asserting its legitimacy is particularly clear when one examines the type of publications at the center of festival scholarship; while the field is quite recent, it has already led to several anthologies, edited collections, and readers. These volumes fundamentally seek to carve a space for *future* festival scholarship by both increasing the visibility of our research (curating a volume that invokes a coherent field) and enabling us to create various courses on the topic (training students and researchers). In so doing, these volumes often narrate the field's history and define what festival studies is, should, and could be. Tellingly, Marijke de Valck's introduction to the field—aptly titled “What is a Film Festival? How to Study Festivals and Why You Should”—simultaneously acknowledges the *diversity* of the festival phenomenon and aims to make sense of festival studies as a coherent field of research (de Valck 2016).

Quite clearly, these interventions testify to a need to find new vocabularies and conceptual frameworks that could account for a multiplicity of types of festivals.

<sup>10</sup> This quest for legitimacy takes on a particular importance for scholars working on minoritized festivals: the rubric of identity complicates our position in the symbolic economy of knowledge production. As such, scholars working on minoritized festivals are often asked to simultaneously affirm the specificity of their case study (defining, for instance, LGBTQ festivals as another *type* of festival) and to explain why this focus matters beyond their case study (performatively positioning LGBTQ festivals as *significant* beyond LGBTQ circles). The fact that most of the scholarship on LGBTQ festivals focuses on big, established events can be partly understood as an effect of this quest for legitimacy: discussing the size of (some) LGBTQ festivals or their role in the economy of film enables us to justify our focus on identity-related events to non-queer readers. After all, as Zielinski reminds us, (some) LGBTQ festivals are “often second largest only to the IFF [International Film Festivals] in their respective city” (2008, 116). Read in this light, scholars' focus on major festivals fundamentally aims at making LGBTQ festivals matter—despite and because of identity. It may, however, foreclose an examination of smaller, *queerer* festivals.

These attempts to *define* the project of festival studies are clearly needed and are an effect of the symbolic economy of knowledge production. Field formation necessarily entails an epistemological double bind: it simultaneously legitimizes and thus performatively carves a space for festival scholarship *and* sets the parameters through which festival studies operates. Rather, I am interested in how field-formation can at times reproduce a focus on big, established festivals: in defining a field dedicated to film festivals, they often end up defining which festivals should be at the center of our scholarly inquiry. In that context, historical research—in particular archival research on marginalized and forgotten festivals—can act as a counterbalance to festival studies' methodological and theoretical apparatus by reminding us that big, established festivals may only be a particular *type* of cinematic event.

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### 3. Film Festivals as Affective Economies: Methodologies for Following Buzz as Film Festival Affect

*Jonathan Petrychyn*

**Abstract:** This chapter offers guidance for tracing affect at film festivals. Building on the work of festival scholars who use Pierre Bourdieu to theorise festival capital, I argue that the most useful framework for understanding affect at film festivals is Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies. Specifically, I focus on the circulation of "buzz" and theorize its operation in two case studies: an ethnographic analysis of the buzz surrounding *Moonlight* at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016, and a textual analysis of an archive of queer film festival. By offering both ethnographic and archival case studies, my aim here is to demonstrate the flexibility affect theory can offer for various methodological approaches to studying film festivals.

**Keywords:** affect, ethnography, archive, buzz, Sara Ahmed

This chapter offers some methodological and theoretical guidance for tracing, finding, documenting, understanding, and feeling affect at film festivals. To date, Felicia Chan and Ger Zielinski have offered some of the clearest guidance for festival scholars interested in following affect, feeling, and emotion. Chan follows affect ethnographically, and maps festival affect through a series of encounters with the films, physical spaces, and imagined community of a given film festival (Chan 2017, 99). Zielinski, in contrast, draws on Cvetkovich's influential notion of an "archive of feeling" to theorize queer film festival ephemera as productive of "new affective ephemeral media that is folded back into queer cultural experience" (Zielinski 2016, 139; Cvetkovich 2003). While both works offer important practical guidance

on following affect ethnographically, neither offer a robust theory of affect unique to film festivals. Further, neither approach attends specifically to the quintessential festival affect: buzz. To this end, this chapter aims to build on this important work by offering both a theory of festival affect along with some additional practical guidance for following festival affect ethnographically and within the archive.

To do this, I start first by theorizing affect within a film festival context. I argue that the most useful framework for understanding the operation of affect at film festivals is Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies. As a theory that articulates affect as economic insofar as affect *circulates*, the theory of affective economies fits well within ongoing theoretical work in festival studies on the circulation of buzz and Bourdieuan forms of capital (Burgess 2014; de Valck 2014). I then turn my attention to two case studies in theorizing festival affect. The first attends specifically to "buzz," and offers an ethnographic analysis of the buzz surrounding *Moonlight* at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016. The second case study focuses generally on the vast archive of queer film festivals, and explores the circulation of positive and negative affects across the archive. Here I draw on a secondary analysis of some interview excerpts found in Stuart Richards's study of queer film festivals in Melbourne, San Francisco, and Hong Kong, as well as some archival materials I gathered while conducting primary source research on queer film festivals in Regina and Calgary, Canada. By offering both ethnographic and archival case studies, my aim here is to demonstrate the flexibility affect theory can offer for various methodological approaches to studying film festivals.

## Theorizing Affective Economies

Affect theory, with its "emphasis on change and relationality," provides a framework to understand how bodies, signs, and objects relate within the world (Boiciurkiw 2011, 21). Following on from the work of Sara Ahmed, I conceptualize the operation of affect in film festivals as an economy. Affect is not a feature of an object that it can transmit. Rather, affect is an effect of the circulation of objects in the festival network. As I have written elsewhere:

In an affective economy, signs, objects, and bodies do not have feelings, emotions, or affects; that is to say, they are not the source of affect. Rather, affect is produced through the circulation of signs, bodies, and objects, and 'the more signs circulate, the more affective they become' (Ahmed

2014, 45). Films do not have affects that they transmit to audiences. Nor do newspapers, speeches, programs, programmers, audiences, journalists, and any of the countless signs, bodies, and objects that exist within film festival networks. Affect is not transmitted; affect circulates (Petrychyn 2020).

By thinking of affect as economic—as that which circulates, not transmits—Ahmed situates affect as something akin to capital. Like capital, affect accumulates: we place investments in it, it accrues value. Affect, though it acts like capital and circulates like capital, can be resistant to the conversion into economic capital that can characterize Bourdieu's other forms of capital because affect is often unpredictable.

Theorizing affect as an economy attunes us to how affect circulates within festival spaces alongside films, distributors, audiences, and other actors within the festival network. In my own work I have been interested in thinking through this question of the relationship between affect and film festivals, both within the archives of festivals long past and in festivals occurring within what de Valck describes as the “here and now” to grasp the ways affect circulates across, within, and between festivals (de Valck 2016, 9). Though affect theory has a reputation for being a present-focused theory (Seigworth and Gregg 2010), and is thus perhaps most useful for ethnographic research, Ahmed's theory of affect as an economy also provides a framework for following affect in the archive. It is to these two methodological approaches—ethnography and archival research—that I turn to now.

### Ethnographic Affect: *Moonlight*'s TIFF Buzz

“Have you seen *Moonlight*?” When I attended the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2016 this question followed me everywhere. *Moonlight* came to TIFF from Telluride with some buzz around it, but it remained to be seen how the Toronto audience would react. Following its premiere screening at TIFF, *Moonlight* became the “must-see” film of the festival. TIFF added new screenings regularly throughout the festival for both press and industry and the general public. Review after review published during or shortly after the festival noted the film’s buzz, the “surge of emotion” after its premiere gala screening. *Moonlight* generated buzz. But how? Why do some films generate buzz, but not others? And what does buzz do to a film?

Buzz is the quintessential festival affect, a word given to all those positive and negative feelings that circulate in the festival network. Buzz circulates promiscuously and is the primary currency of festival exchange, no matter

the size of the festival. Buzz is notoriously difficult to pin down, and as an affect it is incredibly non-specific. But at its core, buzz is simply another word for a more formative affect: interest. Buzz is a marker for interest generated in an object within the festival network. For Probyn, “Interest constitutes lines of connection between people and ideas. It describes a kind of affective investment we have in others” (Probyn 2005, 13). Buzz is the flurry of interest that accumulates around a film, a party, a director, a festival. Buzz can be generated by a media frenzy, word of mouth, by rumor, or by fleeting glance. Buzz is accrued through the meeting of actors in the film festival event, which is sometimes then translated into economic capital in the form of box office receipts, distribution deals, or film sales.

Buzz is not something that a film *has*—it’s something a film *generates*, and something that *circulates* around the film. In plain speaking, a film doesn’t have buzz: there is buzz *around* something. Buzz is an economy. By reconceptualizing our understanding of what buzz is as something that circulates, and not as something that a film definitively has, directs us to everything else circulating around the film as indicative of the circulation of buzz. There are no words for feeling we can point to for buzz—we know it when we see it. We feel it.

Indeed, trying to reconstruct *Moonlight*’s accrual of buzz after the fact is difficult because of its affective ephemerality. Reading reviews we can construct a general sense of positivity about the film—we might say the reviews are “glowing”:

It’s been eight years since Jenkins gave us his debut *Medicine for Melancholy*, and many of us in Toronto had been hoping he’d made the most of the time to, if nothing else, avoid a sophomore slump. Instead, as we all realized while standing and clapping and sobbing while the director and the cast took the stage and the leaves above us felt like they were rustling over our heads that he’d just given us a rare gift. We would be leaving the theater as different people than we’d come in (Fear 2016).

At the film’s gala debut Saturday, the audience gave a rousing standing ovation. During the Q&A that followed, Ali wiped away tears as McCraney said his performance brought back memories of the real drug dealer who helped him learn to ride a bike as a child. “I miss that drug dealer dearly. To sit with him for 45 minutes (onscreen) is a gift,” McCraney said (Mandell 2021).

Already warmly received at Telluride, *Moonlight* sent a palpable surge of emotion through the packed theater where it had its first Toronto International Film Festival screening Saturday night (Chang 2016).

By contrast, long before its TIFF premiere, Jenkins' second film *Moonlight* had already generated buzz after a superbly edited trailer debuted online to much acclaim and an all but presumed "new masterpiece" status (Lazic 2016).

But positive reviews and standing ovations are not singularly constitutive of buzz—Dennis Villeneuve's sci-fi epic *Arrival* had great reviews that same year after its TIFF premiere, but never was I asked, "did you see *Arrival*?" Buzz is more than that. Reviews of *Moonlight* at TIFF uniformly talk about the "surge of emotion," as Justin Chang puts it in his review for the *LA Times*, that went through the theater during its premiere screening, and then followed it as the film played the festival. Buzz is about how that surge of emotion encounters positive reviews, standing ovations, rush line gossip, and the broader historical and social context that the film premieres in. People talked about *Moonlight* because it also captured a particular moment in the North American zeitgeist—a moment where intersections of race, class, and sexuality were front and center of the public consciousness. Buzz circulates when the right confluence of factors meets a film at the right moment. Buzz circulates when various actors in the festival network react. Buzz circulates when festival gatekeepers—journalists, programmers, venue managers—and festival audiences converge around a particular set of unpredictable and undefinable moments.

Buzz fundamentally indexes a considerable amount of interest around a film, and as such, is a key indicator of a film's ability to move through the film festival circuit. When a film has buzz, other festivals want to screen that film. Future research on festival circuits and networks may do well to pay attention to where, how, and under what circumstances buzz circulates around a film, a festival, and other objects and actors within festival networks. What relationships to power does buzz index? Which films are allowed to become "buzzworthy"? And what roles do various festival gatekeepers and stakeholders have in influencing which films get buzz and which do not? How do, for example, festival advertising, program placement, the star system, the distribution of capital, and fandoms affect buzz? These are some questions that festival scholars interested in pursuing buzz as an object of scholarly inquiry need to attend to.

### Archival Affect: Feelings in the Queer Archive

Buzz, of course, is not the only affect that circulates at film festivals. When seeking out affect at festivals, we need to also pay attention to how other

words for emotion, affect, and feeling are mobilized across festivals' verbal architectures (Dayan 2013). Ahmed suggests that to follow affect, we can follow "how words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects: how they move, stick, and slide. We move, stick and slide with them" (Ahmed 2014, 14). How do festival organizers, critics, and audience members describe the festival to the press, to researchers, in their program notes, and in other festival ephemera? What sorts of emotive words—words like happy, sad, anger, shame, pride—do they use? Where do these words appear—and where do they not appear—and what does this tell us about how affect circulates at festival?

By way of example, we can look at where happiness appears in the queer film festival archive. While any affect could do here, happiness is particularly useful because of its tendency to be written about in economic terms (Ahmed 2010, 10). We can take this to mean both that happiness has an economy insofar as happiness circulates, but also that happiness involves certain forms of capital. Within economics, happiness is correlated with purchasing power; the more purchasing power a society has, the happier it is presumed it will be. If we consider the queer film festival in these economic terms, then its happiness is determined by its power in the market. Happiness is economic, and that happiness is tied to the circulation of capital within the festival environment.

When we consider the queer film festival in economic terms, then its happiness is determined by its power in the market. The more money the festival is taking in from corporate and public sponsors, the more power the festival has to provide films, parties, and other events and services to its community, sponsors, and audiences in order to maintain their happiness. For example, at a number of points in Stuart Richards's study of queer film festivals in Melbourne, Hong Kong, and San Francisco, he quotes directly a number of moments the organizers speak of happiness:

So the festival was burnt out, financially not in a happy place (Daniel in Richards 2017, 70).

We work with some big "all American" companies that wouldn't want to be associated with the S&M doco or the Bruce LaBruce doco. So you keep them happy, you make sure you guide them in the best way possible (Wallace in Richards 2017, 126).

The obvious answer [to how you measure festival success] is ticket sales but I don't see it just like that.... Last year's festival was really easy. Everyone was really happy. I felt like there was a lot of love in the room (Daniel in Richards 2017, 133).

I love seeing people lined up to see a film on the street. That is pretty awesome. It just makes me happy being there part of the numbers (Berliner in Richards 2017, 230).

In all of these instances, happiness is used to describe some aspect of the festival's finances. Whether it be discussing strategies to keep festival sponsors happy by programming (or not programming) certain films, or describing the sense of happiness felt during a full house screening or line up, happiness here is tied to financial stability. Likewise, Richards notes that the happiness of characters in a film is a further key measure of festival success (Richards 2017, 153). When the characters on screen are successful, sponsors and audiences are happy. When the audiences are happy, they are buying tickets. When sponsors are happy, they continue to honor their contracts and provide funding to the festival. When the festival's audiences, funders, and film characters are happy, the festival is happy. Happiness is economic and tied to the circulation of capital within the festival environment.

Happiness indexes, broadly speaking, what affect theorists term “positive affects” (Tomkins 2008). These are affects designed to elicit good feelings. However, in the festival archive, and in the queer film festival archive, negative affects travel just as easily. And these affects too are often tied to the circulation of capital. The way pornography travels at queer film festivals is instructive here. When it comes to queer film festivals, panics over sex and pornography are common, and are often rooted in concerns over public funding being used to support pornography. In 1995, The Fire I've Become Queer Canadian Film & Video Festival—a radical queer of color film festival held in Calgary, Alberta, Canada in 1995 and 1996—generated a flurry of affect when Dave Rutherford, a conservative shock-jock, got his hands on the program of the festival. He took umbrage with particular films with sensational titles like *Lessons in Baby Dyke Theory* (Thirza Cuthand 1995, Canada), and *Frank's Cock* (Mike Hoolboom 1993, Canada), and insinuated that these films must be pornographic and that all public funding of the festival should be revoked as a result. Five years later, on April 28, 2000, in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, the program for Queer City Cinema, the city's biennial queer film festival which has been organized since 1996, became a lightning rod of controversy in the Legislative Assembly. On that day, June Draude, a member of the opposition and right-leaning Saskatchewan Party, rose during Question Period to ask what began as what seemed like a series of routine questions on how much the government was providing to Queer City Cinema that year, and trotted out the program to make her point:

Mr. Speaker, the brochure goes on to say that on May 13 at 1 p.m. there will be a panel discussion entitled *Community Porn* featuring visiting artists, activists, porn filmmakers, and porn actors. This little porn discussion group will be held in conjunction with screening of some of their movies. So, Mr. Deputy Premier, it seems we have a bunch of porn stars coming to Regina to promote porno movies sponsored by [government agencies] SaskTel, SaskFILM, and Sask Arts Board. Mr. Premier, how much money are you giving to this little porno film festival? And do you think this taxpayers' dollar should be used to promote pornography in Saskatchewan?<sup>1</sup>

Draude is accusing the government of funding pornography via its government agencies, citing the festival's panel discussion on "Community and Pornography." This question kickstarted an exchange that went on for another 15 minutes, had government ministers passionately questioning the allegations, and opposition members outraged that the government would spend money on, in their view, "promoting pornography" when the provincial sales tax was being raised, and school budgets were being cut.

Here the festival programs of Queer City Cinema and *The Fire I've Become* index a flurry of negative affects. However, unlike in my discussion of happiness above, there are not necessarily any "words for feeling" in these exchanges. Video recordings of the Saskatchewan Legislature document the anger in Draude's voice, the distain with which she spits out the word "porno." Though we have no audio recording of Rutherford's show in Calgary, secondary accounts of it suggest a similar disdain for the festival, a similar flurry of negative effects.

Further, it is worth asking if such a flurry of negative affect is constitutive of buzz. Buzz indexes interest, and that interest does not necessarily have to be positive. Indeed, affect theorist Silvan Tomkins theorizes interest not as a positive or negative affect, but rather as a foundational affect that makes all other affects possible (Tomkins 2008, 188). Rutherford and Draude's interest in *The Fire I've Become* and Queer City Cinema did produce buzz around the festivals. Following these public outbursts of negative feelings, there were flurries of news coverage, gossip, and protests. These festivals captured a particular social and cultural moment in North America, where queer sexuality was more openly and defiantly moving into the public sphere. What these examples show us that it is not necessarily any singular aesthetic, social, or cultural characteristic of a film that produces buzz; rather, it is affect itself—positive or negative—that produces buzz at film festivals.

<sup>1</sup> Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan Hansard, April 28, 2000.

## Conclusion: What is Affect Good For?

Affect allows us to seek out resonances across film festivals that may be difficult to follow otherwise. By theorizing affect as an economy, I have tried to offer a flexible yet robust framework for festival scholars to understand and theorize affect in their own research. Affective economies orient us toward the ways affect circulates. Instead of seeing affect as characteristic of festivals, or a film, or a party, or an audience, affective economies encourage us to see affect as something that sticks these various festival actors and objects together. Affect theory directs us toward other ways of understanding festivals as networked: affect doesn't move cleanly from one festival to the next, but slips, slides, gathers, discards, and circulates promiscuously. These networked relations offer multiple moments for affect to bubble up and erupt on the surface. The complexity of the film festival as an institution—it is not only a place to screen and view films, but also to meet filmmakers, do business, go to parties—provides innumerable opportunities for bodies, objects, and signs to circulate and accumulate affect.

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## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 4. Film Preservation, Archives, and Film Festivals in Latin America

*Juana Suárez*

**Abstract:** This chapter focuses on the status of archives and archival materials related to Latin American film festivals; the specific programming of film restoration in those events, and specific festivals devoted to film restorations. It addresses both the existence of physical and digital archives and access to collections and the history of festivals. By providing some examples of what has been done, and suggesting actions, the author advocates for the understanding of film festivals' memory as an integral part of the history of film in the region as well as for an understanding of the role preservation plays in cinematic ecosystems.

**Keywords:** memory, film programming, film curating, audiovisual heritage, cultural legacy

Multiple paradigms potentially enable a discussion about the relationship between Latin American film archives to film festivals. Here, I focus on two such paradigms. In the case of the first one, I consider how issues related to film preservation and archives figure into festivals' programming and curatorial activities in Latin America, and if and how film festivals have curated their archives. Such an undertaking by festivals would facilitate organized and accessible archives over time. With the second paradigm, I address the existence of festivals and muestras/mostras (showcases) devoted exclusively to feature preservations, which, in turn, raises awareness of the crucial need to save and preserve audiovisual heritage and the cultural legacy of festivals.

In the first case, major film festivals such as the Morelia International Film Festival, the Guadalajara International Film Festival, the International Film Festival UNAM (FICUNAM) in Mexico City, the Buenos Aires International Film of Independent Cinema (BAFICI), the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema (Havana), the Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival (FICCI), the São Paulo Film Festival, and the Mar del Plata International Film Festival (Argentina) all have recently showcased digital restorations of Latin American films, many of which have been iconic productions. Due to limits of space, I will refrain from providing a historical overview of film to film restoration which preceded the possibility of transferring with telecines or, more recently, via film scanning. Questions of preservation figure in these festivals not simply by incorporating restored film into the programming. Celebratory events, such as retrospectives, lifetime awards, homages to specific directors and their legacies, milestones of specific films, and celebrations that invoke historical trajectories often demand archival excavation that goes beyond merely locating high-quality screening copies.

The attention to film festivals in the region has historically been placed on FIAPF accredited film festivals such as Mar del Plata International Film Festival and the Cartagena de Indias International Film Festival. However, several festivals and *muestras* have expanded in recent years to secondary and tertiary cities in different countries. These expansions highlight regional histories and how national and local festivals, which at times are devoted to specific film genres, have contributed to the development of national cinemas. In addition, there is an increasing number of festivals related to production, representation, and topics germane to specific communities and contemporary issues, such as indigenous media, human rights, Afro-descendant groups, LGBTQ communities, and environmental issues. Documentaries frequently have served as a basis for numerous niche festivals of the likes of Muestra Internacional de Cine Documental de Bogotá (MIDBO), DocMontevideo, DocBuenosAires, È Tudo Verdade Festival Internacional de Documentários in São Paulo, FIDOCs in Chile, and Festival EDOC in Ecuador. The creation of documentary festivals derives, at times, from a perception that documentaries are not sufficiently valued by large festivals, despite the genre's centrality in Latin American film histories. Moreover, the growth in documentary film festivals also responds to the increasing production of documentaries and the need to foster an academic and public environment that permits discussions specific to documentary filmmaking. Regardless of the reason for the creation of documentary film festivals, multiple issues related to

archives—for instance, archival production and found footage—operate as *documentation* and, thus, mesh with select forms of documentary filmmaking.

These different scenarios invite us to consider the role that preservation plays in these festivals not only as spaces to showcase restored films, but also to call attention to versions of restored films, and, more importantly, to host conversations on the current status of Latin American film archives and film preservation. Such conversations broach issues related but not limited to the physical infrastructure of institutions managing audiovisual legacies, their administrative practices, and their ability to provide access to materials. The above-mentioned celebratory activities at a film festival necessitate services from an archive, services which inevitably are not only about the films. Archival activities involve the location of paper, ephemera, and memorabilia, such as lobby cards, posters, scripts, costumes, magazines, newspaper clips, scholarly production, and even cameras and other equipment. The history of film festivals themselves and their documentation (programs, advertisements, publications, and similar media) is pivotal to the work of programmers, curators, film historians, academics, researchers, artists, and workers from many fields. In turn, a cardinal question is how well maintained, organized, and accessible is the information about festivals.

Much of the research for this chapter has been done at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic prevented traveling to centers of documentation, cinematheques, and headquarters of festivals to determine what the physical collections are about and what kind of conservation and preservation policies and practices are in place. In digital times, however, one would expect that an internet search would hint at information on how to locate the archives of Latin American film festivals. Any comparison with festivals in European or North American countries is not only unfair and colonial but detrimental if one considers the differences in budgets as well as Eurocentrism and its equivalents. Nevertheless, the attempt to locate online information about any film festival archive shows the negligence that is endemic to many of them. With few exceptions, the inattentiveness to film festival archives seems to affect many festivals worldwide. In some cases, many issues of copyright and permission to release images prevent institutions from creating robust film festival archives if these procedures have not been contemplated in the process of organizing events. Some other institutions, such as the Festival de Cannes, are very practical and provide general guidance about materials available for online consultation and direct users to the Cinémathèque française, the institution entrusted with

the materials.<sup>1</sup> Given that such an arrangement does not take extraordinary quantities of digital space, this is a practice that could be implemented by many festivals if materials are housed at a specific institution and they are not ready to provide access as impressive as organizations such as the Toronto International Film Festival are able to.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to ignore that many recent and nascent efforts on the part of film festivals in Latin America have been foiled by the inability to afford a website. Still, film festivals depend heavily on social media for advertisement and dissemination of their activities, which provide a basis for training in archiving social media and other ephemerality as a practice.

To establish how Latin American film festivals have been archived, we can refer to select festivals that have an internet presence. Festivals such as Mar del Plata feature extensive materials on their website in the section “Ediciones Anteriores” (Former Editions). This endeavor dates back to the “Primer Festival de Cine Argentino” in 1948, with a temporal gap to 1954, which explains the form of the current festival. Each year’s section is illustrated by that year’s poster or the *Gaceta* (program book) and some edited clips of images of the festival featuring important international guests and main events. Not specific to a single section in the Mar del Plata’s website but rather accessed centrally in this section via combined searches, it is also possible to locate books and other publications related to the festival. Overall, there is an effort to provide an archival dimension to the festival and attest to its chronology.

The International Festival of New Latin American Cinema’s website features a section called “archivos” and a search engine with subsections, such as “scripts, posters, catalogs, awards, jury members, publications” and other content. This project, however, only encompasses the festival’s thirty-seventh to forty-second editions from 2014 to 2020. The festival was created in 1979. Given the festival’s historical importance, this is a project worth completing, yet demands substantial archival archaeology as well

<sup>1</sup> See the site of the Festival of Cannes which summarizes available holdings online and offers a significant list of references on writing about the festival and directs users to the Cinémathèque française: <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/the-festival/the-history-of-the-festival/> Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> The library of the Toronto International Film Festival is a state-of-the-art project that not only compiles the history and materials related to the festival but also offers a complete catalog and numerous opportunities to manipulate the search engine. See <https://tiff.net/library> Last Accessed October 3, 2024. It goes without saying that the Toronto Film Festival’s digital infrastructure is an expensive project that requires financial investment, technological development, and human capital. Yet, such investment signals the way in which the memory of festivals remains as significant as their other activities.

as human, physical, and digital resources. Similar to the case of Mar del Plata, copies of publications and books produced under the rubric of the festival are present, and a more concerted effort could transform the site into a valuable digital resource.

The “Sobre el festival” (About the Festival) of BAFICI also features an “Ediciones anteriores” section that documents the festival from its beginning in 2009. The content is non-standard from year to year and, in lieu of a curated repository, the website sections document important news, galas, programming, special guests, and similar highlights. The site is hosted on the website of the city of “Buenos Aires Ciudad” along with other cultural venues and initiatives of the municipal government. The contents’ density often appears abridged and is related to the allocation of digital resources from the city to each cultural institution.

A final example is the website of Festival Internacional de Cine de Cartagena (FICCI), whose “Memoria FICCI” section contains the collection of materials from the fifty-fourth to the fifty-eighth editions (the Festival celebrated its sixty-first edition in 2022). The inconsistency of the archival project seems to be, in part, a consequence of the political erosion that the festival has endured since 2018 when the festival board requested that Diana Bustamante resign her position as artistic director, after a stellar job in programming and in the renovation of the festival’s spirit following the work of her predecessor, Monika Wagenberg. At the moment of her dismissal, Bustamante was contemplating the organization of the festival’s archive. FICCI is just one example of festivals in dire need of intervention since materials from former years are suffering from deterioration due to exposure to tropical weather, lack of physical infrastructure for archival holdings, and access. Prior to the work of Bustamante and Wagenberg, the festival was directed by Víctor Nieto for forty-eight years. As in any other long-standing festival in the region, there is an intellectual history, a history of cinephilia, and a history of programming that needs to be documented. Moreover, one needs to consider that during Nieto’s long tenure, FICCI was closely associated with Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, his political and intellectual circles, and his legacy to cinema. Before the proliferation of showcases and festivals in that country, and before the current mobility of Colombian cinema in transnational spaces, FICCI was a pivotal point of reference for filmmaking not only for the country but for its global networking. Wagenberg and Bustamante added a more contemporary edge to the festival, vindicated the role of youth in the cinematic transformations of the Colombian industry, and imprinted a necessary distance from magical realism and Macondian auras. Documenting this legacy is also important

because it speaks of women's contributions to the cultural agendas of the country.

The four festivals documented do not follow standard classifications and subsections, and the main content—when available—is related to the general catalog, the programming in local neighborhoods, and a smattering of YouTube videos, often with a channel affiliated with and carrying the name of each festival. While this is an important tool, one must keep in mind that although associated with archival functions, YouTube is not an archive, but an online sharing and social media platform subjected to all the vulnerabilities of web services, digital objects, and the company's terms of agreement. It would be useful to determine arrangements for the backup of the videos uploaded, how are they organized, and, in general, who is tasked with the responsibility of archiving materials for each festival. Because social media, digital platforms, and digital content are inexorably the future of documenting film festivals, policies about what to save, how to save, and guidelines for digital preservation become imperative for all festivals. In the digital sea, it would be impossible to save everything. A lot of material becomes ephemeral in the era of Tik-Tok, Instagram, and live broadcasting. However, important conversations, masterclasses, and other exchanges are also taking place, and they should be saved for posterity. Effective and consistent digital preservation policies, as well as actions to start saving the analog assets of these festivals, are essential to safeguarding these chapters of Latin American cinematic history, their local/global edges, and the way they have shaped taste and influenced cinephiles through the years.

In returning to the second paradigm, the focus shifts to film festivals solely devoted to film preservation, of which there are few in the region. To date, the largest and oldest of such events is the Festival International de Cine Recobrado in Valparaíso, Chile. The festival started in 1997 and features mostly Latin American cinema but includes some foreign film restorations. The festival is invested in screening films in sixteen millimeters and thirty-five millimeters, given the name of the festival "recobrado" (recuperated), not necessarily implying restoration. As such, the festival emphasizes the notions of "reconstructed" and "remastered" cinema and its mission statement establishes the festival as a "resistance to the new multimedia landscape." The administration is run by Corporación Cultural M. Graham, a subsidiary of the Chilean Ministry of Culture.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See the site for Festival de Cine Recobrado: <https://www.cinerecobrado.cl/>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

The Mostra de Cinema de Ouro Preto (CineOP) began in 1980 as an initiative of the Casa de Cinema de Porto Alegre in collaboration with collective groups such as Mel de Abelha and Corcica Cooperativa dos Realizadores de Rio de Janeiro. Since 2006, the Mostra allocates a substantial segment of its program to showcasing recent Brazilian restorations and to conversations about film preservation in that country. The festival's promotional slogan expressly states its commitment to the field: "tratar o cinema como patrimônio cultural" (treating cinema as cultural patrimony). The participation of the private sector has also bolstered the sustainability of the event over the years: Universo Produção is the company currently in charge of planning the festival. The festival partners with the Brazilian Association of Audiovisual Preservation (ABPA), by providing space for the annual meeting of the association and its corresponding board and business meetings. The Encontro de Arquivos (Meeting of the Archives) creates a space to discuss the regional politics of preservation, digital challenges, and new pathways in light of political changes. According to an article in *Agência Brasil* that discusses the context of the first online version in 2020, Cinema Ouro Preto had hosted fifteen editions of the Encontro Nacional de Arquivos e Acervos Audiovisuais.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, a Preservation Award was added to celebrate achievements in the field. The tenth anniversary of the inclusion of preservation yielded a publication with a range of activities and achievements over a decade. In 2016, the Mostra was the forum for the launch of the Brazilian National Preservation Plan. In sum, it is a celebratory, pedagogical, and cultural summit.

Although it is not possible to locate an organized online archive of the Mostra, the website lists a summary of the fifteen editions of CineOP. Some entries are more comprehensive than others, and some of them highlight special tributes. The first one, for example, honored the legacy of Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Salvador Trópia, and Adão Soares Gomes. A collective effort could yield reconstruction work of the archive in order to ensure that the important work done by this mostra is saved for prosperity. Different documents and programs are posted in a dispersed fashion in the Issuu publishing platform, and they are a significant step towards the creation of a repository.

Since 2016, the MAMUT Festival de Memoria Audiovisual in Medellín (Colombia) has been providing a space for an event described as a "punto

<sup>4</sup> This is according to Raquel Hallak's statement in an interview in <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/geral/noticia/2020-08/mostra-de-cinema-de-ouro-preto-sera-virtual-pela-primeira-vez>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024. Hallak is the CEO of Universo Produção e Coordenadora Geral da Mostra de Cinema de Tiradentes, CineOP e Cine Belo Horizonte.

de encuentro y debate sobre el uso y la preservación de las imágenes de archivo y sobre el uso del cine” (a meeting point and debate about the use and preservation of archival images and the uses of cinema).<sup>5</sup> MAMUT has also been an academic space, and it has devoted considerable attention to the inclusion of home movies. Moreover, the festival has oriented the discussion and conversation about archives to prioritize topics within the political agenda of the country, such as territorial disputes, biodiversity, and the displacement of Afro-descendant and indigenous communities. The website hosts very granular information for the latest edition but it does not feature an archive of former editions. If available as an archive or digital repository, the diversity of activities and the wide array of uses of archival materials that MAMUT programmes would make it a valuable resource for new initiatives across the region.

In 2021, Filmoteca UNAM celebrated the fourth edition of Arcadia Muestra Internacional de Cine Rescatado y Restaurado. Its mission statement states that its goal is to promote the Mexican cinematic legacy, and the first version of the muestra was programmed in tandem with the celebration of the 1971 Student Movement. Although the pandemic determined that the event was held online twice, the expectation is for Arcadia to take place in person and to maintain its original spirit by featuring Mexican cinema, cine-conciertos, talks, round tables, exhibits, and special activities. The current plan is to host the activity every eighteen months.

Another important preservation event is the Festival de Cine Silente México in Puebla which celebrated its seventh version in 2022. While silent cinema festivals are very important given the possibility of reviving specific films from a specific period, and of raising awareness of preservation, there is considerable work to perform to educate audiences that preservation does not relate only to “old and classical films.” The field of moving image preservation extends to analog films in small gauge, production in magnetic media, films that might have survived because they were transferred to optical media such as DVDs, and born-digital productions. Films’ survival might have been enabled by scanning and digital restoration but the process of saving digitized content does not stop there. Professionals in the preservation field are keenly aware of these issues and understand the complexity of digital preservation. However, this information often surprises common spectators, film buffs, festival goers, and even filmmakers and creators. It is worth noting as well that in the past VHS tapes and DVDs were preferred

<sup>5</sup> See website of Mamut Memoria Audiovisual: <https://mamutfestival.co/>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

carrier formats for festival screeners; chances are many films only survive in those formats. Such conditions reiterate the importance of film festival archives, and, in this particular case, the maintenance of inventories of materials that were never returned, and submission/return logs if they were created.<sup>6</sup> Along those lines, one can only imagine the number of sixteen millimeter and thirty-five millimeter film copies that might survive in vaults holding festival materials and the possibility that some of those copies might be a unique surviving version of a film.

Returning to festivals devoted to film preservation, a number of retrospectives and programs take place in local institutions such as *filmotecas*, cinematheques, and audiovisual centers. Cinemateca de Bogotá (formerly Cinemateca Distrital) scheduled a series called Restaurados for three consecutive years (2019–21), which will eventually become a biannual event. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the online version of Restaurados benefited from the robust network of archivists associated with the New York University Audiovisual Preservation Exchange (APEX) editions in Latin America, and archivists working under the auspices of other independent initiatives. Most screenings were preceded or followed by thorough contextualizations of the production of the films, history of the filmmakers, producers, cast and crew, and conversations about technical procedures related to the preservation process, which broached the topic of how fundraising and international collaborations are necessary to save just one film.

I draw attention to this comprehensive mode of presentation that accompanied films at Restaurados because, ideally, it enables more effective lobbying for audiovisual preservation. The mode of presentation is also a productive way to educate new audiences who might not be aware of how analog cinema used to work. At most film festivals, restorations are programmed in very isolated ways and often overlook the work of archivists and film preservationists who are invariably eager to inform and share with audiences. Moreover, collaborative efforts to preserve films should be highlighted, since they usually entail incredible perseverance and coordination. All the efforts are laudable, which range from the support of The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project to save iconic and canonic Latin American films to independent efforts to safeguard a diverse selection of films.

6 At different occasions, I have had the opportunity to see the holdings of Bogoshorts, the film festival devoted to short films in Bogotá and the holdings of the Rio de Janeiro International Short Film Festival- Curta cinema; in both cases the number of unclassified screeners in DVD is daunting. Optical media, as any other type of media, is subject to decay in the form of data rot, delamination, and other forms, as well as subject to obsolescence.

