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*International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2010 13: 290  
DOI: 10.1177/1367877909359735

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Volume 13(3): 290–307  
DOI: 10.1177/1367877909359735



## 'And the winner is ...'

### What happens behind the scenes of film festival competitions

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**ABSTRACT** ● With a commitment to artistic excellence film festivals are set apart from regular exhibition venues and commercial interests. Although one of the festivals' key functions is to add value, few academics have carried out empirical research on festival prizes and prestige. In this article we aim to contribute to the understanding of film festivals as a network of cultural capital by reconstructing what happens behind the scenes of the Joris Ivens competition of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, analyzing, among others, jury reports and interviews with jurors. In our analysis we draw attention to the various subjective and contingent elements in the selection process as well as to the influence of the festival context in setting (expert) evaluation standards. We identify recurring elements in the jury deliberations and, following our findings, argue that festivals are not mere barometers of changing norms, but forces that drives, shape and legitimize change. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● awards ● cultural capital ● film competitions ● film festivals ● juries ● prestige ● prizes ● selection systems ● value addition

They [the survivors] found it difficult to judge the film by its artistic qualities. That's why I am so very pleased to receive the Joris Ivens Award. For myself. But especially for the sixteen survivors. (Gonzalo Arijon quoted in Ekker, 2007)

In the documentary *Stranded*, Gonzalo Arijon tries to show how the survivors of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 57, which had crashed in the Andes on 13 October 1972, relate to the traumatic events 35 years later. Earlier films on the plane crash had met with heavy criticism. The fiction film *Alive: The Miracle of the Andes* (dir. Frank Marshall, 1993) was accused of misrepresenting the survivors' decision to eat the human meat of their deceased fellow passengers as an ethical choice, while *Supervivientes de los Andes* (dir. René Cardona, 1976) had been widely dismissed for exploiting the sensational aspect of cannibalism. With *Stranded* the Uruguayan director wanted to move away from the story's superficial freak appeal and make a movie on group dynamics instead (Ekker, 2007). He interviewed all 16 survivors, relatives and members of the rescue team. *Stranded* premiered at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) at the end of November 2007. The film is what IDFA calls a 'poetic documentary.' Arijon intersperses his interviews with dramatized scenes from the 72 days spent in the ice-cold Andes. This artistic concept proved difficult for the survivors to judge by its merits. The Joris Ivens jury, on the other hand, was full of praise for the cinematic qualities of the film. Jury chair Diane Weyerman described *Stranded* as 'emotional and poetic' (in McNab, 2007).

In this article, we aim to reconstruct what happens behind the scenes of the Joris Ivens competition (in the period 1988–2006). We interviewed jurors<sup>1</sup> and festival staff, and analyzed the jury reports from the festival archive, the IDFA website as well as newspaper articles.<sup>2</sup> Our primary interest lies with the institutional (festival) setting in which prestigious awards are bestowed. For even if we do not know whether the survivors thought differently about *Stranded* after it had won, the prize itself is widely regarded as a hallmark of quality, and winning it brings cultural recognition to Arijon and ascribes outstanding value to his artistic choices. Winning the award leads to media exposure, best of fest screenings and better distribution. It also ensures *Stranded* a position in the festival annals, and opens the door to documentary film canons. At the same time, one can easily criticize the prizewinner's status, because cultural quality, isn't that like taste – something class-related and ultimately subjective?

Perhaps it is due to the imprecise meaning of quality and the fact that (expert, professional and popular) opinions notoriously diverge on what the most noteworthy films of specific festival editions are, that few academics have done empirical research on film festival competitions. Recent theoretical work from the emerging field of film festival studies (see De Valck and Loist, 2009), however, has suggested that one of the key functions of the film festival network is to make distinctions in the world's annual film production by adding value and cultural capital (Elsaesser, 2005: 96). Competitions, prizes and awards are, in other words, the festivals' bread and butter (see also Czach, 2004; De Valck, 2007; Hofstede, 2000), and a closer look at the process of value addition will further our understanding of how film festivals operate as a network of cultural capital. This article aims to build on existing

film festival theory. It will contribute to the few existing case studies that deal with the procedures preceding the award ceremonies of film festivals (Helmke, 2005; Pride, 2002), draw on studies that explain the role of prizes in the cultural economy (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996; English, 2005), and examine the proliferation of prizes. We shall start with a brief exposition on cultural prizes, power and prestige. Second, we will present our case study on the Joris Ivens award, the most prestigious prize allotted each year to a feature-length documentary at the IDFA. Finally, we discuss how this look at prizes 'in the making' (Latour, 1987) may contribute to our understanding of value addition at/and festivals.

