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11

Global Cities and the International Film Festival Economy (2001)

Julian Stringer

→ COMPETITION AMONG CITIES
(2008) Film International 6:4 :53-59

② Ahn (2008) "Re-powering Film Festivals" Dissertation
Indiana University. Dpt of Comparative Literature

A week doesn't go by these days without some city somewhere in the world staging its own international film festival. Events in Berlin, Honolulu, Hong Kong, London, Moscow, Toronto, and Venice provide just a few of the most visible pinpoints on a vast, sprawling map of transcultural film exhibition and consumption. Leaving its mark on select corners of the globe, this caravan of images flows from location to location, national border to national border, so as to connect exciting and emergent film industries with the international traffic in cinema. Festivals are significant on regional, national, and pan-national levels; they bring visitors to cities, revenue to national film industries, and national film cultures into the world cinema system. And their importance has increased significantly over the past two decades. As theatrical markets for movies have shrunk around the world, festivals now constitute the sole formal exhibition site for many new titles.

For these reasons, considering the power dynamics of the international film festival circuit is important to any understanding of contemporary world cinema. Festivals function as a space of mediation, a cultural matrix within which the aims and activities of specific interest groups are negotiated, as well as a place for the establishment and maintenance of cross-cultural-looking relations. Moreover, they play a key, if often underacknowledged, role in the writing of film history. Festival screenings determine which movies are distributed in distinct cultural arenas, and hence which movies critics and academics are likely to gain access to. *

This last point is hardly negligible. As so many of the non-Western films

that Western audiences are likely to be familiar with emerged as festival entries, scholars tend to approach them through the nostalgic invocation of those moments when non-Western industries were "discovered" – that is, discovered by Westerners – at major international competitions. A recent example of this can be found in Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's popular textbook, *Film History: An Introduction*. Assigning a mere sentence to the history of Korean cinema, they assert that "South Korea, site of a flourishing industry in the late 1960s, eventually attracted festival notice with such meditative films as *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (1989)."[1] This sentence has the unfortunate effect of implying that Korean film production is a mere adjunct to the primary historical importance of international film festivals, and it underpins a critical position which consigns virtually the entire history of a divided national film industry to oblivion. Aside from illustrating how what are ostensibly *distribution* histories of world cinema too often masquerade as *production* histories, this example assumes that non-Western cinemas do not count historically until they have been recognized by the apex of international media power, the center of which is located, by implication, at Western film festivals.

HISTORY

Similarly, Yingjin Zhang has discussed how the importance assigned to film festivals carries implications for the histories of both film production and film studies. Zhang explores the consequences of the recent global unspooling of a number of so-called Chinese "ethnographic" films, such as *Red Sorghum* (Yimou Zhang, 1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (Yimou Zhang, 1990), and *Ju Dou* (Yang Fengliang, Yiman Zhang, 1991). As he puts it, "favorable reviews at international film festivals lead to the production of more ethnographic films, and the wide distribution of such films facilitates their availability for classroom use and therefore influences the agenda of film studies, which in turn reinforces the status of ethnographic films as a dominant genre."[2]

In addition, film festivals provide a focus for the convergence of issues concerning the relation of cultural production to cultural policy. As just one manifestation of this convergence, scholars are beginning to take note of how closely film festivals relate to issues of national identity, how intimately their histories are tied up with the politics of cultural nationalism. Marla Susan Stone, for example, has shown how the first such event, held at Venice in 1932, was organized as an explicit act of propaganda aimed at legitimizing and promoting Mussolini's fascist state on the world's stage.[3] Similarly, Heidi Fehrenbach's research on the ascendancy of the Berlin Film Festival in the 1950s demonstrates how that particular event was tied to the spectacle of German reconstruction and democratization after the fall of Hitler.[4] Indeed, one might say that all the major festivals established in the immediate post-war period (Berlin, Cannes, Edinburgh, Moscow, London, Venice) were closely aligned with the activities and aims of particular national governments. This kind of historical work suggests that such events worked to promote official state narratives and hence perpetuate the continuation of the nation-state system itself.

