
The Film Festival: Principal Node in Film Culture

By Dina Iordanova

By dedicating this issue to film festivals, *Frames* is reasserting the special position that St Andrews occupies as a hub for investigations in global film culture. The studies presented here – courtesy of the dedicated work of editors Cassice Last and Sophie Hopmeier, assisted by a team of other postgraduates – represent a symbolic continuation of our extensive work that found expression in the volumes of the Film Festival Yearbook series.

However, the work with film festivals among our community is not limited to commissioning scholarly research. Many of our PhD students are either currently involved or are likely to end up involved with film festivals in their careers. Darae Kim, for example, joined the programme after working at the Busan IFF in South Korea and Peize Li has worked as volunteer at film festivals in Shanghai and Belfast. Many among those who have graduated from the department do work with festivals, such as Yun-hua Chen who directs a small festival in Neubrandenburg in Germany, or Raluca Iacob who programs documentaries for the Astra film festival in Sibiu, Romania. Alumna Ana Grgic is working with a number of film festivals in Romania, Albania and Croatia, and Lars Kristensen with festivals in Scandinavia. An array of academic visitors – from Turkey, Spain, Poland and elsewhere – spent time in St Andrews using our festival-themed collections. Well-known programmers of global festivals – Gianluca Farinelli of Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, Dimitris Kerkinos of the Thessaloniki IFF – contributed to the Film Festival Yearbooks. Others, like Azize Tan of the Istanbul IFF, took part in workshops held here. Last but not least, many of our own faculty are involved with film festivals – Dr Leshu Torchin with Edinburgh, Prof. Michael Cowan with the Giornate del cinema muto in Pordenone, Dr Philippa Lovatt with the Glasgow Short Film Festival, Dr Anuja Jain with the Bengaluru IFF, and Dr Jennifer O’Meara with the Dublin Feminist Film Festival.

The special issue of *Frames* is also special to me, for two reasons. First, as it is one of my profound beliefs that engaging the PhD students in all scholarly projects is a pillar in developing a convivial research community. It is pleasure and privilege to having been invited by the students to assist in putting together this volume—and to see them involved with work on film festivals over the years. Second, because the year 2018 marks the tenth anniversary since I first commissioned and published work on film festivals – for a special issue of *Film International* in 2008.

What a difference a decade makes....Ten years ago many of the festivals did not even want to talk to us: what could academia possibly offer to them? There was only Marijke de Valck's, now classical, book on festivals, the long essay by Thomas Elsaesser, and some scattered shorter pieces - by people like Daniel Dayan or Paul Willemen - that have since become cornerstones of festival studies. Working initially with Ragan Rhyne and Ruby Cheung, we started commissioning and publishing writing on festivals under the auspices of the Leverhulme-funded project; Dynamics of World Cinema. Later on we were joined by Alex Fischer and Stefanie Van de Pier, and, for a while, by Thomas Gerstenmeyer and Enrico Vanucci.

Ten years later, and people email from all over the globe to tell me that due to our work they can now teach on film festivals. Once their modules on festivals are in place, larger publishers, who earlier shunned away from proposals on festivals as it was not possible to demonstrate any market for this writing, changed their stance, and have launched series on festival work. A range of edited collections and monographs - on festivals in Africa, Australia, and on various festival circuits (documentary, anthropology, and so on) - have materialised. My own pieces, mainly those on the festival circuit and on the film festival as an industry node, are frequently quoted, translated in various languages, and re-published by festivals.

Festivals are opening up to our work - in recent years I have taken part in workshops organised in conjunction with the large international festivals at Venice and San Sebastian, in Dhaka and in Teheran, at the China Film Archive in Beijing. Festival researchers hold regular meetings at Berlinale and Toronto. Various festivals - Locarno, Lyon, Turin - are considering launching academic programmes on the side.

In a recent presentation I classified the types of possible academic engagement with festivals in the following categories - as board member, as speaker for masterclass, as programmer of a strand, as jury member, and as consultant. Looking over the past decade, I realise that I have been involved with festivals in all these capacities at one time or another: I served as board member for the Edinburgh International Film Festival. I have given masterclasses at more than ten important international film festivals, from Douarnenez in France to Tromsø in Norway. I have helped program sidebars and retrospectives and have written for many a festival publication. I have served as jury member for a range of diverse festivals - from the huge Busan IFF to the short film festival NexT in Bucharest, from the women's film festival in Sale, Morocco to the expertly curated documentary festival in Yamagata, Japan. I have also been consulting for a festival that is still to appear, one in the beautiful city of Perth in Scotland. The opportunities are many, and I know that other colleagues

and doctoral students have similar engagements and opportunities.