### Film festival prizes, power and prestige

A festival's professed commitment to artistic excellence and nothing else positively demands a reading in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the social mechanisms behind taste and distinction. (Elsaesser, 2005: 96)

Film festivals, in short, are sites of passage that function as the gateways to cultural legitimization. (De Valck, 2007: 38)

It is hard to overestimate Bourdieu's influence on contemporary thinking when it comes to culture and the arts. His key concepts of habitus, field and capital have become invaluable tools to 'expose the power relationships produced and reproduced through cultural resources, processes, and institutions' (Swartz, 1997: 52). Especially his extension of the Marxist idea of capital – which not only covers material but also cultural, social and symbolic forms of power in Bourdieu's theory of practice – seized the imagination of scholars interested in aesthetics, arts and cultural institutions. In this theory, Bourdieu postulates that the logic of economic interest should be broadened to include the pursuit of symbolic (non-material) interests. All action, he argues, is strategic, albeit in a tacit rather than conscious way, and people make use of various resources in order to maintain or improve their social position. Resources are capital in the Bourdieusian sense when they constitute power relations. Cultural capital then comes in three forms: embodied (as internalized dispositions), objectified (as objects that can only be apprehended with certain cultural abilities) and institutionalized (as credential and cultural systems). Bourdieu has argued that the growth of objectified and institutionalized forms has enabled cultural capital to become the basis of social stratification in modern societies; taste is a social mechanism that distinguishes between the classes (Bourdieu, 2003).

The development of film festivals parallels the increase in institutionalized cultural capital that Bourdieu observed in contemporary modern societies. The number of film festivals has increased exponentially ever since Venice made her grand entrée in 1932. For the purposes of this study we shall dwell more specifically on the proliferation of festival prizes and frame this trend in

light of festivals' institutional logics. That film festivals should be understood as a network of cultural capital becomes most apparent in comparison with commercial cinema systems. For (Hollywood) studios, profitability is indicative and symbolic capital (cultural value) is markedly less important unless it can be translated into economic value.<sup>3</sup> Film festivals, in contrast, are dedicated to cinema as art. Their programming follows not from the business model of blockbusters, but from the philosophy that great films deserve audiences. With the increasing emphasis on box office performance and the consequent domination of regular cinema and multiplex screens by a handful of commercial hits, film festivals have steadily gained importance as an alternative distribution and exhibition network for (a top selection of) the remaining world film production (see De Valck, 2007). That festivals can create cultural capital underlies this success.

There are several ways in which festivals add value, but the most striking is without doubt the bestowal of awards. Competition programs that award prizes are excellent ways of creating prestige. To the honor of being selected by a film festival for the competition are added the extended and formalized evaluation by an appointed jury, and, most importantly, the critical attention such competitions bring in media and press. The amount of value added by screening a film in a festival competition depends on the position and prestige of the festival. With the large number of film festivals and competitions around, not every prize will make a big impact and prestige bestowed may indeed be marginal. In *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), James English locates the beginning of what he calls a proliferation of cultural prizes in 1901, the year the first Nobel Prize for Literature is awarded. Attracting worldwide media attention, the award, as English argues: 'seized the collective imagination with sufficient force to impose with unprecedented intensity the curious logic of proliferation that has raised prizes from a rather incidental form of cultural activity a hundred years ago to an undeniable force today' (2005: 28). The first cinema award with global impact was the Academy Awards, better known as the Oscars.<sup>4</sup>

In an appendix to *The Economy of Prestige*, English shows two figures comparing the 'rise of the prize' in cinema with the growth of awards in literature (2005: 324). Both show a sharp ascent in the curve of awards from the 1970s onwards, which, as English points out, by far outmatches any expansion in production. The rise in film prizes, however, is less remarkable when we consider the transformations affecting the international film festival circuit at the time. In the 1970s the standard film festival format was changed from showcases of national cinemas (screening films submitted by national film funds or associations) to independent programming institutions (screening films selected by programmers). Not only did the shift to festivals as *independent* institutions of selection enhance their credibility (and thus prestige) as guardians of cinema as art, it also made room for a refined task division between the various bigger and smaller festivals (De Valck, 2007: 214), paving the way for a new generation of specialized or themed film festivals. While documentaries had been of mere peripheral interest before, the genre could

take centre stage at the new specialized documentary festivals. With respect to the proliferation of prizes at festivals we consequently need to account for several logics driving it: the first follows from the specialization of events, as each new themed event will be prompted to bestow its own themed award; a second is linked to an acknowledgment of different professional practices (for example, separate prizes for feature-length and short films) or stages (such as first appearance awards); and the third corresponds to the general logic of awards-accumulation, which, some argue, creates immoderate niches and causes prize inflation (English, 2005: 65).