In Britain, the popular newspaper critic Dilys Powell wrote as early as 1947 of how film festivals provide a unique opportunity to contemplate other national ways of life. In her article, "The Importance of International Film Festivals," published in the *Penguin Film Review*, she wrote that "The value to critic and creator alike of detaching himself from his normal surroundings and looking at the cinema against a neutral background will remain. And here, I fancy, in this temporary escape from the national projection room, is the lasting value of the film festival."[5] But Dilys Powell got it wrong. Film festivals have not offered an escape from the national projection room, so much as one of its major showcases: they have not provided a neutral background for the pure gaze of aesthetic contemplation so much as a location for the implantation of nationalist agendas. In Thomas Elsaesser's telling phrase, the international film festival circuit has constituted "a kind of parliament of national cinemas," a network of official diplomacy implicated in the institutional policies of host and participant nations.[6] Certainly, this remains a key way of conceptualizing film festivals, despite the fact that with the rise of the international co-production in the 1970s, many festivals (including Cannes and Venice) dispensed with national classifications altogether, in recognition of their increasingly problematic and redundant nature.

While the question of national politics continues to be crucial to the idea and practical organization of film festivals, the reasons for their growing importance have changed and become more complex over time. What matters now is not just the showing of films within a context of national display and objectification, together with the "opportunities for comparison, for the renewing of serious standards of judgment" that Dilys Powell talked about in 1947, but also the symbolic qualities of a festival's connection with a sense of extra-national place and identity.[7] At the same time as we need more work on the historical link between film festivals and concepts of national cinema, we also need to move the discussion on to considerations of the exhibition site itself as a new kind of counter public sphere. While the establishment of events like Berlin, Cannes, and Venice in the postwar period signaled that the balance of power was shifting in the new world order, the rise of film festivals on a global scale since the 1980s is implicated, too, in the restructuring of an alternative social object, namely the modern city.

Mapping the Circuit

As David Morley and Kevin Robins have pointed out, the reorganization in recent years of transnational finance and speculative capital, as well as of electronic delivery systems and other communications networks, has changed the role of cities around the world, bringing about new confrontations between city administrators and transnational corporations, and stimulating global competition between cities so as to attract ever more mobile investments.[8] Within this worldwide marketplace, film distribution has taken on some of the same characteristics as other indicators of deep social and economic change. Major cities now find themselves in competition with each other for the cultural resources of global financing, just as they do for the money generated by tourism and the heritage and leisure industries.

Once upon a time, festivalgoers could contemplate other national cinemas at the small number of major events held throughout the year, and the films on display were clearly labeled as the products of specific countries. In the immediate postwar period, the festival circuit constituted less than a dozen events, all of which could be attended by a jet-setting elite of filmmakers, cultural attachés, distributors, royalty, and journalists – that charmed circle of the great and the good described by Peter Baker in his 1962 novel, *To Win a Prize on Sunday* (published while Baker was editor of *Films and Filming* magazine).[9] As local film festivals began to proliferate in the 1980s and 1990s, however, this aura of exclusivity evaporated – with over five hundred events now being held in all four corners of the world, is there really anything special about any of them? Consequently, cities have sought to establish a distinct sense of identity and community – an aura of specialness and uniqueness – through promoting their film festivals within the terms of a highly competitive global economy. Cities and towns all around the world have found it necessary to set up their own events so as not to be left out of the game.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the key metaphor used by media discourses to describe the organization of international film festivals – namely, the "festival circuit." What exactly does this term mean? In order to answer this question, let us consider three possible usages. First, our common-sense understanding of the term, gleaned from journalistic and trade sources, suggests, simply, a closely linked network of interrelated, interdependent events. Second, for more discriminating or politically-oriented commentators, as well as for such festival participants as traveling filmmakers and visiting programmers, it may represent a closed system impossible to keep up with. Simply put, some festivals within the circuit are more dispensable then others, some worth the decision to attend, others not worth investing time and money in, particularly if they are deemed politically objectionable, opportunistic, or ineffectual. Practical financial decisions determine which events are most important for hard-pressed media workers unable to participate in all the festivals that make up the system.

Yet it is also possible to read the festival circuit in a third way, namely as a metaphor for the geographically uneven development that characterizes the world of international film culture. By this I mean that the development of trade and information links between nations and regions through film festivals has necessitated the establishment of new core–periphery relations; there is a positive need for a dominant center (big festivals) and its subordinate or dependent peripheries (little festivals). The film festival "map" that one could draw up at any given time, showing the proliferation and distribution of such events around the world, does not just chart their existence on a mass spatial scale, it also provides a temporal dimension to the circuit's organization. In other words, the point is not just that some festivals are bigger than others, but that the timetabling, or scheduling, or temporal management of the festival season determines the activities of distinct cities in relation to one another. Events are measured and compared, high spots differentiated from low spots, glamorous and sexy locations separated out from the not-so-glamorous and not-so-sexy. Inequality is thus built into the very structure of the international film festival circuit. In part, the astonishing growth of such events in the 1980s and beyond may be viewed as the logical result of the global economy's need to produce a large reservoir of other locations in other cities so as to continually rejuvenate the festival circuit through competition and cooperation.

