

Exhibition & Community around the Queer Film Festival

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Seeking Queer Alliances: Resisting Dominant Discourses and Institutions

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This paper¹ investigates the phenomenon of lesbian and gay film festivals as they quickly constitute a transnational global network.² More specifically, I argue that the festivals echo, in ethos and structure, a tension found in the debates between proponents of the ethnic model of sexual identity and those of anti-essentialist queer theory (e.g. Gamson).

To discuss lesbian and gay film festivals is a challenging linguistic task. There have been several distinct phases in their historical development that require some attention and reveal the cultural politics of their times. Not only have their names changed, but also the meaning of the words comprising them. In the 1970s they began as gay film festivals, run mainly by gay men with very little lesbian content. As women became more present and vocal within the organization and the audience of the festivals, demands for greater lesbian representation increased. Consequently, the name shifted to 'gay and lesbian film festival' and then to 'lesbian and gay film festival.' The politics of community access and cable television production opened some festivals to video submissions, which followed with the ungainly name change to 'lesbian and gay film and video festivals.' This change brought into the festivals a curious mixture of professional and amateur discourses, for example, feature films were programmed alongside video art, documentary films alongside amateur short films or videos, and so on. Similarly, the politics of inclusion has continued up to the current 'LGBTT and sometimes Q film and video festival,' which for brevity is sometimes called 'queer film festival.' While these festivals work hard to accommodate each of the sexual identities represented in their titles, specialized festivals also exist for each category. For instance, there are now lesbian film festivals, bisexual film festivals, and transgender and transsexual film

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² This paper stems from my dissertation research project on the cultural politics of LGBTT(Q) film festivals in North America.

festivals. Effectively, the name play across almost three decades hints at the sexual and gender politics in and around all these festivals.

The lesbian and gay film festival has been with us in North America since the mid-1970s, with San Francisco as its mythic place of origin at the height of sexual and gay liberation, nearly a decade since New York City's Stonewall riots and a few years before AIDS. During the 1980s they went continental across the United States and Canada but mainly to large cities. Now they pepper North America, both in major urban center as well as in smaller rural towns. Through the 1990s these festivals quickly went global. The vast majority of European countries have at least one or two, with a few notable exceptions. They exist in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, and so on. Precisely how they manifest themselves in these diverse locations, each with its own constellation of races, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes and local sexual histories, is impossible to predict. Today, the festivals serve multiple functions: they may offer scholarships, project completion grants, prizes, social gatherings and parties, and even a little glamour.

In the mid-1970s the first gay film festivals were organized by small groups of local filmmakers and activists in order to show one another their work. Typically these filmmakers already knew, or knew of, each other well from the local film and gay bar scenes. In San Francisco, they met at Harvey Milk's famous camera shop where their films were processed. The shop served as an informal hub of activity for the burgeoning independent gay film scene. The festival screenings were opened up to the public, and many attended. Naturally, the filmmakers were delighted to discover that their work had an audience, besides one another. However, the original organizers quickly passed the

festival on to keen film buffs, curators and programmers, since the filmmakers themselves were more concerned about making films than administrating a festival.

The lesbian and gay film festivals were not the first or only ones to deal explicitly with sexuality. Pornographic films have been with us since the beginning of cinema itself. There were several important erotic film festivals during the 1970s, inspired by the sexual liberation movement; and, of course, there are even today many specialized pornographic film festivals throughout the world. What the lesbian and gay film festivals contributed to film culture was their heightened emphasis on homosexual desire, its representation in various forms and practices, and its cultural and sociopolitical contexts.

As film scholar Thomas Elsaesser, among others, has recently pointed out, the so-called A-list international film festivals were typically founded with specific political aspirations in mind and acted as effective showcases of the current regime in power. Mussolini commissioned the first film festival in the world, setting it eventually in Venice. The French response was the 1939 festival in Cannes but the Second World War interrupted and deferred its opening on September 1st. West Germany had its own in West Berlin. The Soviet side had festivals in Moscow and Karlovy Vary. The Marcoses in the Philippines founded their own festival in Manila. Of course, there are many rich examples worldwide. Elsaesser claims that such festivals have gradually molted from their original nationalist political aspirations and have now entered into a strongly global network with one another.