The distinction between these three logics will be relevant when we analyze what happens behind the scenes of the Joris Ivens award. First, however, we need to highlight another side of the festival network. Festivals not only bestow prestigious prizes but also offer a range of industrial services that support film production, distribution and exhibition (De Valck, 2007: 203–15). With the emergence of smaller, specialized festivals, this professional function was enhanced by markets, funds, training and activism to measure the needs of distinct communities. By explicitly expanding their commitment to artistic excellence with a concern for business demands, festivals have also increased the value of their competition and prizes, enabling a better translation of cultural into economic value. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for symbolic capital accrued from participation in a competition program to be directly capitalized at the market taking place next door. It is here that it becomes most tangible why Bourdieu understood capital a manifestation of power relations. As credential systems, film festivals not only set standards of (good, high cultural) taste, but also hold power over career and business opportunities. Elsewhere, De Valck has described film festivals as ‘sites of passage’ (2007: 36–9).<sup>5</sup> The term refers, on the one hand, to the construction of film festivals as liminal spaces, set apart from regular exhibition venues and commercial interests. On the other hand, it underlines the powerful position festivals hold; festivals function as gateways to cultural legitimization, as filmmakers need to pass through festivals to make a transition – gain esteem – in the professional field. The strong interrelations between festivals and professional parties make it increasingly difficult for independent filmmakers to find funding or distribution outside festivals. Festival laureates dominate art house programming and have a strong say in the competition over financiers’ money for new projects. Independent filmmakers seem well aware of these dynamics and participate in the festival circuit in large numbers. However, the amount of cultural value and prestige that can be distributed by any festival is limited and thus the stakes are high. With our case study we offer a look behind the scenes of IDFA, aiming to shed some light on the relation between festival prizes, power and prestige.

### **The world’s largest documentary film festival**

In the international circuit of documentary film festivals IDFA ranks among the top three most prestigious and influential events (see ‘In Depth ...’).

Counting 145,000 admissions in 2007, IDFA is the largest documentary film festival in the world. The festival attracts a dedicated audience. Foreign visitors of the festival frequently report bewilderment upon seeing the long queues for ticket counters, discovering the many sold-out screenings – even for the bleakest and most obscure films – and observing Dutch film lovers, who do not seem to mind the November rain and excitedly drive their bicycles to the next cinema theatre venue (Mandelberger, 2006). IDFA is also very well-visited by the industry and press; it attracted 2500 registered professionals in 2007. The festival offers a marketplace (Docs for Sale), co-financing market (the FORUM), fund (Jan Vrijman Fund) and training program (IDFAcademy), as well as discussions, debates and talks. Both professional and public interest in IDFA contributes to its prestige.

IDFA was founded when Festikon, a festival for educational films organized by the Dutch Film Institute in Utrecht from 1961 to 1987, ceased to exist. Festikon's programming included ample space for documentaries, and, when it was cancelled due to a lack of interest in the genre of educational cinema, its director Menno van der Molen envisioned a new festival dedicated to documentaries. Ally Derks, who had started as an intern in 1985 and stayed on as Festikon's press and public relations officer, was asked by Van der Molen to prompt the initiative and become the festival's first director. Derks accepted and brought two fellow Theatre and Film Studies graduates into the organization, Adriek van Nieuwenhuyzen (who still works at IDFA as the head of the Industry Office) and Willemien van Aalst (who worked at IDFA until 1999). 'Ally naturally assumed the role of leader, she instantly became the face of the festival,' Van Aalst reflects (Van der Valk, 2003). Derks' leadership and influence come to the fore most clearly in the selection of the films. It is well known that the director and her personal tastes shape IDFA's profile and programming. Yolanda Klarenbeek, IDFA's financial director, explains why the organization foregrounds its director: 'We made a well-considered choice to give Ally final responsibility for the selection, in particular for all competitions...Nobody has seen as much as her, she is *the expert* [our emphasis on expert] when it comes to the contemporary documentary' (Van der Valk, 2003).