Just as cities seek to imitate and reproduce each others' success through spatial and city planning, the proliferation of film festivals has been characterized by a similar modular quality. Events are established on the basis of other, prior, and successful events, and a new category of individual, "the international film festival consultant," has played an important behind-the-scenes role in mediating and solidifying the links between disparate cities and their film festivals.

I wish to use the term "the international film festival circuit," then, to suggest the existence of a socially produced space unto itself, a unique cultural arena that acts as a contact zone for the working-through of unevenly differentiated power relationships – not so much a parliament of national film industries as a series of diverse, sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating, public spheres. My argument is that it is cities which now act as the nodal points on this circuit, not national film industries. In short, I am asking that we pay as much attention to the spatial logics of the historical and contemporary festival circuit as we do to the films it exhibits. The circuit exists as an allegorization of space and its power relationships; it operates through the transfer of value between and within distinct geographic localities.

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Festival Image

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Any individual film festival strives to remain competitive on two fronts. On the one hand, a sense of stability is crucial to the promotion of events on the circuit – such and such a festival is worth attending because it is established, a regular fixture in the diaries of the great and the good, and so on. On the other hand, expansion is also necessary if the individual festival is not to be left behind by its rivals; festivals are advertised as Bigger Than Ever, Better Than Ever, Comprising More Films Than Ever. Yet one of the peculiarities of the whole phenomenon is that just because a festival in a particular city is internationally established and growing more successful by the minute, it does not necessarily follow that this will lead to growth in the film industry of the respective nation that city belongs to. For example, Manthia Diawara has pointed out that the success of African film festivals has not led to many benefits for distinct national African industries.[10] Furthermore, this kind of observation backs up the work of Saskia Sassen, who has illustrated how major financial centers such as London, New York, and Tokyo constitute a system of world cities whose success rates run independent of current economic situations in, respectively, Britain, the USA, and Japan.[11]

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Consequently, the ambition of many festivals – regardless of their actual size and the catchment area they draw participants and audiences from – is to aspire to the status of a global event, both through the implementation of their programming strategies and through the establishment of an international reach and reputation. Their ambition is to use the existing big festivals as models so as to bring the world to the city in question, while simultaneously spreading the reputation of the city in question around the world.

Such ambitions indicate that intercity rivalry and cooperation through film festivals has occurred at a variety of different levels on the basis of a range of differing administrative, governmental, and cultural and political activist concerns. In the case of what I call (following art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach) the "universal survey festivals" – that is, those major events that aspire to show movies from all four corners of the globe and attract a good deal of international media exposure – such events constitute attempts by a coalition of the state, local government officials, corporate sponsors, and intellectuals equipped with film expertise to make their own intervention into the festival scene by competing in the bidding wars for audiences and titles.[12] In order to compete within the terms of this global space economy, such events must operate in two directions at once. As local differences are being erased through globalization, festivals need to be similar to one another, but as novelty is also at a premium, the local and particular also becomes very valuable. Film festivals market both conceptual similarity and cultural difference.

Another way of putting this is to say that as local festivals are forced actively to conceptualize themselves so as to compete for global financing, they have to create their own sense of community, and hence their own marketable trademark or brand image. It is important to analyze the specific marketing strategies cities utilize as they attempt to secure what may be called a "festival image" for themselves. Elsaesser points out that "Festivals are the Olympics of the show-business economy, even though not all are as market-oriented as the Cannes Festival. What competes at festivals are less individual films than film concepts, film ideas, sales angles, or what Stephen Heath called a film's 'narrative image.'[13] Elsaesser's perceptive comments are written in the context of the international circulation of New British Cinema in the 1980s, but my argument is that this kind of thinking needs to be extended more to the extratextual and extranational levels as well. What many festivals actually now market and project are not just "narrative images," but a city's own "festival image," its own self-perceptions of the place it occupies within the global space economy, especially in relation to other cities and other festivals.

