BOOK REVIEW

Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals
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Dimitris Kerkinos
Festival Programmer

Film festivals are live events that celebrate the art of cinema, giving the audiences the opportunity to enjoy commercially unviable films, which otherwise they would not have the opportunity to see outside a festival. Through the films they showcase, film festivals affirm different kinds of cultural identity, function as alternative networks of distribution for independent films and international cinema, and facilitate their marketing. Film festivals started as a European phenomenon and turned into a global one in the late 1970s, a period in which they became independent institutions with professional programmers. Although film festivals differ from each other in a number of ways, it is their programming – a festival's most important activity – that really differentiates them, offering them their distinct identity.

Editor Jeffrey Ruoff considers programmers as "cultural gatekeepers who triage worldwide film production and guide audiences through the multiples of movies produced annually" (p. 3). In their effort to present films that are diverse and critical, characterized by cinematic and aesthetic originality, by innovation and/or experimentation, programmers contribute to the formation of the public taste. Moreover, their search for discovering new talent and new trends, the way they conceptualize their programmes in which they provide distinct categories and specific emphases, their reevaluation of forgotten or misunderstood directors, films or movements, confirm Ruoff's idea of a festival programmer as "auteur, critic [and] historian" (p. 7). In a similar manner, critic Richard Porton and his colleagues argue in *Dekalog 3: On Film Festivals* (2009) that authored festival programming is in itself an act of film criticism. The identification of, and support for, new trends, new waves, new directors, and new films by

programmers provide the first cut for critics and academics who will write the history of cinema. Screenings of older restored prints and other archival endeavors directly intervene in the discourse of film history (ibid). Moreover as programmer, critic, and film director Mark Cousins (2009) states in his article 'Widescreen: On Film Festivals', a film festival should be authored and the people who run film festivals must think of themselves as storytellers and stylists.

On the other hand, we should make it clear that film programming is not just an artistic activity that only involves a cinematic background, a sense of taste and aesthetics, an inner logic or a narrative structure. It is one thing to know how to appreciate a film and consider it for the programme and another, equally complex, to be able to secure it and screen it in a festival. This practical aspect in programming whose mechanics reach far beyond the desired cinematic excellence, is quite often – not only in the secondary film festivals but also in the A-type festivals that struggle among themselves for premieres – determining the final selection of a programmer, as big sales agents and distributors not only control the art film market, often investing in films in the production stage, but ultimately decide to which festivals a film will go.

Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals is a compilation of essays, written by a variety of authors (festival directors, programmers, critics, and scholars), that aims to draw a picture of what it takes to organize and make a film festival happen. With disparate points of view and cultural perspectives, this anthology covers a wide range of aspects that define film festivals, giving the reader a valuable (although by no means an exhaustive or a fully comprehensive) insight into their world. Broadly international in scope, it avoids to discuss the major film festivals, such as, Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance, etc., for which there is plenty of literature, but chooses instead to focus on other festivals, through which it unfolds the amount of work involved and the dedication needed for the realization of a film festival. The book makes a valuable contribution to the growing field of film festival scholarship, following publications such as the series of *Film Festival Yearbook* anthologies, Marijke de Valck's *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007), Richard Porton's *Dekalog 03: On Film Festivals* (2009) or Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong's *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (2011). Although, it is the only book-length publication to date to dedicate itself to programming for film festivals, most of its emphasis is given to the festival experience rather than programming itself.

The volume is organized into three parts – "Finding Audiences for Films", "Finding Films for Festivals", and "Programming Identity and Themed Festivals" –, in which the essays do not always fit their category or relate much to programming. In the opening chapter of the book's first part, academic Marijke

de Valck offers an excellent historic overview of programming practices from the 1930s to the present, detailing the three major phases of festival history and programming as: 1) platforms for national cinemas, 2) showcases of auteurs, new waves, and cinéphilia, with special emphasis on Pesaro Film Festival's innovations and its influence on the circuit, and 3) globalized, professionalized, and institutionalized events with substantial sponsorship, expanding beyond art cinema. She defines programming as a cultural practice since it "implies a committed handling of cinema as cultural expression and an evaluation of films as artistic accomplishments", which ultimately differentiates festivals from commercial distribution and exhibition networks. With programming being the core activity of film festivals, she is right when she makes the point that "if one wants to understand or critique film festivals, it is necessary to understand the scope and effects of programming" (p. 26).

The rest of essays in this first section have not really much to do with audiences or programming. Gerald Peary's piece is nostalgic and enjoyable, narrating stories from some of the festivals he has been in the last 30 years as a film critic. Marcin Giżycki's text looks at the development of animation festivals and describes the way they interconnect, while the closing piece of this first part is James Schamus's input on what it takes to bring a gala premiere to an A-list festival.

The anthology settles down in the next section, offering personal accounts from festival programmers. Richard Peña, director of the cinéphile New York Film Festival since 1988, narrates his personal history as a programmer, discussing his commitment to auteurism, modernism, and film as an art form. Ruoff's interview with Telluride co-founders Bill and Stella Pence offers insights to another highly curated American festival. The Pences talk about the founding and early years of the festival when it was purely dedicated to a cinéphile audience, with an eclectic programme that consisted of old classics and new films, undiscovered masterpieces, rare tributes, but also premieres from all over the world. Valuing the practical over the theoretical the Pences not only refer to the importance of ventilation in a theatre, but also to the festival's need to transform itself under the pressures of the marketplace accommodating films that have good chances to be part of the Academy Awards.