### Pre-selection, expert selection and peer selection

The prize places a certain power (very widely underestimated by sociologists of culture) in the hands of cultural functionaries – those who organize and administer it behind the scenes, oversee the selection of members or judges, attract sponsors or patrons, make rules and exceptions to rules. (English, 2005: 52)

Few studies on prizes have scrutinized the organization and administration behind the scenes. For our work on film festival prizes, it is first necessary to distinguish between *pre-selection* (programming) and final *selection*



(by juries) during the festival. Pre-selection and nomination for the competition are decisions that rest in the hands of the festival organization. This structure has important implications for the distribution of power and the setting of priorities. For festivals it is, for example, pertinent that their awards not only consecrate special achievements, but also generate news value. So, in addition to concentrating on recent films (maximally one festival calendar-year old), festival selection committees increasingly demand that submitted films are *premières* (De Valck, 2007: 68). In the year 2009, IDFA accepted only world, international and European *premières* for its competitions, and, since 2007, most program sections allow no more than two prior festival screenings. Moreover, as 'priority is given to world *premières*,' IDFA clearly positions itself as a leading documentary festival within the festival network and encourages filmmakers and producers to reserve their *premières* for IDFA (IDFA, 2008a). We will first look at the way the selection *process* distributes power among the director, programmers/pre-selectors and jury members, and then briefly consider which *types* of selection are used in the various steps.

Since the festival's founding in 1988, it has been Derks, once crowned 'Madame IDFA' by a critic (Meershoek, 2004), who decides which films are programmed and which are selected for various competitions. This 'one-woman model' continued until 2001, when Derks installed seven official 'pre-selectors' (Pas, 2007). The pre-selectors are all Dutch film professionals, who hold positions as chief editor, film critic, film fund advisor or film scholar. Films submitted to IDFA are registered in a database. They receive a number and are entered with additional information, such as the name of the director, country of origin, duration of the film and a short synopsis. They are then grouped according to four broad geographical categories: Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe and the United States. The pre-selectors only view films from the area of their specialization (Derks quoted in Meershoek, 2004). Together they work their way through about 2500 submissions annually (a growing number), rating films from one to ten. The films evaluated with an eight and up are forwarded to Derks, who will consider them for final selection. Roughly 500 documentaries reach her desk in this way. In addition to this flow of pre-evaluated films, Derks views and selects films independently, including documentaries by established directors, which go straight to the director's desk.

For a closer look at the *type* of selection in the various phases leading up to the Joris Ivens competition, we can apply Nachoem Wijnberg and Gerda Gemser's (2000) distinction between three basic types of selection systems: market selection, peer selection and expert selection. In an interesting study on the case of the Impressionists, they persuasively argue that the type of selection system used for evaluating visual arts has a clear influence on the evaluation criteria used (2000: 323), a point which we will return to shortly. In this study, Wijnberg and Gemser demonstrate that the Impressionist painters did not achieve acclaim until the peer selection system of the established

Academies was exchanged for a system of expert selection by curators, critics and dealers (who valued innovation). Pre-selection at film festivals falls into the category of expert selection (by professional programmers), while the jury-model used for the evaluation of films participating in competitions is based on peer review with a touch of expert selection. Jury members are active in the (festival) film community as directors, producers, actors, journalists or festival directors, in this sense they are peers of the filmmakers in competition. The competition jury as a rule includes last year's winning filmmaker. Further, because 'the stature of the judges guarantees the stature of the prize' (English, 2005: 123), the jury members tend to be established professionals with distinguished track records and, for that reason, they also have some 'expert' status. It is here that we see the self-affirming practice of film festivals at work: by inviting last year's laureates to act on the following year's jury, they not only 'upgrade' these filmmakers to establishment, but also confirm the status of their own competition program as obligatory *site of passage*.

To summarize, at IDFA the director, the experts in pre-selection, and the peers in the actual competition jury, all exercise influence on the process leading to the conferral of awards (and prestige), but not all do so in equal measure nor in similar ways. In terms of numbers, the team of pre-selectors are the most important gatekeepers. Their individual rating decides whether a film will or will not be considered for further evaluation. Out of the approximately 2500 submissions, only 500 qualify. In terms of content it is Derks who sets the standard. She is responsible for the final selection (circa 250 films) and will actively use her connections in the larger documentary network to present a program that, on the one hand, underwrites IDFA's philosophy and mission statement (see below), and, on the other hand, aims to be cutting edge and competitive compared to documentary programming at festivals elsewhere. In the Joris Ivens competition, roughly 20 films make it to the final selection (until 1993, 40+). In terms of factual prizes and prestige the international jury decides who wins what. Looking at the impact of the former two steps, the power usually attributed to competitions is put firmly in perspective. Making it into a festival program seems a bigger achievement than the actual winning of an award (see also Pride, 2002: 26). 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 event. In the next section we will investigate what criteria of quality are used during the jury deliberations, how these relate to the criteria imposed during the important phase of pre-selection and what the process of (international) group discussions contributes to the evaluation.

