



Queer Cannes: On the Development of LGBTQ Awards at A-List Festivals

A Festival Report

by Antoine Damiens

Cannes may be the most prestigious and talked about film festival in the world. In this context, the creation of a gay and lesbian award in 2010—the Queer Palm—has received a fair share of attention in the media. This prize is, however, not unique: Berlin has awarded the Teddy since 1987 followed by Venice’s Queer Lion in 2007. While such awards are highly valued by film professionals, they are often ignored in the film festival literature.

This festival review attempts to illustrate the specific position of queer awards on the circuit, starting out from my experience as a staff member at Cannes' Queer Palm. In particular, I (1) resituate the creation of the Queer Palm within an alternative historiography of gay and lesbian film exhibition, carefully highlighting the role played by A-list festivals in the queer circuit. I then (2) analyze how such awards mobilize A-list festivals' status in order to promote queer cinema. In my conclusion, I (3) compare the Queer Palm with the Teddy, and I contend that structural differences between Cannes and Berlin might account for how these two awards foster differences in queer cinema.

While the Queer Palm has been described as a brand new phenomenon, queer features have often been screened at major festivals, and in particular at the Berlinale. Berlin film festival's role in the development of queer cinema can hardly be denied: as early as 1984, one could find in the city's gay bars a list of queer features screening at the festival that year (Thomas 1984; 1985). The Teddy, launched in 1987, has since helped the Berlinale in becoming the main market for gay and lesbian films. Queer distributors, producers, and festival planners come to Berlin in the hope of developing

their respective projects, selling their films, or promoting their new features on an international scale.

Similarly, in the 1970s and 1980s, one could find queer films in various cinémathèques and artist-run centres. For instance, Vancouver's Pacific Cinémathèque organized a gay and lesbian retrospective in 1977 (Pacific Cinémathèque pacifique 1977) and Beverly Hill's Tiffany Theater programmed a series of films dealing with homosexuality in 1978 (Tiffany Theater 1978). In Toronto, various artist-run centres and cooperatives exhibited queer films, partly in reply to censorship (among others: Greyson 1993; Cossman 1995). Throughout the period scholars and filmmakers actively lobbied mainstream venues, advocating for the inclusion of queer works in the canon. For instance, Thomas Waugh's letters to the *Festival du nouveau cinéma*, (Montréal) might have led to the creation of a gay and lesbian program in 1980 (Festival du nouveau cinéma 1980; Waugh 2006). Similarly, the National Association for Lesbian and Gay Filmmakers' insistence on finding new circuits of distribution (Forgione 1980) may be credited for helping both legitimize queer cinema and create the first gay and lesbian festivals. In these cases, activists sought to multiply the venues in which queer cinema could be screened—which included major festivals. In the 1990s, New Queer Cinema—a genre which benefited from the boom in independent filmmaking, notably at Sundance and TIFF—fostered the inclusion of gay and lesbian films in major festivals (Rich 1992; 2013).

I quote these examples at length as they illustrate one of the specificities of what Jenni Olson calls the “queer film (festival) ecosystem” (2001; quoted in: Loist and Zielinski 2012). Queer films are never only contained within a niche market nor fully integrated into the mainstream. They often circulate in parallel circuits, “with specialized distributors and programmers with their own networks and meetings at larger festivals ” (Loist 2010). These circuits are embedded in one another; they often “share resources, personnel, expertise [and] films” (Zielinski 2008, 116). As Loist and Zielinski put it:

The queer film festival circuit is connected to the larger film festival circuit, but it also forms a separate parallel entity. This network can be further differentiated into several levels. Going top-down one can differentiate

between the queer-friendly 'A-list' festivals and markets, 'wholesale' (Bachmann 2000) or 'business' queer film festivals and a large number of smaller 'retailer' festivals. (2012, 52)

Given this, queer awards at A-list festivals can be understood as a pivotal node in the queer film ecosystem; they foster cooperation between various actors: as Marijke de Valck and Mimi Soeteman note, “winning the award leads to media exposure, best of fest screenings and better distribution. It also ensures [the winner] a position in the festival annals, and opens the door to (...) film canons” (2010, 291). A-list festivals' awards carry with them a certain amount of symbolic capital, in effect legitimizing the winning films *as art* while making them more viable on the market (a tension further explored in: de Valck 2014). In this context, what differentiates queer awards at A-list festivals and their equivalent in LGBTQ circles is not so much their budget—they are “precarious” organizations (Loist 2011), but rather the former’s strategic position on the circuit:

