



Introduction — Vol. 3 No. 2 (Winter 2015)

This issue of *Synoptique* focuses on film festivals and their networks at a moment when festival networks are expanding to fully occupy a space in their own right within the global media economy despite their beginnings in the 1940s as mere showcases for national cinemas in prestige nations. (De Valck, 2007) Many international film festivals now partake in the development of emerging national and regional industries. For instance, International Film Festival Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund, the first of its kind, has since 1988 shown a deep commitment to funding film projects in the global South, particularly in East Asia. More locally focused, Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) has since 2004 contributed to establishing a regional film economy in the Arab world through film funds and awards, as well as training workshops and film markets. These examples of massive events and initiatives can overshadow more humble practices that are just as vital to film economies on different scales, contributing to the growth and sustainability of smaller film communities. Faced with this impressive proliferation of film festivals and their networks globally and locally, film studies has developed tools to help us think of how the immense variety of film festivals and the complexity of their networks impact film economies and communities. *Synoptique* adds its voice to the academic debate by looking at the more humble practices aforementioned, as a way to continue questioning how film communities and economies are shaped through film festivals' various networks.

Before a cohesive subfield of film festival studies was inaugurated in the late 2000s—mostly around a series of books published at St Andrews University Press and Amsterdam University Press¹—few works had thoroughly analyzed the roles film festivals have played in global film circulation, or the tension at work in the local

¹ Active members in this collective effort include Dina Iordanova, Ragan Rhyne, Ruby Cheung, and more recently Leshu Torchin, Jeffrey Ruoff, Alex Marlow-Mann, Stefanie Van de Peer, and others. Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist—both at the University of Amsterdam when the St Andrews University Press series on Film Festival Studies was launched—have also been instrumental in the shaping of film festival studies as a subfield.

reception of internationally produced films. Such inquiries had emerged alongside the rise of global studies and have been in conversation with film studies since the late 1990s. As a result of this wide focus, studies on film festivals have from the start questioned the way they exist as and within networks.

Bill Nichols' foundational article, "Global Image Consumption in the Age of Late Capitalism" (1994) mobilizes issues of spectatorship in film festivals to read global dynamics through the lens of semiotics and postcolonial studies. Nichols describes festivals as cosmopolitan networks that gather "a global cohort of film viewers" in a context that "adds a global overlay to more local meanings" of international films. (4) This first study of the phenomenon thus focused on the event itself as it reveals the global networks of industrial actors and spectators in which festivals are embedded.

Similarly, Julian Stringer contends that film festivals are "significant on regional, national and pan-national levels" and work to situate "national film cultures into the world cinema system". (2001, 134) By positioning his reflection within Immanuel Wallerstein's concept of "world systems" (2000), Stringer aims to examine the power dynamics of what is then understood as the international film festival circuit, theorizing how these dynamics inform the formation of contemporary film studies. Relying as well on Saskia Sassen's concept of the "global city" (1991), Stringer contributes to the burgeoning field a vision of how film festivals are embedded in the global cultural and financial flows that circulate and form nodes in urban media centers.

In his seminal article, "Film Festival Networks: The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe" (2005), Thomas Elsaesser theorizes film festival networks in a more systematic way than Nichols. Here, Elsaesser focuses on European cinema to show the decline of the national framework and the necessity of moving towards a post-national perspective in order to understand the global distribution of films. He turns towards modern system theories, such as Niklas Luhmann's autopoetics, Manuel Castells' "spaces of flows", and Bruno Latour's "Actor Network Theory," as a way to translate the idea of a European film circuit into a system. In turn, Marijke de Valck incorporates Latour's

theoretical framework into her own analysis of four major historical European film festivals in order to equate the role of human and non-human actors, such as press facilities and accreditation systems, and to examine the “successful transformations of film festivals and their survival as a network.” (2007, 30) Her insistence on the relational interdependence of the elements of a system or network, however, implies that there is no hierarchy between the actors and the network. As a result, as de Valck herself acknowledges, Latour’s “Actor Network Theory” can “become a problematic instrument with regards to power relations and inequalities in the network” (39).