Treating film festivals as a constituent feature of today's global city – something it is necessary for every major city to have – and taking the rise of the global city as a metaphor for the simultaneous allegiance and rivalry between events on the international film festival circuit, may be taken in either of two ways. Positively, events that establish festival images that fully engage with global/local dynamics, that fully suggest the international dimensions of local film cultures, may produce a genuine local city identity based around a shared sense of cinephilia and an engagement with dynamic processes of cultural exchange. Such is the case, for example, with the Hong Kong International Film Festival which, since its establishment in 1977, has grown to the point where it now attracts 100,000 visitors a year. Hong Kong has a cultural remit to provide both an international forum for the exhibition and evaluation of pan-Asian cinemas, and a repository for archival knowledge about local film cultures.[14]

On the other hand, of course, all of this may simply lead to the establishment of a touristic and commodified aesthetic. This latter tendency has been a vital, if underexplored, aspect of the festival circuit since the beginning (Venice, 1932, did not just promote fascism, it also brought visitors to the city's hotels during the off-season). This process was articulated very directly by the Mayor of Berlin when introducing visitors to the 1998 Berlin Festival held in February of that year:

> For the 48th time the Berlin International Film Festival is brightening Berlin's often dreary, gray February skies. And just when it seems as if winter will never end, inside the movie theaters everyone can catch a glimpse of star glamour. Along with the great variety of films presented during the festival, the line-up of international film stars adds yet another highlight to the already rich cultural agenda of the Berlin winter season . . . . while you are enjoying encounters with exciting new worlds of cinema from all the five continents, don't forget the real world outside, off the silver screen, and take a little time to discover the streets and squares of Berlin: there is much to be seen in the city's many museums, theaters and exhibitions.[15]

The fact that film festivals provide opportunities for tourism and the boosting of a city's economy is obvious enough, but it is worth highlighting the felt need for the constant reiteration of touristic rhetoric – festivals need to keep plugging subsidiary attractions because cities need to keep in the public eye. During the weeks immediately before and after it is being held, for example, Berlin has to attract programmers, filmmakers, and other visitors from similar events in Rotterdam, Miami, Bombay, Gothenburg, Hiroshima, Portland, Texas, Victoria, and St Petersburg, cities which will all seek to build on their attractions, festival images, and sense of unique local culture with each passing festival season.

Planning the Festival Spectacle

As the example of the highly visible Berlin Film Festival suggests, one feature of the uneven geographical development that characterizes the global film festival economy is the two-tiered system it now embodies. Little festivals handle specialized audiences and create new opportunities, while big festivals, specifically the universal survey festivals, attract tried and tested talent and appeal to a much wider market. The two-tier system represents the consolidation of power amongst a handful of mega-events, or global festivals in global cities, together with the bustling activity among a veritable throng of niche operations, or smaller events catering to particular tastes and particular constituencies.

What unites these tiers is the necessity of determining the key locational criteria used in deciding when and where new film festivals will be established and older ones maintained. Processes of city planning and spatial planning are clearly important in this regard. Fixing the regional characteristics of festivals through their identification with particular cities requires a consideration of the links they forge between local councils, businesses, governments, and communities, as well as some discussion of how all of these relate to global networks of power and influence. On one level, film festivals are being used to tap local alliances that may well blossom in the future, encouraging in the process forms of urban movie spectatorship that promote place and community-bound affiliations. As with comparable phenomena such as sports meetings, beauty contests, museum exhibitions, and the rise of the conference circuit, film festivals are planned and marketed around a clear sense of visibility. More and more these days the festival crowd does not appear to be there primarily to enjoy the show so much as to provide evidence of its existence for worldwide observers (for example, through spectacular open-air screenings.) Whereas at Venice in 1932 the glamour of the festival audience was used to promote and legitimate the politics of the fascist state, it is now used for a variety of different reasons as well, including as a

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prop in a grander show staged for the festival circuit and the rival cities that participate within it. While there has been a shift in the understanding of how spectacle can be deployed at film festivals, the proliferation of the virtual festival experience (for example, through websites) has similarly taken festival and city identities into cyberspace – into wholly new notions of spectacle and wholly new (electronic) space economies. In this regard, the establishment of the FILM-FEST project in the USA (a series of commercial DVDs based around individual festivals like Sundance and Cannes, comprising clips from featured movies, *cinéma vérité* tours of key locations, interviews with visitors and organizers, and so on) is highly significant.

The planning of spectacle around a city's distinct festival image has a further function: it helps develop initiatives related to real-estate activity within cities, thus helping to rejuvenate the value of urban space through the mobilization of global interests. Just as the long-term value of local real estate is determined by the recognizable and marketable differences between places, festivals within any one specific nation-state may end up in competition with each other in terms of potential land prices as much as in terms of which festival will gain access to which films and filmmakers. Take the example of the Pusan International Film Festival, held in postcolonial Korea. Pusan provides an interesting case study in that it has been self-consciously modeled (as a showcase for Asian cinema in the region) along the lines of the existing, highly successful Hong Kong annual event. As Soyoung Kim has pointed out, Pusan is attempting to mobilize a sense of local identity around its festival as part of a wider initiative, on the part of Korea's newly inaugurated local governments, to challenge the legacy of the "Seoul Republic," or the heavy industrialization of Seoul which proceeded on the whim of the authoritarian, centralized government regime of the 1980s.[16] As such, the festival has sought to attract financial investments to the city, its beaches, and the Pusan Yachting Center in Haundae, and away from the national capital, Seoul.