(1) Films in the running for a queer award are pre-selected by an A-list festival. In other words, they already benefit from the festival’s symbolic capital, as well as from the buzz, publicity and media attention associated with A-list festivals. As Marijke de Valck and Mimi Soeteman note:

Making it into a festival program seems a bigger achievement than the actual winning of an award. For many filmmakers, being selected for the festival is, indeed, what matters, not only because the invitation already adds (modest) value but mostly because it grants them access to the professional (network) opportunities of the events. (2010, 297)

Queer awards legitimate a film as art and validate its queerness. Running for an A-list festival's queer award is perceived as a guarantee both of a film's artistic merits and of its possible inclusion within the queer canon. As such, various LGBTQ festivals look at Berlin's or Cannes' selection when doing their own programming: this insistence on *art* and *queerness* enables festivals to justify their selection on both fronts. This contrasts with awards at LGBTQ festivals: being pre-selected only adds a 'reduced' amount of queer symbolic capital (Zielinski 2008; 260).

(2) Films selected for a queer award do not compete solely for that prize but are often

eligible to receive multiple awards. For instance, *Stranger by the Lake* (Guiraudie, 2013) won both the 2013 Queer Palm and *Un Certain Regard's* directing prize. This “accumulation effect” accentuates the value associated with a queer award, and further enables a film to bridge various circuits.

(3) Finally, the co-presence of numerous queer films in a single venue opens up a space for a sub-market in which queer festivals, distributors, producers and directors “shop” for their new projects. At the same time, a selected film also benefits from the festival’s larger market.

Queer awards not only enable a film to navigate between the various circuits that compose the queer film ecosystem, they also create synergies: A-list festivals are where the “industry” meets, and are often, for filmmakers, distributors and producers, a space in which business is conducted. Queer awards mobilize their links with A-list festivals in order to carry on their activity: they derive their legitimacy from their status as prizes embedded in such festivals. In the remainder of my paper, I'd like to further analyze how queer awards benefit from their ties with an A-list festival. I start from a basic claim: Cannes and Berlin do not occupy the same position on the circuit. In comparing the Queer Palm with the Teddy, I thus illustrate how these two prizes mobilize different aspects of their relationship with an A-list festival, and in so doing promote different areas of queer cinema.

Cannes' Queer Palm was founded in 2010 by journalist and PR agent Franck Finance-Madureira. Its jury is composed of both filmmakers and critics (in 2014: President Bruce LaBruce, Cuban-American filmmaker Anna Margarita Albelo, Brazilian video-artist Ricky Mastro, French journalist Charlotte Lipinska and Portuguese festival curator Joao Ferreira). Every film selected at Cannes (including in the *Director's Fortnight* and *Critics' Week* 'independent' sections) can be nominated for the Queer Palm. Whereas the Teddy has been an official award since 1992, hosted within the Panorama section of the Berlinade, the Queer Palm has no official link with Cannes. It follows Cannes' tradition

of sideline awards (which include for instance the Palm Dog, the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury or the Ministry of Education Award). Its existence is however recognized by Cannes, which facilitates the acquisition of accreditations and tickets for the screenings. Hence a major difference between the two awards: While Berlin's Panorama's selection board may select particular films with the Teddy in mind, the Queer Palm must rely on Cannes' suggestions since staff members are not able to pre-screen the films.

Throughout the event, efforts were geared toward getting the attention of the media—a difficult task within the context of an A-list film festival. The Queer Palm's communication plan tapped into the various meanings embedded in the expression “queer award”, targeting professional journals, highbrow newspaper (such as *Le Monde*), queer-related outlets and so-called “alternative” media (*Vice*, for instance). In this aspect, the composition of the jury was a fundamental element: in addition to screening films, jury members' duties included press interviews, which helped publicize the award on an international scale; jury members' expertise (de Valck and Soeteman 2010) participated to the legitimization of the award. Jury members, in exchange, benefited from media coverage and Cannes' larger market and parties, enabling them to foster their (film) projects and to meet distributors.