### Quality criteria and the process of jury deliberation

Determining the quality or value of cultural products prior to or even after consumption tends to be notoriously difficult. (Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000: 323)

During jury deliberations it is decided which filmmakers will walk away winners. We have studied almost 20 years of jury reports, IDFA's organization and press coverage, and interviewed jury members and festival employees, in order to try and find patterns in what happens behind the scenes of the Joris Ivens competition. From our findings we would like to advocate a tripartite understanding of this process, on which we will elaborate below. Not unsurprisingly there are, first, no objective criteria of evaluation and all discussions and decisions should be understood as part of a discursive and historical context. From our study we conclude that there are three main recurring issues in the festival discourse: 'aesthetic versus political criteria,' 'TV aesthetics versus cinematic aesthetics' and the matter of 'truth-value.' These three issues elicit strong debate among jurors of what constitutes quality in a documentary. Second, the festival – and, in the case of IDFA more specifically, its director's vision – primes the jury deliberations and evaluations. Third, juries engage in discussions that depend to a large extent on personal tastes and cultural preferences. Consequently, the outcome of Joris Ivens competitions should be understood as the result of a process of subjective negotiations; the model used is one of circumstantial compromises rather than absolute verdicts.

A close look at jury reports and analysis of interviews with jury members shows that there are three major discursive themes that influence the evaluations. The first theme fits a universal tension in the history of prizes. As English writes:

[There are] two conceptions of artistic greatness with which prizes have always had to contend, and which have been evident not only in the internal disputes among jurors, but also in the contending of prize against prize. Every prize that declares or betrays a social agenda opens the door to new prizes claiming greater purity of aesthetic judgement, while every prize claiming such purity opens the door to new and more explicit articulations of artistic value with the social good. (2005: 60)

The tension between the aesthetic and political criteria of evaluation traditionally has a more significant weight in the genre of documentary, which has a closer connection with actual events and factual material, than fiction film.<sup>6</sup> In the IDFA jury reports, press reviews and our interviews, this tension emerged in the references to an opposition between 'journalistic' and 'poetic' aesthetics or between 'socio-critical relevance' and 'emotional appeal' or between 'topicality' and 'creativity'. The theme clearly intersects with our second understanding of jury deliberations, as primed by the festival context and organization. The Joris Ivens competition was named after Holland's most radically left-wing filmmaker Joris Ivens (1898–1989), who supported the Indonesian struggle for independence (*Indonesia Calling*, 1946) and made films for the Dutch labor union and against the American aggression in Vietnam. In its early years, the festival explicitly followed in Ivens' engaged footsteps, for example by offering its Western audience

films made by East European filmmakers during the Perestroika period. Later on, the festival would be criticized for letting the social relevance of content prevail over form and artistic value, and for being too politically correct. Miryam van Lier, a former IDFA staff member, acknowledges this and writes on the occasion of the festival's tenth anniversary: 'It seems that IDFA's goal to be a platform for creative documentaries is strained by the socio-cultural task it has set itself and the selected documentaries' (1997: 92). The festival's focus on political and critical content led, as English would have predicted, to the foundation of a new festival in 1999. Stefan Majakowski established the Shadow Festival as a counterweight against the political focus of IDFA and declared he would fully dedicate the event (organized during IDFA, and so its shadow, as it were) to creative and experimental documentaries, to the originality of filmmakers, to unusual cinematographic form, border-crossing explicitness and expressive images (Shadow Festival, 2008).

The second recurring theme in the jury discussions concerns the opposition between TV aesthetics and cinematic aesthetics. A West European juror recalls: 'There were heavy arguments based on different professional traditions: conflict about how much narration or talking heads was acceptable.... Some preferred so little that it was almost fiction film.' Again, IDFA's priming is relevant in this respect. In its mission statement the cinematic is explicitly favored (alongside political engagement):

During IDFA, creative documentaries take centre stage. This means that IDFA chooses films which express the filmmaker's point of view in a creative and cinematic manner. The selection takes place on the basis of clear criteria. IDFA searches for documentaries that are cinematically intriguing or innovative, are relevant or highly topical to society at large, and stimulate the viewer to reflect, discuss and ask questions. IDFA strives for an international, diverse, topical and politically committed programme. (IDFA, 2008a)