The work of the Film Foundation's World Cinema Project is nothing less than remarkable. The restoration credits attest not only to their efforts but also to the significant negotiation and fundraising that has to take place in order to realize a single project. The following examples are illustrative of this point: *Limite* (Dir. Mario Peixoto, Brazil, 1931; restored in 2010 by the Cinemateca Brasileira and the Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata Laboratory); *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Dir. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Cuba, 1968; restored in 2017 by the Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata Laboratory in association with Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos ICAIC and financed by The Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation); *Enamorada* (Dir. Emilio Fernández, México, 1946; restored by UCLA Film & Television Archive in collaboration with Fundación Televisa AC and Filmoteca UNAM); and *Lucía* (Dir. Humberto Solás, Cuba, 1968; restored by Cineteca di Bologna in association with ICAIC at L'Immagine Ritrovata Laboratory, funded also by Turner Classic Movies). These projects evidence a tremendous effort of transnational negotiation that is no different from other film initiatives in the industry. Consider, for instance, efforts like the one spearheaded by Viviana García-Besné and her project Permanencia Voluntaria that has given a second run to many of the films produced by Cinematográfica Calderón. Permanencia's endeavors include Mexican *fichera* and *cabaretera* films such as *Víctimas del pecado/Victims of sin* (1951), starring Ninón Sevilla, and iconic B-Series films of El Santo as well as films such as *Sombra verde/Untouched* (Dir. Roberto Galvadón 1954), a film that inspires a reexamination of the Mexican cinematic canon.<sup>7</sup>

No less important are initiatives led by national and regional film archives. Filmmakers have, at times, ardently devoted their own energies and time to the stewarding and preservation of their work. For instance, Martha Rodríguez, particularly the films she made with the late Jorge Silva, are now available in digital restoration and include *Chircales* (1968; restored by Arsenal in Germany). Equally important is the restoration of

<sup>7</sup> Permanencia Voluntaria is a counter archive that has received significant international attention and support, mostly for the restoration of films. Yet, the daily demands to maintain the project are multiple and expensive. The project has been supported by institutions such as the UCLA Film & Television Archive, which at the moment stewards their collection of nitrates. Permanencia's most notable projects include providing a restored copy of *El Santo contra el cerebro del mal* for the film's premiere at the 68th Berlinale in 2018. The film was also screened at the 2019 TCM Classic Film Festival and at a retrospective in San Francisco in 2022. *Perdida*, a 2009 documentary by Viviana García-Besné, describes the story of these films. More specifically, *Perdida* traces the history of Calderón Cinematografía and explains the familial affect that led the filmmaker to rescue these films.

the films of the late Colombian filmmaker Luis Ospina who was always concerned and devoted not only to his own materials but also to the work of his contemporaries Carlos Mayolo and Andrés Caicedo. Ospina was always attentive to the future of his work and cared for the archival value of films and other archival assets of the times of *Caliwood* as well as other periods of his filmmaking.

As pointed out, many Latin American restorations have relied on collaboration among one or more countries: L'Immagine Ritrovata, UCLA Film & Television Archive, Cinemateca Portuguesa, Filmoteca de Cataluña, the Vulnerable Media Lab in Canada, and Arsenal have all been pivotal to many of these restoration projects. Given that these entities reside in different countries, the work of film restoration underscores and reiterates the transnational nature of Latin American film history and how film preservation fits into the ecosystem of film industries and festivals.

The efforts of these institutions and individuals should figure in the larger conversation about film preservation, archives, and all types of film festivals in Latin America. The latter are spaces where considerable advocacy can happen. The need to remind readers (and spectators) why preservation matters might appear abstract. However, it is crucial to emphasize that preservation is about the memory of communities, and the memories of countries. Moreover, preservation is about the history of communities, countries, and the world, and film and media history, and the history of technology that has become available to a country at a specific time owing to transnational connections. Put another way, film preservation matters because it is about education, exhibition, and access. The question of access is at the core of what archivists and film preservationists do. Yet, providing access requires much effort in Latin American archives, whose challenges can't be reduced to financial hardships and technical limitations. A number of challenges to accessing materials also stem from antiquated administrative models where the archive is understood as a cryptic sarcophagus for a select few. Obsolete bureaucratic practices reiterate the need to advocate for more transparent, inclusive, and shared practices in archival institutions.

Film festivals draw producers, directors, stars, celebrities, crew members, film enthusiasts, programmers, curators, distributors, academics, historians, cultural administrators, secretaries of culture, private and public administrators of film and cultural institutions, students, and many other individuals who are invested and interested in the creation of images as well as in the future of their creations and the legacies of the past. Film festivals themselves also produce history, images, master classes, and, in general, film history that should be added to the annals of Latin American

filmmaking. The chance to provide access to that media in the future should be at the core of festivals.

Film festivals, moreover, are a place of visibility where advocacy should be paramount. Festivals provide space where audiences can discuss how political crises endanger and threaten audiovisual legacies, as has been the case with the recent crisis of the Cinemateca Brasileira and Centro Técnico do Audiovisual in Brazil, which is ineluctably linked to the erosion of cultural policies during Jair Bolsonaro's presidential term. One should also wonder about the status of film archives in countries where access has become increasingly difficult, such as Venezuela. Festivals can also serve as think tanks where collaborations begin and conversations extend to the history of the legacy of non-dominant industries and Latin America. Festivals can also be spaces of celebration of what is saved and preserved as well as those minor but nevertheless important victories archival institutions can afford: acquiring a scanner, acquiring collections of important filmmakers, getting national or international support for international preservation projects, being able to update vaults and facilities, training technicians and staff, extending preservation discussion to new visual art forms and iterations, and finding films thought to be lost.

In general, archives in Latin America face multiple obstacles. They are challenged by unresolved issues of the past. In addition, archives are taxed by numerous difficulties, such as becoming sustainable and independent around technology; training staff and administrators on a regular basis, since technologies change frequently in the move towards green and environmentally friendly practices, among other issues. Discussions about archives should happen within the larger film ecosystem and as part of the infrastructure of every national film industry. The concern for decolonizing archives, securing sustainable institutions, and making sure budgets are allocated should be part of the overarching conversation within the film industry. Such a conversation should not be a separate chapter nor an occasional conversation, but a central topic to ensure that the work of our creators remains available for posterity, not as ashes of the past.

## **Part 2**

Decolonizing Film Festival Studies:  
Practice-Based/Practice-Led and Collaborative  
Methodologies



## 5. Positionality, Immersive Methodology, and Collaboration in Film Festival Research

*Estrella Sendra*

**Abstract:** Film festival research is largely informed by ethnographic methods, guaranteeing access and participation in events defined by their liveness and multi-faceted dimension. By self-reflecting on the experience of conducting fieldwork in Senegal, this chapter invites reflection on the researcher's role and research methods. In an effort and commitment to contribute to decolonising academia, it identifies three main phases in the research design. These are the researcher's positionality, their immersion in the film festival, and the collaboration with festival participants and fellow researchers. By reflecting on these three dimensions, this chapter engages with a key research question: how do researchers arrive at film festivals and subsequently move along its circuit, in order to examine them?

**Keywords:** methodology, ethnography, decolonisation, Africa, festival, collaboration

Having been invited to join a reflexive and supportive space whose aim is to share insights on film festival research and methodologies, I feel compelled to acknowledge Hélène Neveu Kringelbach's work, whose self-reflexive writing style and methodological reflections have inspired my presence and work on this fascinating ever-growing field of film festivals and cultural festivals more broadly. This piece draws largely on my fieldwork research on cultural festivals in Senegal, where I spent nine months between October 2015 and September 2016, as well as short periods for the purpose of my doctoral thesis, from 2014 to 2018. Whilst the focus in this chapter is on

film festivals, my main case study during that fieldwork research in Senegal was the Festival international de folklore et de percussion, also known as FESFOP, located in Louga. This is not a film festival, but a music festival, which has largely informed my engagement with further cultural festivals in the country and the world. However, this chapter is also inevitably shaped by the context in which I wrote it, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted festivals and the way in which we research them. Such disruption has shed light on the need to rethink film festivals and encouraged the adoption of innovative formats where issues of access have been raised upfront. This chapter seeks to contribute to the collective effort to work towards the decolonization of film festival research (Dovey and Sendra 2023), by identifying three main phases in the research design. These are the researcher's positionality, their immersion in the film festival, and the collaboration with festival participants and fellow researchers. By reflecting on these three dimensions, this chapter engages with a key research question: how do researchers arrive at film festivals and subsequently move along its circuit, in order to examine them?

## Accessing and Arriving at Film Festivals

Film festival research is largely informed by ethnographic methods (Burgess and Kredell 2016; Dickson 2017; Lee 2016; Vallejo 2017). These involve the data collection from participant observation in the festival and its multifaceted presence in the everyday lives of people and places, before, during, and after the official festival dates. Ethnography, understood as “being there” (Lee 2016) and “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998, 2001, quoted in Lee 2016, 124), becomes a crucial research method. This is because festivals are defined by their liveness and multifaceted dimension. Festivals are “multisensory” and “multifocal” events (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 57–58). They are not to be seen *“simply as public events”* (Dovey 2015, 22). Instead, they are “a site of negotiation of diverse (and sometimes) opposed agendas, in which each participant’s task (curating, presenting the event, writing critical reviews or presenting a film) can—and actually does—have multiple purposes” (Vallejo 2017, 254). Daniel Dayan makes this very clear when speaking of the existence of a “double festival,” and the need to read print paper (the written festival), other than engaging in participant observation (the audiovisual festival) (Dayan 2000, 52, cited in Lee 2016, 130). This multidimensional nature fosters a need to adopt multiple positionalities in the research field (Lee 2016, 123; Neveu Kringelbach 2013, 20). Toby Lee describes ethnographic

fieldwork as “an ad hoc process, with the researcher improvising on-the-spot responses to unexpected circumstances and tricky interactions—playing different social roles as needed, listening to whoever is willing to talk” (Lee 2016, 123).

Yet, the reflection on potential new directions in film festival research forces us first and foremost to ask ourselves: How do we, researchers, arrive at film festivals? In other words, what motivates us to conduct research on festivals, and how do we access their “behind the scenes?” How does such an arrival shape our situated journey along its circuit? As multifaceted events, festivals are “a space of flux” (Burgess and Kredell 2016, 165). Access to their various layers is crucial (Dickson 2017, 261), inviting reflection on our positionality (Vallejo 2017, 257; Burgess and Kredell 2016) and its impact on our research process and findings (Burgess and Kredell 2016, 160). Acknowledging our positionality entails the introduction of ourselves in the festival circuit, reflecting on who we are, our research motivations, and our background stories. By doing so, we can start seeing the connections between our concerns and those of our research subjects, favoring an ethical approach towards the people who make research possible. This is because film festival research is a collective endeavor, involving research *subjects*, and not just objects. It is inscribed within arts, humanities, and social sciences, hence, dealing with people, in structures shaped by their “social capital” (Bourdieu 1986; Quinn and Wilks 2017). I seek to illustrate the importance of positionality by sharing my experience conducting research in Senegal, reflecting on the way in which I, a white Spanish woman researcher based in London, landed in this prolific cultural and festival region, in order to then examine how this positionality shaped my access and movement to the multiple dimensions of film and cultural festivals.

My first physical encounter with Senegal was triggered by my dissatisfaction with the representation of the African continent in the Spanish media. They offered a repetitive image of Africa as a homogenous and very distant mass defined by its poverty and “under-development,” without any critical insight into the centuries of slavery and colonialism by Europe, or the wide range of cultural practices and heritage across the continent. Such problematic media coverage fostered a psychological distance which contrasted significantly with the geographical proximity between Africa and Andalusia. A road-trip from Algeciras to Tarifa would offer sufficient evidence: confused sonic waves, swapping from Arabic to Spanish radio stations, welcoming messages by telephone providers, wishing consecutive happy arrivals to Morocco and Spain, roaming charges as if we had actually traveled from one place to the other, and panoramic views from Tarifa

to the African continent. This frustrating contradiction motivated me to make a documentary film featuring African migrant communities in Spain, which, in my region, Seville, were mainly from Senegal and Nigeria. I was fortunate to be put in touch with Mariama Badji in November 2012, a Senegalese journalist then living in Madrid. She became the leading voice of the documentary, and the co-director of the second part, which was shot in Senegal the following year.

My first trip to Senegal was thus as a filmmaker, to host a screening of *Témoignages de l'autre côté/Testimonials from the other side* (2011). This first experience of positionality was complemented by that of a journalist, since, thanks to Mariama Badji, I was offered an internship in the national newspaper *Le Soleil*, in 2012, where I wrote a series of articles for the cultural and region sections. It was then, as a journalist, that I started my journey to the cultural and festival landscape in Senegal. At that time, I was also a postgraduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, where I continued to examine the representation of cultures as mediated through festivals. I then made a preliminary study of the Festival International de Folklore et Percussion (Sendra 2012), also known as FESFOP, in Louga, which I later chose as my main case study for my doctoral thesis on festivals in Senegal, since I soon noticed that it required much more in-depth research.

My multiple positionalities did not end there. Having been privileged to take the module Aspects of African Film and Video at SOAS in 2011, at the time in which its module convenor, Professor Lindiwe Dovey, was also co-founding and launching Film Africa at the Royal African Society in London, I soon became involved in African film festivals in Spain and the United Kingdom, adopting multiple roles, such as media officer, photographer, complimentary tickets manager, interpreter, to become the director and co-curator of the Cambridge African Film Festival from 2014 to 2016. In one such involvement, as the international media officer for the African Film Festival of Cordoba-FCAT 2012 (now hosted in Tarifa and Tangiers), I met two young Senegalese filmmakers, Keba Danso and Pape Bolé Thiaw, and a journalist, Kodou Sene, who would introduce me to a key film figure in Senegal, Abdel Aziz Boye, now deceased, founder of Ciné Banlieue, a free film training school located in the outskirts of Dakar, and organizer of the Banlieue Films Festival. Ciné Banlieue would then host screenings of my various films, positioning me as a filmmaker. I have been writing news (Sendra 2017a and 2017b) and academic articles (Sendra 2021 and 2023) about the space and festival, positioning me also as a journalist and researcher. I also appointed two filmmakers trained there, Mamadou Khoma Gueye

and Nazir Cisse, for the documentary film co-directed and co-produced with Mariama Badji, *Témoignages... "wa suñu gaal"/Testimonials from the People in Senegal* (2016), becoming also a co-producer. Some submitted their films to the Cambridge African Film Festival, positioning me as a curator. However, by association, I would also be seen as a financial partner, at least, potentially, due to my Spanish nationality and relation with the African Film Festival of Cordoba-FCAT and Aula Cervantes, the cultural attachment of the Spanish Embassy in Dakar.

In December 2014, at the beginning of my PhD, I went to the fourteenth FESFOP in an exploratory trip to select my case studies. After this exploratory trip, an official letter was sent to FESFOP informing the organizers of the selection of the festival as my main case study and requesting access and collaboration for the purposes of my research. This was responded to positively and I was granted an extra role, introduced often as an "intern" ("stagiaire") rather than as a researcher. These multi-positionalities and background in Senegal prior to my arrival for fieldwork research, mainly over a period of nine months between October 2015 and September 2016, shaped my access to the festival scene, and informed my research methods and findings. It allowed me to immerse myself in the various dimensions of festivals, beyond the dates in which these were celebrated.

## Immersing Ourselves in the Festival

An immersive methodology invites us to move from the ethnographic focus of the importance of "being there" to the self-reflexive and critical question of how *we* are (*t*)*here*. "[F]ilm festival scholars are usually insiders of the culture they aim to analyze" (Vallejo 2017, 257). The challenge, in such a case, is to be able to achieve some degree of detachment. However, it is worth examining what happens when this is not the case, when the researcher is an outsider, and thus needs to try and immerse themselves in the festival. As Lesley-Ann Dickson notes, "[a]ccess requires a 'necessary connection' to the research setting, however close or distant that connection may be" (2017, 266). Despite the identified potential lack of critical distance, she argues that "insider status is arguably the preferred researcher position within film festival studies because it means that the research has benefited from access to some/many/all of the event's assets" (Dickson 2017, 257). In her study of the Glasgow Film Festival, she suggests "a fluid positioning and a multi-method approach" (Dickson 2017, 273) as "a 'critical core'—a non-aligned position where distanced, reflexive understanding could take

place" (Dickson 2017, 268). Similarly, Toby Lee discusses her immersion in the Thessaloniki International Film Festival by adopting various roles and being open to the value of the "unexpected encounters" (Lee 2016, 124–27).

There is thus an agreement as to the value of qualitative ethnographic methods and participant observation, in order to immerse oneself in festivals (Loist 2016; Vallejo 2017; Lee 2016, among others), as well as of the need to perform different roles beyond and as researcher. It is the norm to find ourselves looking for alternative "excuses" other than conducting academic research, to approach festivals, since sometimes participants "do not seem, for some reason, to find academics of much use at all" (Iordanova 2013, 4). Fewer studies have specifically focused on the challenges of approaching social interaction with festival participants in research in a postcolonial context. This soon became an important point of concern when reflecting on my presence and research in festivals in Senegal.

I was deeply inspired by Neveu Kringelbach's ethnographic work on dance in Senegal, where she referred to the Festival Kaay Fecc in Dakar (Neveu Kringelbach 2013). She shares the view of the difficulties of justifying the researcher's presence in the festival field. In her book, she reflects on dealing with a constant feeling of having "to give something back." She also became a dance apprentice, enrolling in sabar percussion and dance workshops to help legitimize her presence in the field (2013, 20–24). To her, a key obstacle to access and immersion in festivals in Africa is the local perception, arguably "distrustful of the ethics of research in Africa by outsiders," because a scholar from outside Africa travels to observe, learn from people, draw conclusions and "go back to be called an 'expert'" (Neveu Kringelbach 2013, 24). Neveu Kringelbach's reflection and self-reflexive writing style fostered critical thinking into ways of conducting research ethically, based on relationships of mutual trust, on "reciprocity practices" (Peirano 2020, 64; Vallejo 2017, 253–54). Such relations contribute to moving from a methodological shift, from ephemeral, self-interested one-way encounters, which has led to the criticism of ethnography as "zoological," "Orientalist and exoticising" (Alexander 2006, 401), to sustainable, reciprocal relationships, encouraging dialogue between practice and research, and thus with an activist potential to foster social change. In fact, it resonates with the recent call from The Care Collective to radically transform the political system into one "that puts care front and center" (The Care Collective 2020, 5). This is one that identifies the need for "caring communities," based on "mutual support" and a "sharing infrastructure" (The Care Collective 2020, 45–46). Applied to film festival research, this would mean a research project informed by a caring method, based on a caring community of researchers, practitioners,

and festival participants concerned with the sustainable growth of these festivals, for research, cultural, and social purposes.

Aware of the much needed self-criticism and reflexivity of immersive methods and my early career researcher status, I seek to share here some of my practices and approaches in Senegal. I hope that this experience will offer some insight into the collective challenge and duty of decolonizing academia. My humble aim is then just to engage in caring practices, by sharing some tips for fellow film festival researchers, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Immersive research relies on the acknowledgment and embracement of multiple positionalities; it requires mixed methods, an ability to grasp the multifaceted nature of festivals, namely, participant observation, qualitative interviews and oral (their)stories, archival research, audiovisual and visualization methods, and digital ethnography; it approaches festival research diachronically, decentralizing the festival time-space and extending the research period beyond the festival dates; it is collaborative, engaging in dialogue with practitioners and researchers on the ground; and it is aware of the emotional labor involved, respecting implicit rules of confidentiality and acknowledging the difficulties of “leaving the field.”

Despite selecting FESFOP, a music rural festival located in Louga, as my main case study during my doctoral research, I was interested in tracing, for the first time, a genealogy of all sorts of cultural festivals in Senegal (including film festivals), in order to situate FESFOP within the broader festivalization in the country, both in urban and rural areas. This required the combination of a series of methods during fieldwork. Thanks to my background as a journalist, mentored by Omar Diouf, then Editor Chief at *Le Soleil*, and collaboration with the sociologist Saliou Ndour, I was able to access (written) print archives, in particular, the National Archives of Senegal, now located in the intersection between Malick Sy Avenue and the highway, meters away from the National Grand Theatre Doudou Ndiaye Coumba Rose and the Canal Olympia cinema in Dakar; the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) archives of the *Dakar-Matin*<sup>1</sup> coverage of the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres; the archives in the headquarters of the newspaper *Le Soleil*, with digital access from the year 2010 of their publications; and the FESFOP archives. I further accessed a variety of digital “archives,” such

<sup>1</sup> This is the same newspaper that would eventually become *Le Soleil*. *Le Soleil* was a name given by Senghor. The national newspaper had previously been called *Paris-Dakar* (1933–1961), stressing the link between the two colonial capitals, and since independence, *Dakar-Matin* (1961–1970). It is after then that the newspaper was re-named *Le Soleil*, suggesting a rupture with the colonial origins of the newspaper.

as the PANAFEST archive, the printed and digital archives of the Cultural Department of the Spanish Embassy and its cultural center, Aula Cervantes, in Dakar, as well as Senegalese-based online platforms and networks, with articles, images, and videos.

These offered varied accounts of what Dayan has described as “the written festival” (2000, 52), as mentioned above. However, my aim to trace the genealogy of festivals required a much more *in situ* collaborative, multi-sensory, and multidimensional positionality, with close attention to oral testimonials, as well as participant observation (with different degrees of participation) in several festivals (seventeen in total) across the country. While “being there,” immersed in the territory of Louga and the cultural scene of Senegal, more broadly, I adopted multiple roles, shaped by my background experiences in the country. In order to access oral stories of festivals, filling the notorious gaps identified in the written archives, I relied on oral sources, through first-hand oral testimonies of festival participants and cultural actors. I conducted twenty-three semi-informal, semi-structured interviews, and fifty-eight formal interviews, as well as engaged in a large number of casual discussions and meetings among festival participants and journalists. Consent forms were completed by interviewees in the case of formal and semi-informal interviews, as well as formal letters both from SOAS and FESFOP. In the case of filmed interviews, consent was expressed orally, as well as in the case of casual discussions and meetings.

My fieldwork research was divided into three two-to-three-month trips, from October 2015 to January 2016, April to June 2016, and July to September 2016. However, while “back” in London, I continued to be “inside” the festival and cultural scene, even if from abroad, to the extent of being considered by some a “cultural actress,” that is, as a person within the Senegalese cultural sector. My constant communication with cultural actors and journalists made me part of the “festival circle,” participating in local discussions on festivals, among organizers, journalists, and artists. Although it would be misleading to assume this was the case for all stakeholders and participants, as the network kept growing over time, I am sure I remained a complete observer for many. During my first fieldwork trip, in Louga, I became part of the “FESFOP delegation,” acting as a videographer, photographer, and researcher of the festival, and was often introduced by the FESFOP president, Babacar Sarr, as “an intern.” This period was also key for networking and for collaboration with local researchers both at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar and the Université Gaston Berger (UGB) in Saint-Louis, the latter being the home of Saliou Ndour, the sociologist whose term “two-tier music,” referring to its local and international dimension, had inspired

my understanding of festivals in twenty-first-century Senegal as “two-tier festivals” (Sendra 2018). I attended five other festivals in this period, in Saint-Louis, Kaolack, Dakar, and Louga, including the International Festival of Documentary Film in Saint-Louis (StLouis’ DOCS), and the Banlieue Films Festival in Dakar. During my second trip, coinciding with the spring festival season, I went to seven festivals in these same locations, with different forms of participant observation. This proved to be indispensable for the study of FESFOP in relation to the broader festivalization of the country. It was also key to interviewing more festival organizers and cultural actors.

The third trip took place just after the end of Ramadan, and thus there were a very limited number of festivals, of which I attended four. The purpose of this trip was threefold: first, it allowed me to fill gaps through further data collection, interviewing key festival organizers and cultural actors; second, it would offer access to festival locations outside of the festival dates; and third, I was able to engage in a tangible research collaboration with Senegalese sociologist Saliou Ndour, analyzing together the archives of the coverage of the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Négres in Dakar-Matin, in light of the festival’s fifteenth anniversary in 2016.<sup>2</sup> This collaboration allowed me to research from within, or rather “nearby” Senegalese academic reflections on festivals and creative and cultural industries, quoting Trinh T. Minh-ha, who very rightly points out that “a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them’ is a conversation in which ‘them’ is silenced” (Trinh 1989, 67).

Digital ethnography is indeed key to complete and contest the written and unwritten accounts of festivals. Facebook operates as a crowd-sourced grassroots collaborative archive and site of celebration of these festivals. In a context where websites are often outdated or non-existent after a certain period of time, there is always a Facebook page of a journalist or a former festival director, where dates, images, and experiences are collected. Even if Facebook requires access to the Internet, it remains a largely accessible platform. This is because of its efficient use through a mobile application, in a context where mobile phones exceed the Senegalese population (Sendra and Keyti 2022, 84). I found observing Facebook particularly relevant, especially when I was not physically based in Senegal. Through Facebook, I was able to participate digitally. My continuous digital engagement allowed me to witness one of the first initiatives of online programming during COVID-19, by

<sup>2</sup> The results were presented in the International Conference of Pan-Africanism: From Colonial Exhibitions to Black and African Cultural Festivals, celebrated from 20 to 22 October 2016 in Florida State University, in Tallahassee, and in a co-authored article in *Interventions—International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (Sendra and Ndour 2018).

the Yennenga Centre, where password-protected film screenings were made available over a certain period of time, as was a live talk with Abderrahmane Sissako. The Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/CentreYennenga>) of this young yet promising film hub in Dakar led by Alain Gomis became a carefully curated online film festival program, that inspired other film festivals hosted later in the pandemic in a blended format. This proves the importance of digital ethnography as a method, because it allows us to move along the circuit when we cannot be present in person; and even when we are, it offers multiple festival experiences and stories.

Equally enriching in accessing the multifaceted feature of festivals was the adoption of both visual and visualization methods. Visual methods consisted of the integration of still and moving images in my PhD thesis and further research outcomes, that is, photo-reportage and practice research of a range of festivals, as well as the production of a documentary film on my main case study. Visualization methods contributed to the dissemination of the data collected in a concise way, inviting further researchers to use the produced materials for further research purposes. These included maps of festival spaces (showing performative spaces and ways of interacting and participating); the distribution of festivals across the country before and after the year 2000 (illustrating their increasing decentralization); maps of specific locations (to contextualize these geographically); calendars of festivals (evidencing the rich festival scene in the country and thus moving beyond the study of festivals in isolation); and chronological tables of festival editions and of the foundation of festivals in the country (offering a historic overview of festivalization in Senegal). Visual and visualization methods have greatly contributed to the collaborative ethos of immersive methods, offering materials to be potentially used by festival organizers and participants for fundraising among other purposes, as well as by fellow researchers interested in this region.

Immersive methods are further determined by continuous ethical considerations. Most importantly, I am aware of how my positionality as a white European woman researcher shapes the way in which festival participants share their various experiences and understandings of the local and international dimensions of the festival. Yet, at the same time, being visually identifiable as a white European woman gave me privileged access in certain arenas where a black body may have encountered greater barriers or the need for special clearance. For instance, during the opening of the Biennale de Dak'Art, featuring a speech by president Macky Sall, despite the strict security controls and need for a badge or official invitations to access the National Theatre Sorano where the opening was held, a completed

and printed application form from me was enough (prior to collecting my badge) to let my three Spanish visitors and me in.

I was only able to trace a comprehensive genealogy of festivals in Senegal thanks to relationships based on trust. During my fieldwork period in Senegal, the boundaries between trust and friendship became at times quite blurry. It was in this context that some critical and controversial statements arose. However, I preferred not to include them in my thesis, for ethical reasons, as they were implicitly confidential or told me as a “friend” rather than as a researcher.

Immersive methods involve affect, that is, emotional labor, as it also leads to implicit rules of confidentiality. These have sometimes prevented me from making explicit or even implicit references to some of the critical views and aspects of festivals. I still consider the respect of such rules crucial in this and any other kind of research, which I see as collaborative. I think that it is that respect for “silence” of the unsaid that has made possible what has been said throughout my research. I have also anonymized certain statements and people mentioned to illustrate certain festival dynamics, whenever the information was not received first-hand or authorized, stressing the phenomenon rather than specific personal situations. The testimonials did not derive solely from relations of trust. They often led to expectations of achieving further visibility, funding, or mobility opportunities, due to my international networks and multi-positionality. While the realization of such expectations was enlightening for the purpose of my research, to examine the ways in which ideas of the “international” are understood by artists and other festival participants, I have also avoided excessive personification, that is, naming specific people to illustrate examples. This takes me to the closing section of this chapter, where I emphasize the multi-directional aspect of film festival research, based on dialogical and collaborative relationships, where the researcher is committed to the idea of “giving back” (Neveu Kringelbach 2013, 24). It is thus, as suggested before, the direction that can prompt the shift towards establishing sustainable, reciprocal relationships between practitioners and researchers.

## **Giving Back: Dialogical and Collaborative Methodologies in Film Festival Research**

This chapter has stressed the value of oral sources, of social capital at festivals, and thus, the importance of “being there” and of “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998, 2001 quoted in Lee 2016, 124). Access is thus social, and “[t]o gain and retain social access entails the active creation and maintenance

of personal relationships" (Carmel 2011, 552). This feature has led scholars to compare ethnography to gossip, with negotiations of access and an attempt to grasp as many perspectives as possible, and shared curiosity (Carmel 2011, 554). This is why we can never say anything final about a festival, as it is experienced differently by the different people who attend it. There is a Wolof proverb that captures this idea of "ethnography as gossip"—"*Lu gan xam ci dëkk, ku fa dëkk ko ko wax*" ("what a stranger knows about a town, someone living there has told them"). This proverb shows the collaborative dimension of the social capital entailed. Even if single-authored by me, any research outcome I have shared is polyphonic and only possible thanks to multiple voices, all invested in the same cause—festivals and creative industries in Senegal—in a context where this investment has a highly activist dimension, that my work hopes to shed light on.

Crucial to the participation in gossip was multilingualism. I was honored to receive the SOAS Language Acquisition Fund to be given private Wolof tutorials.<sup>3</sup> While my Wolof is still not at a native proficiency level, I am able to understand the vast majority of any oral conversations, particularly in relation to the topic of festivals and the everyday. Most of the interviews have been conducted in French, at times shifting from French to Wolof, or vice versa. However, a large number of interviews in Louga were conducted in Wolof, sometimes with help from Wolof speakers. Other interviews were conducted in Spanish, with Spanish cultural actors or institutional figures, or Senegalese people who can speak Spanish because of their education or travel experiences. Being able to understand Wolof was also indispensable to interacting with people, as well as to following meetings and identifying the difference in speeches at festivals or cultural events, when switching from French to Wolof. It enabled dialogue, and encouraged collaborative relationships which I am currently developing through co-authored publications and projects.

An immersive methodology is collaborative and dialogical. It is decolonizing in that it is multi-directional. It does not end in data collection "in the field," traveling "back" and disseminating it for a reduced academic circle. It is much more multi-directional, that is, it takes into account issues surrounding equality, diversity, and inclusion. It is about going back and forth. An immersive methodology is not constrained by the festival dates. Instead, it extends its time and space beyond the festival date and location. It seeks to give back, involving different forms of emotional and symbolic labor. Throughout my PhD research, I performed various kinds of labor, adopting

<sup>3</sup> These were delivered by Miriam Weidl, from November 2014 to May 2015 and then again from November to December 2016 at SOAS, University of London.

multiple positionalities for purposes other than my research, such as being a photographer, videographer, or graphic designer of reports and portfolios. However, these actions never seemed enough. When I finished my PhD it was clear to me that I needed to go back to Senegal and share my results with the participants. I needed to show them what I had done thanks to our interviews, trust, and shared time together. I presented my results in French in three different locations: the Regional Cultural Center in Louga, home of my main case study; the Sunu Xarit Aminata Cultural Centre in Gadiol, a rural region undergoing a social transformation through the Hahatay Association; and Aula Cervantes in Dakar, which had been a great source of support and access to information throughout my thesis. A hard copy of the thesis, written in English, but orally presented in French, was left in Louga, and a digital one in Dakar. The results were overwhelmingly rewarding. I felt it was then that people became aware of my positionality as a festival researcher, and of the potential social and transformative impact of academia. Yet, more importantly, it was then that participants understood that this thesis had only been possible thanks to being so polyphonic, thanks to including such a large range of voices. It was also then that participants realized that such genealogy and analysis of festivalization in Senegal had only been possible thanks to the various forms of access I had been granted. In the last few years, I have been moving my research focus to film festivals in Senegal, which were still young at the time of my PhD. The ongoing engagement with Senegalese cultural festivals involves a high degree of emotional labor, at times invisible, intangible, yet somewhat evident, I hope, through ethics of research. I continue to question ways in which my research could foster some local impact, generating and sharing resources and establishing synergies, increasingly more structured, that can further engage in reciprocity practices among festival researchers and practitioners.

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## About the Author

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## 6. Immersion, Reflection, Triangulation: Festival Research Methods in Small and Precarious Cinemas

*Jasper Vanhaelemeeesch*

**Abstract:** The goal of the chapter is to offer alternative and complementary methodological approaches to the study of (small) film festivals in small and precarious film cultures through a post-Third-Worldist lens (Shohat, 1997). Central is the idea that the selected methodological and theoretical frameworks arise in dialogue with the research contexts and subjects. Such a grounding of the approach has as its aim to analyse cultural expression where it originates, instead of acknowledging its existence solely based on international circulation or reflecting on discursive acts based on unilaterally imposed western ideas on aesthetics and representation. The proposed methods are based in anthropological fieldwork and sociological studies of film and media.

**Keywords:** film festivals, ethnography, network analysis, Central America, small cinemas

### Introduction

The study of film festivals often requires the researcher to be part of the events that constitute the object of study (Lee 2016; Vallejo and Peirano 2017; see also chapter 5 in this volume). Whereas there are certain advantages to archival and desk research on film festivals, the spatial and temporal distance from the festival experience limits the researcher's in-depth understanding of the festival dynamics as well as the opportunities for collection and analysis of empirical data. Hence, film festival scholars tend to travel to attend festivals, and by doing so insert themselves into the research context. Ethnographic

fieldwork includes phases of sensorial immersion, interaction, reflection, and the need for relational meaning-making, i.e., the co-creation of meaning that involves the researcher's own positioning and experiencing. Therefore, an ethnographic approach to film festivals generally warrants reflection on issues of access, researcher's involvement, and ethics. This chapter explores my research engagement with film festivals in Central America and Cuba. It discusses how the fieldwork was complemented by a network analysis of production relations to offset some of the method's limitations and to arrive at an analysis of film-cultural developments in the region. More broadly, the following reflects on methodological approaches to the study of film festivals in small and precarious film cultures through a post-Third-Worldist lens (Shohat 1997). The resulting multipolar, polycentric, relational and regional perspective simultaneously signals a globalist turn in film and media production and scholarship as well as the ongoing struggle against neocolonial processes of power in and through media and communication.

The main consideration was that the research design arose in dialogue with the research context, which resulted in the combination of two different methodological approaches. The aim was to analyze cultural artifacts in the setting of production relations where they originate, with an emphasis on film festivals as facilitating and enabling meeting grounds. The methodological framework introduced here is the result of five years of research that led to the completion of a doctoral dissertation on Central American film cultures and film festivals.<sup>1</sup> The research included a total of five months of fieldwork at film festivals and film schools in the region. The main question that guided the research was how film festivals have contributed to the development of contemporary film cultures in Central America (1994–2019). This underlying question can be broken down into several elements that reflect different functions and responsibilities of film festivals and dynamics of film production in the respective Central American countries.

Data was gathered through desk research and subsequent field visits to film festivals in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras, and Cuba. My festival attendance led to more profound insights into professional networks and enabled the process of analyzing and visualizing these networks. In terms of research design, the ethnographic fieldwork inspired the creation of a database containing 344 Central American feature films that were released between 1994

<sup>1</sup> The research was supported by the Vandenbunder Baillet Latour Chair for Film Studies and Visual Culture and carried out at the Visual and Digital Cultures Research Center (ViDi, University of Antwerp) from May 2016 until April 2021. The dissertation is titled *Common Ground: Film Cultures and Film Festivals in Central America* (2021).

and 2019, as well as the names of 5,607 film professionals who collaborated in the production of these films. The database's starting point is 1994 because it marks the release of the only fictional feature film in the 1990s, *El silencio de Neto/Neto's silence* (1994). Around the same time, the first film festivals in the region emerged (Costa Rica 1991, Guatemala 1998) and the last of the region's Peace Agreements were signed in 1996, which put an official end to nearly four decades of armed conflicts that preceded the contemporary, postwar, era.

After the data entry of nodes (films and film professionals) and edges (links), the production network was visualized by means of the open access GEPHI software, which runs predefined algorithms to determine the network's connectedness. The software identifies the "communities" of close collaboration that constitute Central America's film-production networks. It highlights the elements within and between the respective communities that are particularly important for sharing information. These calculations provide us with rankings and visualizations which allow us to analyze the flow of information in production networks in a small cinemas-context. It was also important to consider the positions of the festival organizers and their associates in the network.