Despite criticisms of their reliance on hegemonic paradigms, 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. In their introduction to the first volume of the *Film Festival Yearbook* (St Andrews Film Studies Press) on “The Festival Circuit,” Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne argue that we need scholarship that explores “structural models of the film festival circuit as a whole” to understand how “these individual festivals create what we understand as constituting a circuit, a cohesive network.” (2009, 1) In her own contribution to the eponymous volume, Iordanova reflects upon the position of “the film festival circuit” in the global film economy and concludes that it fails to be an adequate distribution network. However, she contends that it does make up a parallel and “alternative” circuit of exhibition. The adjective “alternative” has since then been included within the very conceptualization of film festivals as a given, and has remained largely unquestioned.

Some nuances have been brought about by the *Film Festival Yearbook Series* itself over the last few years. Subsequent volumes break down film festival studies into a variety of networks, which has given focus to the multiplicity of avenues that had been dismissed by the reductive early theorizations of a singular film festival circuit. Other investigations have shown that multiple and non-exclusive networks could be formed around themes, aims, sizes, or geographical divides. Volume 6 of the book series, dedicated to “Film Festivals and the Middle East,” features a self-reflexive introduction that questions the terms of the regional delimitation in order to offer an adequate

understanding of situated networks. Co-editors Dina Iordanova and Stefanie Van de Peer reflect upon the use of the colonial denomination Middle East rather than MENA (Middle East and North Africa) or Muslim World. They justify this framing as an ambitious act aimed at showing the diversity of the region and its relationship with its diasporic and exilic populations.

The focus on a network woven around diversity, tensions, ruptures and inequalities suggests an underlying new conception of networks beyond the coherence that was once a given in the beginning years of film festival studies. This recent complexity opens up new avenues to study film festivals by including marginalized actors and involving methodologies that go beyond questioning success and management. An example of this fragmentation of the initial singular film festival circuit is Jean-Michel Frodon's use of the word "archipelago" to describe the various networks of festivals developing within the Arab world that are simultaneously interacting with and independent from one another. (2014, 15) Joshua Neves also uses the term "archipelago" to qualify a network of regional film festivals at the margin of globalization in South East Asia. He convincingly argues that this term allows thinking of rupture and continuity simultaneously by looking at the role of regional imaginaries in the film festivals' economic strategies (2012).

These new understandings of festival networks are more in line with the questions this issue of *Synoptique* intends to raise. By evoking "other networks," we mean to do two things. First, we endeavor to include new objects of investigation in the field of film festival studies beyond the obvious objects of A-list film festivals that have triggered much fascination both in academic studies and the press. For instance, Norbert Bakker's contribution to this issue on the beginnings of online film festivals questions how notions of virtual geography, defined as a new dimension to geography generated by computer mediated technologies, help us think beyond traditional landscapes of community-gathering. Turning towards this online exhibition space also brings us to consider another genealogy of film exhibition that emerged on the Internet through economic interests that exceed traditional film festival communities. Alternatively, in her

perceptive festival report of the Milwaukee Film Festival, Susan Santha Kerns focuses on the communities built around small festivals, re-asserting local festivals' political potential for social change through communal pedagogy. Our first impetus for creating this issue focused on "other" film festival networks is, thus, driven not only by curiosity and the need to always look further, but also by the very desire to stretch what counts as being part of the festival networks in order to open its branches and reveal its porosity. By drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's image of the ever-expanding and decentralized rhizome rather than the self-reflexive and enclosed modern system theory that Elsaesser and de Valck after him once used, we are finding new avenues to pursue in film festival studies.

Second, "other networks" refers to the need to think of film festivals beyond the dualism of central structures and their "alternatives," which constricts investigations and isolates film festivals from their political, economic and cultural backgrounds, complexities and ramifications. Even if none of the contributions of this issue explicitly engage with theories of networks, they all develop a sophisticated understanding of networks that are both open and closed, demanding that we revise assumptions of a world organization based on strict centers and peripheries. Germain Lacasse's historical inquiry of the Festival du cinéma international en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (FCIAT) situates the festival as an event that is both geographically marginal and culturally central to Québec film development, while at the same time linking the region to international film festivals by introducing global art cinema. Examining the history of the festival through the representations of the region and the local film industry in Québécois films, Lacasse also leaves space for various imaginaries of the festival, as well as its inclusion into other narratives of Québec and international cinemas. Furthermore, Antoine Damiens' report of the development of LGBT awards on the set of major film festivals such as Cannes turns our attention towards the marginalized "queer film (festival) eco-system" and its increasing and strategic inclusion into events considered to be mainstream not only in film festival networks but also in global film economies. Rather than pointing to a unified queer culture promoted through this new

channel, Damiens highlights the various ways in which A-list festivals incorporate queer productions, therefore fostering differences in queer cinema.