As this example suggests, a particularly important question concerns the status of international film festivals in postcolonial societies, and particularly in postcolonial global cities. How do festivals in these locations position themselves within the uneven power differentiations of the global economy? How do they interact with other cultural and non-cultural institutions so as to build up a sense of a postcolonial, local film culture? More than that, what role do international film festival consultants play in the conceptualization of postcolonial urban identities? The case of India is particularly intriguing here, as it holds its national festival in a different city each year, thus stimulating intense rivalry and competition among a range of key locations.

In sum, a quick scan of the hundreds of events with their own web pages on the internet testifies to the ubiquity of the boom in local film festivals today. Such events open up new and counter public spheres within a circuit of globalized media distribution, cutting across concepts of the national in complex but instructive ways. An average of over forty towns and cities now hold such events during each and every month of the year. As such events can be found splattered around the world, it is worth raising the question of whether or not it is still possible to pinpoint exactly where the core of the festival circuit resides – where its center is. For example, some Western journalists have complained that there are now "too many" film festivals in the world. This is a statement which seems to betray an anxiety over journalists' own inability to attend – or police – all the major events, and hence an implicit recognition of the impossibility of making too grand or sweeping statements about the state of contemporary world cinema. The complaint, "There are too many film festivals in the world today," also raises the specter of the *situated* nature of the different and contingent positions from which the spatial logics of the contemporary international film festival circuit can be observed and understood.

Notes

1 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), p. 774.
2 Yingjin Zhang, "Chinese Cinema and Transnational Cultural Politics: Reflections on Film Festivals, Film Productions, and Film Studies," *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 2, no. 1 (1998): 121.
3 Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 100–10.
4 Heidi Fehrenbach, *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity After Hitler* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 234–53.
5 Dilys Powell, "The Importance of International Film Festivals," *Penguin Film Review* 3 (1947): 60.
6 Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1996), p. 16.
7 Powell, "International Film Festivals," p. 61.
8 David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 119.
9 Peter Baker, *To Win a Prize on Sunday* (London, Souvenir Press, 1966).
10 Manthia Diawara, "On Tracking World Cinema: African Cinema at Film Festivals," *Public Culture* 6, no. 2 (1994): 385–96.
11 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
12 Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, no. 4 (1980): 448–69.
13 Thomas Elsaesser, "Images for Sale: The 'New British Cinema,'" in Lester Friedman (ed.), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (London: UCL Press, 1993), pp. 52–69.

14 Hong Kong International Film Festival (HKIFF), *20th Anniversary of the Hong Kong International Film Festival 1977–1996*, (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1996).

15 "Welcome: Governing Mayor of Berlin," *Moving Picture Berlinale Extra*, 11–12 February 1998, p. 3.

16 Soyoung Kim, "'Cine-Mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question," *UTS Review*, forthcoming.

Part 3

Cinema and the Postcolonial Metropolis

Part 3 interrogates the relationship between urban identity and urban development, on the one hand, and the cinematically articulated identities of a range of postcolonial nations and cities, on the other. Moving beyond the Western European and US centers, this section foregrounds the shared conditions of cities such as Hanoi, Manila, Port Elizabeth, Lagos, Sydney, Montréal, and Dublin, all of which have experienced economic and cultural peripheralization, subordination, and/or exploitation; a legacy of cultural division between various ethnic/national/linguistic populations; and often traumatic adaptations to the realities of transnational capital and economic development in the late twentieth century. These common conditions are examined in terms of their articulation through appropriately (and often necessarily) non-industrial cinemas, including low-budget production, civic documentary, local video, and art-house film. The section considers the possibility and practice of cinematic resistance by "subordinate" or "marginal" cities and film cultures, to economic, political, and cultural crises, particularly as these are precipitated by globalization.

In "Streetwalking in the Cinema of the City: Capital Flows Through Saigon," J. Paul Narkunas analyses the articulation in the film *Cyclo* of recent market liberalization and capitalization in Vietnam, through a focus on the traumatic history of Saigon from French colonialism, through American occupation, to bankruptcy in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Rolando B. Tolentino, in "Cityscape: The Capital Infrastructuring and Technologization of Manila," describes the contentious roles played by a number of Filipino