Turning to the contributions in this special Issue on festivals I see, once again, a display of the symbiotic relationship that academics and festivals have been developing.

The article by Lyell Davies – who also contributed to Sonia Tascon’s book on activist film festivals – is making further contribution to what is shaping as one of the most important areas of festival studies, outlining the dynamics of different stakeholders and the narratives that reach out far beyond the actual films and including special considerations on the positions taken by audiences that ultimately further the festivals’ potential political role. Sara Breyfogle’s text on refugee film festivals represents a logical extension of this work, as, in scrutinizing events from around the world, it explores examples that can be regarded as some of the most important manifestations of politically engaged film festival activism.

It is another type of collaboration, based on affective labor and networks, that inevitably touch on the ‘precarious cultural work’ essence that marks festival undertakings, which informs the investigation offered in the contributions by Antoine Damiens on Toronto and John Greyson, and Heshen Xie on the LGBT festival in Hong Kong. The dynamics of friendships that were sustained through an array of complex and often adverse economic and social conditions lies in the basis of these amazingly resilient festivals. These studies extend and compliment the work done by scholars like Skadi Loist in Germany, Stuart Richards in Australia, Ger Zielinski in Canada, and Bilge Tas in Turkey.

More and more I grow convinced that we need to pay more attention to exploring the specificity of the ways locations and venues are chosen and used at film festivals. Why is it that festivals like the one in the remote Ardeche village of Lusass is unanimously regarded as the most important documentary event by the majority of intellectuals in France? Would the festival be the same if it was taking place at Centre Pompidou in the heart of Paris, as it is the case of its counterpart, Cinéma du reel? Why is it that a small town like Douarnenez in Brittany – approximately the size of St Andrews – not known for golf but rather as the home of sardine canning factories, has been the site of one of the most important festivals dedicated to minority issues for over four decades now? Or how about the Auroville film festival that takes place on the land of the global New Age community established by Sri Aurobindo and The Mother near Pondicherry in Tamil Nadu? We need to explore the dynamics established between festivals that are centered mainly in one venue and those that are scattered around town – do they provide better opportunities for conviviality? The example of Fajr film festival comes to mind here – as

Fajr is, in fact, two festivals. The first one is an audience-focused event that takes place in February and plays out at cinemas around the whole large city of Teheran, whereas the second one is an international industry-focused event that comes with a market and is staged mainly for international guests predominantly at a sole central venue, Charsou. Different goals, different locations, different venue types...

It is these issues - addressing the dynamics of the stakeholder communities (mainly filmmakers and audiences) and the venues of the festival - that the three shorter contributions in the Point of View section tackle: The festival that celebrates the specific body of Bodo work needs to take place close to the community and keep it involved; its political goals to foster self-expression make its location imperative as explored by Ankush Bhuyãn. Ted Fisher's text, outlining the emerging festival circuit in Texas where films are made 'fueled by the hope of being programmed' was particularly dear for me to read: it took me to places that I fondly remember from the time I worked in Austin, TX in the early 1990s. Back then SXSW was a nascent small event, and Fredericksburg only hosted an Oktoberfest celebrating beer. How things have changed... Last but not least, Mina Radovic's investigation of the venues of the BFI London film festival show how a big city event is trying to balance out between the tendency to center at tested venues and the need to reach out to multiple communities scattered around the multicultural metropolis.

As the place for networking and pitching meetings, the film festival plays a role in film production and helps further financing, development, and team formation. As the place that hosts film markets, it assists the theatrical and auxiliary distribution. It also facilitates deal-making that makes other types of film circulation possible. Finally, as the place where films are actually screened and seen, it is an exhibitor in its own right.

Films and people cross paths at the festival; careers and dissemination strategies change course as a result of these encounters, often becoming transnational. The festival provides dialogic space where various strands of national and regional film cultures come together. With all this, the film festival comes to occupy a special position in the structure of film culture: it is film culture's principal node.