Chapter 5: Curating Film Festivals
Peter Bosma

In this chapter of his book, “Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives,” Peter Bosma dissects the various choices and considerations that go into establishing a successful film festival. He does this by going through all possible complications or questions that may arise when attempting to curate a festival. Noting the popularity of film festivals all over the world, Bosma aims to answer the questions surrounding the rise in the event, specifically “what is happening exactly, how has this happened, and will it last?” (68). Though there is a festival for every day of the year, Bosma only focuses on the international circuit in this chapter, as these are the festivals that matter most to the international community, especially to the Hollywood film industry, and therefore are of interest to the most people.

Part I: An Exhausting Celebration of Cinema

The chapter begins with a section detailing what film festivals actually are, and consequently what the role of a festival curator entails. Film festivals, Bosma notes, are comparable to a biennale in the modern art world, meaning the film festival curator has a similar role to an art curator, as well as that of a gatekeeper. The curator is the one to determine — specifically in these international film festivals — what will be displayed on an international stage, and therefore which films get to be part of the conversation — and the marketplace. Often, a film festival will be the first platform to launch a film before it proceeds to a commercial circulation in theatres, due to the popularly held belief that films shown in a festival are curated through good taste, which provides the seal of approval for public audiences.

Though the idea pervades that films screened at festivals are the cream of the crop, the actual curation of the festivals depends on a large amount of luck and unpredictability, as everything depends on what the actual crop is for that season and what the curator happens upon. Because of the abundance of films that are made every year, it is likely that many good films get lost in the shuffle. Some films will be amplified because of the circuit, and others will be buried beneath the noise of typical festival media coverage.

The main challenge for the curator, Bosma explains, is how to satisfy such a diverse audience such as one that would attend a festival, specifically with regards to their degree of interest in various aspects of film culture. At a festival there is anyone from industry folks looking to buy films, to casual film fans who enjoy attending the cinema. To solve this problem, he provides us with the option of curating the festival to satisfy niche markets and audiences, thereby not needing to please as diverse a crowd. According to film festival scholar Dina Iordanova, there are three possible curatorial reasons to do this: to use the festival “as a tool of
cultural diplomacy, to promote a particular identity agenda, or to explore the economical potential of diasporic events and to foster ethnic minority talents” (70).

Part II: Branding the Film Festival Experience
To ensure a film festival’s success, branding is key. Due to the high cost of running a festival, it is important to market it in such a way that it will be successful enough to recoup some of the money spent. Marketing is used to sell products, and here the product is intangible — the festival’s programme. What separates each festival from one another is its curator, as only they can be the one to curate the specific programme of films that will appear that year. The curator’s role is integral to the branding of the festival as without that specific slate of films and events, the festival would not be itself.

Despite the overall importance of the curator, they are also often the ones with the most potential to stand in the way of good “corporate branding”. A curator does not typically want their festival to be known as corporate — they want to curate a unique and artistic programme — often the antithesis of corporate. What works better for branding is a predictable slate of films, so that the audience knows what to anticipate and therefore will want to show up.

What further complicates the role of the curator is that there are thousands of films to choose from, and only a comparatively small number of films that can be screened within the few days of the festival. Bosma provides us with two potential strategies to whittle the abundance of films available into a programme. The first strategy is to look for films that are artistically satisfying, which includes favouring “personal expression” and innovations to the craft of cinema. The second strategy would be to focus on films that say something profound about various social issues such as human rights abuses, climate change, food industry issues, etc. This method elevates films based on what they say and the impact they can make on the issues they discuss, rather than films that impact the world purely based on their artistry. Both strategies are valid, and each curator will still put their specific spin on them to create their programme.

Part III: Ranking the Festivals
Due to the size and competitive nature of the international film festival circuit, each festival aspires to have the largest number of world premieres and compelling discoveries. Bosma observes that this is a largely unexplored area of studies, aside from some websites that amalgamate lists of information they gather about as many festivals as they can. The International Federation of Film Producers Association (FIAPF) considers itself to be the authority on festival rankings, but since that notions is often rejected according to Bosma, he
provides us with some alternative ways to determine which festivals are most successful, specifically quantitative research or qualitative evaluation.