The main observation was that the six largest communities detected in the regional network corresponded to the six interconnected clusters of national film production in the region. The largest community was predominantly Costa Rican (containing 36.66 percent of the network's population), in order of magnitude followed by Panama (20.92 percent), Guatemala (14.42 percent), Honduras (8.99 percent), Nicaragua (8.89 percent), and El Salvador (4.77 percent). When combined with the observations and insights from the fieldwork, the data reveals how the collaborative communities of individuals, institutions, associations, or film festivals are connected throughout the region.

In sum, the research drew its findings primarily from the fieldwork at various Central American film festivals and the empirical relationality of peoples-events-cultures, or, in other words, of actors and networks (de Valck 2007; Latour 1993). The immersive data-collection and in particular the limitations and contingencies of participant observation have found both its reflection and complement in a network analysis that was developed after the fieldwork. The relationality that characterized the region's film production-networks was also central to the theoretical and methodological frameworks. The relational epistemology, of (co-)creating meanings and knowledge through connection and difference (Wildman 2010), underlie both approaches described earlier, marked by stages of immersion, reflection, and finally, triangulation, in bringing both approaches together. These

phases include important issues of access, positionality, and collaboration, as already expertly outlined in this volume by Estrella Sendra in chapter 5 and which will be exemplified in the following sections.

## Decentering the Field of Film Festivals

Among interdisciplinary approaches to the study of film festivals, there are two tendencies that have specifically marked both academic and professional, practitioner-oriented, approaches to film festivals. First, the multi-day film festival we know and study has been shaped by Western (European) and Northern (American) postwar-diplomacy. Second, the film festival is also characterized by its relations to twentieth-century avant-garde filmmaking, “global arthouse cinema,” and “world cinema.” The festival welcomed films and filmmakers that tended to circulate outside mainstream and popular multiplex theater venues. As they now near a century of existence, the “big four” in Venice (seventy-eight editions in 2021), Cannes (seventy-four editions), Berlin (seventy-one editions), and Rotterdam (fifty editions), were studied with the focus on global processes of film production and circulation and on the cultural and industrial developments of specific national cinemas around the world (de Valck 2007; Wong 2011; Papadimitriou and Ruoff 2016).

The dominant focus on international film festivals represents a centripetal perspective on the “film festival galaxy” (Quintín 2009). Many festival programmers and industry professionals would indeed regard these few festivals as the most important base of encounters where tastes and trends are negotiated, marketed, and sold, because of the value generated by the events as quality labels and institutions. Film festivals in Europe and North America, with a few notable exceptions such as major events in Havana (forty-two editions in 2020), Busan (twenty-six editions in 2021), or Burkina Faso (twenty-seven editions in 2021), have traditionally served as the most significant springboards for the careers of a handful of non-Western films and filmmakers as well.

However, these assertions are as correct as they are Eurocentrically reductive in theorizing the film festival phenomenon and its *global* significance. In a broader take on global filmmaking and the functions and responsibilities of film festivals, the top-down and external validation of films through international circulation has gradually been complemented by alternative takes on the roles of film festivals in the global film landscape. For most filmmakers around the world, international circulation represents the apex of success and follows an often long and painstaking journey from producing scripts to connecting to audiences. The focus on international film festivals

and its relatively self-contained “club” of insiders and established auteurs excludes the large majority of filmmaking and filmmakers in the world who are found at the lower ends of the marketing budgets, often at improvised and small venues in front of a handful of spectators.

## From Exhibition Platforms to Interfaces for Film Cultures

As the academic study of film festivals emerged, questions about the functions of film festivals have occupied a central position (Iordanova 2013; Carroll Harris 2017). The primary responsibility was said to reside in the exhibition of films, especially of those films that do not or do not easily reach commercial theaters or television screens, by way of an alternative form of distribution that can help with a commercial release after the festival run (Carroll Harris 2017). Moving beyond film festivals as exhibitors, a whole substratum of diverging interests emerges. From the first multi-day festival format in Venice in 1932 onwards, festivals took on many different responsibilities, as a powerful player in city politics (Stringer 2003), tourism, but most importantly as:

a participant in many other aspects of the creative cycle—such as production financing, networking, and distribution—and thus turns into a key player in the film industry, as well as society at large. Indeed, it is increasingly the case that film festivals bridge the film industry with politics and other spheres. (Iordanova 2015, 7)

Iordanova’s recognition of the film festival as a nodal interface with a certain in- and output for the film industry is useful in seeing the festival as a field (cf. Bourdieu), as a social arena in which the agendas of a multitude of actors from within and outside the film industry collide, clash, and intersect, and where aesthetic and economic interests are negotiated (2015). The film festival not only provides a platform and connects the actors in the network but also relates to other entities as an institution. Each festival is an “interface” of various screens and platforms that connects to other festivals or platforms, between which films can hop onto similar or different islands in the archipelago of the global film festival landscape (Loist 2016). Considering the festival as a nodal interface facilitates an expanded view on festivals as actively shaping and cultivating film cultures (Iordanova 2015).

The field’s diversification into exhibition, production, politics, and tourism has brought along epistemological and methodological implications

for the study of film festivals and global film cultures. On the one hand, the diversification foregrounds social and collaborative aspects of film-making, while on the other, it shifts the primary function of film festivals away from alternative exhibition spaces. Instead, we can begin to identify cultural-economic imperatives underpinning film marketing and sales of films-as-commodities. More broadly, we can see festivals as *social* meeting grounds where these negotiations take place. Film festivals emerge as important because of their ability to connect film professionals-as-laborers with each other, with institutions and structures that enable production, and, last but not least, with their audiences.

## Fieldwork: Immersive and Reflexive Ethnography

Despite the accompanying logistical (travel- and scheduling-related), personal (health and safety), time-consuming (festival activities run from the morning until late at night) challenges, ethnographic methods require the researcher's immersion in the film festival. Ethnography's methods are applied to access the "deep structures and thick descriptions" (Nichols 1994, 27) that surround and give meaning to a festival, to get "a sense of the particular and the local" as described in Lee (2016, 122). This approach could be seen as richer than analysis of the institutional rhetoric produced by or about festivals in academic and non-academic writings, press releases or declarations, as it ultimately reveals information about the festival as a social experience of performances (Lee 2016 135). Similarly, ethnography can account for elements of serendipity and disruption that characterize film festivals as live and ephemeral events that generate an overwhelming amount of data.

In studies on media industries, ethnography can offer "more realistic data about the actual performance of film agents" than can be found in quantitative analyses (Vallejo and Peirano 2017) by looking at the intersections and contradictions of the actors' agendas at festivals. This, Aida Vallejo and María Paz Peirano argue, not only improves our understanding of the film festival phenomenon, but also of film cultures as a whole (2017). The Dutch ethnomethodologist Paul ten Have also defines the objective of ethnographic research as "the study [of] observable activities, that which is scenic, and the intelligibility and organization of social practice" (ten Have 2004, 25). The focus here is on the processes and procedures of how the social order that makes up a film festival is produced, and not on the overall causes, conditions, or effects of those practices. According to ten

Have, DIY research experiences, interactions, observations, and on-the-spot recordings not only lead to research findings, but in themselves condition the research procedures in a “retroductive” fashion, i.e., by revisiting the frameworks after being in the field. During and after the fieldwork, this has implied an emphasis on reflexivity, regarding the findings but also regarding the methods used.

Olivier de Sardan recalls that “[t]he ‘emic’ (in other words, the attention paid to the actors’ point of view [...]]) and the ‘descriptive’ (in other words, the use of observation [...]) are fundamental properties of anthropological work” (2015, 10). In “etic” perspectives, the researcher is an outsider looking in, at an analytical distance from where the events are experienced. At a film festival, the most etic position would be that of the anonymous spectator who only watches films and remains a silent, distant observer of the festival’s proceedings. The “emic” or the insider’s perspective allows for new meanings to emerge from the ethnographic encounter, which is best captured in a situated description of participant observation. Participant observation at film festivals, in which a researcher engages, implies a necessary negotiation of emic and etic perspectives, respectively those of the other participants and of the observer, which implies that the researcher’s reflexivity also becomes a tool of ethnographic research in unraveling cultural discourses (Burawoy et al. 1991).

In the words of social psychologist Geert Hofstede, applying the insider-perspective, the emic without the outsider-perspective, the etic, results in case studies that cannot be generalized, whereas the etic without the emic gets stuck in abstractions that cannot be related to real life (Hofstede 1998, 19). This explains the difficult and sometimes awkward balance between the descriptive and the analytical, between superficial, thin, fragments of the lived experiences and the relation to larger theoretical or historical discourses.

For example, it is difficult to situate an event such as a minutes-long standing ovation by 5,500 people for Serbian documentary filmmaker Emir Kusturica in a packed Karl Marx theater on the opening night of the Havana Film Festival in 2018, where he presented a documentary on former Uruguayan president José “Pepe” Mujica. A mere description of the ovation does not capture what this means to, for, and about the continent of Latin America and its past and current social and political climate, or even Kusturica’s ideological leanings. Meanwhile, it also does not capture the feeling of enchantment of being present amid the crowd’s wild enthusiasm, which influences the experience to a great extent. The same documentary became available on the Netflix streaming platform afterwards. While

still an enjoyable work, it was not nearly as captivating as during the first viewing in Havana.

My first interaction with the film festival research context occurred at the Ícaro International Film Festival in Antigua, Guatemala in November 2017, where I met the festival's coordinators. This was the beginning of a multi-sited interaction, of which the last physical encounter occurred seventeen months later in April 2019. The initial fieldwork experience at the film festival in Guatemala consisted of mingling with the people involved in the national and regional satellite organizations that make up the Ícaro Festival, the longest running film festival in Central America (1998–ongoing). As time and events passed, I assumed different roles while navigating the festivals in the region. As a student, I mainly asked questions. I brought a smartphone and a notebook to write down contact details, to record and capture specific moments, to take notes about events, screenings, or stories I would witness. As a festivalgoer, I watched films and took part in the educational programmes and other workshops. As I established more connections with the organizing crew and the guests, my role increasingly developed from observer to participant. By the end of the festival week, I was invited to attend the awards ceremony, banquet, and closing gala, normally not accessible to the general public, which provided me with a rather privileged festival experience. Later on, I took part in festivals' programming selection committees and festival juries. For editions following my fieldwork, I was invited to watch and judge films that were submitted to an online platform.

I found this inclusion in the festival beneficial. It justified my participation in the events, and it led to easier access at other events. The online submission platforms brought the added benefit of being able to access films that were part of the festival. The digital platform meant that I had to spend less time at the festival trying to watch all the relevant films, because I could (re)watch them on separate occasions. This way, I was able to focus on social encounters and other meaningful activities at the festival.

My brief inclusion in the field of film festivals demonstrates the value of ethnographic fieldwork as well as the need to incorporate a reflexive moment in the process of data collection and analysis. The data collection process is inextricably tied to the research context, and more specifically to the researcher's positioning within that context, as parts of the collected data result from the interaction between the researcher and the researched. As a white, cisgender male, Belgian researcher, I was "a foreigner" at any given moment during the fieldwork, and as such subject to moments of both privilege and prejudice concerning my identification. During interaction

with festival participants, my presentation as a researcher occasionally led to the suspicion of having arrived “to study them,” which would come up when people would humorously introduce me to others as “a Belgian researcher who came to study us, so be careful what you say.” As the fieldwork took place in a predominantly Hispanic context, the research was performed almost entirely in Spanish. I cannot with certainty say why exactly I got invited into a favorable setting to perform this research, as I can only speculate that my motivation to develop the project coincided with the festival participants’ eagerness to explore all means available to place Central American cinema in a spotlight. My at times unavoidable ignorance vis à vis local histories and specific cultural contexts inadvertently presented me as a blank slate and my research as a modest opportunity for voices and perspectives, arguably subaltern with respect to global media studies, to be communicated through channels different from the ones one already had access to.

The ability to be reflexive as part of the research endeavor has been increasingly emphasized as a modality of investigation. Ethnography resorts to methods such as “participant observation” or “thick” and “thin” description (Geertz 1973; Nichols 1994, 27) to foreground knowledge that has its origins in our perception (cf. phenomenology). Alongside the inclusion of a moment in which the researcher creates distance to reflect on the individual experience, other superficial and multisensorial aspects of thinness are also increasingly foregrounded, to aspire to a greater openness to take in the world and downplay preconceived ideas on the studied context.

Any claims of truthful observations are a result of the interaction between the observer, i.e., myself, and the observed world, that relate to each other in mutually constitutive ways. As an observer, one is positioned in direct relation to the observed, breaking down “the separation between the ‘I’ and the world that was sustained by rationalism” (Favero 2018, 62; Merleau-Ponty 1962, xvi). The approach suggested here is likewise informed by this ontological relationality to suspend the clear-cut distinction between observed and observer, while incorporating a detached observation, of seeing and contemplating one’s own position as part of the observation in a reflective analytical moment. The resulting unity or oneness of the observer and the observed world implies that “[t]ruth emerges here as an experience that is strictly dependent on the observer rather than on the thing out there” (Favero 2018, 62). It follows that observations obtained and rendered in the course of the research do not lay claim on an objective truth, but to an “experience of truth” instigated by the researcher’s insertion into and interaction with the research context (xvi; Favero 2018, 62). It is through the ethnographic work which implies prolonged multisensorial interaction, repetition, and

contestation of information through observations that the research is able to nuance the subject matter.

Ethnographic fieldwork requires the researcher's immersion into the field in order to perceive and experience it first-hand and through that interaction generate and abstract knowledge. The process of meaning-making does have to be further clarified here, as it is not only a task of jotting down field notes on things that happen during and after you see them happening (cf. Clifford Geertz' "thick description"), nor is it restricted to the spatial field through which you move, as the domains of perception are at once multisensorial, multimodal, ephemeral, offline, and online. Anyone who experiences a film festival is immediately aware that not everything that is on offer can be taken in. The usually packed programs constantly force visitors to choose between the viewing of films or partaking in educational and other social activities, which makes the research process, like that of the visitors, a selective and limited experience.

## The "Fields" of Festival Research

Edgar Gómez Cruz and Elisenda Ardèvol (2013) reflect on the definition of "the field" in media studies, which expanded under the influence of digital ethnographic research and an anthropology of global issues, as exemplified by Hastrup and Olwig (1997):

From an anthropology of global issues, Hastrup and Olwig, for example, have argued that instead of viewing the field as a "site"—a usually distant place to go to carry out fieldwork in—it is better to understand it as a set of relations, focusing on the connections between multiple locations where actors engage in activity: "ethnography in this strategy becomes as much a process of following connections as it is a period of inhabitance" (Gómez Cruz and Ardèvol 2013, 37 quoting Hastrup and Olwig 1997, 8).

The field in which this inquiry takes place is thus located simultaneously online and offline, near and distant, impersonal and embodied, which also characterizes film festivals as ephemeral events where all kinds of media and people temporarily converge in a physical or virtual space. Every festival experience is unique and impossible to recreate, or even to analyze in its totality. Since film festival fieldwork relies heavily on being present and participating in the celebration of cinema and culture, it is not always possible to attribute meanings to the things that happen during these

events. For most festival participants, simply being there and partaking in the celebration carries a sort of emotional potency that cannot or should not be analyzed. This foregrounds the lived perception that the festival event is more significant than that which can be abstracted from our perceptions.

These challenges, regarding the field as “a set of relations” and ethnography as “a process of following connections,” were addressed in the qualitative network analysis in this work. The large-scale, data-driven visualizations that result from these analyses should be interpreted as complementary, visual, forms of data presentation that can add meaningful layers to the discipline of (digital) ethnography.

## Network Analysis of Production Relations

The immersive data-collection and in particular the limitations and contingencies of participant observation have found both its reflection and complement in the qualitative network analysis that was developed after the fieldwork. In other words, the empirical research has led to the systematization of a dataset containing 344 Central American feature films produced between 1994 and 2019 and all the professionals who worked on them that could be retrieved from festival programs, promotional posters, production folders, Internet Movie Database listings, or from social media. The analysis only considers production relations and does *not* explicitly include parameters such as film schools, film festivals, exhibition circuits, or social relations in a stricter sense. While it is likely that individuals who work on the same films are socially connected to each other, this cannot be assumed here. In the network, they can only be connected to each other indirectly through their participation in the same or related film productions.

The criteria for film selection included fiction, documentary, animation, or experimental feature-length (greater than fifty minutes) films that are national or transnational (co-)productions with a meaningful degree of participation from any of the six Central American countries. The “meaningful degree of participation” is determined based on the inclusion of Central American film professionals involved in the production and can be subject to discussion on a case-by-case basis. The research does not establish an exhaustive list of criteria to define a film’s “nationality,” but follows general indicators such as the given producing country, the nationality of the directors and producers, the filming locations, and other basic parameters of “national identification.” The goal of the network analysis is not, however,

to provide a comprehensive dataset on social connections, but to provide approximations of affinity and collaboration in the milieu-building venture of film-cultural development.

## Triangulation

The main research contribution consisted of mapping and clarifying the importance of film festivals in supporting and developing the small and precarious cinemas of Central America. The particular geographical focus broadens the empirical scope of a growing body of literature on regional cinemas, media cultures, and film festivals. The complementary use of ethnographic fieldwork and network analysis in the context of small cinemas adds to existing models of film festival studies and digital humanities. The research design can therefore serve as a roadmap for other studies that can benefit from integrating rich cultural analysis with network visualization, the potential of which has not yet been fully explored.

The social and relational essence of a multimedia event such as a film festival has intuitively surfaced in relational analyses. Where ethnography falls short in mapping out and analyzing production relations as they develop over time, except perhaps through interviews and long-term participation, network analysis can process decades of data to unveil links and associations that research participants may not even have been aware of. Social individuals are assumed to know their connections, but not necessarily the connections of their connections or how they developed over time. The possibility of adding variables furthermore opens a field of inquiry into relations and schools, relations and funding mechanisms, relations and specific festival participation, and many other potential strands of research.

It does, however, take an ethnographic engagement to understand how and why the intricacies of the film festival phenomenon “work” in the specific context to enable those connections. It is while sharing thoughts with other festival participants during the social events at the festival that one might find like-minded professionals looking for opportunities, for scripts to be produced or funded, or for other motives to surface. Often, projects and collaborations take flight because of these connections. The deeper social, cultural, and even ideological structures of these events cannot be accessed through data-driven approaches alone, as they require an immersion in the emotive transactions between individuals that take place at these events. Similarly, a thorough network analysis also invites a repeated engagement with the field, whether to present the findings or reveal the social and cultural

dynamics that led to the “statistical” connection. All aspects considered, the research advocates the potential of “network ethnography,” which, combined with the appealing visual representation of data, can provide both scholars and professionals with greater insight into the significance of film festivals.

Through an emphasis on creative clusters and cultural participation within Central America, the research has grounded film-cultural developments within the producing communities. This relational perspective ideally aims to reterritorialize and reindigenize where possible the discourse on film-cultural developments in post-Third-Worldist contexts. While I was first drawn to Central American cinemas through the overseas success of films such as *Ixcanul* (Bustamante 2014) in the international festival circuit, I entered the field of Central American film festivals to study the cultural artifacts in the context where they originate. This implied that the Central American case would not merely be homogenized and universalized as part of global film cultures, and compared to European cinemas, Hollywood cinemas, or others. Instead, through acts of participation and abstraction, the theory and methodology are informed by the practice of being in the field.

The adoption of a relational epistemology grounded in the studied practices allowed us to see Central American film cultures as a tapestry of interconnected diversity, instead of as a unified totality. Theorizing regional dynamics does not aim at flattening out the differences between the countries that constitute Central America. Instead, it transcends the many social, political, and economic differences to emphasize moments of convergence such as the shared effort of developing small film cultures. It accounts for diverging world views and belief systems, for both insider and outsider perspectives, for contestation and reevaluation, since the process of knowledge construction is one of complex and dynamic complementarity and compatibility, dependent on the observer’s vantage point.

## Conclusion

The global proliferation and diversification of film festivals is increasingly being studied through a focus on small film festivals. The essence of film festivals in a small cinemas-context lies not only with the exhibition of films, but especially with their potential as meeting grounds that connect people through shared experiences that revolve around matters of education, development, production, and exhibition of films. The main findings from the fieldwork and the network analysis foreground the collaborative network of creative labor in the region, including how it is facilitated by film

festivals. From this perspective, the events can be seen as catalyst drivers of film-cultural development. They substitute and complement various elements of state support for filmmaking practices or of the integrated studio systems found elsewhere. This is not, however, to be attributed to the increasing interconnectedness of a globalized network society in which the network metaphor becomes ubiquitous and therefore quite void. Instead, the dynamic relations are characterized by an act of communal *resistance* to processes of globalization and deterritorialization, as much as they are driven by the needs and conditions created by the global film (festival) market.

My approach to the study of small cinemas and film festivals meant that festival participation was crucial in designing the research, as most insights were acquired through recurrent encounters. The interactions with festival participants helped delineate the subject matter, formulate questions, and question formulations. Along the road there were unexpected turns, serendipitous encounters, disrupted plans, and contingencies, all of which have led to my understanding of the subject. In the days after the festivals had ended, on my way to the next festival destination, I became especially reflexive with respect to the lived experiences. Traveling between different events meant that the knowledge I acquired was crafted along the way, along the lines of the “meshwork” where life is lived (Ingold 2015). As this is true for the way researchers can understand the intricate world of filmmaking in Central America, it is also true for the practitioners who journey across the region to fulfill their professional aspirations.

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## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 7. Providing Needed Space for Caribbean and Diaspora Filmmakers in Miami

*Jonathan Ali*

*Edited by Amanda Earnhart*

**Abstract:** The Third Horizon Film Festival was founded with the aim of providing a space in Miami to screen films by filmmakers from and about the Caribbean and its diaspora. Since it began in 2016, the festival has grown to encompass both radical and conventional forms of politically committed filmmaking, as well as cinema from other Global South spaces and their diasporas. This chapter argues for Third Horizon as a particular type of event: a film festival that is both identity-based (screening work made by people of a specific identity) and carefully curated (not screening work merely because of the identity of its makers).

**Keywords:** Film Festivals, Caribbean film festivals, Caribbean cinema, Caribbean diaspora cinema

As a small festival, Third Horizon is, to use a term we pointedly and repeatedly use, carefully curated. Curated, as opposed to programmed. I make a distinction. I see a similarity between us and several other relatively small US festivals—Art of the Real, Black Star, Doc Fortnight, Prismatic Ground—that are screening some excellent work that larger festivals like Sundance and Tribeca often overlook. Curatorially speaking then, Third Horizon seeks to punch above its weight in some ways. This has led to increasing audience numbers as well as critical success. Third Horizon has as its focus Caribbean cinema, and functions as a festival to provide needed space for Caribbean and diaspora filmmakers to exhibit their work. The distinction should be made

between Caribbean and Black or Afro: while the majority of Caribbean people are of African descent, the region and its diaspora are made up of people representing a range of ethnicities and backgrounds, and the films reflect this. Miami, Florida, where *Third Horizon* takes place, is home to a significant Caribbean diaspora community, which has largely been underserved when it comes to seeing cinematic content from the region. *Third Horizon* therefore gave us the opportunity to program for this audience—as well as Miami cinephiles in general—not only the latest films by Caribbean filmmakers, from the Caribbean diaspora and non-Caribbeans at work in the region, but also older, even classic films that had never been screened in Miami. We’re looking both to bring together an audience (an underserved Caribbean community in Florida) and create an audience (cinephiles interested in seeing good cinema that happens to come from the Caribbean).

The diversity of the Caribbean is, paradoxically, both its greatest asset and its most divisive factor. The islands, historical sites of great exploitation and unfathomable cruelty, were never envisioned as anyone’s utopia, but they contain within their infinite variety of races, cultures, languages, and beliefs, endless human possibility. Cinema, itself a hybrid of other art forms, has a potential in this regard that the Caribbean itself, I believe, is yet scarcely aware of. As Stuart Hall, the quintessential Caribbean man, said of an emergent Caribbean cinema, it is “that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are” (1989, 80). I couldn’t put it any better than that. As we work to bring cinema to a complex population whose artistic relations cannot be easily defined, we’ve come across other examples of unique challenges posed to us as an island festival. In 2017 one such challenge was hurricanes Irma and Maria, which hit the Caribbean and south Florida mere weeks before the festival was set to begin. Irma, in particular, had severely affected Miami, and there was speculation that the festival might not come off or that if it did, many potential audience members still recovering from the hurricane’s effects would not turn out. Thankfully, the festival was held and still had a lively audience, but that same year *Third Horizon* was also suffering from decreased sponsorship. In a move sadly indicative of the political climate in the United States, the festival’s two major corporate sponsors from 2016 did not come back on board in 2017. This further complicated the ever-present hurdle of securing titles in a timely fashion given the issue of premiere status and festivals in competition with one another for that honor. *Third Horizon* has a loose South Florida premiere requirement, but even so we’ve been on occasion unable to secure films within one festival year of their premiere given where we are on the festival totem pole.

As a Caribbean film festival we sometimes encounter the expectation that we will program a film merely because it's Caribbean. This is not the case and has in some instances led to notable omissions. The question of trauma porn, poverty porn, violence porn...that voyeuristic lens...it's not restricted to only outsider filmmakers. We routinely turn down films by Caribbean filmmakers because we feel like these films are recycling tropes picked up from Hollywood in telling Caribbean stories. We want the films we program, even if they are genre films, to have a certain ethical integrity about them, and to go beyond clichés of the Caribbean as an exotic, sun-drenched tourists' paradise, a place made up largely of bikinis and beaches. We are committed to our mission of subverting stereotypes, and to presenting the Caribbean region as so much more than just sun, sea, and sand. Our aim is to show that the thing that we extol as "Caribbean cinema" is as multifaceted, dynamic, and surprising as the region itself. Concerning festivals of years past, one criterion was that all of the region's major groupings in terms of colonial heritage—English, Spanish, French, and Dutch—had to be represented. An ideal film program reflects the diversity of the region in terms of geography (both countries within the region and the diaspora), language, thematic concerns, style, and the gender and sexuality of the filmmakers concerned.

Outside of our Caribbean focus, given the fractured political moment we continue to find ourselves in globally, we've also decided to foreground radical and empathetic filmmaking voices. These kinds of films focus on the struggles of the marginalized against traditional structures of power. Now is the most inclusive we've ever been in our selection, with the most countries we've ever had represented in our lineups. We deliberately mix fiction, non-fiction, hybrid, and experimental work, reflecting an outlook of global solidarity in this moment of precarity and potential. We want work that is challenging and pushes boundaries both in terms of content and form. In selecting films for *Third Horizon*, format matters as much as content. We seek to celebrate films that go beyond mere representation, reflecting an imaginative, resourceful, and politically aware use of the medium.

What can be said is that the Caribbean is the last region of the globe whose films and filmmakers are yet to be—if I may use a contentious word—discovered. Yes, there's Cuba, and there have been individual filmmakers like Haiti's Raoul Peck who have achieved international acclaim, but the region as a whole remains largely unknown. That's partly due to the fact that, for decades, there was really no industry: a lack of resources and institutional support conspired to keep potential filmmakers from making work. But with the digital revolution, and a concomitant (if inconsistent)

show of support at a state level, the infrastructure has begun to be put in place for an industry to develop and hopefully thrive. We see short film-making as a way for filmmakers to hone their craft, find their voice, and get a toehold within the vast ecosystem of the international film industry. The hope is that these filmmakers—all very talented, potential auteurs in the making—will go on to establish themselves and the Caribbean as a force to be reckoned with in the near future. And we're seeing the results: filmmakers are beginning to emerge onto the international film festival circuit and beyond. Third Horizon, of course, is an ideal place to see some of this work. As the steady increase in its attendance illustrates, the festival, despite several challenges, is succeeding in its mission to increase the diversity of Miami's film exhibition landscape, and in particular bring Caribbean films not only to Miami's community of cinephiles, but also to its significant Caribbean population.

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## 8. On Studying Film Festivals and Migration: Borderlands and Beginnings

*Rachel Johnson*

**Abstract:** Film festivals are constituted by borders: the flow of films and resources permitted by globalised “free” trade, and the circulation of narratives that represent borders and their transgression. This chapter asks how approaches to studying film festivals change when we allow them to be led by notions of migration. It advocates for the treatment of such notions as fluid rather than fixed, creating a “borderland” of meaning and, ultimately, research that remains open to transience, contradiction and ambivalence (Anzaldúa, 1987). I explore data-driven and case study-based methodologies, discuss the understandings of migration and the film festival network produced by each, and consider how we might bring both together in an iterative “pluriverse” of film festival studies (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

**Keywords:** decolonization, migrant crisis, migrant modalities, slow time

### Beginning

The simultaneous dissolution and hardening of borders is often considered one of the defining paradoxes of our age, founded on the contradiction between globalized “free” trade and heavily policed migration (Amin 2018; Rose 2007; Bauman 2000; Appadurai 1990). This contradiction, too, characterizes the film festival network, the 10,000 or more film festivals worldwide, differentiated but interconnected through flows of films, people, culture and capital (including symbolic capital).<sup>1</sup> To be globally “networked,” film festivals

<sup>1</sup> This should be differentiated from a film festival circuit, which presents an intensification of the interconnectedness of the network. A circuit is a grouping of film festivals that share, and sometimes compete over, similar sources of funding, audiences, and pools of films. On networks and circuits, see Iordanova (2009) and Loist (2016).

depend upon the kinds of border crossings permitted within globalized “free” trade. Globalization, however, continues to be rooted in imperialist practices, be that through the extractive industries, import of migrant labor, or the continuing dominance of film industries in the global North (Amin 2018; Patel 2021; Hill and Kawashima 2016). This entanglement of globalization and imperialism has conditioned the development of the film festival network itself, the movement of films around it, and the organizational models of festivals within it—in other words, precisely the border crossings that may or may not be permitted along the network. This is exemplified by the condensation of a section of festivals into a Eurocentric “short circuit” (Nornes 2013, 151), the festivals and the films they exhibit endowed with a continuing “cultural hegemony” (Vallejo 2020, 158).<sup>2</sup>

However, film festivals are not only constituted by border crossings, they also represent the transgression of borders and the people that either do or have done so (migrants, refugees, and the diaspora). Film scholars have long demonstrated a concern with the role film festivals play in representing migrants and migration, for example through the cultivation of cinemas of migration (accented, exilic, and diasporic cinemas, for example); the production of paratexts that center on themes of migration; or the nurturing of intercultural understanding between migrant and “settled” communities. Over twenty years ago, Hamid Naficy (2001, 23) highlighted the importance of film festivals to the development of that which he terms “accented cinema,” filmmaking characterized by “artisanal and collective production modes and [...] filmmakers’ and audiences’ deterritorialized locations.” Marijke de Valck (2013, 1502) has since observed that film festivals are migration cinema’s primary network of exhibition, crucial also for industry networking and intercultural community building. As well as contributing to the development of cinemas of migration, film festivals can reproduce or challenge dominant discourses about migration through their own practices. Monia Acciari (2017, 21) has proposed ways in which a film festival’s programming might invoke a “cosmopolitan assemblage” informed by notions of deterritorialization. Meanwhile, Dorota Ostrowska (2019) and I (Johnson 2020) have each interrogated the “gazes” certain film festivals have constructed in relation to migrants through programming, choice of location, and production of paratexts for migration films.

These contributions have created a valuable foundation for research into film festivals that is sensitive to the uneven power relations involved

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between colonialism and the historical development of film festivals in Europe, see Dovey (2015).

in border crossings of all types, and, in particular, those enacted through human migration. How might we build on this foundation to analyze the relationship between film festivals and one of the defining paradoxes of our times? Such an inquiry might require us to reframe the question that has animated research in this area so far. Rather than asking what film festivals can tell us about migration and migration cinema, we might consider what thinking *through* migration can tell us about film festivals. How might we conceive of connections between film festivals within the network, as well as the practices of specific festivals, if we allow our analysis to be led by a notion, or notions, of migration?

We cannot ask these questions without evoking definitions of migration and film festivals respectively, and thus participating in the institutional construction of each. Decolonial scholarship has long warned against imposing a fixed meaning, a singular truth, onto peoples and situations, as doing so often participates in an imperialist construction of the “other” (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 2). These considerations multiply in research involving migration, a reality deeply touched by the pasts and presents of colonial power, and the representation of which, when fetishized, has been described as a form of “slow violence” (Pérez-Melgosa 2016). These concerns are also pertinent to film festival research, particularly that which aims to apprehend something so heterogeneous as the film festival network. Scholars such Lindiwe Dovey, Joshua McNamara, and Federico Olivieri (2013, 3) affirm that “making broad sweeping statements about what film festivals are, or defining film festivals within a rigid Eurocentric model, fixes the meanings—and political potentialities—of festivals.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, rather than producing a fixed definition of migration through which to study film festivals, or a fixed definition of film festivals through which to study migration, we might allow our inquiry to be animated by plural and ultimately fluid conceptualizations of each, such that we do not reproduce the unequal power relations often involved in discourses about either. Through this emphasis on plurality, we might seek to create a “borderland” of meaning: a shared and transient territory open to contradiction, ambiguity, and ambivalence (Anzaldúa 1987). This has important implications for methodology, and even the place from which we begin our research. How can we approach the study of migration and film festivals in such a way that enables transience, contradiction, and ambivalence?

3 Antoine Damiens’s (2020) study of LGBTQ film festivals raises similar questions regarding the role of definitions and legitimization in film festival studies’ methodologies and theoretical frameworks.

This chapter at once proposes and enacts an experimental, iterative research process, a process that proceeds cyclically rather than linearly, that has its ideas and assumptions undone as it progresses. (Meaning here, is enabled to “migrate” across conceptual borders.) As such, it creates a dialogue between conceptualizations of migration and of film festivals, allowing each to transform the other as the essay proceeds. I do not offer a fixed definition of migration, but allow facets of it to emerge discursively throughout. In lieu of this definition, I begin with a provisional review of trends in the film festival network—an indication of the different types of festivals that typically engage with migration as a topic, theme, or cinema. Then, I suggest examples of specific film festivals that either fit within these trends or challenge them—to consider the exigencies of studying film festivals through migration, and the complexities that have emerged through my forays into this research.

I reflect on two approaches to constructing such a dialogue—approaches that begin differently but, when pursued iteratively, may not necessarily finish in different places. The first begins with externally-produced definitions of migration, from dominant media discourses and agencies’ reports to migrant-led cartographies. This approach uses external definitions as a starting point for large-scale (and likely data-driven) research that traces changes in the film festival network—for example, the coincidence between the so-called “migrant crisis” and increase in the number of European film festivals that take migration as their primary theme. However, through subsequent iterations that engage with the practices of particular film festivals within the network, this approach at once understands film festivals through, and considers how they might enable us to re-evaluate, such external definitions. Because of its movement from the external to the internal, I designate this an “outside-in” approach.

I compare this with an “inside-out” approach. This procedure begins with conceptualizations of migration produced within film festivals—for example the London Migration Film Festival’s reframing of migration through the lenses of slow time and climate change. As well as festivals dedicated to migration as a topic, I consider film festivals which instantiate “migrant modalities” (loosely defined as modalities of movement, the subaltern, and sub-national). I suggest that this approach, pursued in a decolonial framework of “knowing inwardly” (Minh-ha in Chen 1992, 82), and working with film festivals that might be typically overlooked or marginalized within the context of imperialism, can create counter-hegemonic notions of migration that might also enable us to conceptualize the film festival network.

Tracing the axes of time and space, I offer preliminary findings from each method to reflect on film festivals and migration. My application of each approach, and the findings I share, are informed by the commitment to “desire-centered,” rather than “damage-centered” research advocated by indigenous scholar Eve Tuck (2009). Desire-centered research moves beyond analyses that center only on people and institutions’ reproduction of colonial power. Instead, it acknowledges the messy, complex intersections between reproduction and resistance, and seeks to foreground the “wisdom and hope” of historically marginalized communities (Tuck 2009, 416). As such, while I acknowledge the colonial histories, hierarchies, and practices constitutive of film festivals (and even the network as such), below I present an aspirational account, one that seeks to highlight and strengthen festivals’ capacity to challenge hegemonic power structures. I extend such aspiration to film festival research, concluding that both outside-in and inside-out approaches can offer a way into researching film festivals through migration, and that, through a shared, iterative philosophy, they might contribute to an open and decolonial “pluriverse” in film festival studies (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 3).

## Type

However we approach the subject, studying the film festival network through migration entails the study of film festivals—but which? To begin, we need a provisional sense of which film festivals might be at once defined by and participate in the process of defining migration. Below, I share some preliminary observations of trends in film festivals’ engagement with notions of migration, above all as a theme—a subject represented in films or in festival paratexts such as catalogs or live events. This is but another starting point for inquiry; later iterations will reveal examples of film festivals that do not necessarily fit within the trends outlined here.