The same juror explains that, for him, IDFA seems to say 'we aren't surrendering' to TV aesthetics, on the one hand because the selection for the Joris Ivens competition 'was not produced within TV-parameters (time-slots of 35/42/52 minutes)' and, on the other hand, because of the selection's cinematic aesthetics: 'one film contained reading out loud from a diary, which isn't common on TV.' In its (pre-)selection, IDFA excludes 'typical television documentaries' such as nature films and news reports based on research journalism (Derks quoted in Meershoek, 2004). Instead, they value a filmmaker's signature, his 'authentic' style and personal voice, thereby identifying primarily with the tradition of cinephilia and auteurism. In the jury debates on quality, the growing influence of television, omnipresent as dominant outlet and financier of the larger part of the documentary genre, is also discussed. In 1991 the jury concludes: 'Certain documentaries resembled television interviews and neglected the essence of film appeal, that is to

say, the image.’ But with the spread of (digital) video as a (cheap) means of production, juries struggle with the question of whether a cinematic style depends on cinema technology. While the jury of 1997 still seemed to favor celluloid – ‘Acknowledging the value of the video medium in today’s industry, we were further struck by the dedication of producers who had both the vision and economic means to use film in their work’ – the jury of 2001 approached cinematic style as a meta-language independent of film stock – ‘We are happy to note that it didn’t matter whether these features originated on 16 mm or 35 mm celluloid or on Hi-Definition or MiniDV digital video, because, in the end, we were judging cinematic films of the highest quality.’ Most jurors follow IDFA’s preference for cinematic aesthetics, which becomes clear in the repetitive use of positive terms such as ‘poetic,’ ‘innovative,’ ‘art’ and ‘visual celebration.’

Going back to our discussion on the logics of prize proliferation, we see how IDFA responded to this problematic issue by adjusting its program structure. Originally, the Joris Ivens competition was open to all films. Since then, extra prizes (and juries) have been established for documentaries of a particular length. The Joris Ivens award is reserved for the best documentary film longer than 60 minutes, the Silver Wolf Award (established in 1995) is for the best documentary under 60 minutes and recently the Silver Cub (established in 2005) was added for the best film of less than 30 minutes. The differentiation in awards alludes to an increasing awareness of the professional documentary filmmaking practice in which film length signifies the exhibition context for which a documentary is produced. Films ‘made’ for television have to fit in television timeslots of circa 55 minutes, whereas films aiming for a theatrical release run to cinema length. Although the rationale for such a specialization in prizes is that aesthetic standards for films produced for cinema and television differ, the situation is more complicated in reality, as the jury deliberations show. Cinema-length films can have TV aesthetics, while cinematic films are included in the competition for the Silver Wolf Award. Derks (2007) explains why: many producers submit a director’s cut for the Ivens Award as well as a TV-length version of the same film footage, edited to participate in the Wolf competition, thus maximizing their chances of selection.

A final recurring issue in the debates on quality is ‘truth value.’ It deals with the fuzzy demarcation between fiction and documentary, and poses the question if and what borders there are to a director’s creative approach and, if so, what they are. How far is a film director, for example, allowed to influence what happens in front of the camera? These discussions should clearly be understood in relation to the larger discussions on the definition of documentary heated up with the surge in fake documentaries in the mid 1990s (Juhasz and Lerner, 2006). IDFA joined in the discussion when it deliberately chose the mockumentary *Relics – Einstein’s Brain* by British director Kevin Hull as the opening film in 1994. One jury member from this period remembers two films were less appreciated because they contained scenes that were suspected of not being completely authentic. Although another jury

member, a North American film critic, rejected this as 'a rubbish argument,' the films were not short-listed as award candidates. Over the years, juries' attitude towards this issue slowly changes. Around the millennium, the winning film contained doubtful scenes in terms of truth-value. The jury still debated the issue, but decided that uncertainty about the movie's authenticity – 'whether you believe it or not' – did not affect their appreciation of its excellence. By 2007 the issue appeared less controversial and prizewinner *Stranded* was praised as 'emotional and poetic', partly thanks to an artistic concept that relied on dramatized scenes.

Since there are no objective criteria for the evaluation of documentaries, the jury deliberations are influenced by universal issues affecting awards (political versus aesthetic criteria), current debates (truth-value) and the position of 'their' prize in the context of the festival. This last point needs some explaining as it foregrounds the issue of power relations. Interviewed jury members appeared fully aware of the institutional setting in which they evaluated films. Moreover, the jury reports show not only awareness but also affinity with IDFA's politically engaged festival image. In 1991 the jury writes: 'The winning film reflects the philosophical conception of Joris Ivens (tolerance, compassion, humanity and an understanding of people's needs and aspirations).' In 2004 they 'would like to begin by saying how proud we are to be giving this award in the name of a man who represented the best nature and most noble intentions of documentary filmmaking.'