We have grouped pieces on documentary film festivals together into a special dossier within this issue, not to ghettoize the conversation on documentary film festival networks, but in acknowledgement that these networks have their own concerns, values, inclusions and exclusions that have scarcely been addressed in current film festival scholarship. The special dossier on documentary film festivals collects two extensive interviews (conducted in writing through email), and one festival report. Together they provide a picture of documentary film festival networks today in four regions, hotspots of international documentary film presentation in South Korea, the US, and Canada: the Demilitarized Zone in South Korea where the 5 year-old film festival, DMZ Docs, focuses on films that promote peace and reconciliation; Durham, North Carolina, home to the largest doc fest in the US, Full Frame; Montréal, Québec, the birthplace of the international, grassroots, documentary screening initiative, Cinema Politica, and the forward-looking RIDM (*Rencontres internationales du documentaire*) film festival; and Toronto, Ontario, which hosts Hot Docs, the commercial hub for documentary film in North America. Networks are identified for each festival through both the interests of the authors and the peculiarities of each location's relationship to documentary film.

In her report on South Korea's DMZ International Documentary Film Festival, Catherine Russell provides insight on the balance between local and international networks when symbolism and logistics seem to be at odds with each other. Here, through Russell's astute observation, we discover that, within this festival setting, much of the political inquiry that might be thought critically necessary for change has been drained from the process of advocating and representing reconciliation and co-operation between the folds of a partitioned Korea, despite efforts to program many experimental documentary films that address certain aspects of these goals. In our interview with Deirdre Haj, the director of Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, we learn that Full Frame constitutes a node within local and national institutional networks that includes high schools, with

whom the festival establishes collaborations; Duke University, who provides a venue and financial backing to the festival while including teachers and students to the mission of the festival; and IFP (Independent Filmmaker Project), which fills in for a lacking national organization serving the interests of the laborers of the documentary community. Full Frame's network reveals the various ways in which festivals contribute to community-building, and their crucial position in supporting an economy, that of documentary films, that despite its increasing popularity is still subject to precarious conditions for its production, exhibition and distribution. Alternatively, Ezra Winton, co-founder of Cinema Politica with Svetla Turnin, sees the exhibition of documentary and its attendant interested parties as inherently inhabiting unconventional spaces within their respective larger social spheres. For this reason, Winton finds himself critical of the more institutionalized networks that larger documentary film festivals, like Toronto's Hot Docs, maintain to the exclusion of activist communities' who naturally hold high stakes in the nonfiction representation of social, cultural, environmental, and economic issues. Winton's answer to such lack of space for activism in industry-focused documentary film festivals, which so often give way to more powerful economic and political interests in the documentary film festival circuit, has been the innovative activist participatory documentary programming, exhibition, and distribution model of Cinema Politica that aims to maintain an ongoing dialogue between activists and communities through documentary. What the "Special Dossier on Documentary Film Festivals" shows is that documentary film festival networks seem to vary considerably depending on the needs and diverse priorities of their local communities, in addition to their levels of association with various national or international interests. Accordingly, their study must be rooted in a strong understanding of the local geopolitics around which they form. Moreover, these interviews lay out how film festivals provide a privileged, while still integrated, space for the distribution and interests of documentary films and its communities, because the documentary film industry in its complexity does not benefit from the same visibility as entertainment films do.

Finally, this issue offers an overview of Jeffrey Ruoff's book *Coming to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals* (2012) by Will Fech. As Fech writes, Ruoff's

compilation shines the spotlight on the behind the scenes of programming as a gesture to always further include the industrial discourse of the practitioners into academic research. Because it also includes first-person accounts from festival programmers and festival surveys, Ruoff's edited volume informs us on how film festival studies have conceived of their own intervention, that is, as one that is itself partly embedded in the industrial networks they investigate. Similarly, this issue of *Synoptique* showcases a variety of formats to investigate film festival networks: in addition to the peer-reviewed articles, we also compiled interviews, a book review and film festival reports. We hope to show that there are even more possible approaches to film festivals than there are festival networks, and that this diversity should encourage us to always experiment towards new models and methodologies of research.

Papagena Robbins and Viviane Saglier, Guest Editors

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