The obvious film festival type that engages with ideas of migration is migration film festivals—festivals such as the CineMigrante Film Festival in Argentina, the Izmir International Refugee Film Festival in Turkey, or the United Nations’ Global Migration Film Festival. Beyond festivals that address the concept, migration, we can also consider those that address the people: migrants, or the diaspora. This can range from festivals made specifically for refugees, such as the Sahara International Film Festival (FiSaraha) held in the Sahrawi refugee camp in the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, to the numerous diasporic film festivals around the world. Indeed, comparing these festival types—such as those “by and for” refugees, and diasporic film

festivals—raises productive questions about different migrant identities and audience address (Breyfogle 2020; Acciari 2017). A third typical case would be festivals that show sustained engagement with migration primarily as a social or humanitarian “issue.” These are typically human rights film festivals. As Sonia Tascón (2015), de Valck (2017), and Ostrowska (2019) have noted, migration is a prevalent, even constant, theme at such festivals, although the politics of their various “gazes” remains contested.

Migration, diasporic, and human rights film festivals seem to provide the baseline of the network’s engagement with migration, numbering approximately 1,491 film festivals worldwide according to the industry website, FilmFreeway. However, the phenomenon of film festivals representing migration is much more extensive than this number suggests. Several other kinds of film festivals evoke notions of migration, programming films and special events dedicated to the topic, particularly in the last decade. In fact, one of the most productive features of migration cinema may be its ability to traverse disparate areas of the film festival network, crossing not only geographical borders, but borders of festival type as well. Understanding which borders migration films can or cannot cross, and on which conditions, is vital to understanding film festivals’ relationship to, and constructions of, migration. The curation of migration cinema may be influenced by mode, as suggested by the prevalence of migration films at documentary film festivals (Vaughan 2020). It may be conditioned by understandings of the intersectionality of identities reproduced through identity-based film festivals such as the International Queer & Migrant Film Festival, or special events such as the “Troubled Sanctuary” discussion and screening of *Un-settled* (Tom Shepherd 2019) at Frameline Film Festival in 2019. Alternatively, the appearance of themes of migration at a variety of festivals may be determined by topicality: the need for film festivals of all kinds to engage with contemporary political debates in order to retain relevance, as noted by de Valck (2007, 205–6) and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong (2011, 1). As I have argued elsewhere, this is exemplified by the European “A” circuit’s programming and awarding of migration films and effusive discourses about migration during the peak of the so-called European “refugee crisis” (Johnson 2020).

## Time

In considering film festivals’ programming of migration cinema during periods in which migration is considered “topical,” we move from conceptualizing

the film festival network in terms of type to conceptualizing it in terms of time. That the film festival network changes over time hardly bears repeating; new festivals emerge, their different aims and interests subtly reshaping the plural mosaic of film festivals that culminate in that which we might call a network. However, through the lens of migration, these changes become at once more defined and more complex. Indeed, as we move onto questions of time, particularly the time of migration, we enter heavily contested territory. As decolonial and indigenous thinkers have shown, time can be conceptualized as linear and measurable or non-linear, experiential, cyclic (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 3). The time of migration, too, is contested: is it the linear time underpinning analyses of peaks in rates of migration, a migration conceived only at the border? Or the cyclic time underpinning the colonial conditions that predicate migration—from political instability to the climate emergency created by imperialist, extractive practices, making migration not a singular moment in time, but a “return of the repressed” (Bettini 2019; Strongman 2008)?<sup>4</sup> Below, I reflect on what taking different approaches to time, migration, and film festivals might entail, before further complicating these through notions of space.

Taking an outside-in approach, we can analyze how factors identified in externally-produced, often but not always hegemonic, discourses of migration might intersect with developments in the film festival network and the circulation of films around it. Thus, in relation to time, we might investigate whether the last decade of reported “peaks” in both rates of migration and media attention to it correlates with an increase in film festivals expressing an explicit interest in or dedication to these themes (UNHCR 2021; Triandafyllidou 2017). Adapting Franco Moretti’s (2013) method of distant reading, for example, we might observe that, the majority of the 360 film festivals that include the keywords “migration,” “migrant,” “refugee,” or “refugees” in their descriptions and calls for film submissions on FilmFreeway were founded in the last three years. This number decreases steadily the older the festival, with just four film festivals (2.5 percent) founded fifteen or more years ago. This contrasts with film festivals that mention “diaspora,” the proportion remaining the same between festivals founded over fifteen and those founded over three years ago (48, or 34.3 percent). While a preliminary exercise, this keyword search suggests that one area of growth for the film festival network may be through the founding of festivals that explicitly engage

<sup>4</sup> Adeyanju and Oriola (2011) also provide an important account of this formation, without investing in the psychoanalytical terminology of “the repressed.”

with themes of migration—a change that corresponds with UN reports of the last decade as a “peak” in both rates of border crossings and media attention on the topic.

Rather than approaching the question of film festivals and migration through notions of an external truth (in this case, “peaks” in migration, assumed to condition the development of the network), we can approach the question from the inside, from the truths that film festivals construct. Working from the inside-out would highlight plural truths that may challenge external, dominant, narratives of migration, including in relation to time. The programmers of the London Migration Film Festival, for example, seek to reframe the time of migration, bringing their lived experiences as migrants to bear on their curation of migration cinema (Parrott and Stahnke 2021). This includes programming films such as *Ága* (Milko Lazarov 2018), which shows the relationship between the slow time of climate change and migration, or *Bangla* (Phaim Bhuiyan 2019), which depicts experiences of migration that last long after the physical journey captured in the notion of rates of migration. While LMFF also programs films that document migration as a time-limited journey across a border, in placing such films in dialogue with those such as *Bangla*, the programmers seek to complicate dominant notions of migration that would construct it only at the border. Their programming aims to create a conversation between the multiplicity of forms of migration, suggesting an intention towards the decolonial plurality and complexity I have discussed above.

Another common challenge to notions of measurable or linear time in film festivals is experiential time—the time of the festival itself. Ostrowska (2019, 272–3) analyzes this in relation to the “migrant festive chronotope,” a specific iteration of the time-event of the film festival that is founded on the transitoriness of the event and its production of a threshold of experience, at once a temporary “home” and site of revelation. We can extend this to consider the ways in which film festivals can create times out of historical time, and how this can, itself, challenge the external time of migration contained in reports of so-called “crisis” points. Although I will discuss this in more detail in relation to space, it is crucial to note that research with indigenous and migrant-led film festivals can show how festivals might inscribe non-linear epistemologies into their apparatuses, challenging hegemonic notions of time in their very modes of practice. Such research can also highlight the various modalities through which film festivals might construct migration and/or time, illuminating a plurality of practices within the film festival network.

## Space

The study of film festivals and migration invites, too, an investigation of space. As I argue above, film festivals are constituted by border crossings, and a focus on migration can attune our research to the different modes of border crossing permitted, or not, across the film festival network. This may also suggest a parallel between migratory routes for people and circulatory routes for films. From the outside-in, then, we might work from accounts of migratory routes and chart parallel maps of the film festival network as well as migration films' movement through it. This cartographic approach would respond to the "spatial turn" in film and media studies (Avezzù, Castro, and Fidotta 2018, 85), most recently expressed in the data visualization and mapping techniques used in research on film circulation (Loist 2020). Such approaches are often underpinned by traditional considerations of film festivals as events taking place in fixed locations and thus within certain national contexts.<sup>5</sup> While this emphasis on location may risk further entrenching national borders, recent research on migration and cartography highlights ways in which an outside-in approach can challenge hegemonic accounts of migration at its outset. This depends upon the maps that we choose to begin from. Instead of using migration authorities' often dehumanizing maps of migratory routes, such as the controversial "Frontex map," we might begin from cartographies that chart movement from migrants' perspectives (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020). This would include the "fictional cartographies" exemplified by the Migration Trail map, a map which traces migrants' emotional journeys as well as their movement across Europe (Toffano and Smets 2022). Beginning from rich cartographies such as these, we may uncover alternative maps of the film festival network—maps reconstructed through the lens of migrants' experiences.

We can deepen the understandings created through such maps by moving from the outside in, focusing on specific film festivals that appear along the cartography we have traced. Like any process of selection, this implies assumptions about significance or legitimacy. This next iteration thus necessitates a further re-evaluation of the geography of the film festival network, and assumptions concerning the significance of the festivals that constitute it. Building on the work of decolonial scholars, we might deliberately focus our attention on those festivals or regions that challenge

<sup>5</sup> Studies which consider film festivals in their national context are innumerable, evidence, perhaps, of the productivity of notions of "the nation" in film festival studies and beyond. For a small sample of such research, see Czach (2004), Chan (2011), Ahn (2012), Peirano (2016), and Stevens (2016).

dominant notions of geography, and even the “legitimate” film festival.<sup>6</sup> Pursued in this way, an outside-in approach can also reveal new connections between film festivals within the network, as well as alternative frames through which to consider migration. The Slum Film Festival in Nairobi, for example, is not a migration film festival *per se*, but shows films “made by film-makers from the slums and marginalized areas around the world” (FilmFreeway, 2019). While a crucial site for the cultivation of slum filmmaking, the festival’s emphasis on marginalized areas more generally enables it to support other kinds of filmmaking too—including films made by and about migrants (Dovey, McNamara, and Olivieri 2013). In 2017 the festival awarded Best Film Kenya, Best Script in Feature Film, and Best Actress to *It has Killed my Mother* (Patient and Hortence 2017). The film was directed by Abdul Patient and Aminah Rhwimo Hortence, founders of Exile Key Films, a film production company based in the Kukuma refugee camp in Kenya. This case highlights a possible intersection between slum and refugee filmmaking, further complicating dominant ideas of migration as located solely at the border.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, it also challenges our assumptions about which film festivals might be relevant to the development of migration cinema, including the very notions of “type” that this chapter began with. Thus, through its movement inwards, an outside-in approach can bring to the fore ambivalences in frames of migration as well as in frameworks for analyzing the film festival network.

Which assumptions, and which definitions of space and migration would we find if we were to take an approach that begins from the inside? What would we find if we were to consider migration not only as a geopolitical question, but as a modality of movement? Working with film festivals attuned to displacement, such as migrant and indigenous film festivals, can highlight modalities that privilege mobility and fluidity over fixity.<sup>8</sup> For example, the Ambulante Film Festival is not held in one place, but travels around Mexico, privileging not capital cities but marginalized places often overlooked by the state. Further disrupting notions of fixity, the festival’s program changes as it travels, adapting to the audiences and regions it

6 I refer to the work of such scholars throughout this chapter. In addition, see Olivieri (2011), Petty (2012, 2020), Falicov (2010), Peirano (2016), Sendra (2020), and Esteves and Oliveira (2021).

7 We should complicate even this notion, however; as films such as *Bangla* highlight, migrants and refugees live not only in slums or camps either, but often in large cities. Indeed, the relationship between city-based migrant film festivals, filmmakers, and audiences is a vital area for further research.

8 On indigenous film festivals, displacement and alternative modalities of programming, see Peirano (2017) and Córdova (2017).

visits. The festival has been described as animated by a “wandering spirit” which crosses regional and socio-political borders (Brown 2019). While not “migrant” in the sense of crossing national borders, the festival engages with displaced indigenous filmmakers and migrants at the sub-national level (that is, within Mexico, yet not recognized as “Mexican”). This is complemented by the itinerant modality of the festival itself, a modality that challenges common notions of film festivals as fixed to a city, national identity, or even a defined programme.

Moving our attention towards other areas of the film festival network, we can contrast the itinerant modalities of the *Ambulante* festival with film festivals such as the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (HRWFF). Such festivals also operate at a sub-national level, but in very different ways, instantiating different conceptualizations of space, border crossing, and migration. I include this example not only to demonstrate the iterative work of moving between film festival types, but because it suggests the contradictory power dynamics contained in notions of the transnational that I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. The comparison provides, in other words, a foundation from which we might start thinking through some of the paradoxes of the film festival network. HRWFF is typical of many human rights film festivals, in that it is organized in association with international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), is hosted in international centers for human rights, and is involved in networking for human rights film (de Valck 2017, 210). Through its association with the international Human Rights Watch NGO, and hosting of editions in various cities, the festival crosses national borders. It is certainly transnational, although I would not say that it “migrates.” This is because HRWFF is transnational in a way that appears to maintain notions of fixity while framing global Northern cities as centers of power. HRWFF brings a predetermined program of films to a series of cities (usually capital cities) in the global North (Amsterdam, Berlin, Geneva, London, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Oslo, San Diego, and Silicon Valley). These cities constitute a sub-national network of centers for festival editions and the advocacy for human rights.

Therefore, while the *Ambulante* film festival appears to work on the sub-national level in the sense of subaltern—i.e., working “from below,” privileging people, places, and practices unrecognized by the state (Spivak 2005, 476, 482; Sharp 2011)—HRWFF works on the sub-national level in a different way, transmitting a fixed program through a global network of “media capitals” (Neves 2012). Although crossing national borders, it does not appear to undo them. Rather, the organization of this festival instantiates the concept of migration as a human rights issue to be advocated for (and thus

addressed) in the global North. Comparing these two film festivals through the lens of mobility, border crossing, and two concepts of the sub-national, we can notice the contradictory notions of migration and space that might animate different parts of the film festival network, as well as human rights policy more generally. It suggests the plurality and power dynamics of the network, and (thus) the necessity of apprehending it through an iterative (re)engagement with a variety of film festival types, sites, and modalities.

## Coming Full Circle

In this chapter I have argued for the relevance of studying film festivals in relation to concepts of migration and vice versa. I have suggested some trends in the circulation of migration cinema around the film festival network, and reflected on what this might tell us about film festivals—be that types, times, and spaces of festivals or of the network as a whole. Moreover, I have considered some of the methodological challenges involved in studying film festivals through migration. I have compared two possible approaches, an outside-in and inside-out approach. The former starts from ideas of migration produced outside of film festivals and then looks inwards to examine how these factors might condition the development of the film festival network and the activities of film festivals within it. As the examples above suggest, such external definitions are often, but not necessarily, hegemonic—they can encompass official statistics that perpetuate notions of “peaks” in rates of migration, but may also include counter-hegemonic maps that trace alternative, experiential maps of migrants’ journeys. The focus on the external, and likely scope of such research, invites large-scale, data-driven methods such as Morettian (2013) distant reading, applied to festival paratexts and calls for submissions, or the circulation research pioneered by Skadi Loist (2020). The inside-out approach, by contrast, invites the case study-based approach common in film festival research, but seeks to move beyond an analysis of singular festivals and enable comparative research that apprehends the film festival network more broadly. This approach ultimately aims to leave aside dominant ideas of migration and even the epistemologies on which they might be founded—epistemologies of linear time or geopolitical space (e.g., the nation state). Such ideas can shape film festivals, and research may attend to the tensions between activist aims and persistent, dominant epistemologies often at play in festivals’ treatment of migration (for example HRWFF, above). However, the analysis I propose typically seeks out practices and modalities of film festivals—particularly

those in the Global South—that might offer alternative, counter-hegemonic conceptualizations of migration. Working with such film festivals, we may then discover new ways of seeing film festivals and the network.

Through an iterative movement between inside and outside, both approaches offer the possibility of complicating the concepts they began from. This movement seeks to analyze film festivals both holistically and comparatively, considering their complexity as events that might simultaneously resist and reproduce colonial power relations. In doing so, it furthers Tuck's work of "thirding" the resistance/reproduction dichotomy, refusing to reduce festivals to just one side of it. Further research in this area should, therefore, go beyond the examples I have given above, and consider the complex interactions between festivals' different facets: their organizational structures, internal hierarchies, programming, locations, engagement with audiences, and place within local/regional cultural industries.

If we move between the outside-in and the inside-out, we find ourselves coming full circle. While these two approaches begin from different places, they need not be mutually exclusive. Within the same project, we might find a movement from the outside in through Lev Manovich's (2011) notion of "close reading" individual objects (e.g., film festivals) within a large dataset. This process of close reading might surprise us, even challenge some of the assumptions through which the dataset was created. Alternatively, moving from the inside out, we might investigate how the concepts or modalities we discover within specific film festivals might apply across the film festival network, or if they are complicated. We also need not pursue this research alone: rather than an individual project that seeks to "do it all," we might create space for a network of plural projects that work in dialogue with one another. In doing so, we would find ourselves contributing further to the "pluriverse" of film festival studies, animated by both its multiplicity of approaches and the dialogues between its members. Whether working inside-out or outside-in, being pursued within one study or through dialogue between many, these approaches have the potential to meet in an iterative, open pluriverse of film festival studies, bringing new, migratory awarenesses to bear.

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## About the Author

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## 9. Unraveling Curatorial Dilemmas: Practice-Led and Auto-Ethnography in the Study of Human Rights Film Festivals

*Alexandra-Maria Colta*

**Abstract:** This chapter proposes a methodological approach that can reveal the often hidden to the outsider eye, difficult decision-making process and the factors that influence programming and the ethos of human rights film festivals.. Drawing on the main case study (Document Human Rights Film Festival in Scotland) this chapter discusses the use of practice-led ethnography and autoethnography to the study of programming film festivals and the findings they generated. These methods contributed to the understanding of the often difficult-to-articulate subjective decisions behind curation as well as the creative, emotional labour involved in this process. This chapter also reflects on the dual role of the researcher and/ as practitioner, the challenges and opportunities of being both insider and outsider, fulfilling industry and academic agendas.

**Keywords:** ethnography, practice-led research, film festival research, festival programming, festival labour

On a Sunday afternoon in January 2020, a few months after completing my PhD thesis on the politics and practices of programming human rights film festivals (Colta 2020), I had one final important presentation to deliver: an overview of my findings and recommendations to the festival that has been my main case study: Document Human Rights Film Festival<sup>1</sup> (henceforth

<sup>1</sup> Document Human Rights Film Festival website: <https://www.documentfilmfestival.org/>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

called “Document”), the longest-running film festival in Scotland dedicated to human rights-oriented non-fiction cinema within a local and global context. Next to me at the round table sat the current coordinators alongside the founders, board members, and thesis supervisors, all of whom had contributed to the longitudinal study of Document. I shared with them the findings accumulated during two years of fieldwork, discussed the findings in relation to the broader international human rights film festival landscape, as well as the analysis of archival materials which covered historical data from Document’s seventeen years of existence. In this chapter, I will explain and reflect on the methods used during my doctoral research, focusing on the mixed-method approach that included statistical analysis of programming and contextualizing it with practice-led ethnography, where the researcher takes an active role in the activity and organization that is the main field of study. I will discuss some of the findings that these methods generated, such as imbalances in the process of programming, in terms of access to films that represent a diversity of voices, in terms of criteria for the selection, and in terms of the challenges of working as a film curator or programmer. I will also discuss the role and responsibility of the researcher to address injustices and challenge misconceptions in the field, concluding with the outcomes of the knowledge exchange session referred to above, at the end of the PhD project.

## **Researching Human Rights Film Festivals: Context and Methods**

Human rights film festivals have proliferated over the past 30 years, becoming specialized cultural intermediaries that actively shape and define “human rights cinema” (Grassilli 2012) and ways for engaging audiences in conversation and potential action. Despite the common thematic focus and the collaborative nature of their activity based on knowledge and resource-sharing rather than competition, human rights film festivals come in all shapes and sizes, organizational structures, and programming approaches. By 2020 when I completed the research for my thesis, I identified over 130 film festivals that define themselves as human rights oriented, and each of them is influenced by the specific local and temporal context in which they operate (Colta 2020). The scholarship so far has addressed the manifold manifestations of human rights film festivals and their history and activism (Iordanova and Torchin 2012), their development in relation to local contexts and the “humanitarian gaze” (Tascón 2015), and their power to transform audiences into political subjects (Tascón and Wils 2017). There

are also notable contributions that explore the process of programming from professionals who draw on their own practical experience to explain how human rights discourses and films circulate globally (see Blažević 2012; Kulhánková et al. 2015). However, the decision-making process and the factors and criteria that influence programming remain relatively under-explored. Also, more research is needed into grassroots, autonomous organizations guided by a do-it-yourself practice and ethos, operating at the fringes of mainstream culture (Lowndes 2016). Such organizations, their politics and practices, tend to be overlooked by film festival studies, as they do not hold the same prestige or commercial influence as their top-tier counterparts. Nevertheless, human rights film festivals in their manifold organizational forms and politics, actively contribute to discourses around human rights, activism, and cinema, problematizing the representation of human suffering at a distance.

My thesis and this chapter explore the perspective of a film festival located in Scotland, in the Global North, in a liberal democratic country, while showing an international program of films. The issues of representation of other nations and suffering on screen are at the core of this study and determine a critical, self-reflexive, and practice-led approach. This approach was facilitated by the Applied Research Collaborative Studentship (ARCS), designed as an institutional partnership between two universities—Glasgow and St. Andrews—and Document. This festival became my main case study, providing access to its resources and archives as well as an opportunity to actively participate in its activities.

Founded in 2003, Document began as a grassroots organization, exploring human rights issues through documentary alongside debates and discussion events. Over the years, it developed into a professional cultural organization but maintained a relatively small-scale team and program compared to other festivals, showcasing around twenty to thirty films over a long weekend in one main venue, with a team of two or three year-round core staff. Nevertheless, it is an important example to explore due to its close historical links to the Glasgow grassroots art scenes as well as for its international reputation, as the only UK member of the Human Rights Film Network, a network of human rights film festivals from all over the world.

The research design was developed as a longitudinal case study of Document, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods associated with “practice-led ethnography,” auto-ethnography, and action research, which were deployed gradually as my fieldwork progressed over two years. I started from an outsider position, exploring the wider landscape of human rights film festivals, looking at how they have developed in close connection to

their local history and stakeholders. I then continued as an insider, studying the festival's archives, doing interviews with key people, and collecting data about funding, films, and audiences during the two editions covered during the fieldwork. My role gradually became more involved in the organization's activities, as I actively participated in the programming process as a member of the selection panel and I contributed to decisions regarding the festival's output. This approach was informed by "practice-led research" that "focuses on the nature of creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance for that practice, in order to advance knowledge about or within practice" (Skains 2018, 85). Undertaking programming responsibilities, I focused on the task and range of activities as well as on the conditions in which programming takes place and how it operates. These different activities that I undertook as an active member in the organization were not included in the research project from the start. However, I quickly realized that such a close involvement was essential, as I had to go through these experiences to understand on a personal level the work and the challenges that the programmers can encounter. This access and positioning within the organization had to be constantly negotiated, guided by the dual role of the ARCS research project—to advance academic knowledge and to disseminate findings about film festival programming to be used as a resource for the festival to develop its practices and operations.

### **Counting Imbalances in Festival Programming—Quantitative Data**

Festival scholars have called for more quantitative data to provide a balance between facts and narratives, between the particular and the general (Armatage 2009; de Valck 2007; Stringer 2003). Many of these scholars explored how festivals are extremely concerned with their image and the way they present themselves, choosing what information to display, publicly or privately, with researchers or journalists. Thus, access has often been indispensable to researchers seeking the facts that can paint the fuller picture behind the stories. Similar to other ethnographic studies of film festivals that aim to balance qualitative detail with quantifiable facts (Mitchell 2017; Dickson 2014), I also found that "hard data" revealed striking results that complemented the qualitative detail obtained during fieldwork.

As a member of the selection panel for both the 2016 and 2017 editions, I had access to the full list of submitted films received through the open submission process. To submit to Document was free and open to everyone,

regardless of country, year of production, or premiere status. Within a five-month window, the festival received over 220 submissions each year, which is typical of festivals of a similar theme and size as Document. In order to assess the accessibility and outreach of this process, I grouped the films by the main country of production to discover their geographical distribution, which revealed striking results. As you can see below (tables 9.1 and 9.2), both charts reveal how Western Europe dominated the submissions section for both editions. The fewest submissions came from the African continent (four films in 2016 and eight in 2017).

**Table 9.1. Number of submitted films by continent/region 2016**

Africa	Asia	Australia & NZ	Europe (E)	Europe (W)	Latin America	Middle East	North America
4	21	7	23	111	25	16	15

**Table 9.2. Number of submitted films by continent/region 2017**

Africa	Asia	Europe (E)	Europe (W)	Latin America	Middle East	North America
8	15	42	116	13	25	17

One of the possible reasons for this disparity is that Document is a European festival, and its profile and reputation were built in this context. This data also reinforces the idea that human rights discourse is a Western construct as well as the fact that film industries in Western Europe are more developed<sup>2</sup> and thus produce significantly more films. In turn, selecting films from these sources, had the potential of perpetuating the humanitarian gaze, a concept formulated by Sonia Tascón that evokes a relationship of unequal power between who is watching and who is being watched. In her 2015 book *Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context*, Tascón suggests that films and consequently festivals, can establish a gaze depending on the geographical direction in which they turn when representing suffering—from a distanced, privileged position seeking impoverishment and pity in others. Tascón explains the tension of representing human rights violations and suffering at a distance, or the “humanitarian gaze” through a set of looking relations, whereby some organizations or films “look out”

<sup>2</sup> Other regions such as North America also have very developed film industries, but in this particular case, the data was not as significant.

at others' troubles from a detached, distant position or "look in," framing and understanding their own.

When I shared this finding with the festival team, it sparked a conversation on how to make the festival more accessible and to encourage submissions from under-represented filmmakers. The data showed that the festival wasn't reaching out to those groups despite the *no-fee-and-no-premiere* policy. As such, guided by the findings and by the coordinators' renewed curatorial aims, the festival transitioned to a targeted submissions approach, sharing the call with organizations, filmmakers, and networks working with filmmakers and producers outside Europe and North America, to encourage more direct engagement with groups that might not have engaged otherwise. It also meant sourcing films directly from distributors or filmmakers to fill in the gaps in representation and plurality of voices. While the editions that followed are beyond the scope of this research, and have not been studied in-depth in relation to this new approach, rethinking the submissions process generated more awareness and self-reflection over representation and the active role of festivals in reaching out to marginalized filmmakers and their stories.

### **Unraveling Curatorial Dilemmas—Practice-Led Ethnography**

The process of curating or programming a film festival differs from one festival to the other. The decisions are mainly subjective, driven by the curators' instinct and are rarely articulated to the public or even internally to the team. A practice-led ethnographic approach and an active involvement in the curatorial process can illuminate some of the reasons behind these decisions by exploring them on the ground, as they unfold.

For this, I immersed myself in the field as an observer and active participant in the selection panel. I watched over 110 films during fieldwork for which I did additional research, wrote programming notes, participated in programming meetings, organized interviews<sup>3</sup> and kept a research diary reflecting on this work and how that made me feel.

Using these methods for collecting data, I was attempting to understand the criteria and ethos that guide curation, and which often remain unspoken. Some of these methods were more effective than others. The interviews, for instance, only revealed a part of the story. When asked about criteria, some

<sup>3</sup> In addition to two group interviews with the coordinators who led the two editions of the festival during fieldwork, I also interviewed the festival's founders, one of the former coordinators, and other collaborators who worked closely with the festival over several years.

of the programmers said: “the idea is that it’s open and that there aren’t any criteria.” Some of their programming notes were ambiguous as well, with wording such as: “interesting, moving story; not good enough,” “fine; can’t see it at Document.” Some programming notes were detailed, focusing on the form, content, or reaction to the films. Programming meetings were also rich in debates about formal quality over content or urgency of subject matter over ethics. The process of watching films on my own, writing notes about them, and discussing them in a group setting expanded my understanding of the criteria. Eventually I started noticing patterns in interpreting and reviewing films. This led me to identify ten main criteria that illuminate the programmers’ values and responsibilities towards the filmmakers, the audience, and the profession itself. These represent the main dilemmas encountered in the programming process and they are further nuanced and established through communication and collaboration among each other and with other contributors who can influence this process (such as board members, funders, external experts, or advisors etc.). Most of these criteria can be applied to other festivals, as they address more general notions of aesthetics, ethics, representation, and pragmatic reasons. However, some of these curatorial questions (for example, questions 5–7) are specifically relevant to human rights or political/identity-based festivals.

#### Key curatorial questions

1. Is the film “well-made”?
2. Does the film add variety to the program through form and/or structure?
3. Does the film address Document’s thematic interests?
4. Is the film ethically made?
5. Does the filmmaker have a personal connection to or lived experience of the subject matter?
6. Does the film offer a “looking in” perspective?<sup>4</sup>
7. Does the film offer positive/hopeful stories?
8. Is the film relevant in the current political climate?
9. Can this film secure funding?<sup>5</sup>
10. Would the film go well with a specific venue/context in terms of themes, occasions, or collaborations?

<sup>4</sup> “Looking in” was mentioned above in relation to Tascon’s conceptualization of the “humanitarian gaze.” In this context, it refers to the programmers actively seeking films that address domestic issues, in order to encourage an active, critical spectator who can relate more directly to the local context.

<sup>5</sup> This pragmatic criterion referred to the potential opportunities to apply for funding with a certain film or strand.

For example, when addressing a film's formal quality, there was a consensus that a distinctive vision, filmmaking skills, attention to detail in terms of sound design and editing were very important. However, equally important and praised were the amateur camerawork or rough-style aesthetic if they were in line with the subject matter or the conditions of filming.

Similarly, a lot of attention was given to the ethics of filmmaking, as the programmers often analyzed the relationship with the subject, the claims made in the film as well as the context of production. For example, one of the points of debate revolved around the level of intrusion of the filmmaker or the use of techniques from fiction storytelling (re-enactments, animation, using professional actors, or staging scenes). For instance, Document 2017 selected *Left on Purpose* (2015), a documentary about Mayer Vishner, an anti-war activist of the 1960s. The film focuses on the man during his old age, as he battles addiction, depression, and considers suicide. As the film progresses, the filmmaker becomes more involved in the story and in trying to stop Vishner from taking his own life. The tension that looms over the entire film (and is indeed expressed throughout) is the fear that the camera becomes an enabler, capable of pushing the protagonist closer to suicide, or being complicit to a tragedy in the making. The ethical debate and the filmmaker's role in the protagonist's life are central not only to the film, but to the programmers as well. This invited reflection on the potential impact on audiences, which raised further ethical issues about presenting the subject as a vulnerable figure, influenced by the presence of the camera and the attention provided by subsequent visibility. Evaluating this film and others like it for Document prompted an exercise in self-reflexion by the programmers and a conclusion was reached that there would be a need for providing additional space where these ethics can be discussed, questioned, and analyzed with the audience. Through conversation and by reflecting on our choices, it became apparent that such techniques are justifiable in documentaries, when they are done with honesty and with an ethical approach towards the subject and the context.

Another curatorial dilemma focused on the spectatorship of suffering—many of the films we watched presented violence, gross human rights abuses, and graphic images of suffering. This prompted many conversations around the importance of showing these images to raise awareness and provoke a reaction versus desensitizing audiences and perpetuating compassion fatigue.<sup>6</sup> The programmers felt they had a responsibility to be a filtering

<sup>6</sup> This concept has been discussed by several scholars, including Susan D. Moeller (1999) and Lillie Chouliaraki (2006) to argue that exposure to human suffering in the media can

wall between the filmmakers and the audience, limiting the number of films that depict trauma and suffering. The programming notes revealed countless instances of films that were “distressing,” “sad,” or “unwatchable” for showing images of violence, torture, badly injured people, or dead bodies. On the one hand, such films depict the realities that many people are facing and can create a sense of urgency and mobilization. On the other hand, they can perpetuate feelings of pity towards powerless victims, indifference, or choosing not to see at all (Juhasz 2016). Document programmers, driven by their responsibility towards audiences, wanted to challenge this perception by offering alternatives: “heroic victims,” empowered protagonists that have agency to fight back (Nash 2018) and elements of humor or hope, which can be powerful tools to create empathy rather than apathy for the viewer and convey new beliefs and perceptions about human rights films.

These are some examples of curatorial questions or dilemmas that programmers of film festivals, in particular those dealing with documentary or human rights cinema, that emerged from observation and active participation. These are not fixed or clear-cut criteria, but they inform the final selection and decisions in terms of how films are then presented to the audience or paired with other off-screen events. Even if the criteria change over time and are shaped by each team of programmers, it is important to verbalize and make the curatorial criteria visible, highlighting the potential biases, gaps, and responsibilities inherent to this work. Not only would this transparency create more self-awareness among the team itself, but it would also encourage a more open relationship with filmmakers and other stakeholders.

### **Auto-Ethnography and Action Research: Programming as Emotional and Precarious Labor**

The insider position in the field offered me an insight into the conditions of programming and the type of work involved. While programming is a collective, creative effort, it often carries a tremendous emotional toll, for festival workers more generally, but especially for human rights-oriented ones, due to the thematic focus, which will be discussed in more detail below. Throughout most of the programming process, the programmers did not know if the funding they applied for would be awarded, if they

lead to emotional and physical exhaustion, no longer able to feel compassion for others, thus disconnecting the viewer from the people represented on screen.

would be paid for their work, and if they would be able to cover screening fees for any of the films selected. The festival staff mentioned feelings of anxiety thinking about their own and the festival's sustainability, while the public-facing narratives had to present an optimistic image of growth, constant renewal, and excitement.

Furthermore, the constant exposure to images of suffering had a significant impact, something which I discovered first-hand. As I mentioned earlier, I kept a research diary during fieldwork, guided by auto-ethnography which "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). This is an extract from this diary where I describe the conditions of watching a documentary as part of the selection panel:

The film follows the protagonist, a teenager from Afghanistan living in an asylum seekers' center for minors in Denmark. He is about to turn 18 and be kicked out of the center or deported to his home country. While watching the film, I was very aware of what had just happened a few days ago in Germany when a 17-year old Afghan teenager and refugee had launched an axe attack on a train. This comes after several other terrorist incidents in France, Germany and other parts of Western Europe. It feels like whenever I turn on the TV, I hear about a new atrocity happening and this has definitely affected my film viewing, especially those that focus on asylum seekers or refugees living in Europe. I am trying to find different stories to those told in the media beyond this constant state of threat and fear but it is difficult to overcome this over-burdening feeling. (Fieldwork journal extract, July 21, 2016)

This extract echoed the countless comments of my colleagues who expressed feeling "sad," "distressed," "overwhelmed" by images of suffering while encountering such suffering on a daily basis in mainstream media. These findings made me approach programming as a form of emotional labor, where the programmers suppress their feelings of anxiety, anger, or distress to convey the narrative of success for its stakeholders. Having these feelings towards some of the films did not influence the programming process beyond the responsibility to balance difficult representations of suffering with some positive, hopeful stories. However, it did push the programmers to become more resilient throughout the film-viewing process. One of the programmers evoked the act of suppressing feelings: "You have to engage less with emotions than as an audience member" in order to be able to "allow yourself to react to films" (Daily 2016, pers. comm.). In other words,

programmers have to be able to compartmentalize and manage feelings, to anticipate and understand emotional impact and potential avenues for mobilization, without being overwhelmed by it. All of these findings generated several discussion events on precarity in the film festival sector among local organizations.<sup>7</sup>

## Challenges, Ethics, and Knowledge Exchange

In order to take a critical approach and analyze the process and outcome of the programming process, I needed some distance from the event and the festival. I encountered similar problems as Dovey (2015), who also draws on her own professional experience in founding, directing, and curating to inform her research interests in African film festivals. She felt it was “difficult to achieve the necessary critical distance when evaluating one’s own work, making it all too easy to adopt an inappropriately self-congratulatory tone” (2015, 23). As a member of the submissions panel and a contributor to the festival output, this challenge intensified as I needed to repeat the narrative of success in reports submitted to funders and in highlighting the benefit for the wider audience. However, this made me reflect on the questions related to the role of festivals more broadly, such as: What makes a successful festival? How do we understand value and measure it? What were the aims of the event and were they achieved? I applied these questions to the study of programming and to develop a critical evaluation of the live event as it is understood by my own and the coordinators’ subjective practice. Similar to Winton and Turnin (2017) and Dovey (2015), I also argue that it is important to recognise our own role in the culture we are studying, how “we (as researchers) may also bring about change, and be changed” (Dovey 2015, 22).

Even if some of these findings were not related to my initial research questions, I felt they had to be in my thesis and on the agenda of festival research. I wanted to raise more awareness of this matter and make it public through open debates. This may be a case of what anthropologists call “over-rapport” (Given 2008; Roberts 1994), empathizing too much with the research subjects at the

<sup>7</sup> “Labour of Love—Festivals Speak Out on Working Conditions” was an event organized as part of the Radical Film Network Scotland festival in 2018 that celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of 1968. The event brought together trades union activists with festival workers in a conversation that explored the need to champion the working conditions of festival workers, whilst cognisant of the precarious nature of the organizations themselves. In 2019, as part of the seventeenth edition of Document Film Festival, a second event on this subject was organized to address these issues and identify action points for change.

expense of critical thinking. My drive for intervention in the field, proposing an action that could lead to change, is also problematic. Even though I was an insider in some of the festival's activities, I was still an outsider in other affairs and I had a slightly more privileged position, as a PhD student associated with the university. I was not directly hit by the precarious working conditions, but I was inviting others to speak out about them and expecting them to openly share these personal experiences. As researchers, our academic output can be used to raise awareness and work with the people that are part of our research to make an intervention in the field and bring about positive change. We might also have a different vision of what needs to be changed and what methods are necessary to achieve it. Whether that refers to creating more sustainable and fairer working environments, or to putting pressure on funding bodies to support organizations to develop in the long-term, they will emerge from the people going through these experiences on a daily basis. However, this is a challenging element of research that requires further consideration about what should we, as researchers, do with our findings—maintain a detached position or raise awareness and try to facilitate change?