Quantitative research, the easier method, can be accomplished by looking at ratios, such as the amount of films shown, the number of world premieres, guests received, etc. Though this method may seem to be the most accurate, it is incomplete because it does not address the quality of the product the festival is selling — the programme itself. Performing a qualitative evaluation would address this blind-spot, but it is a much more difficult assessment due to the reliance on human subjects. To assess audience satisfaction with both the quality of the films and the event itself, a survey may be given out. The problem with this is that all visitors are coming in with preconceived expectations, which makes it difficult to gauge whether the event is a success or not. Bosma provides the alternative option of consulting a forum of experts instead of the full audience, but even with that there are difficulties, such as determining what criteria is actually measurable.

Part IV: Organizing Film Festivals

There are many factors to consider when determining how to organize a film festival, an event with many moving parts that all need to occur as seamlessly as possible. Bosma states that the most obvious of considerations is that a curator is a member of a team, and that team has two responsibilities — to produce a market-friendly and profitable programme and to have an effective workplace model (fundraising, accounting, HR). With regards to the second point, Bosma brings up that age-old dilemma, the fact that film festivals rely on un-paid volunteers and interns in order to survive. According to him, the relationship must be mutually beneficial in order to exist, and he thinks it is — the volunteers must receive something to motivate them, and the festival receives a direct line of connection to their would-be audience and young professionals.

Logistically, festivals are complex beings that require a perfect system that can deal with the steady stream of prints, industry guests, guests of honour, and regular audience members that need to be looked after throughout the event. Crowd control is a huge part of festival organization, as is coordinating box office sales and seat reservations.

The context of the festival is a factor in the organization as well, and Bosma provides us with three: the international festival circuit, censorship, and the festival visitors. All three will influence how a festival runs and how the curators choose the screened films. The circuit is a factor because whether festivals are cooperative or competitive with one another will change what they are able to show. Censorship affects organization because it will alter what films they decide to show, either through self-censorship out of a moral or ethical responsibility, or due to external censorship regulations like the laws of their country. Finally, the audience is something
the festival needs to consider when thinking of how it should be organized because there should be methods in place to allow them to communicate with the festival as much as possible, with features such as Q&As or audience surveys.

Part V: Researching the International Film Festival Circuit

In the final section of the chapter, Bosma touches on a point brought up in this course — that film festival research is a relatively new field of study. There is even debate as to which discipline it truly belongs — cinema studies, anthropology, social sciences, etc. So far, film scholars like Marijke De Valck have been at the forefront of film festival scholarship, placing them for the most part within the realm of cinema studies. Bosma provides a brief overview of much of De Valck’s festival-related work until that point, specifically her work on the development of the film festival circuit. What is most important to our discussion today is her research on the progression of festival programmers. Early festivals presented national cinemas, where curating as we know it today did not exist. Films were chosen based on how well they represented their country of origin, rather than the technical prowess of the film. It was not until the 70s and 80s, which De Valck refers to as the “age of programmers,” where films were selected based on their artistic merit and innovation.

As Bosma reminds us, there is still much research to be done on film festivals in general, and especially on curatorship. It is a challenging field of research due to the lack of attention that has been paid to them until very recently, leaving a large hole in the information that should be available. The field is progressing, but it is imperative to study festivals further, both to understand their past, and more importantly, to understand their future.

Discussion Questions:

1. How important is the artistic quality of a film at a festival? If the film fits in with the “brand,” is that the most important? Specifically with regards to huge international festivals (i.e. TIFF) how important is the curator?
2. In your opinion, what should be the key ingredient in a well-curated programme? What do you look for when attending a festival? What are some surprising curatorial choices you have experienced?
3. What do you think is the future of film festivals? Is the current model sustainable?