Zoë Elton, director of programming for Mill Valley FF, gives us a detailed and unpretentious account of a typical day for her during a festival's edition, describing what she goes through as a programme director. Her focus is on practical issues, showing how dealing with crises' solving, such as the arrival of a print, is an indispensible part of the daily menu (that is to say, agony) of a festival programmer. The programmer's state of being during and after the festival is further highlighted by comments on the impossibility to relax (even if a print has

safely arrived and tested), while an event is still going as his/her work is people's entertainment, or on the depression one feels once the festival is over after months of preparations and hectic festival days. A truly insider's perspective that eloquently explains how practical is the work of making a festival.

This second part also includes surveys of peripheral national festivals. Gönül Dönmez-Colin's essay gives us an informative and critical overview of Turkey's major festivals, showing the role that festivals have played in the development of film culture, nurturing Turkish cinema, educating audiences and filmmakers, while at the same time supporting freedom of expression. Social anthropologist Toby Lee focuses on the Greek filmmakers' boycott during the 50th anniversary of the Thessaloniki IFF, underlining the political basis and engagement of the festival. She discusses the surrounding public discourse and how the festival and by extension Thessaloniki functioned as a space of social negotiation, where the protesting filmmakers and the different social actors who reacted to the boycott used the festival to articulate notions of local, national, and European cultural citizenship.

The closing chapter focuses on identity and themed festivals which are dedicated to those underrepresented in mainstream media. The contributors of these essays highlight the programming strategies of such festivals and address their special contexts which help define their cinema. Skadi Loist surveys the past and the present state of gay and lesbian festivals, and shows how programming at LGBT festivals differs from other non-specialized, non-identity festivals, as their programming is connected to the theoretical critiques and evolving self-definitions in the larger community. Like Lee's piece, Loist shows how politics routinely affect programming, an aspect that seems present in all festivals (expressed in a variety of ways), even though few programmers or festivals are willing to address openly. Another writer who puts programming into cultural context is Mahen Bonetti, executive director of the New York African Film Festival. In her essay she highlights the importance of field knowledge and the programmer's responsibility to properly represent a region, so that to overcome the existing misunderstanding about African cinema to which programmers have contributed by their often stereotypical representation of the continent. She makes clear that a programmer should not homogenize the various cultures that exist within a region but should move beyond the obvious and the familiar by introducing emerging directors with new themes and subjects, new aesthetics, and narrative styles.

In this last part of the book, there are two more essays that offer close analyses of Asian festivals. Sangjoon Lee gives a historical account of the Asian-Pacific FF (1954-1972), a pioneering festival in programming Asian cinema that played an important role in invigorating the region's cinema network. Sayoko Kinoshita, a

Japanese animation filmmaker turned festival director, records her struggles along with her husband Renzo Kinoshita to create and keep going the Hirosima Animation Festival, the first animation film festival in Asia. Her efforts to get support and raise sufficient funds, while at the same time overcoming all kind of different problems, eloquently express the determination needed to make a festival come true. Although, like Elton's contribution, focuses more on the practical aspects of organizing a festival, she also touches upon artistic issues – describing in detail the decision-making process of her selection committee – something that is generally missing from other essays that discuss the selection process.

As mentioned earlier, apart from the artistic side of a programmer's work, there are also practical issues related to programming which go beyond taste and aesthetics. These are not explored or adequately discussed in this anthology and concern: A) the programmer's scouting procedure which resembles a detective's investigation work, in the sense that (s)he uses all possible means and sources to find films for the programme: (s)he follows the work of selected directors and utilizes personal networking and relationships to find out about the films that are about to emerge. (S)he is constantly surveying the field, looking for new talents and urging for a discovery, making targeted visits to festivals to check new or upcoming productions, previews films that are in development or post production, asks for screeners and goes through direct submissions. B) The programmers' engagement in delicate negotiations to secure films. Although it is briefly mentioned by Elton, Pence or Loist, it deserves further scrutiny, as it is imperative to speak of the role that the sales agents and the distributors play in determining the programming options of many festivals. It is not only the sales agents' control over which festivals a film will go to but also their demand for high screening fees which often make the projection of a film forbidding. And as far as local distributors are concerned, their release strategies and quite often their absurd claims in order to give a film to a festival rather than to another, greatly affects a programmer's final selection. C) The chase for premieres which constitute, not only for the A-type but also for smaller but status ambitious festivals, a decisive factor in building their programming. This results into paying more attention to the premiere status of a film rather than to its quality, making thus concessions that often alter the programmers' "auteur vision" for the sake of the festival's prestige and reputation. And as festivals exist in relation to each other and are in a constant struggle for power, fighting among themselves for films and premieres (as touched upon by Pence), so do programmers within a festival, developing among themselves power relationships in order to secure discoveries and films for their programmes. Because, ultimately, through their selections programmers seek to express themselves on aesthetic and intellectual level, trying to offer a vision of the world that relies on their work philosophy, their subjectivity, their cultural sensitivities and their ideas about cinema.

As a result, the complex internal and external factors which are connected to the diversity of the programming body and to the way a festival is structured in relation to making programming decisions, as well as, to the mission, the goals, and the objectives of the festival, that is, its politics, are conditions that greatly affect the programmers' decisions and need more scrutiny. Overall, however, *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You* is a worthwhile collection on the present festival experience, illuminating through its varied approaches the organization and the programming of a film festival.

REFERENCES

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