## Conclusion

The study of film festivals requires a multi-method approach, exploring both the quantifiable facts as well as the qualitative details. Ethnographic studies of film festivals have become more frequent, broadening our understanding of the lived experience of a festival from the perspectives of audiences or of its workers. Drawing on a practice-led approach and auto-ethnography provides a nuanced understanding of creative practices such as programming, as well as the conditions in which meaning is produced. Keeping track of personal reactions to the work can generate more knowledge about this practice, which, in turn, can potentially have a long-lasting, practical legacy. At the same time, these methods can make visible the unspoken, unrecognized labor that goes into festivals, as well as providing potential avenues for change towards becoming a more sustainable, fair, and inclusive practice.

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## About the Author

**Alexandra-Maria Colta** completed her PhD at the University of Glasgow in partnership with the University of St Andrews and Document Human Rights Film Festival, a collaborative framework exploring politics and programming practices at human rights film festivals. She is also involved in film curation and distribution, working with the Scottish Documentary Institute as Distribution and Talent Manager, and as Board Member at Document Human Rights Film Festival. She also teaches film and television studies, curation, and festivals. Before starting the PhD project, Alexandra studied media and cultural studies at the Centre for British Studies at Humboldt University.

# **Part 3**

Post-COVID-19 and Film Festival Studies



## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 10. Programming under COVID-19: London Film Festival 2020<sup>1</sup>

*Maria M. Delgado*

**Abstract:** This chapter reflects on a number of programming decisions made during the 2020 London Film Festival. Drawing on data from the BFI, team programming meetings and discussions, and input from the Festival Director as well as four of the festival's programme advisors, the chapter maps the process of what programming for the London Film Festival entailed through a pandemic that shook the world.

**Keywords:** programming, film audiences, film curating, filmmakers, festivals

If you'd have asked me to discuss programming for the British Film Institute (BFI) London Film Festival before 2020, this would have been a different piece of writing. When I have spoken or written in the past about this work, it's generally in terms of how the core programming team work with a wider group of program advisors, our commitment to view all open submissions that come in, my own programming decisions and the films that I am highlighting,<sup>2</sup> and how the festival has developed since Adrian Wootton took over as Director in 1996. I usually mention that the BFI London Film

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to my colleagues at the BFI London Film Festival (LFF) for their thoughts and insights, especially Grace Barber-Plentie, Helen de Witt, Sarah Lutton, Leigh Singer, and Tricia Tuttle. Thanks also to film producer and curator Nico Marzano and Joana Granero of the London Spanish Film Festival for broader conversations on film programming.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, three examples of the annual features many of the program advisors offer: Delgado (2018), Lutton (2019), and Robey (2016).

Festival, or LFF as it is commonly referred to, is the UK's largest film festival, founded in 1957. It is supported by the British Film Institute or BFI, one of the world's oldest and foremost national bodies for cinema. It's a twelve-day festival, held in early October, screening to audiences in cinemas across London. It usually has UK and international premieres of more than 200 features from around the world, as well as a number of shorts programmes. It has a series of strands—Love, Debate, Laugh, Dare, Thrill, Cult, Journey, Create, Family, Treasures, and Experimental—introduced by the festival's artistic director and Head of Exhibition at the BFI Clare Stewart in 2012 which offer audiences distinct ways of exploring the program (Gant 2017). Each year, the festival has a different graphic which features across all branding, from the printed brochure to the website. The festival has been presented in association with its lead sponsor, American Express, since 2010.

But then, in early 2020, COVID-19 arrived and everything changed. The UK government legally introduced lockdown measures from March 26, later than many other countries in Europe. With the BFI closed, plans to travel to Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival (BAFICI) jettisoned, and the BFI festival team considering how to deliver the planned FLARE! London LGBTIQ+ Film Festival (due to run 17–28 March), the LFF had to be reconsidered. For the first months, it wasn't clear what exactly the 2020 format might look like; nobody knew what COVID-19 might mean even in the short or mid-term or even when the BFI would reopen. Fast forward to September 8, and just seven days after the BFI reopened, the program for the 2020 festival was announced.

So how did we get there? These reflections, drawing on data from the BFI, our team programming meetings and discussions, and input from the Festival Director as well as three of my fellow program advisors, map the process of what programming for the London Film Festival entailed through a pandemic that shook the world.

At the time of writing (2022), I am part of a team of twenty-one program advisors; we work with a festival team that works on the festival all year round: the Director Tricia Tuttle, Senior Programmer Michael Blyth, three other film programmers (Grace Barber-Plentie, Laure Bonville, and Hyun Jin Cho), two other programmers with responsibilities for series and XR (Rowan Woods and Ulrich Schrauth), and four shorts programmers (Nellie Alston, Philip Ilson, Aduke King, and Elaine Wong).<sup>3</sup> The festival is a team effort. So, it's all about dialogue—dialogue among us all about what we've

<sup>3</sup> There have been some changes to the festival since I wrote this piece in 2022. Kristy Matheson took over as Director of the Festival in 2023; new programmers have entered the core staff and

seen, what we'd like to prioritize and dialogue, and how the films fit into the different program strands. Dialogue with sales agents, producers, directors, national film agencies and film promotion bodies, other festival directors and programming teams. Dialogue.

Between March and June 2020 with COVID-19 raging and no idea of when the government lockdown would end, we were looking at a very different festival model, but it was still ultimately about dialogue. Meetings with the core programming team—the advisory programmers meet the core team both on an individual basis and in monthly meetings—ensured we shared information gleaned from producers, directors, and sales agents who had films ready for viewing or in post-production. Continuing to view films in a purely online format, we continued to discuss what the priorities would be with discussions in May and June already identifying a programming strategy that would present around fifty as opposed to 200 plus UK premieres, all screening in a virtual form, with each film presented with the introduction and/or Q&A, and frequently both at a specified time. A range of free events including an international short film programme, Screen Talks, roundtable discussions, and a new Virtual Exhibition of XR and Immersive Art was also planned. The expansion to a greater focus on VR had been scheduled with the appointment of Ulrich Schrauth, the director of Hamburg's VRHAM! Virtual Reality & Arts Festival in March 2020. Schrauth's plans for a physical installation had to be shifted to an online format in line with much of the festival delivery, but it marked a development towards a new focus on bringing immersive audience activities into the core festival programme. Anticipating plans for some cinemas to reopen from August 14, the LFF also partnered with exhibitors in the BFI Audience Network and twelve cinemas in the UK to present around twelve previews that would also feature on BFI Southbank, shifting the festival's focus outside of London to a greater degree than in previous years—Mike Leigh's *Peterloo* (2018) had premiered outside London at HOME Manchester in 2018 as part of that year's London Film Festival. With an audience jury replacing the official jury for the festival's competitions, the 2020 festival was going to look very different to any previous LFF edition.

On July 2 the BFI announced the new format for the festival in an official press release—the official program was announced on September 8. Countdown had begun. Selection was harder than in any previous year; we had to reduce the usual number of invites as the program was 72 percent smaller than what we usually featured—fifty-nine films as opposed to

Matheson has restructured the team of advisors to create a selection committee. I joined the selection committee for the 2024 Festival.

229 in 2019. Decisions felt tough, as there was so much strong work that we just couldn't invite. There were difficult conversations with filmmakers, producers, and sales agents about films we loved but that couldn't make it into the festival. I've been acutely aware of the challenges that filmmakers, producers, and sales companies have had in trying to find spaces for their work in 2020 and I've felt a strong responsibility during 2020 and into 2021 to pass on recommendations to other UK festivals, sharing films that delighted, impressed, troubled, and challenged me with other programmers, in the hope that audiences in other fora can engage with them.

Selecting films was also a different process. We had monthly Zoom meetings but as my colleague Leigh Singer, the program strand advisor for Laugh, commented, "To view new films on a small laptop screen, alone at home, and largely forgo the group discussions and connections to a wider programme, felt very isolating" (2021). We were also very aware of the broader context in which we were working. COVID-19 was everywhere, reshaping our understanding of the world, providing a new perspective on the dangers of environmental exploitation, requiring a new way of thinking through relationships to community. "Last year's devastating events," Singer continues, "challenged far more than film festival programming, but within that remit, it brought home to me more than ever how much cinema—as productions, as festivals, and as audiences—thrives and depends on being a communal endeavor and entity" (2021). It is perhaps no surprise that Pedro Almodóvar, whose *The Human Voice* we featured as one of our preview screenings as part of the 2020 Festival, noted the importance of the cinematic experience on the film's Venice premiere (Roxborough 2020).

Audiences are key to LFF. The way I write copy is always thinking about potential spectators. The Q&As that follow our screenings are spaces for audiences to engage with what they have seen, share views, ask questions of the filmmaker and/or other members of the creative team, request clarification, and listen to how others are responding to what they have just viewed (and indeed experienced). In late August and early September 2020, I had to record introductions to the films and Q&As with filmmakers without sharing that space, without the festival audiences that make festivals, to quote my colleague, Experimenta's co-curator Helen de Witt, "the rock and roll of cinema" (2021). One of my favorite things about the LFF is engaging with audiences in the moment of having seen the film; it feels unique and important. It's a point echoed by Sarah Lutton, the Festival's Nordic Program Advisor who sees programming as "also very much about audiences. I learn a huge amount from being part of and observing audiences...I know how much filmmakers get from sharing their films in person, hearing reactions

and getting questions from a public audience. So often this is only one of the few times filmmakers actually meet the people who buy tickets for their films" (2021). The virtual screenings involved rethinking how to engage with audiences. What does it mean to host a Q&A when you are not in the room with the audience, you can't hear their responses to the film and observe their engagement as you begin the dialogue with the filmmaker? The festival films were scheduled to premiere at a particular time to ensure this sense of an event remains, but this proved new territory for us all, especially with filmmakers who we may not have met before or coming to the LFF for the first time. We were all aware of the fact that whatever we could do, it wasn't the same as a live experience. "To conduct a Filmmaker Q&A via Zoom, with no audience present," Singer discerned, "seemed like a poor facsimile of the true moviegoing and festival experience" (2021). Lutton additionally noted the importance of her prior relationship with the filmmakers she interviewed on Zoom for the introductions and Q&As:

Although it was a strange experience to film the introductions and Q&As remotely, I felt we already had a connection and a sense of trust with one another, as I had met the filmmaking teams in person on other occasions, and had presented and hosted Q&As with both sets of filmmakers at previous LFFs. I think that made a huge difference to the way we were able to speak with each other, especially in terms of the questions I felt able to ask and the candor of the filmmakers' responses. The filmmakers knew I genuinely valued their body of work, and that I had been a passionate advocate for their creativity. I think it would have been much harder to conduct an online Q&A with a filmmaker I had never met, as there was very limited time before the recording to attempt to build any new rapport (2021).

In rethinking how audience participation might work for the 2020 festival, audiences were invited to take the place of the Festival's official juries—the festival has a best feature film competition, a best documentary feature (Grierson) competition, and a best first film (Sunderland) competition. London is primarily recognized as an audience festival rather than a competition festival,<sup>4</sup> but these awards are important in providing a means through which films might secure wider exposure and distribution in what is seen as a difficult market

<sup>4</sup> For further contextual information on the London Film Festival's position within the broader festival ecosystem and its development as an audience festival, see Diestro-Dópido 2021, 141–93.

for non-English-language exhibition.<sup>5</sup> Carla Simón's *Estiu 1993/Summer 1993*, first seen at the Berlin Film Festival in 2017, is a good example here—with a Special Mention for the Sutherland Competition in 2017 and distribution with New Wave Films following in 2018.<sup>6</sup> Viewers who attended the Virtual London Film Festival were invited to vote on Audience Awards in four categories: Best Fiction Feature, Best Documentary Feature, Best Short Film, and Best XR.

When announcing the 2020 format, Festival Director Tricia Tuttle mentioned the importance of getting “back to cinemas”; the decision to work with independent and cultural venues across the UK is about taking the festival out across the UK to a new level, ensuring also that safety is prioritized for audiences and cinema staff (BFI Press Release 2020a). The seventeen cinematic premieres presented in collaboration with cinemas, together with the fifty-four virtual premieres reached audiences of 141,253. The festival opened with *Mangrove*, part of Steve McQueen's Small Axe BBC series, presented as a free screening in thirteen UK cinemas, an important contribution to wider discussions about black histories in Britain in a year where Black Lives Matter had highlighted historical and structural injustices, and widespread racist practices, calling for widespread change, including changes to film industry practices.<sup>7</sup> The closing-night film, Francis Lee's *Ammonite* was presented through the Festival's partnership with distributor Lionsgate, not just at BFI Southbank but in over 350 participating cinemas on October 17, reaching 14,000 admissions that day—the highest grossing film on that date (BFI Press Release 2020b). The events, masterclasses, and talks program reached 174,285 (BFI Press Release 2020). In comparison, the 2019 Festival saw 178,789 for screenings and events—with 17,730 of these press and industry screenings. Forty-one countries were represented in the 2020 program with 39.6 percent of the films directed by women. The Virtual Audience Awards (out in place for the 2020 Festival only) were won by: Thomas Vinterberg's *Druk/Another Round* (Denmark 2020, Best Film); Benjamin Ree's *The Painter and the Thief* (Norway 2020, Best Documentary), Tommy Gillard's

5 The annual BFI statistical Yearbook, published by the BFI's Research and Statistics Unit, lists exhibition figures for the UK. The most recent Yearbook at the time of writing can be found here: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/industry-data-insights/statistical-yearbook>.

Huw D. Jones (2017, 153–57) summarizes the UK market position for 2013 from an EU survey where the UK is positioned as having the smallest market share for foreign-language films, with only 5 percent of audiences stating they had seen “many” foreign-language films on any platform (TV, DVD, VoD, streaming, or in the cinema) as opposed to 19 percent in Lithuania and 18 percent in Spain. The UK's 5 percent represents half of the European average.

6 Simón's second feature *Alcarràs* (2022) won the Golden Bear at the 2022 Berlin Film Festival and was picked up for distribution in the UK by Mubi. It was part of the 2022 BFI London Film Festival.

7 See, for example, Steve McQueen's experiences presented in Thorpe and O'Hagan (2020) and Esquire Editors (2020).

*Shuttlecock* (UK 2020, Best Short Film), and Anna West and David Callanan's *To Miss the Ending* (UK 2020, Best XR/Immersive Art).

In terms of Spanish and Latin American work, we had six films and a Screen Talk with Michel Franco following the UK virtual premiere of *Nuevo orden/New Order* (2020)—which had had its world premiere at Venice where it won the Grand Jury Prize—reaching audiences of 1,929.<sup>8</sup> I was particularly keen to feature *New Order* because its political stance seemed to embody something of the extremes of the current moment—it felt resonant and timely, a prescient reminder of the horrors of the inequalities that COVID-19 had brutally exposed. *Un crimen común/A Common Crime* (2020) by Argentine director Francisco Márquez, similarly exposed social injustices and the dangers of a bystander culture that resonated in ways that recalled the work of Lucrecia Martel. These felt important urgent films that I wanted UK audiences to engage with.

Reflecting on the Festival's Nordic program for 2020, Sarah Lutton observes that:

Because of the significantly reduced number of titles we could show in LFF 2020, I ended up with only two Nordic titles selected for the programme.... The two Nordic titles *Another Round* and *The Painter and the Thief* were both films which I knew would resonate with audiences in a very personal way.... In many ways LFF 2020 was a great year for Nordic work as both *Another Round* and *The Painter and the Thief* scooped the festival's audience awards for Best Fiction and Best Documentary respectively. I think the very personal and intimate nature of both films lent itself well to online viewing. (And, of course *Another Round* went on to win the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, so in many ways LFF audiences could feel gratified that they had been given the opportunity in this unusual year to see the "Best" international film). (2021)

We all programmed, I would argue, with a heightened awareness of the temper of the times and this did have real implications for particular strands. "Let's be honest," Leigh Singer recognizes, "laughs, and comedy in general, seemed far thinner on the ground, which didn't make 2020 programming any easier" (2021). 2020 forced programmers to rethink how they work. For LFF we were only able to program about 28 percent of our usual number of films. There was so much good work that we saw but couldn't fit into the program. It

<sup>8</sup> The accessible version of the Screen Talk with Michel Franco is available on the BFI's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqR1oUmJvJ8>.

was hard to have conversations with filmmakers, producers, and sales agents about films we loved but that didn't make the final cut—although this played out differently across the festival. Lutton notes that: "The pandemic affected the availability of a significant number of films I had anticipated being able to watch and select for LFF. Many were either re-scheduled for future release, delayed in production or production was postponed (in the end several of these films were completed/made available for consideration for LFF 2021" (2021). De Witt observes that "submissions were fewer as films had not been finished. Added to that, some filmmakers withdrew as it was important for them to have their films on a cinema screen. This we understood. In the end, although the program was reduced, we felt it still retained the mix, balance and texture of what Experimenta has come to be" (2021).

The smaller festival for 2020 led me to reflect what this might mean for filmmakers in terms of more limited spaces for physical exhibition of their films. Of course, Mubi, Amazon Prime, Netflix, and other digital platforms are buying work for exhibition across streaming platforms but will they buy some of the smaller, more adventurous films we programme? I remember in 2017, programming a small Brazilian film directed by João Dumans and Affonso Uchôa called *Arabia/Araby*. Argentine filmmaker Martín Rejtman had recommended the film to me when he'd seen it at BAFICI that year, a poetic, tender road movie that sought to give form to the life of a nomadic individual whose life might have so easily been rendered invisible. Seen at LFF by a buyer of films for airlines, a deal was struck for exhibition across a group of airlines making a real difference for a small independent production company who had made the film on a shoestring budget. I worry that such films might fall between the cracks or quite simply that we will inevitably be able to program less work with implications for the filmmakers that might have made it into the program in previous years.

In addition, we know many films have been delayed in post-production because of the challenges COVID-19 has brought. A number of Latin American filmmakers I was in touch with during 2020, undertaking post-production work in a different country to that which they are based in, faced travel restrictions and the closure of labs. As one filmmaker dealing with delays to their post-production process mentioned to me, the next few years are going to bring a fair number of challenges. And challenges to filmmakers are going to produce challenges to programmers and film festivals as films take longer to be completed. This is likely to disproportionately affect countries in the Global South which don't have highly developed film industries with strong or long-established levels of state support.

As programmers we can't disaggregate our curatorial work from film production. We are all part of the same ecosystem. A number of producers and sales agents sought to wait before sharing their films with programmers during 2020, to see what the exhibition landscape might look like in 2021 because they needed to consider their presence at festivals alongside broader exhibition and distribution plans within Europe, North America, Latin America, and further beyond. My own conversations with Spanish and Latin American filmmakers identified specific trends shaping their plans, including delayed shoots and postponed post-production plans. A number of filmmakers commented that the delay to shoots as well as post-production disruption led to a focus on the writing of new scripts or refining scripts in development, although they recognized that they had no idea when and how these scripts would eventually be made into films. I feel as programmers, we will need to remain alert to ongoing developments as the filmmaking, exhibition, and distribution adapts to a post-COVID-19 world. Films in production are reflecting the unsettling nature of these times; a number of the films I saw for the 2021 festival, although made pre-COVID-19, had an apocalyptic quality that feels resonant and timely.<sup>9</sup>

Audiences responded well to the 2020 festival, as our figures demonstrate, but the future will necessitate agility as we navigate, negotiate, and attempt to change this world in crisis. When I first drafted this chapter, we were completing the program for 2021's festival which featured a new partnership with the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall—a neighbouring institution to the BFI's Southbank venues where the opening and closing night films as well as further galas and screenings were held. The 2021 Festival has now come and gone. We retained an enhanced digital presence with special events and Screen Talks recorded and also available to audiences outside the UK, and a digital program presented, as in 2020, via BFI Player, the BFI's screening portal. Physical screenings were also hosted at ten venues across the UK, building on the initiatives undertaken for 2020.

On the eve of the Festival opening, journalist Lanre Bakare interviewed Tuttle with the latter reflecting on LFF as "a symbol of resistance for an industry that has been 'absolutely battered' by the COVID-19 crisis" (Bankare

<sup>9</sup> This feels even more the case in 2022 with films reflecting very directly on both COVID-19 lockdown cultures—as with El Pampero's productions, *La edad media /The Middle Ages* (dir. Alejo Moguillansky 2022) and *Clementina* (dir. Constanza Feldman and Agustín Mendiáharzu 2022)—or featuring broader references to COVID-19 in the characters' behavior and mask-wearing—for example *Tenéis que venir a verla/You Have To Come and See It* (Jonás Trueba 2022).

2020).<sup>10</sup> In further considering the partner venues outside London that formed part of the LFF in 2020, Tuttle went on to note that:

If I am going to venture some sort of prediction for the future, I think we could see a second rise of the importance of local independent cinemas and what role they play culturally within local communities. (Tuttle, quoted in Bankare 2020)

For the programming team, in 2021 we built on what we learned from working through 2020 and the focus on a broader national remit, as well as new modes of working—this included regular fortnightly catch ups with the core program team which made a difference in really building in new structures for very regular communication to address the challenges of not being able to watch films together and comment post-screenings on what we have seen. There were some physical screenings arranged for selection viewing but the vast majority of what we watched for the 2021 festival remained online. Physical attendance at the 2021 festival was 139,400, down 26.6 percent on the in-person attendance for the 2019 festival but there were fewer films featured than in 2019—161 feature films against 229 for 2019 (Dalton 2021b). Tuttle noted the importance of bringing audiences and filmmakers together: “it was great to feel and hear how much it meant to filmmakers, artists, audiences and the industry to be out in force with real vibrancy and a sense of major occasion” (Dalton 2021b). It is this “live” element—the sense of being in a space to experience the film with others and then to be part of that process of engagement between audiences and members of the creative team—that felt so important in 2021.

The 2020 Festival allowed audiences across the UK to engage with the program through its digital hybrid format. 2021 saw the LFF continue with a presence outside London and the Festival is likely to retain this UK wide presence moving forward. Reflecting with Singer, Lutton, and de Witt on lessons learned from 2020, we all agreed that our modes of working shifted as we attempted to think through what a festival needs to be during a pandemic. “To produce any kind of festival at all in such testing circumstances,” Singer concurs “was admirable. But the core LFF

<sup>10</sup> On job losses through COVID-19 to the film industry in the weeks leading up to the 2020 London Film Festival, see Jolly (2020). Dalton (2021a) summarizes the findings of a Creative UK Group report that articulates, as of July 2021, a loss of £2.6bn in GVA during the pandemic. Richards and Pacella (2022) offer useful reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on a range of stakeholders working across Australian film festivals that provides some points of intersection with the reflections in this chapter.

programmers have also been clear about learning some tough lessons from 2020, and I believe there's a real determination to take a greater team-oriented working relationship into future editions, especially if ever again forced to work remotely. That already feels reflected in 2021's dynamic; long may it continue" (2021). Lutton noted significant changes to modes of working that has shifted how we engage with distributors, sales agents, and producers:

Programming is very much about the relationships you build with filmmakers, companies and organizations. I am regularly making new relationships and seeing existent relationships evolve. It is challenging to make new relationships from online-only meetings. I would not like this to continue. However, I have felt more in touch with many existent contacts as we now use Zoom to meet and we have spoken many more times than usual during the LFF selection process. We are no longer reliant on meeting only at physical film festivals and markets. This is a very positive change. (2021)

De Witt too observes that COVID-19 has changed festivals definitively:

They are live events where you never know what will happen—what the playlist will be, and who you will see. Everything is an exciting surprise. You can discover that you actually love the cinema of Albania, you can find yourself standing next to Benicio del Toro at the bar, you can learn how artists' films reveal unexpected visions of ourselves and the world around us. Importantly, festival-going creates new filmmakers. It is the place of intense cinematic pleasures and life changing inspiration. This, COVID took from us in 2020, and changed things forever. Some, like returning to the cinemas, will come back as they were; some will be great improvements in digital access for previously excluded audiences, but some may never be the same, as health and environmental concerns are not going to go away. (2021)

Mass vaccination programs have signaled a return of sorts for the festival culture that formed such an important part of our film viewing experiences pre-COVID-19. The BFI circulated information for festivalgoers on what it was doing to keep audiences, staff, and guests safe for the 2021 Festival—this included enhanced cleaning, BFI staff wearing masks, and the expectation that audience members (with the exception of those who were exempt) would also do so (see Anon 2021). Programmers and program advisors

wore masks on/and offstage, removing them only for the duration of the onstage interview with the filmmaker. Some press coverage commented on identified cases of COVID-19 contracted at the festival (Dalton 2021b; Hipes 2021) but I am struck, in completing this chapter, on the enthusiasm of audiences for being back in the cinema engaging with the filmmakers who came to present work at the 2021 Festival—the thrill of the live. This is what I will carry with me as the lasting memory of LFF 2021—audiences wanting to talk about what they had seen and what it meant to them. The landscape continues to feel uncertain and unstable, but I am consistently reminded of the possibilities festivals offer for encountering works that challenge and inspire audiences—both physical and virtual—to forge a sense of cinematic community.

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## About the Author

**Maria M. Delgado** is an academic, critic, and curator. Professor and Vice Principal (Research and Knowledge Exchange) at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, she has published widely in the area of transnational, European Spanish- and Catalan-language theater, performance, and film. Her film work includes a role as a program adviser on Spanish and Latin-American cinema to the BFI London Film Festival, curatorial work for the Ciné Lumière and BFI Southbank and articles for *Sight & Sound*. Publications include *Spanish Cinema 1973–2010: Auteurism, Politics, Landscape and Memory*, co-edited with Robin Fiddian (2013) and *A Companion to Latin-American Cinema*, co-edited with Stephen Hart and Randal Johnson (2017).

# 11. Steps to a Greener Film Festival Studies: A Multidisciplinary Subfield and the Environmentalist Turn

Ger Zielinski<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This chapter sketches out a possible way to green film festival studies, more precisely to seek out a new theoretical framework and accompanying methodologies that may address issues regarding, say, energy use, carbon footprint of related air travel and waste more adequately. Earlier attempts via the “new materialism” scholarship prove useful but require adaptation and the integration of aspects of the growing field of environmental media studies. Our recent experience of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the response to virtualise film festivals prompts questions concerning energy use by digital video streaming platforms and their respective energy sources. The chapter analyses and evaluates possible theoretical approaches offered by environmental media studies with suggestions on moving forward.

**Keywords:** streaming platforms, film festivals, virtualized film festivals, environmental media studies, greening media

“From technology news to corporate infographics, the vision of the Internet as a green space at once everywhere and nowhere in particular is pervasive.” –

Allison Carruth (2014)

<sup>1</sup> I should like to acknowledge my research assistant Clinton Glenn for his diligent work and the support I have received through my Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant “Buffering Online and Off” for this publication.

In this chapter I address the anticipated legacy of the sweeping virtualization of film festivals, among other types of festivals, throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic,<sup>2</sup> the environmentalist turn in media studies, and how these important tendencies may or ought to intersect one another in the nascent yet vibrant multidisciplinary subfield of film festival studies.<sup>3</sup> My main methodological-disciplinary concern<sup>4</sup> is how to integrate into my research approach an environmentalist aspect. Bringing together the study of festivals and environmentalism at first glance may seem curious bedfellows; however the intersection is timely, as I argue below. The exponential growth in online streaming platforms (and all other internet activity) can no longer be ignored for its high levels of energy consumption. This might be considered a return to and expansion of the “new materialism” of several years ago (Bennett and Joyce 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012).

Those film festivals that were not canceled during the pandemic were recreated in an adapted form online in part or in whole through a process of virtualization with multiple digital technological solutions and combinations (Zielinski 2020b; De Valck and Damiens 2021). The production of a range of virtualized or virtual film festivals centered on online video-file streaming, either synchronous or non-synchronous, suddenly expanded the possible publics well beyond the constraint of their physical locations. However, the exclusive reliance on the media infrastructure of file-streaming platforms now also poses an implicit issue stemming from the consumption of “dirty energy,” as our pre-pandemic internet activities were estimated to be equivalent to that of the entire airline industry, which produces 1 percent of all greenhouse gasses<sup>5</sup> (Carruth 2014; Marks 2020c).

As data journalist Claire Jenik notes on the increased virtualization of our activities over the pandemic, “[a] lot can happen in a minute. And even

2 See the FIAPP’s special statement to governments of all levels for extraordinary support of film festivals worldwide during the pandemic (“Why Film Festivals Matter? Call to Policy-Makers from 41 International Film Festivals and Trade Associations” 2020).

3 Sections of this chapter draw from my paper “What You Ask (and How You Ask It) Is What You Get: On Disciplinarity in the Multidisciplinary Studies of Film Festivals” (Zielinski 2020a) delivered at the online version of the Contours of Film Festivals Research and Methodologies Conference in September 2020.

4 For an insightful conversation on the related issue of positionality, see Burgess and Kredell 2016.

5 This estimate was originally calculated and proposed by The Shift Project, which has also attempted to create a browser extension and phone app for estimating the user’s carbon footprint from online activities (“Carbonalyser: The Browser Extension Which Reveals the Climate Impact of Internet Navigation” 2019).

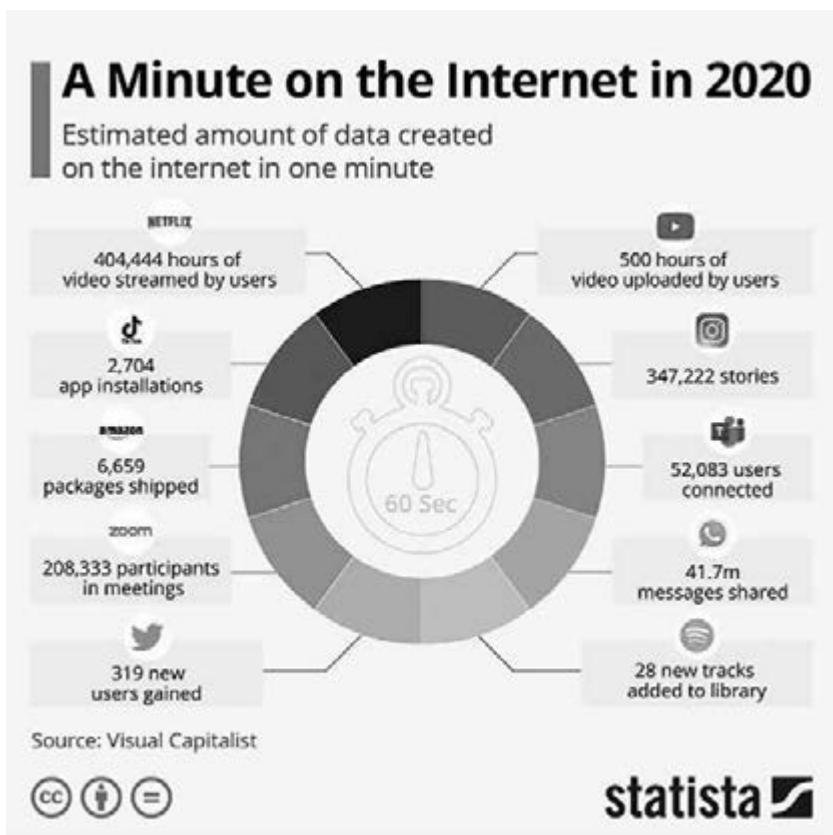


Figure 11.1 "A Minute on the Internet in 2020" (Jenik 2020)

more happened in an internet minute in 2020, the year that made the world change radically. As COVID-19 impacted our lives in a never expected way, many aspects of life – work, education, economy, entertainment, to only cite a few -- moved online.” In reference to figure 1, she continues “[...] a single internet minute holds more than 400,000 hours of video streamed on Netflix, 500 hours of video uploaded by users on YouTube and nearly forty-two million messages shared via WhatsApp. That same internet minute also contains more than 6,500 packages shipped by Amazon as well as an incredible 208,333 participants in Zoom meetings” (Jenik 2020).<sup>6</sup> Such statistics make clear the sheer magnitude of our collective internet activities, the comings and goings of various platforms and companies, but also the steady increase in our online activities. I lay out below how film festivals contribute to all

6 Streamed video conferencing has received much attention over the pandemic with a few journalists compiling best practices for users of Zoom and similar platforms (e.g., Suciu 2021).

of this, alongside Netflix, VOD, gaming, among others, but admittedly in their own smaller-scale ways.

This chapter argues that it is time to find a place in the emerging research area of environmental media studies for film festivals, which will require the careful adaptation of recent environmentalist critiques of media infrastructure and materiality (Starosielski 2019; Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020) to film festival studies and the development of new accompanying methodologies. Film festival studies as an emergent subfield itself has always already been highly multidisciplinary, with strong disciplinary divisions between the approaches that stem from anthropology, urban studies, and sociology to film studies and history.<sup>7</sup> In short, I am calling this an *environmentalist turn*, one that will soon be shared across the study of all communications media, with particular regard to not only the levels of consumption, but also the quality of their energy sources and material infrastructures, as their carbon footprints become better known.

While issues related to climate change have been weighing on many of us for years, the sudden arrival of the COVID-19 global pandemic brought to our attention certain technological trends and innovations that had already been in development in an uneven manner for at least a decade. With the sharp halt of international travel, combined with the brutally isolating effect of quarantines and lockdowns, many of our activities became virtualized and shifted online.<sup>8</sup> Although festivals have been experimenting with online platforms, this has been rather slow and unevenly distributed; the global pandemic brought with it the urgent conditions for concerted experimentation and development. Film festivals became virtualized events, as a range of technological strategies was tested out, for those festivals that were not indefinitely postponed. This surge in online activity and dependence on video-file streaming platforms<sup>9</sup> is an appropriate entry point

7 One may trace the emergence of multidisciplinary film festival studies by consulting the Film Festival Research Network's handy online research bibliography (De Valck and Loist 2021).

8 Current terminology favors the use of "virtualization" or "virtualized film festival" to indicate a festival that has at least in part and temporarily been rendered for online digital delivery, while "online film festival" refers to historical film festivals that were created exclusively for online delivery (e.g., Castle 2000). It is reasonable to anticipate that festivals will retain some virtualized component in the post-COVID-19 period and that it will be much more developed than the earlier experimentation.

9 It is useful to note that in the history of networked media music streaming has always led the way, while video followed closely behind.

to start to analyze film festivals critically, in relation to an environmental media studies framework.<sup>10</sup>

While environmentalism, environmental studies, and environmental science are not new, environmentalism has entered media studies not only as a movement to be studied but as a series of positions and approaches, concepts and research methods. Two important new international academic journals, dedicated to the emergent subfield of environmental media studies, are published in English and take on respective editorial positions of their own. *Media+Environment*'s first issue was published in 2019, while the *Journal of Environmental Media* made its debut in 2020, which I detail below in order to uncover a place for the study of film festival in the discourse. It is useful to know the limits and presuppositions of the subfield as well as how we may find ways to draw from and contribute to it.

In the first edition of the journal *Media+Environment* in 2019 Nicole Starosielski lays out the impressive breadth of approaches to environmental media studies under "elemental analysis," when she writes, "[o]ver the past decade, media studies has become elemental. By this, I mean that the field has become attuned to constituent parts, especially to the substances and substrates that compose media" (Starosielski 2019). By elemental she means material elements of any communications media, e.g., the minerals used in making the circuits in digital devices, ecological matter, or the limits on vision in light design. She understands the study of the material elements of media or "elemental analysis" as the "investigation of media's material and conditioning substrates," and claims that "from an elemental perspective, for example, the internet is not merely an array of computers and cables controlled by companies, but a phenomenon composed through water and water's regulation and through air-conditioning systems and thermocultural practices. In such a vision, all media becomes environmental media, and all media studies becomes environmental media studies," while media's elements are "processual, dynamic, and intra-active" (Starosielski 2019). Doubtless such an elemental analysis of the media of film festivals would involve a multiperspectival approach well beyond what is hitherto conventionally expected. A scholar taking this approach in its fullest sense would have to determine the expansive boundaries of the particular cultural manifestation and its many material parts and their consequences, not only including travel to and fro and

<sup>10</sup> In a separate but related text that I co-authored with Marjike de Valck, we address the carbon footprint from (air) travel as well as that from video streaming platforms (De Valck and Zielinski 2023).

online streaming, but also the production of texts by the festival, flow of communication from the festival, the physical sites of the festival, and their energy infrastructure, and so forth.