The staff then promoted the winning film both domestically and internationally, tapping into both Cannes' role as a cultural gatekeeper to get the film into various art-theatres and its links with queer festivals and media. While the Teddy benefits from its historical role as a key node in the queer film ecosystem and thus from an important media coverage, Cannes' Queer Palm must establish its legitimacy through communication and film distribution.

Because Berlin has been so strongly associated with a queer market, film distributors often try to get their features of queer interest to screen at the Berlinade. Furthermore, Berlin has often been characterized as less elitist and more open to new types of cinema. Berlin's position on the calendar—in February—certainly helped the Teddy

become a prime venue for queer features: since most American queer film festivals take place in the summer, US-based festival programmers can attend the Berlinale to select their new features. For these reasons, only a few gay and lesbian films are screened at Cannes. However, the Queer Palm managed to use this situation to its own advantage: in 2014 it selected an impressive list of 15 full-length features, out of which only 5 contained LGBTQ characters. In so doing, it chose to adopt a broad definition of queerness as “anything falling outside of traditional representations of gender and sexuality”, a fact explicitly acknowledged in the President of the Jury’s statement:

Although we did not award them the Queer Palm, two films in particular stood out for their queer spirit with regard to their assertion of female empowerment and their resistance to social and sexual conventions and male dominated institutions. These films are *PARTY GIRL* by Marie Amachoukeli, *Claire Burger* and Samuel Theis (*Un Certain Regard*) and *GIRLHOOD* by Céline Sciamma (*Director’s Fortnight*). (Queer Palm and LaBruce 2014)

In diminishing the importance of sexual identity as a constitutive part of its award, the Queer Palm aligns itself with Cannes’ insistence on cinema as a pure artistic form. It also further enables a dual communication, which attempts to address both queer circles and more traditional circuits. This is particularly important in the French context: insisting on a vague definition of queerness and on the artistic qualities of a film might help a movie be screened in the various art-theatres that permeate the country. This is, furthermore, in line with French society’s insistence on queerness as artistic transgression, rather than as sexual identity (Provencher 2007). It is worth noting that the Queer Palm is partly financed by Epicentre Film, a distributor which releases an impressive number of queer features but does not advertise itself as a gay and lesbian distributor. Finally, this lack of insistence on sexual identity reflects a trend also present in French queer festivals in general—these events often cast themselves as first and foremost *about films* and do not always display “gay-related visuals” (see for instance: Damiens 2012). Thus, in diminishing queerness, the Queer Palm uses Cannes’ reputation as an elite festival and the symbolic capital associated with its awards. By contrast, the Teddy insists more readily on its gay and lesbian heritage; it notably operates as an advocacy centre, which attempts to facilitate the development of queer film exhibition in countries which are considered as less open to homosexuality (for

instance, in Russia).

Another aspect further differentiates Cannes and Berlin: the existence (or lack thereof) of a queer scene: film festival parties are essential spaces, which enable networking and facilitate film business. While the Teddy benefits from Berlin's extensive list of gay bars, Cannes can hardly be called a “queer city”¹. Part of the Queer Palm's strategy included the opening of an ephemeral queer venue (“*La Dame de Coeur*”), which operated as a social meeting place for queer film professionals throughout the duration of the festival. This place further facilitated outreach and enabled the Queer Palm to contact various film professionals. The staff then attempted to create new forms of synergies between the various actors that compose the queer film ecosystem (making distributors, producers and directors meet in person). Next year, the Queer Palm will go a step further, and will invite these actors to roundtable discussions on issues specific to the queer ecosystem (for instance: “the economy of queer shorts” or on “the Lesbian market”). To that extent, rather than competing with Berlin's queer film market, the Queer Palm tries to create a space in which various actors can exchange ideas, strategies and their vision of the state of queer cinema.

The Teddy and the Queer Palm clearly benefit from their status as awards linked to A-list festivals: they draw their resources and legitimacy from the position of their “mother organization” on the global circuit. However, they do so differently, carefully mobilizing strategic aspects of their festival so as to promote queer cinema. Future research will have to address in more details how these two awards cooperate with the actors composing the queer film ecosystem, but also with one another.

¹Cannes' iconic gay bar, *Le Zanzibar*, closed in 2010. Prior to the Queer Palm, the only queer party was organized by the American Pavilion and the magazine *Queerty*, as a for-profit initiative. The film professionals I talked with did not consider it to be an environment conducive to networking.

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