The priming of juries occurs both due to their embedding in the festival context and by means of pre-selection, which may contain implicit suggestions of quality (based on Derks' taste for socio-political topicality). Many jurors are very ambivalent about being on a jury and include both words of praise and critique of the festival in their reports: 'The festival should encourage more short films' (1989), 'We hope future festivals will be able to attract more entrants from the Third World' (1994), 'We congratulate the IDFA staff under the leadership of Ally Derks for elevating the documentary to its rightful cultural place ...' (1999). Beneath this ambivalence about the merits of the festival as institution – inevitably considered as too exclusive – lies a more fundamental ambivalence about one's own contribution to the selection of prizewinners. As Pride argues, many jurors are reluctant to judge their peers (2002: 26). Indeed, while filmmakers (peers) point to the subjective sides of evaluation and question the possibility of reaching fair and meaningful decisions, programmers (experts) seem less troubled and take a more detached approach towards the selection, looking for new trends, discoveries and innovation. For our understanding of festivals as a network of cultural capital this is a key issue that points to the unequal distribution of power between the various actors involved. The organization of the selection process is such that institutional interests and criteria are set as default standards and jurors find themselves working within the boundaries set by this festival system. Festivals, then, are not only wholesalers of cultural capital, they also draw on *social capital* in their organization, they operate as networks of relationships in which both individual

and collective actions are facilitated by social norms, reciprocity and a certain level of trust.

A third and final way of understanding jury deliberations is to consider them as group dynamics. Again the notion of social capital is relevant here. Almost all jury members in our interviews stated that the nightly debates following the film viewings were enlightening experiences that changed their opinion on what a valuable film actually is. The collective value of jury deliberations, in other words, is the production of a democratic situation in which thoughts, opinions and norms can be discussed. Our interviewed jurors considered the encounters with peers from different cultural and professional backgrounds especially valuable. One example in which the intercultural encounter led to a greater appreciation of cultural difference concerns an East European film whose cinematic style was not appreciated by most of the jury members until one juror, an East European festival director, explained that its extreme static cinematography was the fashionable aesthetic in Eastern Europe at the time. Different cultural tastes, however, can also be the cause of disagreement. Two East European filmmakers recall not understanding the preference of their West European and South American jury colleagues for poetic aesthetics: 'Why not reflect more in a political sense, why invest in tears and aesthetics?' Unfortunately, the system of international juries is not democratic in its cultural representation; as Western jurors tend to dominate the international film festival competitions prestigious prizes are likely to reproduce cultural preferences.

All the jury members we interviewed testified that during the process of evaluation films would 'naturally' drop out, usually leaving four to five potential prizewinners. If there was dissent, the jury sessions would conclude with a negotiation, described by one jury member as a 'cow trade.' This is the moment when personal preferences are fiercely fought over and compromises are made. As Pride argues: 'Winning something largely depends on the jury and the politics of the moment' (2002: 26). At IDFA, with three to five jurors on the panel, three nominations and one 'Special jury prize,' most personal preferences lead to official acknowledgment. The unwritten rule among jurors, finally, is that any disagreements, disputes and fights will not be discussed publicly, which contributes to the unassailable (yet always contested) status of the awards.

## Conclusions

While festival and critics' awards have a great impact on a film's success and a filmmaker's career, they're impossible to control or predict because voting isn't exactly a science. (Pride, 2002: 26)

Voting may not exactly be a science, but if we take into account the work of Latour, who argued that research results of the so-called hard sciences

are incontestable only in retrospect – once discoveries have been ‘black boxed’ – jury deliberations and laboratory work appear more alike than they may seem at first sight; both involve controversies and contingencies. Taking prizes ‘in the making’ as our main interest, what did we find behind the scenes of IDFA’s most prestigious competition? We found a procedural selection system that runs from pre-selection to rejection, from acceptance to nomination and homage. We also discovered a complex discursive apparatus that consists of a series of individual choices influenced by cultural, personal and professional affiliations, by universal issues and topical concerns, by priming and, at the final stage of jury deliberations, by intercultural peer-to-peer exchange and straightforward negotiation. We encountered a festival director whose influence is far-reaching. We did not expect to find objective criteria of quality and were, indeed, confirmed in our belief that it is subjective evaluations and contingent circumstances that tip results. Jury members frequently complained that it is hard to compare films in a genre that is characterized by diversity, and recalled how they found themselves debating the definition of documentary over dinner or drinks, more often than not a cherished experience in itself. The festival organization recognized some of these concerns and, over the years, devised separate competitions for films of specific lengths and started thematic programs to differentiate between selections. However, as we have shown, the proliferation of prizes at IDFA has not been very instrumental in tackling the question of quality. Our analysis brought three main components in the struggle for attributing cultural capital to the fore: ‘aesthetic versus political criteria,’ ‘TV aesthetics versus cinematic aesthetics’ and the matter of ‘truth-value.’ Each remains unresolved. Even the Silver Wolf Award, which, on paper, distinguishes between documentaries produced for television and director’s cuts, failed to produce clarity.