Meryl Shriver-Rice and Hunter Vaughan, the editors of the *Journal of Environmental Media*, sketch out a broad sense of environmental media studies in their first issue, when positing that “emerging interdisciplinary nexus of environmental media studies encompasses and where it falls in the contemporary landscape of scholarship, theory and applied study across various disciplines and their recent subfields committed to studies of the digital era” (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 3). For these scholars, environmental media studies “refers to applied academic studies motivated by the need to address problems at the overlapping spheres of environmental issues and the production and use of *new media*.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis here is clearly on digital media and infrastructure over old media or other communications media. Moreover, the editors understand, reasonably enough, that “[e]nvironmental media studies is an interdisciplinary response to the dramatic escalation, over the past two decades, in the role of digital media in our personal and political lives, and in the direness and awareness of environmental threats and challenges of the Anthropocene” (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 4). Moreover, the scholars posit five guiding principles in their definition of environmental media studies (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 4–5), namely:

- (1) “the term ‘media’ in this context refers to the study of digital screen culture widely, defining the digital as all that is created by the binary code of 0’s and 1’s and is transmitted electronically.”
- (2) “the term ‘media’ is limited so as to avoid a number of neologisms and analogical terms that, in our opinion, have the potential to obfuscate the objects of inquiry within environmental media studies; an example of this is ‘elemental media.’”
- (3) “the term ‘environmental’ [evokes] the interdisciplinary purview and range of topics that make up environmental studies; as is often the practice of academic environmental studies, environmental media studies should provide recommendations for action when possible and contextualize conclusions [...].”
- (4) “studies of environmental media treat the digital as material rather than virtual: the Internet and its infrastructures exist in real spaces that use resources in measurable and destructive ways.”

<sup>11</sup> Emphasis added.

(5) “we borrow from digital anthropology’s assertion that ‘humanity is not one iota more mediated by the rise of the digital’ – it is our definition of being human that mediates what technology is for each of us, not the other way around. [...] This current way of living is increasingly digital, and digital media is increasingly predominant in science and environmental communication – and it is our aim in the *Journal of Environmental Media* (JEM) to explore how this change is affecting our perceptions of and responses to environmental problems.

The editors’ very restricted view of media as only digital (i’s and o’s) (in principle 1) would surely limit any approach to film festivals to their online video-file and live streaming options. There is a polemic against elemental media (in principle 2) that rests on a fear of obfuscation and works to distinguish one journal’s position from another, whereas “environmental” is left quite expansive in its purview (principle 3). In principle 4 we can certainly agree that the increased virtualization of festivals has material consequences. Finally, principle 5 is a polemic against the post-humanist tendency persisting in digital media discourse. As film festival researchers we would have to make the case for studying the larger institution, its media infrastructure, and material demands, which strictly-speaking could not be covered by the editors’ five principles above very neatly.

While we are witnessing here two academic journals striving to distinguish themselves from one another as their subfield itself matures, how might environmental media studies contribute to our research and accompanying methods on film festivals and the questions we might ask? In light of the expansiveness of contemporary media studies one would anticipate a more open or pragmatic approach to studying not only digital media technologies themselves but also analogue media, media and film institutions and cultural formations, such as film festivals, the study of which fall into a nascent multidisciplinary area of its own. An analysis of the environmental impact of a film festival, to be sure, would include more than its online streaming or number of light bulbs used in its theaters. How would a researcher compare the carbon footprint of conventional cinema-going to watching films online, and where would such research find a place in the discourse?

Media scholar Laura Marks has initiated an important research project on the carbon footprint of file sharing and video streaming (Marks 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d). This work clearly intersects with the study of film festivals, particularly in view of their recent virtualization to reach their

audiences via online platforms during the global pandemic.<sup>12</sup> Environmental media studies calls the bluff that we have created for ourselves in thinking that digital media is far superior to analogue media and remains “virtual” without any material consequences. If we have become digital since the boosterism of the early advocates (e.g., Negroponte 1995), then now is our reckoning with the materiality and material consequences of our brave new media. The pre-pandemic estimation was that our total internet activities created a carbon footprint roughly equal to that of the entire airline industry. Evidently, the latter industry has taken a hit but has returned to its robust levels as COVID-19 has been brought further under control worldwide; on the other hand, so many of our activities have been swiftly virtualized, abruptly transforming “going to work” into “working from home,” wherever possible, which has led to a significant increase in our internet carbon footprint (De Valck and Zielinski 2023).

Marks and her team of researchers released their final report titled *Tackling the Carbon Footprint of Streaming Media* (Marks et al. 2021). The research project’s multidisciplinary team of experts consisted of Marks as the principal investigator with a humanities background; Stephen Makoni, a professional engineer; Radek Przedpelski, a new media artist postdoctoral fellow; and Alejandro Rodriguez-Silva, an engineering master’s student. It is doubtful that the project could have been accomplished without that combination of humanities or social scientific and engineer expertise and respective research methods. The project’s aim only intersects in part with those of film festival researchers. I will select a few of the most salient findings from the report to discuss below. Importantly, the team “corroborate[s] The Shift Project’s analysis that streaming video is responsible for over 1 percent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide,” which has been debated in the ICT (information and communications technology) engineering community. Curiously, the team discovered that “[s]treaming video epitomizes the rebound effect, whereby increased energy efficiency leads to greater consumption of a resource [...] Streaming video exists within a market-driven feedback loop of infrastructural expansion and consumer demand,” that continues to spiral upwards. Increased energy supply is afforded when demand is anticipated, which is known as, “[r]edundancy, or the doubling of power supplies for data centers and networks in anticipation of spikes in demand, is one of the foundations of ICT’s disproportionate carbon footprint.” Energy is doubled-up to keep the infrastructure operating at

<sup>12</sup> For discussion of the innovative Small File Media Festival (<https://smallfile.ca/>) associated with Marks’s research project, see (De Valck and Zielinski 2022, 2023; Zielinski 2020b).

peak demand. The report summary also advises people on how to take action into their own hands to curb internet activities, “[i]ndividual best practices include streaming less; streaming at lower resolution; watching physical media and TV instead of streaming; and keeping your phone for three years or more.” Digital devices of all sorts have components that require immense energy expenditure, so slowing our impulse to upgrade would make a difference collectively. Moreover, the report argues that “energy efficiency cannot be the only solution: an absolute decrease in energy consumption is necessary,” which needs to be considered in an overall calculation of energy use when comparing alternative modes of delivery.

The emphasis here on streaming is important but not everything. In brief, any analysis of the carbon footprint of a particular film festival would likely depend crucially on its size and extent, since the immense resources consumed at, say, Cannes could hardly be compared to a small regional festival in terms of the travel of guests, journalists, and audience members, but also the use of their virtualized components. In such cases, Cannes, among other IFFs, would always leave a considerably larger carbon footprint. Further research should lead us to a set of best practices for the design, structure, and running of festivals, as well as to a series of policy recommendations for various levels of government and the regulation of energy sources and industry. Important research has already been done by tourism studies scholar Rachel Dodds, which has been integrated into a very practical website for festival organizers in Canada (“Green Festivals: A Guide to Greening Your Festival or Event”; Dodds 2018), but the strategies detailed would apply elsewhere in the world. The guide is not restricted to film festivals but any type of festival or event. In January 2021, Marijke de Valck and I organized an international roundtable on greening film festivals, at which not only researchers Rachel Dodds and Laura Marks took part, but also festival organizers Amaia Serrulla (San Sebastian) and Fabienne Merlet (Locarno) (see the revised proceedings in De Valck and Zielinski 2022).<sup>13</sup> Each participant expanded on their own projects. Amaia Serrulla addressed the steps taken by the San Sebastian International Film Festival in its plan for festival directors on how to improve the design and running of festivals (San Sebastian Festival News 2021).<sup>14</sup> The festival itself, for example, commissioned an external study of its environmental impact according

<sup>13</sup> Both San Sebastian and Locarno are members of FIAPF and fall under the category of competitive film festivals, alongside the likes of Berlin, Cannes, and Venice.

<sup>14</sup> I thank journalist and scholar Antonio Peláez Barceló for bringing this development to my attention.

to the categories of mobility (all levels of transportation), waste (printed ephemera and single-use items), contracts (with green clauses), energy consumption of the screenings and event, and commitment. The summary report states that mobility accounted for 75 percent of all emissions due to the air travel of international guests. 76 percent of the paper products were recycled, while 9 percent were reused. The summary restricts energy consumption to the physical location of the event with its screenings, parties, and the everyday running of the festival; however, it lacks any analysis of the virtual components of the festival, their energy consumption and energy sources. Nevertheless, the initiative is impressive and will very likely serve as a practical model for other film festivals to follow. Similarly, Fabienne Merlet described the greening process at the Locarno International Film Festival (“Locarno Film Festival Sustainability Report 2019–20” 2020). As festival researchers, we should take note of this important new tendency in the direction of festivals. Moreover, in an area of research that rarely gains access to sensitive documents such as annual budgets, among others, qualitative approaches to the estimations will prove useful, but we will have to leave such work for a future publication.

## Conclusion

As the pandemic experience has reminded us, film festivals are not merely the sum of their films, but rather a valued event that requires expenditure and creates a wide range of cultural and economic benefits. Borrowing here the last line of Janet Harbord’s essay on the film festival as event, she writes “[i]t is possible to read about it later, or the following day, or watch it on the news or catch-up channel, but to experience the actuality of the event with all of the historical resonance of that term, the festival demands that you are there within the fold of its moment” (Harbord 2016, 80). The moment of the festival is undeniable. The aim of bringing methods from environmental media studies into our research is not to condemn or deny our cherished festivals but rather to bring awareness of their environmental impact and seek out ways of reducing it.<sup>15</sup>

With our still-fresh experiences of the COVID-19 global pandemic, our intersection with environmental media studies seems not only timely but urgent. The initiatives at the Small Media File Festival as well as at the

<sup>15</sup> Apprehensions over the anticipated uses and abuses of carbon footprint metrics and reliance on streaming platforms are addressed in (De Valck and Zielinski 2022, 2023).

San Sebastian and Locarno festivals, among a growing list of others, are promising signs for not simply the festivals but also the research to come. Film festival studies is still a nascent multidisciplinary area of research and ought to remain open to approaches that afford the most sophisticated questions to be posed and pursued.

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## About the Author

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## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 12. Festivals Must Not Only Nurture Audiences: They Must Create Them Too

*Hebe Tabachnik*

*Edited by Amanda Earnhart and Tamara Falicov*

**Abstract:** The film curator, producer and festival consultant, Hebe Tabachnik, reflects on dramatic changes in the film festivals since the 2020 onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tabachnik was not defeated by the turbulence caused by the pandemic as the festivals she programmed were evolving from online to hybrid formats. On the contrary she recognised how challenging it was going to be to get back to the past practices. The time of the pandemic became the time to adapt, evolve and create new strategies to reach out better to the audience while investing and nurturing the future one. It was also the time for building larger and stronger bridges across cultures, identities, and histories, and expanding synergies among people, communities and organisations.

**Keywords:** festivals, storytelling, audience, nurturing, diversity

For me, film programming always starts with the story, and a story that resonates with me. There is a combination of elements—the performances, the setting, the approach to the story that should be fresh and unique. I like to see the voice behind that story. If the film resonated with me, I hope it will resonate with different audiences.

I like to make sure that I listen and am very aware of the audience's reaction to the films that I program. I try to fine tune everything, taking

into consideration the subtleties of the different cities, communities, and demographics like Cartagena in Colombia, Palm Springs in California, Seattle in Washington, or Minneapolis/St. Paul in Minnesota. The Cartagena Film Festival (FICCI) has a bustling young audience fed by the city university and college life coupled with more grown up movie goers; Palm Springs on the other hand being a retirement heaven in Southern California with a very lively LGBTQ community tends to have older crowds, however being also part of one the Coachella Valley cities, is attracting a growing younger Latino fans; the Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) brings the cosmopolitan make-up of a big city, has year-round screenings presented in their own venues together with die-hard fans who watch almost the entire festival line up of films; last but not least is Cine Latino Minneapolis Saint Paul with an audience nurtured also by the year round activities of the MSP Film Society and rapidly changing demographics that include a fast growing Latino population. But the bottom line is that the programming teams in all these festivals have a common goal, bring films that the people will appreciate, they will embrace, and with which they will have a connection. Often, the characteristics of a film will encourage a particularly strong connection with a specific demographic. For example, every year the large Ecuadorian community in Minneapolis always comes to see films that represent their country at the Cine Latino Film Festival like the North American premiere of the film *The Preacher (El rezador)* directed by Tito Hara, a razor-sharp thriller set in Quito with a cast led by one of the most renown actors of Ecuador, Andrés Crespo (*Narcos*).

That doesn't mean that they don't come to others, but it's very interesting to see how we help galvanize those communities. Festivals must not only nurture audiences, but they must also create them too, as witnessed a few years ago with the film *7 cajas* (7 boxes) by Juan Carlos Maneglia and Tana Schembri (2012 Paraguay). The film was shot in a market in Asunción, Paraguay called "Mercado número cuatro" (Market Number Four). Piracy is rampant there, but because the market community embraced the film production, the directors, and their vision, everyone felt proud to participate in the creation of the film, and everyone involved swore not to pirate it. The film premiered at Toronto followed by the San Sebastian Film Festival. When released in Paraguay, it had already received accolades as a breakthrough film. The relatively small Paraguayan community in the United States learned of it through word of mouth. The US premiere at Palm Springs International Film Festival in 2013 was almost sold out due to the Paraguayan-Americans who traveled to see it. It is important how you attract an audience to see your films, but it is even more determinant what kind of films you bring that makes the audience interested and invested in that

particular story. It's a fruitful, fragile, and ever-changing dialogue between what you bring and how that content becomes something enticing for the audience to be drawn to that festival.

At the same time, I bring new voices and new stories, knowing ahead of time that sometimes those might be tougher to embrace, but in all the festivals we take the nurturing of these up-and-coming storytellers as one of the most rewarding parts of our programming. I remember many years ago a person leaving the theater thanked me for bringing a film, even if he was the only one who enjoyed it. I'm not programming for one person, but sometimes you are programming for those few. However, at the end of the day people should feel satisfied. A festival is not sustainable if the audience isn't seeing the films. If the theater is empty, something is not right. Even if it might look sophisticated to bring high-concept avant-garde media, it's not doing anybody any favors if the audience is not drawn to that. Quality is the starting point, but then you need to understand what stories will resonate. It's a fragile balance, like tuning a radio.

There's a sense that there is a grey area in terms of programming, but knowing what station to fine tune the radio to is undeniably a puzzle. It can be difficult to gauge exactly what the audience wants. There have been times when I questioned bringing certain films, and then was shocked with the audience's response. Programmers tend to focus on the details, on editing and production values, and think they know what's going to happen. Audiences prove them wrong by being freer and they just dive into the stories. I thought *Al final del túnel* (At the End of the Tunnel) by Rodrigo Grande (2016 Argentina) was going to be a serious dark thriller with just a small fan club but when I showed it, to this eager for clever, emotionally engaging, and original stories SIFF audience, they thought it was hilarious. It helped me see the film with different eyes as well. Fresh eyes. It is probably one of the reasons I love this audience so much. It doesn't matter how many films they have already seen, they are always open and thirsty for more. It was the second time in the history of SIFF that the same movie won both Audience awards for Best Director and Best Film out of some 250 feature films we showed that year.

As a programmer I feel I have an obligation to offer audiences a glimpse of culturally diverse styles of cinema. Being from Argentina, where I also went to film school, my specialty is films from Latin America, Spain, and Portugal. Though Latin American movies have been offered in additional film festival programs, Southern California's huge Spanish-speaking and bilingual population makes Palm Springs an especially apt place for film lovers to gather, with the Coachella Valley having one of the largest Hispanic populations in the United States. The Palm Springs International Film Festival is about 60 percent

White and 30 percent Latino. Currently (2023), the audience requests more Latin cinema. I know from the reaction we get when we show these films, they're thirsty for these stories. The number of Ibero-American films has been steadily increasing, the number of screens available has expanded year after year, and there have been more sell-outs than ever before. Their productions are expanding and reaching new heights every year, cementing their place as some of the most vibrant and creative cinemas in the world. Fresh new voices join seasoned storytellers to bring never-before-told stories with innovative perspectives that always keep focus on the human spirit. The recognition of this region at the Palm Springs International Film Festival, that started as the Cine Latino Award, sponsored by Mexico's largest cinema showcase, the Guadalajara International Film Festival, and the University of Guadalajara Foundation-USA became a permanent competition that highlights the Best Ibero American films in the festival.<sup>1</sup> SIFF also established a similar competition around the same time. That also indicates that the festivals' evolving audiences want more movies from across the hemisphere. Smaller signs of this cultural shift include volunteers from local colleges replacing the movie-loving retirees. We are not even close to finishing our work, but we notice more and more of these little steps forward.

And this is not just Latinos in the audience. We are creating a taste for these films among a wider community. When I program for the different festivals, I'm trying to show universal stories that people will relate to around the world, but most of the films selected are also stories that are moving away from stereotype. I try to show subject matter, genres, and a blend of stories from "nuestras raíces" (our roots) as a celebration of us, and stories that audiences in the past have said they are interested in. I love to take chances as well as to push the boundaries when possible. There is a fascinating trend in some of the newer voices from the region, to mix and blend genres, like *Good Manners* (As Boas Maneiras) by Marco Dutra and Juliana Rojas (Brazil/France/Germany 2017), one of my all-time favorites. It is a hybrid of art house and genre cinema, combining sharp social commentary with Grand-Guignol fantasy. The film premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, played at the Palm Springs, Seattle, and Cartagena Film Festivals. Another outstanding example is *The Untamed* (La región salvaje) by Amat Escalante (Mexico

<sup>1</sup> These are films from Latin America, Spain, Portugal, and the Caribbean. At both Palm Springs and SIFF, we have jury awards for the best film in the Ibero-American Competition. The award was called Cine Latino Award at the Palm Springs Film Festival when it had a sponsor but then it was changed to Best Film in the Ibero American Competition. In the case of Seattle, it carries an unrestricted cash award for the director.

2016) that competed at the Venice Film Festival. Escalante masterfully combines his usual realism with fantasy, and subversive allegorical body horror elements. Animation is also growing in the region with very distinctive styles, higher production values and concepts, and country specific stories that have universal appeal. And of course, there is the increasing thirst for documentaries that shed light on the vast complexities and riches of the region. Every year we challenged ourselves to make the experience of going to the festival relevant, thought-provoking, while inspiring and entertaining.

COVID-19 has of course changed everything dramatically. With most of the festivals going online, some limitations were erased in a second, and everything became available everywhere. Now all showcases understand the vitality of having virtual screenings and being able to reach places where before it was almost impossible. We saw it in Seattle, where the films were available not only in Washington state but nationwide. Now we, as festivals, are overlapping audiences because festivals like Sundance and the Berlinale were also available globally. Where before you had a separate crowd who went to Park City and a separate crowd who went to Seattle, with the virtual space, those borders have vanished, and we are not going back. The numbers that Sundance had in 2021 were stratospheric, borderline a million people. Once festivals tap into that, they are not reverting to the old system. The potential is apparent, as is the reality that there are people who are not going to go to Park City or St. Paul because they're hours away. This is the way society is moving. There is intense demand now, especially from young people, to get content, get it now, and get it easily.

During the pandemic, Cine Latino in Minneapolis/Saint Paul 2020, in the state of Minnesota, moved online. Though it was presented through a completely different format, the essential components of the festival were relatively unchanged. Fortunately, every film we wanted, we were able to present. The ultimate goal, to create an event that will engage and interest people, remained. The elements that did change may have actually changed for the better. One of the great advantages we had is that because everything was virtual, we could reach out to areas in Minnesota we haven't been able to reach in years past, versus just Minneapolis and St. Paul. We were also able to have more live Q&As with creators all over the world. In years past, we would bring in a few guests based on our budget. But in 2020 we had probably forty to fifty people over the week, representing a wide variety of countries and cultures. The films were only available in Minnesota, but these live conversations were free and available worldwide. This means that people could interact with our presenters, which was something we hadn't done before. Someone from a small town somewhere in Minnesota could

interact with a filmmaker in Mexico or Spain or Argentina. If an interested person wasn't available at that particular time, then the sessions were recorded. There was a crowd who would watch Q&As live, but the number of people who watched them after the fact was huge. In 2021, we had a hybrid edition for Cine Latino Minneapolis/Saint Paul, and we saw a very telling situation. People chose very carefully which films to attend in-person and which ones to watch online when that was available for a particular film. It was also evident that having guests in-person drew people back to the theaters. Audiences longed to get together and share the common ritual of that dark room, laughing or crying together in front of the big screen.

Hybrid events are here to stay though, in the post-pandemic time we are living today, festivals are re-evaluating the percentage of in-person versus virtual offerings. I see all these changing circumstances as opportunities. The in-person experience is a necessity. That didn't happen for many months and many events, and it's a loss we cannot replace. But we are building different bridges. We are getting together in a different way. It's a time of adaptation. We must create new strategies and make the best of all these challenges.

I believe my role as a programmer is to be an explorer of uncharted territories. No matter how many mountains, rivers, or plains I have seen already, it is what lies ahead, as yet undiscovered, that keeps me going. My work doesn't end when a film is selected. I like to think we help create a collective story out of all the individual ones, an ideal arena to discuss and embrace our differences, and a vital sense of community between the filmmakers, the audience, and the industry at large. I feel we have an ethical responsibility toward the films, their creators, and to the audience. We want to see them shine, grow, and strengthen their unique voices. We firmly believe in the extraordinary power of cinema and the arts, to inform, inspire, and transform individuals and communities.

## About the Author

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# 13. Tell Me Why You Care? Film Festival Cultures, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Care

*Dorota Ostrowska*

**Abstract:** The attitude of care is one of the most enduring features of film festival cultures. It is present in the fabric of film festivals manifested in the work of curators and programmers, in film festival themes and points of focus, and among audiences and communities. By caring to curate and to organise a film festival event, be it online or live, film festivals create spaces of healing, presence and recovery for communities of film-makers, film practitioners and wider audiences. In this chapter I propose care as a methodological tool to examine constitutive elements of film festivals and their dynamics. I consider care as the overarching framework helping us comprehend critical aspects of film festival cultures and its potential to renew themselves beyond the points of crisis.

**Keywords:** aesthetics of care, ethics of care, programming practice, film festivals

## Introduction

When I first began to think about the idea of care, I was looking for ways to conceptualize the experience of film festivals in war zones. The main example I had in mind was that of the first Sarajevo Film Festival (October 23–November 3, 1993) organized during the brutal and long siege of Sarajevo (April 1992–February 1996). The COVID-19 pandemic made debates about care gain new relevance. They provided a new impulse and inspiration for my reflection about care in relation to film festival cultures which were in particular need of care at the time of the global health crisis.

What is bookending my exploration is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the impact it has had on the cultural life of Ukraine, in particular in relation to film festivals ("Spotlight on Film Festivals in Ukraine!" 2022). Whilst film festivals in war zones and in areas and periods of crisis have been my main focus, I have also found myself returning repeatedly to the relationship between the discourses of care and A-list film festivals on which much of my work on film festivals have focused. For this reason, I will also refer to the A-list film festivals in my reflection on care here as the A-list film festivals provide a particular case study of care in the context of film festival cultures.

My aim is to present ways in which theoretical debates focused on care in political philosophy, as well as in theater and performance studies, can be integrated into critical studies of film festival cultures. I argue that these debates on care offer a new conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of film festival cultures and practices. They are particularly helpful in enhancing our understanding of the relationship between programming practices and film festival audiences. Ethical and aesthetic aspects of care also can help us conceptualize how film festivals could become avenues for collective healing and renewal beyond the points of crisis experienced by various communities or a wider society.

I will first present a brief overview of the existing debates about care and outline the contours of how these conceptual frameworks can be applied to film festival cultures. I will then follow with an exploration of different types of film festivals and how they could be understood in relation to the ethics and aesthetics of care.

## Debates About Ethics of Care

The ethics of care have been an important feature of film festival cultures and practices. They were present in the work of festival curators and programmers, in film festivals' themes and focus, and also among film festival audiences and communities. In many cases film festivals have been set up to respond to a real need within a community for a particular form of cultural practice thus making the film festival practice a source of care for the community. By caring to curate and to organize a film festival event, be it online or life, film festivals have been creating spaces of healing, presence, and recovery for communities of filmmakers, film practitioners, and wider audiences. Women, LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities, migrant, as well as sidebars of documentary and human rights film festivals, came into existence as an

enduring gesture of care towards objects, issues, people, and communities (Iordanova and Torchin 2012; Tascón 2015; Tascón and Wils 2017; Ostrowska 2019). Also, A-list film festivals' pledges regarding gender parity, festivals' environmental impact, management of human resources at film festivals and within film industry, concerns around mental health, diversity, and the inclusivity agenda—can all be seen as an expression of care (Collective 5050 2018; Berlinale 2020; Berlinale 2022; Locarno Film Festival 2021; Cannes Film Festival 2021).

Whilst various film festival practices appear as expressions of care there is little in terms of critical reflection regarding care in film festival scholarship. One exception is a festival review by Dagmar Brunow (2020) where she explicitly uses the term care while discussing a festival organized during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have been trying to address this gap in the film festival scholarship by drawing on the existing research and writing on care in other disciplines. It hasn't been an easy task for there is an extensive literature on care spanning medical and environmental humanities, feminist political philosophy, science and technology studies, and importantly theater and performance studies.

Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries* (1993) is one of the key texts on the feminist ethics of care. There Tronto presents one of the most encompassing and commonly-referred to definitions of what care is, arrived at with Berenice Fisher:

On the most general level, we suggest that caring can be viewed as *a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web (Fisher and Tronto in Tronto 1991, 103).

Tronto's work was important as a feminist intervention within the area of ethics of care. She questioned the association of women with any care-giving function within society, and of care with feminine, weak, and home-based. She found these assumptions problematic because they meant that care was not fully and openly part of the public discourse. She argued that "the values of caring—attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, meeting others' needs—[are] traditionally associated with women and traditionally excluded from public consideration" (Tronto 1993, 3). She aimed to bring care back into the center of the public discourse and weaken the link between care and women which she saw as politically disabling. As a

result of this rebalancing of how care was commonly thought about Tronto wanted care to become a new principle around which our social, economic, and legal relationships were organized.

Tronto's understanding of care was important for the authors of *The Care Manifesto* (2020) which followed from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic ripped through care homes across the United Kingdom on the one hand, and the supportive manner in which various communities pulled together, on the other, that intensified the focus on care in public debate—both how it affects an individual patient and how it is practiced and organized in a wider society. *The Care Manifesto* aims to rethink the practices around care in the medical setting and crucially also in a wider society. Just like Tronto, the authors of *The Care Manifesto* stress the issues of interdependence in our society and the world, which makes the attitude of care the necessary and only possible position ethically: “to put care center stage means recognizing and embracing our interdependencies” (2020, 9). The Care Collective, who authored *The Care Manifesto*, postulates a need for a shift in our concept of care away from the market (neoliberal ideas of self-care) and from the intimacies of family and kinship, already advanced by Tronto, in order to develop “a more capacious notion of care” focused on our interdependencies and communities (2020, 35). The authors of *The Care Manifesto* not only make care part of the public discourse but see it as an engine to drive the transformation of our societies, and basing it on a very different caring model.

The need to go beyond the mother-child dyad as a totemic one dominating the collective conception of care while essentializing men and women was postulated by Tronto and reiterated by the authors of *The Care Manifesto*. The decentering of the mother-child dyad in the predominant conceptions of care was a necessary gesture to arrive at a more expansive and all-encompassing concept of care embodied in all types of relations we may have in the world. Such a concept of care would be politically active, inclusive, and based on a wide range of interdependencies, not just the primal ones binding a mother and a child. As compelling as these arguments might be, decentering of the mother-child dyad in the debates about care met with criticism from writers such as Nel Noddings who emerged as one of the key proponents of the idea of care as rooted in motherhood. But it was not an essentialist but rather relational definition of motherhood which Noddings eventually embraced when she wrote about the importance of “caring relation.” She argued that it was “relations, not individuals, [which] are ontologically basic.” She thus used “caring” to describe “a certain kind

of relation or encounter" (2013, xxi). It is the recognition of motherhood as very important but also as one of many caring relations we establish in our lifetime, both with people and objects, which was the most fruitful and interesting shift in the debates about care for me.

As we will see later, motherhood as an expression of the caring relationship plays a particularly important role in the context of film festival cultures, in particular in relation to film programming practices. The dynamics of the mother-child dyad as described by D. W. Winnicott, serve as a productive model to explore cinema curating and spectatorship as embodiments of care. For this reason, Noddings's interventions about the debates about care and motherhood are important for how we can conceptualize care in relation to film festival cultures, in particular in relation to programming and curating practices.

## What About Aesthetics of Care?

What is striking in the main debates about care, both past and present, is the lack of attention to cultural activities and their social role in the context of care. In fact, Tronto goes as far as being openly dismissive of artistic practice in relation to care. Artistic pursuits are not seen as care because for Tronto they are not directly "aimed at maintaining, continuing, or repairing the world." Following this logic means that "to play, to fulfill a desire, to market a new product, or to create a work of art, is not care" (Tronto 1993, 104). She uses an example of dance therapy and refers to it as a "mixed case" when it comes to her concept of care (1993, 204n10). Tronto argues that such mixed cases have a caring end as an objective but are not pure examples of care which she sees more as an ongoing and all-encompassing process *and* the end. Artistic activity does not constitute such a caring process for her, thus leaving important elements of her argument about care incomplete.

Work done in medical humanities is an important exception in the writings about care and cultural activity. It was Julia Kristeva who spoke most directly about the link between the two in a medical setting involving patients. For Kristeva, a practicing psychoanalyst and cultural critic, caregiving was intricately connected to the psychic lives of patients which are often of secondary importance to medical doctors focused on restoring the body back to health (2012, 156). The emphasis put on the individual's psychic life provides foundations for her intervention in "Cultural Crossings of Care: An Appeal to the Medical Humanities" (Kristeva et al. 2018). The article underlines the crucial and not just secondary importance of arts

and culture in the context of medical practice where it is often seen as an afterthought in the healing process rather than its essential ingredient.

But it is the publication *Performing Care* (2020) by Amanda Stuart Fisher and James Thompson which takes Tronto's argument about care directly into the realm of artistic activity, thus providing a very much needed expansion of Tronto's work. In his contribution Thompson explores the relationship between artistic activity and care as "aesthetics of care" defined as "sensory ethical practice" (2020, 44). Stuart Fisher argues that "care might be understood as an embodied, practiced and artful phenomenon" which allows her to conceptualize both artistic practice and value as intrinsic and constitutive elements of care (2020, 3). Fisher Stuart and Thompson's central pre-occupation is with performance arts, in particular theater, which like cinema and film festivals rely on the audience response, and the relevance of the performance for them. For this reason, some of the key questions around political and social relevance of this kind of art, which they explore in terms of care, immediately resonate with both cinema and film festivals. In this way "care emerges as being constitutively implicated within the concept of performance" while I argue that it is so implicated in the realm of film festival programming (Stuart Fisher, 2020, 7). The question is how does it happen in practice?

Thompson discusses three conditions which need to be met for care to gain such aesthetic dimension: preparation, execution, and exhibition (2020, 45). Preparation for an art project undertaken in reference to aesthetics of care rests on the idea of mutual regard. Performers design their project which is open and transparent in terms of their intentions and goals. Locations are chosen in such a way that disabled members of the public can attend, and they are within geographical and financial reach of the members of the public. Execution "focuses on the process of collaborative working on artistic projects that forge inter-human relationships" (2020, 45). These relationships of care have an aesthetic dimension which is "a shape, feel sensation and affect" (2020, 45). Finally, the exhibition aims at forging a particularly strong, affective, and respectful relationship with the members of the public (2020, 46). As we will see few film festivals meet these conditions fully which demonstrates potential limitations of the application of the concept of aesthetics of care to all film festivals. It is particularly problematic in regard to A-list film festivals.

### **A-list Film Festivals: Do They Really Care?**

It is difficult to see film programming at most A-list film and business-oriented film festivals as a full embodiment of the aesthetics of care. They

are exclusive rather than inclusive events when it comes to preparation and execution. The locations of Cannes, Locarno, Venice, and Sundance are difficult to access and travel is costly. Berlinale and Rotterdam are exceptions to the rule but even they are not easily reached for international attendees because of the costs of travel, accommodation, and legal barriers such as visas. Little is known of the actual processes behind their programming choices apart from limited accounts from the insiders. While in terms of execution there are likely to be elements of mutual regard it is not something that we have much insight into or knowledge of. In many ways the lack of access and insight into these major international film festivals makes them the antithesis of mutual regard which underpins the aesthetics of care. The difficulty of access and exclusive nature of these mega events puts them in the category of careless rather than caring.

But it is different when it comes to the execution, when A-list film festivals are deeply concerned about their audiences—the organizers want the audience members to be moved, captivated, and receptive to the programmes they put on annually. They do care about their reactions and want to engage the audiences. These audiences made up largely of film industry professionals bring in with them their own set of expectations into the festival—and in fact want to have them met. Is then the execution at A-list film festivals exponent of the aesthetics of care? The answer is yes, but sadly this relationship of care is a limited one and extends only to a very particular and selective professional group; this brings into question the overall social relevance of this particularly unique act of aesthetics of care for a film-going public. Yet, somehow a number of films, but not all of them, which perform well at A-list film festivals manage to resonate beyond film festivals. In other words, there is some continuity between the work of film festival programmers and those audience members who don't attend film festivals but see films shown there in other contexts; it may be at a local, thematic, or community-based film festival or simply at a cinema. How do we account for it in the framework of Thompson's typology?

There is an important element of aesthetics of care which is at play regarding cinema and film festivals which Thompson's typology does not account for, and which allows us to explain the impact careless A-list film festivals have beyond the film festival event and whose impact is experienced as an act of care for cinema and cinephilic audiences. It is a question of care in relation to inanimate objects—in this case film. The cinephilic activity is an expression of aesthetics of care directed at an inanimate object rather

than a person.<sup>1</sup> Care for inanimate objects such as film is the starting point for the aesthetics of care which originate at A-list film festivals and resonate with cinephilic audiences beyond. More often than not the condition of arthouse cinema and cinephilia are seen as being in a state of perpetual crisis which positions A-list film festivals and their various strategies and activities as cinema's guardians, enablers, and even saviours. Such an aura of crisis strengthens the perception of A-list film festivals as caring in the eyes of its various audiences—even though the industry-based members of the audience are the recipients of the lion's share of this care.

### **Festivals in War Zones and Situations of Crisis: Risking to Care**

The intensely intimate experience of collective film viewing—the darkness of a cinema hall, the proximity of strangers sharing the same space, and the concentrated focus on screen of those facing it easily evoke some of the elements of the mother-child relationship as analyzed by writers such as the British child psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott. He saw the mother-child relationship, based on exchange and play, as foundational not just for the personal development of an individual human being but also as a framework for any cultural or political activity. As we transition from childhood into adulthood the sphere of play expands to encompass a broad range of activities which has to do with leisure, pleasure, art, politics, and work (Winnicott 1971, 1986; Kuhn 2013). Winnicott shows how the mother-child relationship rooted in care is not essentialist, romanticized, or politically reductive—everything that Tronto saw as problematic—but instead it is enabling and empowering as it reverberates into the realms of the adult's cultural activity, work, and politics. When we try to relate this dynamic of care to the film festival cultures we are faced with an intriguing question as to the impact the experience a film programme at a festival has on its spectators. What is the impact of caring curating and programming on the audiences? What can this care blossom into during and after the screening? Can it emit and be present in other realms of human experience the way

<sup>1</sup> The engagement with ethics of care within STS (Science, Technology, and Society Studies) can be a source of a valuable insight for critical film festival studies which is worth further exploration and investigation. Debates around ethics of care on the one hand and those focussed on cinema as technology on the other could provide a basis to develop a shared conceptual framework between STS and film festival studies (Puig De La Bellacasa 2017; Gaudreault, Marion, and Barnard 2015; Hidalgo 2017; Held 1993; Kittay 1999).

mother's care is for a child once it grows up? What would these other realms be?

It might be helpful to consider first the objectives film programmers and curators may have when putting together their programmes. Personalities and personal interests of the programmers, and the intense emotional labor required in the programming practice, play a role which is as important as the broader context in which they put their programmes together (Czach 2016; Colta 2019). Individual programmers may want their audiences to see a specific film, with a challenging aesthetic or formal elements, or to get across a message—which might be of a political nature, controversial, or even seen as subversive. Among all the different concerns the programmers might have, the nature and composition of the audience is the paramount one. At a time of crisis at audience festivals (as opposed to business ones) the principal objective of film festival programmers is to put together a programme which shows that they understand, and care for their audience members. Nowhere has that been more apparent than in the programme of the first Sarajevo Film Festival which was organized when the city was under siege. This is how the festival director described the conditions in the city: "once I was in the besieged Sarajevo, I learned that the city was a special universe of its own. It lived a mythical time. Killing, hunger, horror... but there was also a kind of everyday life, in a strange way both mad and normal. There were artistic activities, several theater productions were staged, an occasional concert was played, there were exhibitions and some documentary films were produced. The city lived, died and was resurrected at the same time. Beware - No romance here! It was ghastly" (2009). Imagine putting a film festival on in a city like Sarajevo besieged by Serbian snipers.

