
Film Festivals and Anthropology

Edited by Aida Vallejo and María Paz Peirano

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017

Reviewed by Liz Czach, University of Alberta

In the introduction to their volume *Film Festivals and Anthropology* editors Aida Vallejo and María Paz Peirano contend that the positive reception on the international film festival circuit of films from Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), such as *Sweetgrass* (2009) and *Leviathan* (2012), points to the importance of film festivals as sites of negotiating what is, or is not, ethnographic film. "Within the anthropological context," Vallejo and Peirano argue, "information tends to be prioritised over aesthetics or art." They suggest that SEL filmmakers privilege aesthetics and thus have found a platform at film festivals screening documentary, experimental, or art cinema, whereas more traditional ethnographic films are shut out of these exhibition contexts. This reinvigorated debate regarding visual anthropology vis-à-vis film festivals is central to the book's aim. "We argue," they write, "that to understand past and recent changes within Visual Anthropology, it is necessary to study the festivals' influence as both film showcases and social encounters."

Vallejo and Peirano take a broad approach to the intersection of anthropology and film festivals not limiting their inquiry to ethnographic films screening at festivals but also consider how anthropological methodologies can be employed in the service of studying film festivals. With that in mind, the book is organized along two main lines of inquiry: ethnographic film festivals worldwide and ethnographies of film festivals. The book's first section "Mapping Ethnographic Film Festivals" is subdivided into "Curating Anthropology" and "Case Studies." In her introduction to this section, María Paz Peirano's provides an overview of current as well as defunct ethnographic film festivals from the 1970s to the present and effectively establishes the network of ethnographic festivals worldwide, although her use of "peripheral film festivals" to describe those from non-Western festivals has the unfortunate effect of reinscribing a margin/centre dichotomy that troubles much of film festival studies.

The book's first section, "Curating Anthropology" opens with a reprint and expansion of Colette Piault's pioneering 2007 essay on festivals, conferences, seminars, and networks in visual anthropology in Europe. This essay provides a template for the subsequent three chapters, with each expanding upon the dynamics of ethnographic film festivals in a number of regions in the world. Peirano looks into Latin American;

Victoria Vasileva and Ekaterina Trushkina take on USSR and Post-Soviet Russian festivals; and Carlo A. Cubero covers the Baltics. These overviews are mostly descriptive and provide an informative snapshot of ethnographic film festival activity in these areas. The “Case Studies” of the next section proceed to a closer view of an individual festival including contributions on some of the longest running and most important ethnographic film festivals in the world. For example, the Festival dei Popoli in Italy and the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York City, get their due in essays by Vittorio Iervese and Neta Alexander respectively. By and large, these case studies take a historical approach discussing how the festivals were founded, ensuing debates about the nature of ethnographic film, as well as the sustainability of the festivals. In many cases, these histories are told through first person accounts from longtime festival organizers and contributors that provide some fascinating insights. For example, Jay Ruby, a key figure in visual anthropology for close to four decades, reflects on the years he ran Temple University’s Conferences on Visual Anthropology. Ruby, who has long advocated that ethnographic films must be made by filmmakers trained in anthropology, despondently resigns himself to the fact that this has not come to pass. More optimistically, Peter I. Crawford reflects on the films screened under the auspices of NAFA (The Nordic Anthropological Film Association), an association and event that continue to the present day. This mode of personal reflection is also engagingly employed in Nadine Wanono’s reminiscences on Jean Rouch’s contributions to ethnographic film events (beyond his well-known contributions to ethnographic filmmaking). Wanono, a former student of Rouch’s, paints a vividly engaging picture of Rouch and his festival Les Regards Comparés. First-person accounts also inform Paul Henley’s reflections on the Royal Anthropological Institute’s film festival; Eddy Appels discussion of the Dutch Beeld voor Beeld festival and Beate Engelbrecht’s analysis of The Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival.

The book’s final section on “Ethnographies of Film Festivals” is perhaps the most useful for scholars looking to employ anthropological research methods. As Vallejo and Peirano note, one of the foundational texts of film festival studies is anthropologist Daniel Dayan’s productive cross disciplinary essay, “Looking for Sundance.” Similarly, the four essays in this section offer some possible routes for how anthropological methodologies can inform film festival study. Given that most scholars attend film festivals as part of their research, the question of fieldwork and what role a scholar occupies as a participant are central. That is, are the existing models for doing anthropological fieldwork pertinent? Getting inside festivals and understanding their inner workings is one of the largest impediments to in-depth analysis of film festivals, thus Lesley-Ann Dickson and SED Mitchell’s essays about their work as

insider/outsideers at the Glasgow Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival, respectively, are particularly revealing about the possibilities and limitations of such approaches. Dickson, for example, was a doctoral researcher at the Glasgow Film Festival under a program that paired scholars with non-academic institutions. This official collaboration presented a challenge since “the work is expected to deliver two outcomes: ‘intellectual contribution’ to the academy and ‘operational usefulness’ to the industry affiliate.” Dickson’s solution was to adopt a reflexive multi-method approach shifting from audience outsider/insider to festival outsider/insider. SED Mitchell’s experience at the Toronto International Film Festival similarly shifted from audience observer to a “more participatory role as camera-operator for TIFF’s Midnight Madness blog videography.” Through this role, Mitchell gained better access to TIFF employees and was able to witness how the festival promoted organizational spokespersons as an information strategy for the festival.

Film Festivals and Anthropology’s dual focus on ethnographic film festivals, on the one hand, and anthropological approaches to festival study, on the other, results in a somewhat bifurcated volume. For scholars looking for productive ways to employ anthropological approaches to their research, the bulk of the volume on the range and history of ethnographic film festivals may hold limited appeal. It is also disquieting that these inquiries don’t more robustly interrogate the troubling legacy of ethnographic and anthropological film and non-western subjects. In her discussion of the Margaret Mead Film Festival, Neta Alexander points out that “in most cases the filmmakers are Westerners, while the subjects are non-Westerners” which “may serve to reinforce the dangerous assumption that ethnography can never escape its colonial roots...”. She argues, however, that the 2013 festival provided a “more complex and engaging future.” A little more unpacking of this “dangerous assumption” and how festivals are dealing with the colonial and racist legacy that informed ethnographic films could have strengthened this intriguing collection.