Our case study did, however, highlight two important characteristics of the selection process that should be accounted for in the conceptual understanding of film festivals as a network of cultural capital. First, all things considered, the balance of power clearly lies with the festival organization, in particular the festival director. Not only does the festival (director) oversee the larger part of the selection, the festival philosophy also primes the final jury’s decisions. This means that festival prizes and prestige are primarily the result of expert selection and that typical expert preferences – such as aesthetic innovation, originality, an authentic voice and topicality – influence the perspective of peer-jurors who, of their own accord, tend to be reluctant to judge colleagues. Value addition at a festival is, in other words, a top-down affair. The proliferation of prizes may have democratized the process of evaluation (allowing, for example, different parties to award their own prizes, such as international critics’ awards or children’s juries), but the system’s hierarchy holds; the most prestigious prize represents the festival image. Second, as the recurring issues in the jury deliberations showed, festival prizes are not bestowed in a vacuum, but are part of larger ongoing discourses. In our case



study we saw how the perspective on (digital) video technology changed from aversive to welcoming, and how fiction became a more accepted style of documentary filming. Our findings encourage us to suggest that festivals are not mere barometers of changing norms, but forces that drive, shape and legitimize change. In this respect it is important to realize that the (expert) preference for innovation at festivals is linked to the competitive context of the international film festival circuit, in which festivals need to attract attention by means of new discoveries, new talents, new waves, new genres, new current social topics and new norms. Festivals use their most distinctive slots, therefore, not only to call attention to outstanding films, but also to manage their own competitive profile. Competition programs and prizes add value to films and filmmakers, and also to the festival. Reconsidering the weight of pre-selection and priming in this respect, we may even argue that festival prizes are significantly 'programmed' by the festival. Not in the fraudulent sense of manipulating jury decisions by direct intervention, but in the more subtle ways festivals work to foreground films and criteria of evaluation that consummate their festival image. This points to a defining paradox: while awards decisions are ultimately dependent on subjective evaluations and contingent circumstances (which makes winning an award a matter of luck as much as a sign of artistic achievement), festival competitions are, at the same time, set by distinctive and influential (yet elusive) festival standards.

In our article we have suggested, finally, that being selected for the festival might matter more than winning a prize, because it grants filmmakers the opportunity to make use of IDFA's industrial and professional services, and gives them access to the peer community of documentary filmmakers, merits that are more tangible than prestige. This is not to deny that awards matter in the larger film festival network, or that they can make a profound difference in the professional careers of filmmakers. Indeed, opportunities for the translation of symbolic into economic capital have gained relevance over the years. Taking the powerful and self-affirming position of festivals into account, we should, in conclusion, expect festival prizes, in particular prestigious ones, to remain powerful instruments of cultural legitimization for some time to come.

## Notes

- 1 Most jurors agreed to contribute to this research provided that they would not be mentioned by name.
- 2 Some explanation with regard to our methodology is necessary here. The study focuses on the Joris Ivens jury and we collected our empirical data through a qualitative analysis of all jury reports and a selection of jury interviews. Since it was not possible to interview all former jurors, we adhered to the following procedure: we contacted and invited all members of juries to participate. Only the years with a minimum of two members willing and able to tell us about the judging process were included in the research (some

former jurors declined our invitation for ethical reasons, some had already passed away, and a few we were not able to locate). In order to see possible changes occurring over time, we selected five juries with an average interval of five years between them. We made sure that the diversity in the professional and cultural backgrounds of jury members was well represented in our final selection. The interviews were loosely structured and conducted either by phone or in person. We studied and compared the interviews and jury reports for factual information, recounted patterns in ideas, attitude, behavior, and use of certain words or phrases, thereby mixing oral history with a methodology aligned to discourse analysis. The work on jury reports and interviews was, finally, contextualized by also interviewing festival staff, doing web-research on the festival's self-presentation and reading prior interviews with and publications by festival organizers.

- 3 The Academy Awards, for example, are highly valued because an Oscar nomination and/or award will translate into higher box office revenues for the film and higher fees for the honored filmmakers (Dodds and Holbrook, 1988).
- 4 The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was founded in 1927. It aimed to achieve several goals, among which are the 'improvement and advancement of the arts and sciences of the profession by the interchange of constructive ideas and by awards of merit for distinctive achievements' (Levy, 2001: 19).
- 5 'Sites of passage' is a contraction of Bruno Latour's term 'obligatory points of passage' and Arnold van Gennep's concept of 'rites of passage,' and, in addition, alludes to the temporal and spatial dimension of film festivals.
- 6 For documentary's relation to reality, see Sonja de Leeuw's discussion of the representational strategies of documentaries on the Second World War, focusing, in particular, on the holocaust (De Leeuw, 2007).

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