This film festival became an act of heroic defiance on the part of both film programmers and film audiences. The festival injected a degree of normality into the reality of the siege and the war which upended any vestiges of normality in the city. It gathered the inhabitants of Sarajevo, confined to their homes, in a cinema and offered them a rare and dangerous collective experience. The festival thus helped reestablish and reinforce social bonds severed by the siege and ethnic infighting. The act of being in a cinema with a large group of other people was also dangerous as such gatherings were actively targeted by Serbian snipers (Turan 2002). Was it then an act of care or carelessness for the fellow festival goers to attend together? It is a difficult question which may be best answered in terms of how this initial act resonated as an expression and embodiment of care. If the festival goers were injured, or even died, when attending the festival, the decision to gather would be likely seen as careless and unethical. As no

such thing happened and no one was harmed the decision to attend went down in history as an act of resistance—which expressed how deeply and viscerally the inhabitants of Sarajevo cared about their “normality” which the siege so tragically and brutally ruptured. These spectators cared about their identity as inhabitants of a once cosmopolitan and culturally vibrant place. The festival under siege allowed them to tap into this past identity and offered them some hope for the future when this identity might have been restored or tapped into again (Sarajevo Film Festival Catalogue 1993; van der Keuken 1993).

Caring to put on a festival in Sarajevo was also a manifestation of inter-dependencies not just within the local society and community, which were the focus for Tronto and the Care Collective, but also internationally. The festival in Sarajevo was possible because of the goodwill of many individuals abroad who supported the festival by donating copies of films to be screened and by taking the risk of bringing these copies to the besieged Sarajevo. The organizers of the festival emphasized their incredulity in the very fact that a vibrant, open, and cosmopolitan city such as Sarajevo could be brought to its knees in the act of the atrocious war fought on the European continent at the end of the twentieth century. What they yearned for was to be connected to what they remembered they once were and what their city once was—before the war started. The international effort to mount a film festival galvanized the networks of care for the martyred city and its inhabitants and showed a deep sense of interconnectedness and humanity, which for the brief time of the film festival managed to rebalance the otherwise enduring and painful rupture the war and the siege was causing.

## Conclusion

In her account of the ethics of care Tronto proposes four categories which allow us to assess whether an act or practice is an expression of feminist ethics of care or not. The four elements of care are “caring about, noticing the need to care in the first place; taking care of, assuming responsibility for care; care-giving, the actual work of care that needs to be done; and care-receiving, the response of that which is cared for to the care” (1993, 127). In film festivals taking place in crisis situations, all these elements of both feminist ethics of care are present and practiced, making them an expression of feminist aesthetics of care as well. To return to the example of the first Sarajevo Film Festival, it was the festival director, Haris Pašović, who recognized there was a need to organize a cultural event like a film

festival when the city was under siege, and he thus demonstrated his “caring about.” He then went on to organize the festival and thus was “taking care of.” The festival event itself was a manifestation of “care-giving” whilst the participating audience was engaging in “care-receiving.”

These elements of care are not present in the same way at large international film festivals which are much more an expression of another set of attitudes related to care identified by Tronto which she calls “taking care of.” She sees such defined care as masculine, associated with public roles, thus “gendered, raced and classed” (1993, 115). The recent A-level film festivals’ initiatives focused on themes of broadly understood sustainability; their concerns around diversity and inclusion, as well as climate change and environmental impact, are expressions of “taking care of” attitude—a kind of a top down attitude to care. Such care is reactive which does not mean it is not effective and cannot bring some change or improvement, particularly in the ways a given film festival operates. But this type of care is also very different from caring about, care-giving, and care-receiving which is associated with the marginalized and weaker members of the society. There is a grass-roots element to it which “taking care of” lacks. Care is needed where there is weakness, frailty, and injustice—a personal or collective crisis. Community-based, issue-driven, activist film festival are the fullest embodiment of both ethics and aesthetics care. Their programming is an expression of the aesthetics of care experienced by diverse audiences who are cared about and who themselves also want to care.

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## About the Author

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## PRACTITIONER TALKS

### 14. Film Festivals in the Time of COVID-19: A Programmer's Perspective

*Jim Kolmar*

**Abstract:** This chapter details the mechanics of orchestrating film festivals, and how those processes evolved and adapted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. As an event-based industry, multiple cancellations meant the festival ecosystem faced near collapse and migration to online platforms. These platforms played a major role in supporting the business and art of film exhibition and curation, including the development of hybrid forms and alternative modes of collaboration and dissemination. Drawing from fifteen years of direct experience in the field, this chapter investigates the stages involved in taking a film from completion to exhibition. It addresses financial considerations, the challenges arising from the pandemic, and confronts common misconceptions and assumptions made about film festivals.

**Keywords:** Festivals, cinema, independent film, curation, film programming, exhibition

As I write this in early 2022, deep into the omicron phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems premature to cast a critical eye over the changes still affecting the film festival landscape. I have worked in the industry for over fifteen years and have seen many shifts in the field, but few have occurred as profoundly and rapidly as those of the last two years. This chapter is my personal attempt to explore and demystify festival practices (primarily

North American) and address how recent changes may affect the future of the field.

In the immediate wake of the devastation wrought on the festival landscape by the onset of COVID-19, difficult decisions had to be made. Major events were canceled, jobs were lost, local economies threatened, and it suddenly seemed as though the entire North American industry sector was built on sand. And what of the filmmakers? A coveted slot at a major festival can launch a career—denied such a valuable platform, filmmakers found themselves navigating an uncertain future, believing the life of their film, and perhaps career, hung in the balance.

In an attempt to mitigate the loss, many of those festivals scrambled to adapt and provide alternative avenues for these bereft filmmakers. South by Southwest (SXSW), for which I have programmed since 2009, was one of the first large events canceled. The organization quickly coordinated a streaming option in concert with Amazon Prime, with titles culled from filmmakers opting-in from the 2020 program. Tribeca Enterprises and YouTube launched “We Are One: A Global Film Festival,” in collaboration with a number of major festivals, including Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, and Venice. This ambitious event consisted of select films from each of the participating festivals, exclusively streaming them for free on YouTube.

Generally, and understandably, the measures took the form of online presentation, either streaming via a bespoke platform, or through agreements with third party platforms; established services such as Cinando and Festival Scope proved vital, with lesser known networking platforms such as BlueJeans and Talque allowing industry professionals to easily meet online, albeit with occasional technical issues. Later, as festivals developed creative approaches, such as drive-in screenings at Portland International Film Festival 2021, these streaming platforms remained foundational to the festival experiences of 2020–21, and even into 2022.

The requirements of the screening, conference, and industry elements of film events have seen a rapid proliferation of video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom. These have become a near-ubiquitous component of the festival and market experience, and it is hard to imagine a full return to in-person communication. It seems that many of these nascent hybrid approaches are here to stay. Why spend all that time, money, and energy on travel and accommodation, with their attendant environmental impact, when you can simply fire up a streaming or video conferencing platform?

Ordinarily, itinerant programmers like me will spend much of their year traveling to festivals and events, scouting films, fomenting and developing relationships, participating in juries, and generally seeking to establish

contact in ways that are difficult to quantify. Concrete results can be hard to distinguish. These experiences share a visceral sense of place, tethered to specific environmental experiences. A meeting venue might have its own smells, sounds, and textures that distinguish each encounter and lend a certain unpredictability and potential that simply isn't present in a flattened video conference environment. This flattening effect means that every group interaction can feel much the same. Names and faces occur on the same plane, with perhaps the only variation being language or time (one of the challenges of this new reality is the juggling of time zones). It could also be argued that the work of building relationships—a cornerstone of the programmer's remit—simply cannot be thoroughly achieved through a conferencing platform. The personal conversations that lead to productive professional outcomes are compromised by distance and isolation, and one can easily imagine how longer term industry goals may be compromised as a result. In fact, given the neurological and social benefits of shared physical space, this seems like an inevitability.

Regarding the online screening experience, it is a strange phenomenon to present a film to an invisible audience, where room dynamics are lost, and the energy of massed people is strikingly absent. The oft-cited assertion that a film is completed by its audience seems especially poignant in this context. Nevertheless, the pursuit of festival exposure continues unabated. Anecdotally, submission numbers still run high and curation continues regardless. Filmmakers still seek that coveted festival slot and the red-carpet experience that often accompanies it. What the pandemic has *not* changed is the sheer difficulty of emerging from the selection process to see your film garner a festival slot. Many of the filmmakers I talk to still regard the festival world as something mysterious, arcane, and ultimately stacked against them, a glass wall standing in their way. In some senses this is true—the reality of larger festivals is that submission numbers can run into the thousands, with perhaps only a hundred or so feature film slots. So, despite the seemingly improved access afforded by the hybrid model, festivals do still appear to function as a gatekeeper to the emerging filmmaker. It is difficult to combat such an entrenched belief, but there are measures that may be taken. A move towards greater clarity and transparency would be a powerful move forward, both curatorially and in a broader industry sense. A key part of the intimidation factor implicit in boarding the festival carousel stems from a belief that filmmakers are removed from the machinations of the selection process. This is a reasonable assumption—curation tends to take place behind closed doors. Filmmakers are not privy to the process, but it would be helpful to understand how the process works.

Here I will address festivals with a large number of open submissions, primarily drawing from my personal experience with SXSW. Many of these observations will also apply to smaller, curated events. A typical festival season begins with an open call for entries, months before the event. A fee will usually be required, which can be substantial, to submit the film for review. Those fees can stack up quite dramatically, and function as another bar to entry. There is much discussion within the festival world around the availability and ethics of fee waivers, and complicated questions around who gets to make films and tell their stories in the first place. The economic burden of filmmaking shows no signs of abating. There is no easy solution, but, at least under normal, pre-pandemic circumstances, I would suggest that a reasonable line item in a film's budget should be allocated for festival submission expenses, something that is not always a foremost concern in the early stages of development/pre-production.

One of the questions I receive most frequently from filmmakers is some variation of "do you need to know someone on the inside?" The question is cynical, but understandable. How does one get past the gatekeepers? I would suggest that the only actionable advantage in having a personal connection with a festival insider is placing your film on a programmer's personal radar. In my experience, there are few situations where a film has managed to traverse and conquer the selection gauntlet purely on the basis of nepotism. That's not to say it doesn't happen, as it might in any industry. It surely does. The problem for emerging filmmakers is the tendency to assume a disadvantage that, in its most damaging incarnation, might lead them to self-cancel and avoid the submission process entirely.

Once submitted, films will typically be watched multiple times by a committee of screeners (the number varies by festival). This committee is ideally composed of a diverse range of people, typically with an industry background, but certainly not exclusively. The aim is to solicit a plurality of opinions that can serve as a filter for the huge volume of films submitted. Meanwhile, festival programmers will also be screening at high volume, and a programmer at a large event will consider hundreds of titles over the course of the submission period. There are systems in place to organize submissions, usually a widely used submission platform such as FilmFreeway, or using a bespoke system built by the festival itself. Either way, there is an attempt to systematize the process, with a corresponding scoring and reviewing system.

Recognizing the potential for this to translate as a cold, mechanical process, I should emphasize a key factor that filmmakers tend to overlook. Programmers, being fundamentally human, have particular tastes,

idiosyncrasies, neuroses, biases, triggers, and passions. Of course there are certain parameters particular to each festival that must be honored, but there is still a curiosity at the heart of the process, and no clear way to predict how a film might connect. There is a mercurial quality to the process that cannot be regimented. Ultimately, a film only needs to connect with one person, and that one person may well be contrarian or obscure in their tastes. It is part of the programmer's job to find those under-the-radar titles that might inspire them to advocacy.

At some point in the process, a filmmaker might encounter some variant of "we loved the film but it's not for us." It sounds disingenuous, but this is actually one of the trickier aspects of programming. With limited slots, decisions will often come down to the elusive concept of "fit." Put simply, this explores the question of whether a film is appropriate for a festival, as opposed to simply "good enough." Conversely, a film that we might fall in love with may be completely outside the wheelhouse of a particular festival, and will need to find a home elsewhere.

Regarding "fit," it is worth noting the unique characteristics of individual festivals—it is never simply a question of selecting the "best" or "favorite" films. Rather, festival programming must be considered holistically. What is a festival trying to say with its films? Who is it trying to reach? In some cases this is clear cut—genre festivals, for example, cater to horror, fantasy, action, and science fiction fans, and as such provide fertile territory for filmmakers working in those sectors. Those same filmmakers may not fare as well in a regional arthouse festival catering to an older audience, or at a festival devoted to experimental work (though clearly there is the potential for crossover).

Furthermore, a new festival in a crowded market must decide how best to stand out. Such a festival might choose to address an underserved market, such as a particular demographic, or a niche genre. This must then be weighed against the needs of the audience, and whether that audience can justify the event. An avant garde dance festival in New York City, for example, would make sense, but it may struggle in a festival located in a remote rural community, or in a city with a limited population of dance connoisseurs.

Premiere status is another element of the process, and a potentially thorny one. Many festivals, such as Cannes and Venice, have strict premiere policies, including world premiere requirements. Outside of these rules, things get more complicated. Is a regional premiere enough? Does a non-premiere film beloved by the festival trump a less popular world premiere? The pandemic period has rendered things even more complex by blurring the definition of what constitutes a premiere, as so many screenings are forced online,

no longer bound by physical geography. Festivals may find they need to be much more flexible in the future. It is worth pointing out that not all festivals rely on open submissions, instead focusing on curatorial work. This kind of curated programming relies on outreach, research, and working with industry contacts and other professionals to secure titles. It can be complex, often involving international travel and its attendant logistical problems.

In some ways the restrictions of the pandemic have simplified things, as festivals are made more accessible as a consequence of reduced travel. Festivals that may have been impossible to attend, for reasons of economy, distance, or timing, may now be attended virtually, with screenings made available via an online platform. This is particularly important in the case of festivals like Berlinale and Cannes, with their associated film markets (EFM and Marché Du Film, respectively). Programmers previously unable to attend for the reasons outlined above are now able to take advantage of the industry presence at such events, extending their reach, and opening up new professional opportunities. Accreditation fees can also be considerably lower than in in-person events, further democratizing the process. It also cannot be underestimated how valuable these new paradigms are in allowing enhanced accessibility for disabled and immunocompromised industry professionals, though there is a case to be made for reviewing fee structures for those literally unable to attend through “normal,” pre-pandemic circumstances.

It is now possible for festivals to reach broader audiences than ever by presenting films online, removing the need for travel. For example Berlinale has successfully presented many of its titles in recent editions via their online platform. Typically these screenings would be restricted to certain time windows, a limited number of streams, and in some cases geography (by geo-blocking, a means of confining a film’s availability by state, city, or even postal code). However, this also means that programmers are at the mercy of technology, which can be glitchy and frustrating as festivals struggle to adapt. There is also more of the flattening effect mentioned above, and one could argue that the resulting fatigue and frustration could ultimately impact decision making.

It is tempting to try and predict the future of festivals. In 2022, still in the grip of a pandemic, it’s hard to imagine how the festival landscape will evolve. While many events are returning to something like “normal” operations, it would seem that a version of the hybrid model is here to stay. For example, the 2022 edition of the Berlinale took place in-person for screenings, while all industry and market events (EFM—the European Film Market) migrated to a purely online experience. Still, there is no clear consensus on how a festival might consistently balance virtual and in-person

events. They might opt to present a full virtual program of titles, with an accompanying program of drive-in screenings, or other socially-distanced outdoor events. Naturally, a key factor is budget, and it's reasonable to assume a festival might use the opportunity to save money. Other factors such as venue availability, audience composition (many events rely on visiting audiences rather than local), and availability of filmmakers and personnel must be taken into account.

Physical events are returning, but cautiously, and with caveats. Programs are not yet at full capacity, affording fewer slots, and fewer screenings for individual films. The use of online screenings means that festivals are also faced with a time-shifting element. There is precedent for this in the form of industry viewing libraries and platforms like Festival Scope that allow on-demand viewing of upcoming and catalog titles, but for a more public audience, the sense of occasion and *festivity* of a time-locked, site-specific event is compromised.

Safety will need to be even more carefully enforced at live events, and those requirements will vary dramatically between different countries, states, and municipalities; political actors are already interfering with the way festivals emerge from the pandemic. For example, some US states, at the time of writing, restrict or prohibit the administration of certain public health mandates, such as vaccine or mask requirements. This could result in particular issues for festivals working with both private and public entities, creating inconsistencies and contradictions, requiring further nuance in an already nebulous, complex situation. For example, SXSW, a for-profit company, may find its internal policies vary from those of regional government, requiring careful negotiation between concerned parties. Much of this can be addressed by improving clarity and transparency in festival policy, but the shifting sands of public health and safety guidelines mean that these policies can change rapidly and suddenly.

Festivals on the scale of SXSW and Sundance also have significant economic responsibilities that cannot be met with online experiences. Smaller regional festivals such as the Portland International Film Festival that serve as vital events connecting otherwise disparate communities (not to mention stimulating economic activity) find themselves struggling to maintain their position in the festival landscape. There is far more at stake here than filmmaker advancement and professional development. A 2019 report<sup>1</sup> by Greyhill Advisors estimated that SXSW had created an

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sxsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Press-Release-SXSW-Economic-Impact-2019.pdf>

economic impact of nearly \$356 million for that year—a number that had been trending upwards year on year. While SXSW is unusual in that it embodies multiple events under one umbrella, these are clearly not small numbers. Inevitably, that event's 2020 pandemic-induced cancellation led to a significant knock-on effect for local businesses that continues to resonate nearly two years later. For example, the same report indicates a total of 12,800 separate hotel bookings over the course of the event. The impact on the hospitality industry in particular, has proven particularly devastating, though the physical event scheduled for 2022 seeks to redress the balance, at least to an extent.

More subtly, it seems clear that without live events the intimacy of personal connection and capacity to nurture relationships is harder to achieve. Many festivals have a particular, often beloved physical location that serves as the epicenter of the event, at least from an industry perspective. For example, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) has long used the historic Arti and Amicitiae arts space as a hub for its meetings and networking activities. Such a location may also be a conference room, a cafe or restaurant, or even a pop-up venue. Perhaps the true value of these locations is not found in business cards exchanged, or in deals signed. I've come to believe that it is the electricity of human connection that connotes the most dramatic loss to strike the festival world. Like many programmers, particularly the itinerant ones, some of my most meaningful friendships have developed with people I encounter only rarely, but with whom I form fast bonds. I know that any time I go to smaller scale events like Mexico's Ambulante, or Belgium's intimate CONNeXT, I will surely run into old friends, deepening our relationships even as we remember that this may be our only meeting for another year or two. The work of industry and personal relationships is ongoing, and can only be enhanced by physical proximity. A great loss and an irony in the age of social distancing.

Writing this in early 2022, we are again confronted with a wave of in-person festival cancellations, and a future that seemed navigable is again in a state of rapid flux and uncertainty. Festivals and related events will need to be nimble enough to adapt and thrive, providing a vital platform for moving image artists of all stripes, without losing sight of the creative vision that underpins their continued existence. Finally, if we are to assume that human connection represents a bedrock of this peculiar industry, a fundamental aspect of our profession has been compromised by the pandemic in ways that far transcend the purely practical. The glass wall seems even more starkly apparent in a world where people are separated from each other by the literal glass of monitor screens. For now, the hope is that, as we

creep tentatively towards an ideal of live interpersonal interaction, perhaps festivals can again serve as a precious locus for true connection, community, and creativity. It will simply require patience and tenacity.

## About the Author

Originally from Wales, **Jim Kolmar** is a Texas-based independent film curator whose resumé includes South by Southwest Film & TV Festival, Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, and Portland Film Festival. He has mentored for the #Startwith8 initiative and London Film School, and is a regular participant on international festival juries and panels.



## **Part 4**

**Data Visualization and Film Festival Research  
and Practice**



# 15. Studying Film Circulation: Moving Film Festival Research to an Evidence-Based, Global Perspective

*Skadi Loist*

**Abstract:** Most film festivals research to date has relied on theoretical considerations, prioritising individual qualitative and historical case studies. Instead of looking into the details of specific films and encounters at individual festivals, the research project “Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network and the Impact on Global Film Culture” was set up to widen the scope of inquiry by focusing on circulation patterns of films at scale. The Circulation project uses empirical big-data approaches from computational cultural analytics and the Digital Humanities to arrive at evidence-based discussions of alternative distribution patterns in the festival runs, and the positions and connections of festivals in the network. Based on the experiences of the Circulation project, the chapter discusses the potentials and challenges of using computational methods in film festival research.

**Keywords:** film festival studies; circulation; research methods; Digital Humanities; computational cultural analytics

## Introduction

In the early phase of film festival studies emerging as a distinct field, mainly situated within Film and Media Studies but with clear interdisciplinary scope (de Valck and Loist 2009), the field relied mainly on theoretical considerations and single case studies built on archival research. Later, a strand of festival research developed, which foregrounds the networked structure of the festival circuit (Elsaesser 2005; de Valck 2007; Iordanova 2009). With

a move away from historical case study-oriented research on individual festivals, the industry mechanisms that festivals are a part of come into view. Festivals make up a unique and, for many smaller films, the only exhibition network. Yet, the role festivals play within global exhibition and distribution patterns has hardly been discussed within research on film distribution. Although some festival screenings are recognized as important for reference funding, there was no empirical data available on the broader festival market. Most importantly, smaller and less visible festivals are being overlooked and their value is not properly captured by the industry. Here, research started focusing on industry structures (Loist 2011; Vallejo 2014), with a view on funding (Falicov 2016), production (Ostrowska 2010), and distribution (Carroll Harris 2017; Burgess and Stevens 2021). However, most contributions still prioritized individual, qualitative case studies of films, talent, producers, filmmakers (e.g., Vallejo 2015; Sun 2015; Peirano 2018, 2020).

Within this context evolved the research project "Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network and the Impact on Global Film Culture" (in short the Film Circulation project),<sup>1</sup> which in 2017 set out as the first large project to study the festival network from a quantitative, cultural analytics perspective. The goal was to broaden the scope of festival studies by mapping the circulation of films on the global circuit considering existing theorizations from festival and film studies regarding regional, transnational film. The festival sector is a very complex ecosystem in which films circulate on the circuit in different ways with a great variety of dependencies. Therefore, one of the first challenges in the adoption of a cultural analytics perspective is the translation of a complex research question into quantifiable and codable measures. To achieve this, the project was structured in three segments. The first revolves around the films, the second around the festivals involved in screening those films, and the third analyses the circuit and circulation.

In the following, I will give an account of the methodological set-up of the project and will, on the one hand, explain the new methodological approaches taken within this project, and discuss the potentials and challenges for festival studies. On the other hand, I want to discuss the practical challenges and limitations that this approach affords as well as new collaboration opportunities that arise.

<sup>1</sup> The "Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network and the Impact on Global Film Culture" research project (2017–2022) was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under project number FKZ 01UL1710X, lead by PI Skadi Loist, with major contribution by Zhenya Samoilova, postdoctoral researcher on the project.

## Cultural Data Analytics and the Data Gap in Film Festival Research

In this project, we integrated approaches used in the Digital Humanities (DH) as well as computational social sciences. In the area of film studies, DH opens up opportunities for computational work with newly available “cultural data” (Manovich 2017; Coate and Verhoeven 2019). While pushing disciplinary boundaries, DH invites cross-disciplinary teamwork (Verhoeven et al. 2020). Most importantly, it allows quantitative work with large amounts of data without losing sight of critical approaches of humanities and film studies. Computational social sciences offer a comprehensive perspective on new digital data sources that are not merely reduced to the size of data (i.e., big versus small).

The Film Circulation project set out to trace the festival run for a large number of films. The aim was to expand the scope of existing research, which was focusing on limited case studies, where the sample was either based on a filmmaker (Vallejo 2015; Fadda and Garofalo 2018), a production company (Sun 2021), a national cinema (Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018), or competition sections (Mezias et al. 2011). The aim was to create a data set, which enables the analysis of patterns that go beyond specific structures based on the usual criteria, such as national funds, auteurism, and star clout.

No such data sources existed at the start of the project. A few existing projects covered either film screenings at single festivals or personal networks at festivals in particular regions (Vanhaelemeesch 2021). However, we wanted to assess how the festival sector operates at a global level and be able to reveal potential differences based on film attributes (e.g., film length, country of production, genre) as well as festival attributes (such as, A-list, short film, documentary, identity-based festival). For such purposes we needed a sufficiently diverse and large sample of both films and their festival runs.

## Project Design

The empirical study of the movements of films within the international festival network requires a relatively large sample of sufficient data quality. The project was designed to capture data for a broad variety of films screened at a variety of festivals. The sample and the resulting unique dataset accessible for further analysis and collaboration, which has been published with an accompanying data paper providing more details (Loist and Samoilova 2023b, c).

In a first step the scope of the project needed to be defined, i.e., a sample was set as a base to track festival runs. One underlying assumption for the project was the trickle-down effect of the festival runs. In a hierarchical logic of cultural capital, the premiere status dictates the movement within the circuit (Loist 2020). For fear of not being eligible for a prestigious festival later down the festival run, filmmakers usually aim to premiere their film and start their festival run at a top-tier industry festival. With this mechanism in mind, the project was designed to choose sample festivals which are top-tier festivals within their respective (sub)circuit. This included three festivals from the A-list: the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), the Cannes Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) that cover different regions (North America and Europe) and different moments of entry onto the festival calendar (February, May, September). In addition, three major festivals specializing in film forms (documentary, shorts, and LGBTQ film), which act similarly to the chosen A-list festivals as top events within their respective subcircuits, were chosen to assure the inclusion of a wide variety of genres and film forms: the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, and Frameline: San Francisco International LGBTQ+ Film Festival. This selection could rightfully be called Western-centric, with all source festivals being located in (Western) Europe or North America, as it follows the realities of existing power hierarchies present on the festival circuit. Working from the premise to follow films at top-tier industry events, which have the biggest chance for a long festival run, and considering the limited resources to gather data mostly manually this seemed to make sense at the time of conception. Given the advances in data analytics within film festivals studies in recent years, which include a collection of datasets for other regions (see also the chapter by Vallejo and Peirano in this volume, or Vanhaelemeesch 2021) as well as further research into geopolitical power dynamics in the festival sector (Campos-Rabadán 2020; González Itier 2023) and advances to decolonize the field (Dovey and Sendra 2023), the goal will be to combine datasets and arrive at a truly global analysis of the sector.

All films within the program of the sample festivals were included—not just the competition sections—to include the most variety possible while still being able to set a limit and framework for the sources. In this way, the sample was set up to also account for films with smaller budgets, less marketing clout, or which might have premiered before at a different festival. The timeframe originally chosen in the grant application (submitted in 2016) was the festival season 2013 to ensure that the festival runs were already completed. Considering that festivals with contemporary programming

have a rule not to show films older than two years, the festival run is usually completed after three years. In addition, we wanted to be able to connect with the dataset of the Kinomatics project, which collected showtime data between 2012–15 (Verhoeven 2016, 171).

The project collected data at two levels: films and festivals. Both levels have a notable heterogeneity. For example, films included both short and long films, narrative features, documentaries, animations, as well as experimental films and interactive material, premiere films as well as retrospectives. The festivals that are part of the library include internationally recognized events as well as very small ones, well documented ones, and those that have left no traces on the web to help verify their program. Therefore, data collection made use of different data sources that served different purposes.

## Corpus of Films

After the sample was set, the first task to collect basic information on the films seemed straightforward. We took the festival catalogs as sources for information of title, director, length, production year, production company, production country, genre, synopsis, and premiere status. For the 2013 festival edition this amounted to manually collecting information for 1,828 films. The first hurdle for this quantitative approach is how to collect the data. While DH is making advances in making print materials machine readable (Moore 2018), the specific festival catalogs don't easily allow for an automated data collection. Sometimes provided PDFs could not be automatically processed and required time-consuming manual labor, because the structure of the data was not uniform. In addition, catalogs did not provide sufficient documentation and explanation of used terminology (for instance, for genre categories). Thus, much of the information had to be manually inputted into our dataset (in the form of an Excel spreadsheet). This took several months for the 1,828 films.

After initial descriptive analyses we realized that while data on 1,828 films amounts to a large dataset when looked at from a Film Studies perspective, further statistical analysis of specific subgroups and subsamples requires a much larger sample and larger case numbers to be able to make any reliable claims. Thus, we decided to expand the dataset to include the festival editions 2011–17. Here, we encountered further unforeseen hurdles. One unexpected challenge was that we could not actually find all the festival program booklets. That festival archives are precarious, under-resourced entities is not news (Zielinski 2016; Barnes 2020). But that our source festivals, which are top-tier events within their respective area, would not have their programs available

in accessible form came as a surprise. Some festivals, like the Berlinale (at least in the old version of the festival website until 2019) had an exemplarily well-structured archiving site, which stored all relevant information pertaining to the films screened. Other, equally large festivals, for instance Toronto, do not have well-established, research-friendly, consistent material available; neither the festival websites nor the digital brochures were available online. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown also obscured efforts to source physical copies of the programs. In the second phase of the project, we managed to draw on the support of four out of the six festivals who shared their data with the project.<sup>2</sup> The final project sample from the six festivals' catalogs (Berlinale, Cannes, TIFF, IDFA, Clermont-Ferrand, and Frameline) included 9,972 films of various genres and length from 150 unique countries produced between 1900 and 2020. As some films were screened in several programs of the six selected festivals, the sample consisted of 9,348 unique films.

## Tracing the Festival Runs

For the next step in the project, the tracking of the circulation of films through the festival runs, it became clear early on that no reliable data source or database exists that lists the festival screenings of films. Since it was not possible to identify a single complete source, we have used two different strategies for data collection: web scraping release data on IMDb and setting up a survey targeting film makers, sales and production companies. We suspected that the survey data would be limited to smaller films as large world sales companies are difficult to reach with a survey. On the other hand, IMDb data overrepresents larger films from A-level festivals. By combining both data sources, we were able to capture a more complete picture of the festival landscape.

### Data Source One: IMDb

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) is the most comprehensive crowdsourcing-based online movie database that is freely accessible. IMDb contains

<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Florian Weghorn and Anne Marburger at the Berlin International Film Festival; Julien Westermann at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival; Paul Struthers and Joe Bowman at Frameline: San Francisco International LGBTQ+ Film Festival, and Diana Sanchez at the Toronto International Film Festival for their help in arranging and providing festival data.

more than 15.4 million records on movies, games, and series, including nearly 650,000 movie titles and detailed information on film teams, production, and distribution (IMDb 2023). The availability and broad coverage of IMDb make it a very popular dataset among researchers working with digital methods. However, since the data is contributed by different users worldwide and there is no clear quality control protocol in place, IMDb is not an unproblematic data source for different research approaches.

Although coverage of the IMDb data is promising for our sample (84 percent of our sample films were matched with IMDb accounts), data quality issues exist. While the categories of genre, crew names, film length, countries of production, and language in the query are well represented in IMDb, other categories are marked by a large proportion of missing data, such as budget, film websites, and box office (Loist and Samoilova 2023c, 379).

In terms of festival research, the section “Release info” on IMDb also includes festival screenings data (premieres) in the listing (for 76 percent of our sample films). However, the survey data collected in a pilot study<sup>3</sup> indicated that IMDb festival runs are only fragmentarily recorded. A comparison of the festival screenings identified by filmmakers in the survey with those in IMDb shows that IMDb does not list a complete festival run. Nevertheless, a more detailed comparison of the two datasets showed that the IMDb festival data can be at least used for estimates of the length of the festival run (Loist and Samoilova 2023c, 380).

The Film Circulation project, however, is interested in the complete festival runs of films as one of the main aims is to assess the long-tail effects upon the festival circuit. Knowing that the festival circuit is stratified (Loist 2016), we are interested not only in the premieres and festivals’ circulation power (Loist 2020), but also in the exhibition and revenue potential of the long-tail of the circuit. Therefore, gathering complete festival run information is of essential interest.

## Data Source Two: Survey

In order to achieve this, we set up a web-based questionnaire (Samoilova and Loist 2019), which was sent to producers and sales agents to gather information on festival screenings, festival invitations, and awards that

<sup>3</sup> A pilot study by Skadi Loist and Ann Vogel examined film circulation for the films in the Berlinale’s Teddy Award (2016). For this purpose, the festival runs of the films were collected via information from the films’ websites, IMDb, and a survey.

could complete the information gathered from IMDb. In addition, further information on festival submission fees and screening fees, market participation and distribution, and production and marketing budgets—unavailable on IMDb—was collected.<sup>4</sup>

In order to send out the survey, contact information for license holders was needed. Depending on the size and status of a film, a sales agent as well as distributor might represent the film at a festival. For smaller films, the producer or filmmaker might be the direct contact. Finding contact data already posed the first problem, because they were either not available in a festival catalog, or outdated—for instance when a film was so old that the licensed rights had expired, or the named person did not work there anymore, or the company had ceased to exist. The next hurdle was to get people interested in sharing the information. To incentivize respondents to reply, we offered to enter or update their film data on IMDb; 69 percent of respondents took up our offer.

The survey was sent out to 6,010 contacts that corresponded to 6,755 unique films. The final sample resulted in 454 unique respondents (7 percent response rate). The vast majority of contacts (95 percent) belonged to production companies, producers, and directors. We focused mainly on producers, because we assumed that they would be more motivated to respond due to being directly engaged in the filmmaking and having authority to respond (in contrast to employees of a world sales company, who might depend on the decision of their managers). Of the respondents, 85 percent (n=384) indicated that they were film producers or directors. The rest stated that they had other roles (e.g., festival managers, distributors, sales and production managers, interns). For 206 films (45 percent), respondents were able to provide festival data, although not all provided consent for sharing this data afterwards (Loist and Samoilova 2023c, 377-78).

## Festival Library

The gathered information from the festival runs provided us with an organic dataset for the second segment of the project: a dataset of film festivals around the world where the films in the sample had traveled. We needed to verify and match the different festival data for the correct name, city, country, and year of establishment. Resulting from the festival runs

<sup>4</sup> Information and analysis on the first round of the survey sent to the 2013 festival season participants can be found in Loist and Samoilova 2020.

reconstructed via the survey data and IMDb data, we identified a sample of 3,860 unique film festivals.

From the basic information of the festivals (name, location, date) we can give a few indications of the festival sector from the point-of-view of our particular sample. Europe (n=1,897) and North America (n=1,011) are leading location regions, followed by Asia (n=431), Latin America and the Caribbean (n=284), Oceania (n=90) and the MENA region (n=87), and closing with sub-Saharan Africa (36 festivals). The most common locations for festivals within our sample include the United States (n=768), France (n=315), Canada (n=244), Spain (n=206), Germany (n=161), UK (n=158), Italy (n=154), Japan (n=119), Poland (n=78), and the Netherlands (n=76). The most common festival months we found are October (n=580) and November (n=551), while December (n=168) and January (n=155) have the least number of festivals in our sample.

Since the festival library was derived from collecting festivals which have screened our sample films, this is not a comprehensive list of global festivals. Going by film submission platforms, which currently list more than thirteen thousand festivals<sup>5</sup> this is only a fragment of the overall sector. Furthermore, our sample festivals, like most festivals out there, show a bias towards showing national fare from their host countries, for instance in special sections featuring the local industry. This skews the sample towards films produced in Europe and North America (see figure 15.1). This might then lead to a heightened circulation of films in specific territories. In short: this is not a representative sample, nor can it be. In view of the lack of a database that encompasses all festivals and their programs, the project was a first attempt to analyze circulation patterns in the festival sector.

In order to be able to analyze the festival runs in more detail, it was necessary to gather additional information on the festivals and find a way to conceptualize their position in the festival sector.

## Festival Ecosystem

In a next step we attempted to categorize the festivals. One premise of the Film Circulation project was the fact that festivals operate as an alternative exhibition and distribution network. Here, the existing hierarchies in the sector and a need for categorization of festivals play an important role, because festivals in different tiers fulfill different roles in the larger network. For

5 <https://filmfreeway.com/festivals>, last accessed September 5, 2023.



Figure 15.1 Heatmap of Film Production Countries.

Visualization of share of production countries in the entire film sample (9,343 unique films) in percentages, by Zhenya Samoilova (source Loist and Samoilova 2023c). For a color version see: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24585129.v1>

instance, A-list festivals act as industry platforms exerting their “circulation power” by creating visibility, press, and symbolic capital for a film through premiere status, which then has an impact on the further festival run or theatrical distribution (Loist 2020, 2023). Due to this function, A-list festivals do not pay screening fees, instead they may offer travel and accommodation for talent. Mid-sized and specialized festivals, on the other hand, which do not necessarily act as industry platforms but rather as regional showcases, have started to pay screening fees to sales agents or filmmakers to be able to show the respective films (cf. Europa International and Europa Film Festivals 2022). Thus, they play a different role in the long-tail of the festival run, when contributing to revenue generated on the festival circuit rather than in theatrical release.