Not surprisingly, lesbian and gay film festivals have quite different histories – histories that concern vociferous debates over public funding and support, sexual and gender categories, sexual practices, identities and community, as well as intermittent,

sometimes hostile censorship battles. Instead of serving the interests of the nation state and its official culture, the lesbian and gay film festival has rather humble origins in grassroots community-oriented interests, and even claims to transnational sexual identities, often against the nationalist grain of the country at hand. Public funding and support for these festivals has been a long difficult struggle. In the United States, for example, public funding is severely limited on the grounds that the festivals represent, effectively, special interest groups; whereas in Canada public funding plays a larger role in sustaining the festivals.

The structure and organization of current queer film festivals show signs of a common, perhaps characteristic, tension between influences of the ethnic collective model, on the one hand, and influences of queer theoretical positions, on the other. The rhetoric of the festivals make claims to embracing and enhancing a sense of LGBTTQ community. Any particular festival forms a practical hybrid of these two tendencies, while some may be more extreme than others. Many festivals structure themselves in line with the ethnic model, for example, their film programs are sharply segregated according to gender. Boys in one room, girls in the other, with some polite mixing at the negotiated opening and closing films, and perhaps a special program dedicated to trans issues set on its own. Those festivals closer in spirit to the queer theoretical position demand a more experimental approach, more mixing and troubling of sexual and film categories. The structure and ethos of each festival nuances its audience and anticipates their associated comfort level. The rhetoric of their publicity tells us this. The festivals each present an idea of sexuality and its relationship to film and notions of community through the work of their respective organizers and the local journalists, among others.

Let's consider festival programming styles through the well-known case of the large San Francisco Frameline festival in 1986. The "lesbian riot" at a program of lesbian films that included Midi Onodera's *Ten Cents a Dance: Parallax* at the festival has been studied separately by Ruby Rich and Marc Siegel. The film has three distinct parts. It begins with a steamy lesbian scene, then gay sex in a restroom stall, and finally heterosexual phone sex. Disgruntled members of the audience caused a disturbance and stormed out as it became clear that the final scene was deviating from its original lesbian theme. Ruby Rich, the well-known critic who defined New Queer Cinema and its canon in her Village Voice festival review, weaves together in a subsequent article a series of analyses of lesbian and gay reception at queer film festivals from the early 1980s on. Her analysis shows how programming and audience expectations influence one another. Specifically, she finds the audiences remarkably conservative in taste. Rich explores the trends of positive image representation, 1980s lesbian suspicions of bisexuality, and the growing preference for glossy feature films over low-budget independent productions (Rich 1999). Performance artist and academic Marc Siegel takes a more empathetic liberal approach. He situates the riot within the history of programming at Frameline, and its then skewed imbalance of gender content to justify the protest (Siegel 1997). Rich interpreted the event as stemming from non-connoisseurs who had missed the irony and expected "100% lesbian content." This example is but one of many that test and realign the queer film festival's sense of community from within its lived site. Importantly, such actions compelled the gay film festival to become more 'lesbian and gay' by changing its policy of programming, its ethics of exhibition.

The San Francisco event and its tentative resolution brings out a tension that is arguably at the heart of any community-oriented festival, namely a tension between the expectations and comfort levels of the audience, as constituted by the rhetoric around the festival, and notably its idea of sexuality in relation to cinema and community. The vast range of taste and connoisseurship plays an important role here. In contrast to the San Francisco festival, there is New York City's MIX festival of queer experimental media - perhaps the queerest that exists! MIX takes a deliberately queer position regarding its structure and programming. Its radical position attracts audience members who expect to have their boundaries ruffled, and who expect lively debate over the relevance to sexuality of film form and content. The festival's uncompromising stand keeps more general, less specialized audiences away, but wins greater respect from within the professional art world. In the end, it carries greater cultural capital within the art world, but less outside of it.

In summary, queer film festivals have indeed come a long way since the 1970s. Some are, in a sense, queerer and more heterotopic than others. The festivals define themselves through their rhetoric and organizational structures that carry with them an idea of sexuality, identity categories and their relationship to cinema. A defining tension is apparent in the many hybrid combinations of the two main positions, namely sexual essentialism in the more popular festivals and the queer anti-essentialism that is common in less popular, more artistic ones. This dilemma, I claim, is characteristic of the festivals as they address and negotiate their situated locations, however global in aspiration.

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