In order to depict and analyze the hierarchies in the festival ecosystem, the large number of festivals first needs to be categorized (as detailed in Loist and Samoilova 2021). One way to approach the categorization of festivals was to utilize existing industry knowledge. To determine which festivals are considered relevant, we used festival lists of institutions such as film funding agencies, especially those who use festivals as a reference point for future funding, like the German Federal Film Board (FFA – *Filmförderungsanstalt*), or national film institutes and film promotion arms, such as German Films, Telefilm Canada, Unifrance, Unijapan, etc. These industry listings serve as a proxy for festivals’ ascribed importance by following the logic that if a festival is being listed in a significant number of sources it indicates a certain degree of relevance. This way, we included industry logics and insider evaluations of what is considered an important film festival. This approach yielded a list of eighty festivals (2 percent of the 3,860 festivals in

the sample) that were listed in at least 20 percent of the sources: thirty-one out of these had a FIAPF accreditation, while thirty-seven were events qualifying for BAFTA and fifty-one for Academy Awards. Among these festivals are all the “usual suspects” of highly publicized festivals on the festival circuit, including our sample festivals.

Since we set out to work with an evidence-based approach, after having completed this top-down categorization of festivals, the next research challenge was to empirically define which festivals have relevance within the network. Rather than looking at the status assigned by organizations such as FIAPF, the Academy, or BAFTA, we wanted to take a bottom-up approach by utilizing network analysis. One of the main goals of the Film Circulation project was to understand how films are shared within the festival ecosystem.

## Network Analysis

Film festival research has long conceived of the festival sector as a “network with nodes and nerve endings [...] capillary action and osmosis between the various layers of the network” (Elsaesser 2005, 87) and “obligatory points of passage” (de Valck 2007, 36) in the network that influence festival runs. Thus far, a network approach has been primarily applied to producers in the industry (Verhoeven et al. 2020; Vanhaelemeesch 2021; Ehrich et al. 2022).

In the last part of the Film Circulation project, thus, we conceptualize the film festival sector as a network in which festivals are connected through the flow of films. Utilizing the above-described operationalization, research design and analysis, we have captured structural complexities of the festival sector and investigate to what extent the film circulation in the network is structured by film attributes such as year of production, country of production, genre, thematic focus (e.g., LGBTQ films) and festival run (e.g., a difference between short films starting in Cannes or Clermont-Ferrand). Secondly, we examine the network as such, asking what role different festivals play in the hierarchy of the festival network, whether some groups of festivals share films more frequently while other festivals never connect through films, and what this structure can tell us against the background of the existing industry ranking system for festivals.

Through network analysis and visualization, we were able to capture the positions and interconnectedness of various festival sub-circuits within the realm of our sample. By including film and festival characteristics we compared the structure of festival networks across different groups of



Figure 15.2 Cluster of Animation Film Festivals.



Figure 15.3 Cluster of Short Film Festivals.



Figure 15.4 Cluster of Documentary Film Festivals.



Figure 15.5 Cluster of LGBTQ Film Festivals.

Figures 15.2–15.5 Network visualizations of directed, unweighted ( $\geq 1$ ) networks of festivals ( $n=3,115$ ) and shared film screenings ( $n=200, 367$ ); node color indicates if festival is specialized (red) or not (blue); node size is scaled by degree centrality; layout in Gephi ForceAtlas2, by Martha E. Ehrlich <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24589155.v2>.

films. For example, the circulation patterns of short films create a different network structure than that of feature films (cf. Halter and Loist 2021). Similarly, the network visualizations of festival runs of LGBTQ films, short films, animations, or documentaries clearly show festival communities exchanging these genres in specialized festivals (see figures 15.2–15.5, for details see Burkhardt and Loist 2025 and Ehrlich et al. 2022). In other words, the visual network analysis provides visible evidence of subcircuits in the festival network.

In addition, these methods allowed us to examine the concrete positioning and interconnection of festivals within the networks, i.e., which festivals are most connected and thus make up the network core. When zooming

in on the individual festivals within the network core, it became apparent that this method uncovered festivals that are evidently significant to the overall network, yet had not been listed high in the festival ranking based on industry logic (see Burkhardt and Loist 2025). Despite the limitations that our specific sample yields, we are confident that these approaches shed new light on the mechanisms of film circulation on the festival circuit.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used the Film Circulation research project to show which new possibilities digital and quantitative methods open up. In doing so, I have addressed both the empirical and methodological difficulties that arise in an evidence-based approach (Loist and Samoilova 2023a). Evidence-based here means expanding the traditionally qualitative, case study-oriented view to a quantitative approach that attempts to make patterns of circulation visible through cultural big data. In this way, we aim to go beyond a specific, anecdotal industry view, and maintain a critical stance, based in film studies and the humanities. This includes critically engaging with research design and developing research steps in which new forms of data collection are tried out and new categorizations tested. In contrast to classic data-driven, purely statistical approaches that operate only on found data and thus narrow their research perspective to existing datasets, the Film Circulation project applies a cultural big data analytics approach to small data questions. In other words, the project aimed to carve out critical routes to collect data in (relatively) large quantities and with high data quality that is relevant to film festival research questions, ultimately requiring significant resources, in terms of time and labor. In addition, the project dataset has been made available for future use (Loist and Samoilova 2023b, c). In this way, we seek both to connect film festival research to larger discussions in the field of cultural data analytics and computational sciences, and to scale questions about circulation and distribution in the field of film festival research, while also opening up to discussions in media industry and production studies.

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# 16. From the Field to the Database: Combining Methods in Film Festival Research

*Aida Vallejo and María Paz Peirano*

**Abstract:** Framed in the intersection of Digital Humanities and New Cinema History, the chapter focuses on ontology and practice of building databases and designing websites for cultural mapping. We focus on two research projects that created festival cartographies of the Chilean and Basque regions, respectively. The first, describes methodological decisions behind the construction of a database and digital archive of Chilean film festivals, and its visualisation in a public web page. The second, reflects on the methodological tools used to collect and display data, and the possibilities and limitations brought about by new technologies. We argue that the design of these research and knowledge-transfer tools must be conceived as an all-encompassing strategy that implies a deep reflection about categorisation and its negotiation with the actors involved in the festivals' field.

**Keywords:** digital humanities, data visualization, festivals database, mapping, archives

This chapter focuses on the challenges and possibilities of data collection, archiving, and visualization for film festival research. Framed in the intersection between Digital Humanities (DH) and New Cinema History, it offers a key insight into the ontological, but also technical, possibilities of building databases and designing websites to increase the impact of film festival research.

The study is based on the analysis of research practices conducted by the authors for more than a decade at film festivals in Latin America and Europe,

combining different methodologies (including ethnographic methods, archival practices, and content analysis). It focuses on two case studies of research projects conducted by the authors in their own regions in recent years, which mapped Chilean and Basque film festivals, respectively. This mapping provided a much needed overview for the festivals' landscape in these contexts, which facilitated further academic research in these areas. We discuss how previously scattered qualitative data was collected, stored, and made public through datasets, databases, and/or online interactive maps.

This mapping has particular importance in local and regional contexts of low production capacity or "small cinemas" (Hjort and Petrie 2007) for three reasons. The first is that the local film industry may profit from a better knowledge of the main players and opportunities of their local context. This can allow for more efficient fundraising, production, promotion, and distribution strategies by local filmmakers. The second refers to institutional frames. In the age of festival proliferation, there is a need for reliable datasets about cultural events to design cultural policies. These datasets may allow public institutions and sponsors to make informed decisions about where to allocate their funding. Finally, there is a need to raise public awareness of the number of cultural events that occur in a given territory, since many of the youngest specialized festivals from the last two decades are barely known (even among local audiences). These events can help protect local culture (with its own linguistic or socio-political particularities) and foster cultural diversity (as they provide the audience with alternatives to mainstream global audiovisual products).

We argue that the design of the aforementioned research and knowledge-transfer tools must be conceived as an all-encompassing strategy. This involves considering from the very beginning of the study design not only which data will be collected and how, but also how our research output will be displayed on a website.<sup>1</sup> It also implies a deep reflection about festival classification and its negotiation with the actors involved.

## **Between Digital Humanities and New Film History: On Festival Data Collection, Storage, and Visualization**

The use of digital tools for the study of cultural practices has been at the core of the Digital Humanities project from its beginnings (see, for example, Burdick et al. 2012; Warwick, Terras, and Nyhan 2012). The possibilities

<sup>1</sup> This is key for the design of Data Management Plans (DMP), which are a requirement when applying for research funds.

opened up by new technologies has provided a ground for the development of four different levels of digital data management pertinent to the study of various disciplines within the Humanities:

1. Creation of multimedia digital archives. This includes digitization of all types of existing cultural artifacts (such as films, photographs, texts, or paintings); recording of material and immaterial culture (such as sculpture and architectural works in photographic images, oral testimonies in sound-files, or socio-cultural practices in video); and keeping record of social media networks and interaction online.
2. Creation of new datasets, from very basic spreadsheets to complex relational databases.
3. Usage of analytical software to create relationships between data and to answer quantitative and qualitative research questions.
4. Design of visual materials to communicate research results (from static graphs to complex interactive multimedia websites). This involves the publication of research output in new formats that go beyond the written text, making it available (and more easily understandable) for the wider audience.

At this stage, the two research projects explored below answer to levels two and four (by creating datasets about all the festivals in Chile and the Basque context, respectively, and by visualizing it through online interactive festival maps). Nevertheless, in the long term they may be further integrated into levels one and three (by uploading to the website further multimedia materials—such as festivals' catalogs—or by creating database queries to answer new research questions). They follow the path of previous festival mapping projects, such as Skadi Loist's "LGBT/Q Film Festivals Global (1977–2015) NEW MAP," integrated on Google Maps<sup>2</sup>; the web-based Netherlands' Festival Atlas (van Vliet 2018)<sup>3</sup>; as well as other cartographies of film festivals developed in classic textual formats (Leal and Mattos 2009, 2011).

One of the most important research lines within DH, "the spatial humanities" (Bodenhamer, Corrigan, and Harris 2010), focuses on spatial

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1m-UV5Kpw39u-eLn--Dj6RALd4ks&ll=30.356214535922109%2C-62.20190211041435&z=3>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> The website includes graphics and interactive maps and other data visualization devices developed in Digital Humanities, including infographics: <https://www.festivalatlas.nl/>. Other similar projects of different scope have been created outside academia by public institutions, such as the government of Valencia, Spain:

<https://ivc.gva.es/es/audiovisuales/industria-promocion/festimapp-cas/mapa-de-festivales>.

analysis, by using GIS technologies and digital cartographies. Within film studies, recent research projects focus on film distribution and exhibition, using datasets and spatial visualization. These include the Kinomatics project<sup>4</sup> (Coate et al. 2017a; Coate, Verhoeven, and Davidson 2017b; Zemaitytė, Coate, and Verhoeven 2018; Verhoeven et al. 2019) as well as studies developed within the New Cinema History (Biltiereyst and Meers 2016; Treveri-Gennari et al. 2020; van Oort et al. 2020), a line of research that considers film contexts, circulation, distribution, and consumption, and examines cinemas as sites of social and cultural exchange (Maltby, Walker, and Walsh 2014). These studies often rely on DH given that “[d]igitization brings the promise of continuous access to cultural heritage collections because it eliminates physical preconditions for access with respect to time and place” (van Vliet, Dibbets, and Gras 2009). This allows for a further comparative analysis and enables access to results. Thus, some studies, included those linked to research networks like HOMER (History of Moviegoing, Exhibition, and Reception)<sup>5</sup>, focus on creating large databases of film theaters, mapping historical cinema-going practices, distribution, and exhibition circuits, as well as analyzing film reception in diverse geographical contexts, such as Australia, Italy, Scotland, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth noting that these projects are mostly descriptive in an initial phase, as the main goal is to map out the festival landscape and collect basic information about several events, which can be later used to answer various research questions. The first step then focuses on creating an infrastructure for further research. This does not mean that the theoretical standpoint or conceptual framework are not relevant to these projects. Quite the opposite, the design of categories and structures for data collection involves deep theoretical reflection.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, our training in anthropology has played a

4 <https://kinomatics.com>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

5 For more information about this research, check “Homer projects” at <https://homernetwork.org/homer-projects/>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

6 See for example, “Cinema and Audiences Research Project (CAARP); “Early Cinema in Scotland” <https://earlycinema.gla.ac.uk/>; “Cinema Context” ([www.cinemacontext.nl](http://www.cinemacontext.nl)); “Italian Cinema Audiences” <https://italiancinemaaudiences.org/>; “Cultural Memory and British Cinemagoing” (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/digital-collections/collections/cinema>). Other projects’ digital tools are still under construction, for example in Mexico (Pantallas latinas), Chile (Salas y butacas), and Argentina (Historia de los públicos de cine en Argentina).

7 This was precisely the topic of the workshop on festival categorization organized by Skadi Loist in 2021, in which several scholars, including the authors of this chapter collectively reflected on how to create categories that can apply to any kind of festival-related data gathering (Loist and Samoilova 2021).

very important role in our understanding of categorizations for two main reasons. The first relates to the very nature of anthropology as a scientific discipline that tries to understand how human beings categorize their cultural contexts.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the etic/emic dichotomy refers to how the categorizations created by the researcher, from an “outsider” point of view (etic) can differ from those that belong to the particular social group that is the object of study (emic) (see Vallejo 2017).

DH projects involve collaborative research that is committed to public knowledge, creating a model “[c]rafted for a heterogeneous audience with crisscrossing and even contradictory interests and needs, [which] is meant as a porous multiple construct [...]” (Burdick et al. 2016, vii). As we see below, when creating knowledge-transference tools such as interactive websites open to the public, this confrontation can serve to test (and contest) categories between researchers and professionals and enrich or even rearticulate analytical concepts at stake.

On the other hand, DH is changing the way we understand the publication process of research results and its temporal logics. The publication of datasets allows the publishing of raw data long before academic articles are publicly available, making information accessible for researchers and professionals alike. The FAIR data Principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) established by Data Science scholars (Wilkinson et al. 2016) set the guidelines to publish datasets. The publication of festival lists in open access research repositories serves to grant academic recognition to information already published on websites (which are not considered academic publications). Moreover, academic repositories grant access to our data in the future, which partly solves the problem of data availability on websites, which tend to disappear due to technical changes and/or lack of funding in the long term. Another advantage is the recognition of authorship of the festival lists’ collectors and editors. Finally, it is relevant to work with standard formats that grant interoperability and reusability of data. For example, .csv can be imported in different programs, from simple spreadsheet editors (e.g., Excel or Libreoffice), or more complex database managers (e.g., DB browser or MySQL), and PDF lists are easily readable by the general audience. In this context, DH open new possibilities for a collective and global development of film festival studies, where these datasets, such as those created by the

8 Sub-disciplines like the anthropology of language or the anthropology of kinship, for example, deepen on how different words (and therefore categories) in different cultures and languages do condition the articulation of family relationships or the interpretation of and relation to their environments.

projects explained below (Vallejo et al. 2022; Peirano and Ramírez 2022a), can serve as templates for future festival lists.

In terms of qualitative methodology, the use of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) and/or ethno-methodologies based on participant observation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and in-depth case studies also poses questions of how to collect and manage all these data, as well as the way the data are used to represent or visualize a socio-cultural phenomenon. Ethnographic approaches look to combine multiple data sources, relying on the design of diverse tools to collect, organize, and compare these data, in order to construct a more accurate image of the object of study. This problem of data “representation” is a long-standing problem for ethnography (Jackson 1991), looking for more responsible ways of communicating the data collected (and its interpretation) to make it truthful to the object of study as well as accessible to wider audiences. The ethnographic approach also assumes various questions of “positionality” (Burgess and Kredell 2016) that emerge in qualitative research. Data gathered and processed through ethnographic methods heavily rely on the subjectivity of the researcher (as the “primary tool” of research), as well as their social relationships in the field and both the advantages and limitations of their position. Reticence towards the subjective nature of ethnographic methods and researchers’ biases can be compensated for by the accuracy in ethnographic registry (through fieldnotes, website screenshots, photos and/or videos created by the researcher), hence the need for clear management and careful storage of research materials for future analysis, as well as reflective self-awareness of the selected methods and their implications (Davies 2012). Additionally, not all data available from ethnographic research is suitable for storage and publication, considering the privacy of these materials and consent by the people who collaborate in the field, as well as the potential harm to the subjects involved.

On the other hand, Social Network Analysis (SNA), a research line widely developed within DH, focuses on the study of social networks, using software such as Gephi to analyze and visualize connections. Film festival scholars are starting to use this software to reconstruct links between filmmakers (Vanhaelemeesch 2021), and paths of film circulation through festivals (Loist and Samoilova 2022).

In what follows, we will reflect on the specific methods developed by the authors in two research projects. The first, by María Paz Peirano, analyzes the process behind a study that mapped the Chilean festival landscape. The author describes methodological decisions behind the construction of a database and digital archive of Chilean film festivals, and its visualization in

a public website. The second, by Aida Vallejo, describes the research process for building a cartography of film festivals in the Basque context. The author establishes connections between methodological tools developed in her previous research, and the technical possibilities and limitations brought about by new technologies applied in the new project.

## Mapping Film Festivals in Chile

The first case study focuses on the mapping of Chilean film festivals, a project funded by the National Council for Art and Culture (now Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage) in Chile. The project aimed to build a website that compiled systematized information about Chilean film festivals, which at the time was highly scattered, in order to trace their location and historical development. The research looked to map the Chilean film festival landscape and provide a reliable overview of the most common trends among local events. Despite the proliferation of film festivals since 2010, at the time of the research (2017–18) some basic information regarding film festivals remained unclear (González 2017), such as the total number of film festivals, geographical location, and the year. They were founded. It was necessary to gather key information that was still missing or was contradictory, considering the different sources available, thus providing a first descriptive approach to the Chilean festivals' landscape prior to subsequent and more detailed analysis of specific cases and particularities.

The first stage of the research involved the construction of a database of film festivals taking place in Chile, including those that were not originally created in the country and that were not relegated solely to a “national” scope. The database was meant to include all film festivals in the country, either active or inactive (that had not occurred for more than three years). The database's starting point recorded fifty-two festivals in Chile, previously listed by the Council of Audiovisual Art and Industry. Then, we looked for events omitted from this record, mentioned on alternative listings (such as Gutiérrez 2017) or found via further online research and personal interviews, which led us to a final number of ninety-five film festivals (although we are monitoring and updating this number every year).

In doing so, we disregarded previous preconceptions about defining a “festival” that had left smaller events out, and use only a broad operational concept of film festivals, defined in the project as “every regular (annual or biannual) film and/or audiovisual exhibition taking place in Chile for two or more days that, in addition to showing films, includes activities

that extend the experience of collective viewing, such as talks with the filmmakers and master classes" (Peirano 2020, 173). We considered film festivals' both competitive and non-competitive events, with regional, national, and international scope.

The database was made in an Excel spreadsheet and encompasses the official name, short name, and other names the festival is known for (or a previous name); founding year, place (city and region), periodicity, month (considering its latest edition), type of event (competitive, non-competitive), type of films programmed (feature, documentary, shorts, animation), specialization, and latest reported edition. We also added the name of festivals' industry sections to the database, and in its latest upgrade (2019), their training and audience development activities. Other relevant data for further research includes festivals' websites, social media, and contact details (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Email). To facilitate the research process, we provided a "nomenclature" or internal code for a quick identification of each event. During 2020, we updated the information regarding festivals' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and added an "online" or "offline" code (Peirano and Ramírez 2022b). This database has been published open access as a dataset in .csv and .pdf formats (Peirano and Ramírez 2022a).

Additionally, we created a digital archive from the available materials of these events. As film festivals did not usually keep and/or preserve these materials—which are mostly ephemera—collecting them seemed relevant not only to build the database and identify the profile of these events for our project, but also for future research and analysis. The research team<sup>9</sup> collected physical and digital materials later compiled on files for each event, such as official catalogs, programmes, and other related sources (official posters, flyers, photographs, images, and videos created by the festival for self-promotion). These materials were mostly retrieved online using festivals' websites, although this proved to be more complicated than we had expected (several were missing, not working, or incomplete). In some instances, we used instead social media as the main source for online research, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. Physical materials, on the other hand, were collected during fieldwork, thanks to the generosity of some festival organizers and fellow researchers.<sup>10</sup> They were

<sup>9</sup> The team was led by María Paz Peirano, who was assisted by Gonzalo Ramírez, Sebastián González-Itier, Javiera Navarrete, and Marcela Valdovinos.

<sup>10</sup> We acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Elizabeth Ramírez, Alicia Herrera (MUCIVI film festival), Marcelo Morales (FIDOCs, Cineteca Nacional de Chile), and Antonella Estévez (FEMCINE), among others who collaborated in this task.

digitized to include them in the same electronic files, and we originally thought of uploading them to the project's website. However, we ended up doing it only with a sample, due to the server's limited storage capacity. Our plan is to make this available for the public in future website updates.

Fieldwork took place between 2017 and 2018, consisting of multi-sited ethnography that included participant observation and in-depth interviews with festival organizers. As has been explained in more detail elsewhere (Peirano 2020), undertaking fieldwork was vital to access some of the festivals' archival materials and put them into context, as well as facilitating a better understanding of festivals' developments through oral history. The information retrieved via ethnographic research was also used to define the festival's profile and write a short history of the events, based on the triangulation of all sources available. Ethnography allowed us to understand festivals' aims, curatorial decisions, and institutional frameworks, and qualitative data also contributed to contrast and complete the information we had in our database, helping to cover information gaps and tackle contradictory data, such as some festivals' elusive founding years.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the research findings, we established an online platform ([www.festivalesdecine.cl](http://www.festivalesdecine.cl)) that was created by an external programmer and web designer. The website gives access to festivals' profiles and the main results of the project to broader audiences, and provides an introduction to the field of film festivals' studies in Chile, including the existing academic bibliography on Chilean festivals and links to related websites such as Cine Chile ([www.cinechile.cl](http://www.cinechile.cl), the Chilean cinema encyclopedia) and RED ([redfestivalesdecine.cl](http://redfestivalesdecine.cl), the professional network of Chilean film festivals). The website also shows systematized information on each festival, each of them with its own section. This section includes a datasheet with the updated database's information, some images of the festival, its logo, and a short history for each event that encompasses (when available) other data such as festivals' funding, the nature of their competition, industry sections, and its audience development strategies. There is a link to the festival official website and social media for further detail.

The festival profiles were organized by type of festival and region. Searching by type of festival on the website leads to an "etic" classification system created by researchers to organize Chilean festivals. These are divided into six "types," combining festival's specialization, local "trajectory" (years active), and position within the global circuit (number of premieres exhibited):

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the use of ethnographic tools and its limitations for mapping film festivals, see Peirano (2020).

1. International festivals with a recognized historical trajectory (with the largest number of premieres).
2. Long-standing generalist festivals (six or more editions).
3. Long-standing specialized and thematic festivals (according to a type of film, a specific audience, or a particular theme).
4. Emerging generalist festivals (less than six editions).
5. Emerging specialized festivals.
6. Inactive festivals.

This festivals' categorization adapted some categories from the international scholarship available, based on FIAPF's accreditation and elaborated both by Turan (2002) and Peranson (2013), Chilean festivals do not seem to fit those categories (see Peirano 2020; Peirano and González 2018).

Over time it has become more evident that the categories we created are quite problematic. Even when we did not want hierarchical categories to prevail, the combination of trajectory and positioning in the global circuit continues to endorse festivals' hierarchies, and it is debatable the extent to which these are useful to better understand local festivals, as they do not always correspond to festivals' self-perception. As these categories could also end up being more useful to academics than to practitioners (filmmakers and/or festival organizers), we are currently assessing the possibility of changing the search criteria to more practical ones for film professionals, such as focus and specialization, which currently are only accessible using the webpage's open search engine.

To search by regions, the website also includes an interactive map of Chile with its administrative regions, which allows users to navigate through the country and visualize the geographical distribution of the events. By clicking over each area, it displays the list of festivals taking place there, linked to their individual profiles. The map helps to easily visualize an overview of the country's festival landscape and some of its particularities. For example, it shows how every region has at least two active festivals a year, and how they mostly concentrate in the Metropolitan region (Santiago) and in the Valparaíso Region, highlighting the centralization of cultural events in Chile.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The centralization of cultural events is a longstanding problem for Chile's cultural development. Not only is the country's population unevenly distributed, but also political administration is highly centralized. In addition, most educational and cultural institutions are based in the Metropolitan region, and core agents in the field are often based in this area.

Even when we hoped to have the most interactive display possible, we were limited by time and budget restrictions, so we ended up with a simple website in WordPress that would make frequent updates easier and faster. At the beginning, we made the mistake of not controlling the codes to access the page ourselves, leaving it to the external programmer and designer, since it required more advanced web design skills and high maintenance—hence permanent funding. This slowed down the whole process and it became difficult to translate the information into a useful web design both for scholars and practitioners, and at the end we decided to retake control and start changing some elements of the webpage directly.

### **Managing Data in Longitudinal Festival Research: From European Documentary Festivals to Film Festivals in the Basque Context**

Our second case study focuses on IkerFESTS, a research project started in 2017 and funded by the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).<sup>13</sup> The project aimed to map and identify the profiles of film festivals<sup>14</sup> in the Basque context (a territory that extends to both sides of the Spanish-French border), as a response to the lack of either official or informal data about the growing number of cultural events operating in this region. The approach was therefore highly descriptive, trying to answer basic research questions, such as how many festivals operated within this territory, or which was their specialization in terms of topic, film genre, or format. The idea was to initially provide a dataset that could be used to develop more analytical research lines in the future. These lines would include festivals' operational logics and historical evolution (Vallejo 2020); the circulation of Basque-language films through this circuit (Vallejo and Nerekan 2019); or the historical role of some of these festivals in promoting Latin American cinema, including San Sebastián International Film Festival (Nerekan and Vallejo 2017) or Zinebi: Documentary and Short Film Festival of Bilbao (Vallejo 2017).

Methodological tools developed for this study were based on those created for a PhD project that mapped documentary film festivals in

<sup>13</sup> The grant by the University of the Basque Country covered the 2017–18 period. The research team who collected festival data included Amaia Nerekan, Begoña Vicario, Iratxe Fresnedo, Itxaso Castillo, as well as the principal investigator Aida Vallejo.

<sup>14</sup> These would include festivals devoted to other audiovisual forms, including those focused on television and/or hybrid formats, such as video-art.

Europe (Vallejo 2012). The doctoral thesis looked at the operational logic of this festival ecosystem with a multi-dimensional approach (including its historical, social, cultural, and economic dimensions) and thus required an intensive data-gathering strategy, which materialized in a database created ad hoc. This tool was key for three main reasons. The first was the limited time to access data. When the research started in 2007 some festivals in the sample didn't even have a website, or digitized versions of their catalogs.<sup>15</sup> The database was therefore a key tool to collect information that could be impossible to get in the future, either because it wouldn't be available or because of the research costs involved in international travel. The second referred to the long-term strategy of the project. The database was created in the view of a longitudinal project to enable the collection of as much information as possible (including items that were not necessarily relevant for this particular study) as well as to retrieve information later on (what would allow to analyze new aspects of the data collected). For example, the thesis didn't focus on film analysis, but information about films' contents (main topics, synopsis, watching notes, etc.) was collected with the aim of analyzing them as case studies in the future. The third reason has to do with the interdisciplinary nature of the study, as it looked at very different festival practices through various events. Thus, it required the identification of defined categories and types of data that then were translated into different tables and fields in the database.

The resulting (amateur) database, created by the researcher using Microsoft Access,<sup>16</sup> served as a tool for qualitative data gathering through the whole research period (from 2007 until 2012). Its structure's design was highly conditioned by the interdisciplinary approach of the study, navigating between film studies and anthropology. Firstly, it offered the possibility of gathering relevant data for content analysis of festival programs (including sections and their contents) and textual and contextual analysis of films (including basic information like title or duration, plus topics, languages, synopsis, or even watching notes, as well as participating people and companies, countries of production and shooting location, and so on). Secondly, it provided a framework to collect information about the ethnographic

15 For a reflection about research data and festivals see Barnes (2020).

16 The database was created by Aida Vallejo (with informal technical support and advice by a database developer, Fernando Maza). The database developed for the project was subject to the limitations of IT knowledge and availability of software, which in this case was Microsoft Access.

fieldwork conducted at several festivals over six years (including attending professionals and their practices, interviews and informal conversations, and field diary notes about audience behavior, public ceremonies, or social gatherings). The database offered the opportunity to collect and retrieve data from all the festival editions, including participating films and professionals, as well as festival organizers. This allowed for the possibility of retracing professional careers and film circulation through the festival network, and collecting information in real time not only about the ethnographic experiences witnessed by the researcher (the performative aspects of festivals), but also about printed materials found in the festival archives or at the event (see Dayan 2000; de Valck 2007, 131).

When the ikerFESTS project started in 2017, the challenge was to adapt this previous database structure for the creation of a cartography of film festivals in the Basque context. This opportunity was conceived as a key moment for a qualitative improvement of the research tool. This change had ontological implications as well, as the methodological logic behind the database structure would influence both the research work and the output of the project. Technical aspects were key for the development of the new structure. The use of the previous Access structure was no longer an option as it presented several limitations, including: outdated software (and the removal of Access program from the Microsoft pack); the limitation of the database for collective use (the database was created to work individually/locally, therefore in a single computer); and the lack of tools for data visualization (including maps). The new database would need to overcome these limitations, and therefore a new infrastructure was needed. Moreover, the strategy of knowledge-transference and outreach was very relevant for the IkerFESTS project since its inception in 2017. The goal of the study was not only to collect data for further analysis, but also to create a visual tool (an interactive map) that could be used by Basque audiovisual industry professionals and society as a whole, taking María Paz Peirano's *festivalesdecine.cl* website as a reference.

Aware of the time needed to develop a tailor-made professional database, two parallel strategies were developed. The first consisted of the creation of a basic database on a spreadsheet with basic information about festivals in the region, plus the publication of a project blog.<sup>17</sup> Given the interest of industry professionals in our results, we published the festival dataset to grant both immediate open access and protection of our authors' rights (Vallejo et al. 2022). Additionally, we imported this festival list to Google

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.ehu.eus/ehusfera/ikerfests/>. Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

Maps<sup>18</sup> to make it available to the wider audience. The second strategy consisted of a more complex endeavor that would lead to the creation of an online database and search engine of film festivals in the Basque region.

An IT company was contracted to achieve these goals. It developed a new server-based database that could be used by different researchers, and from any computer. In order to make the data about film festivals open access for the wider audience, it was necessary to create an interactive website connected to the database, which would include a map and a search engine to offer users the possibility of searching information about festivals in the region, applying different filters according to different categories (e.g., month and location, or specialization according to film type, format, genre, or theme). A positive aspect of designing a dedicated website from scratch (instead of using existing software for data visualization), was that it allowed us to apply the corporate image guidelines of the University of the Basque Country.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that the data displayed on the website is only a small part of the information actually gathered on the database. It includes basic information about the festival name, location, year of first edition, and general profile, plus more detailed information about the festival, its history, and a list of academic publications about that particular festival. The remaining data (information about all editions of the festivals, people involved, and films included in their programs) is only accessible by the researchers. This responds to the long-term strategy of the database design, as it allows the researcher to collect data which is still partial or not relevant for the wider audience yet. In addition, it offers the possibility of creating new sections on the website in the future, where these data can be displayed. For example, a new page about films could be created, where users can see the circulation of a specific film through this regional festival network.

This strategy also responds to the funding scheme of the research project, as it officially ended in 2018. The database allows for a future project to work on this previous structure and steadily include new data. The existence of different user profiles also provides a tool for data mining that can mobilize further interaction with users, in which festival organizers themselves,

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.google.com/maps/d/embed?mid=1ThWCNX--ULcrSGa\\_kfLYtH-g8uA&ehbc=2E312F](https://www.google.com/maps/d/embed?mid=1ThWCNX--ULcrSGa_kfLYtH-g8uA&ehbc=2E312F). Last Accessed October 3, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> A corporate branding renewal was recently implemented by the university, establishing the guidelines for the production of all types of visual materials: <https://www.ehu.eus/es/web/marka/>.

industry professionals, or audience members could insert information about festivals and films in the database. This could be then double-checked by researchers before publication. Similarly, a feedback form could be created to allow users to report errors or inaccurate information.

A positive aspect is that researchers retain autonomy to include and update information in the database without having to rely on external IT developers, as the database provides for input of data directly to the website once it is uploaded to a server. Moreover, the structure itself is created in a way that new categories can be included by researchers themselves if, for example, new festival themes or categories appear in the future (for example festivals including VR formats, or festivals specializing on new topics such as work, architecture, and so on). On the other hand, although the database is primarily focused on text-based data gathering (plus the possibility of uploading images of the festival logos and each editions' posters), it would be desirable and technically possible to include multimedia information in the future, including video and images of recorded events and interviews, sound, or any other content that could be registered during fieldwork and then stored for further analysis.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The outputs we have shown highlight the possibilities of database creation and publication and how they can make academic knowledge more accessible to the public. This is key for the social and economic impact strategy of our research projects, which have benefited from new technologies that allow for building and using databases in an online server-based system that is open to wider audiences. In addition, new sources of funding for this type of research in the public sector enhance the possibilities of creating new databases and platforms that are open and can have an impact on wider audiences.

Website implementation, however, has also proved to be challenging. Both projects created dedicated websites instead of (or in addition to) adding their maps to other pre-existing platforms, such as Google Maps,

<sup>20</sup> To date these materials are being collected in private hard drives. The university repository can be also used to publish these materials, but this is a possibility which is still to be explored, as there are legal issues of authorship involved. While research materials can be uploaded without problem, the creation of an online festival catalog archive, for example, would require legal consent of the festivals, which are the official publishers and owners of that content.

or using existing GIS spatial mapping software. This has proven to have some limitations but also has some positive aspects. On the negative side, the data stays isolated within the database and cannot be linked to widely used platforms. This of course also affects the positioning of our websites within search engines such as Google, and therefore the potential to reach a wider audience. On the positive side, we keep full control of the structure, categorization system, and design, which in our case is also important for image branding purposes.

Moreover, we have shown how poorly funded projects have to rely on technologies and skills that are totally dependent on the capacities of the researcher herself and that require acquiring new skills such as those developed within Digital Humanities. Another key issue is the autonomy of the researchers to update information that would be directly published online, not relying on IT developers to act as intermediaries, with the subsequent delay and necessity to keep contracts even once the funding for the project is over. In the specific film festival realm, collaborative research also poses questions about the limits for sharing information while also respecting the privacy of the subjects involved in the research. For example, how do we deal with private institutions such as submission platforms and other festival list providers that are also building databases on film festivals but might not be willing to work together on an open access platform? What ethical constraints need to be addressed in the selection, presentation, and publication of the festivals' data?

On the other hand, it is worth noting that the use of web scraping tools within DH is revolutionizing the way we understand data collection, as it allows to automate the importation of data from public online sources and databases. These and other possibilities, such as the use of academic repositories for the preservation and publication of festival research materials, have not yet been implemented in the projects analyzed above. Nevertheless, they will be key for the development of festival research in the future.

Finally, we want to stress the importance of knowledge transfer throughout this research process and the emerging possibilities of using more accessible platforms to communicate our research. Not only can wider audiences access research results, but also research benefits by the ongoing feedback provided by industry practitioners and festival organizers. This results in updating our information and frequent testing of the platforms' usability, helping to revise our interpretations and conceptual frameworks. Even when using DH tools has several limitations and does not immediately solve all the problems related to systematization, representation, and access to the

data available on film festivals, it contributes to enhancing collaborative research and the sharing of knowledge in this area of studies.

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# 17. Independent Film and the US Festival Circuit

*Brendan Kredell*

**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).

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.<sup>1</sup> Through talent academies, production funds, and other mechanisms, a small handful of festivals have indeed served an important incubating function for the media

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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).

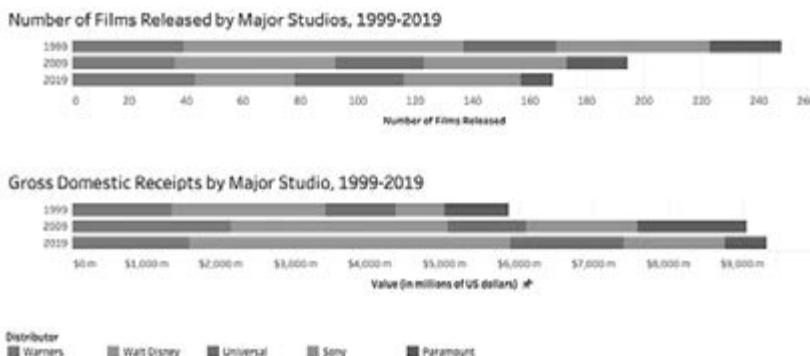


Figure 17.1 Releases and Gross Domestic Receipts by Major Studios, 1999–2019 (data courtesy *The Numbers*)

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).<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 FFD**b**, 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](http://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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 FFD<sub>b</sub> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 FFD<sub>b</sub> 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.<sup>9</sup>

Amidst this instability, the FFD<sub>b</sub> 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 FFD<sub>b</sub> 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 FFD<sub>b</sub> 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

<sup>9</sup> 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 FFDdb. 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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