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# First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals

MARK PERANSON

We've yet to reach the point, as rather trenchantly proposed by Mike Judge in the visionary satire *Idiocracy*, where the collective film experience consists of sitting in a common space and watching a film called *Ass*. Thanks, some would argue, to the role that film festivals play in our culture. It's true that film festivals in the current political economy of cinema exist as an alternative distribution network; their most significant purpose is providing audiences with opportunities to enjoy commercially unviable films projected in a communal space – films that most communities, even the most cosmopolitan, otherwise would not have the opportunity to see. Moreover, these festivals are popping up like Starbucks franchises, in terms of numbers – every major city now has one – and in terms of the products that they offer. The major festivals introduce trendy new sidebars on an annual basis, showing more and more films, and expanding to include, for example, art installations. Yet they still provide a venue for lively interplay between filmmaker and audience, or between film professionals. Festivals, it must be said and not forgotten – though it might seem like I'm doing so over the course of

this analysis – create the general atmosphere for the appreciation of film as art, and, in our transitional time, are thus essential.

But this does not mean that the situation is perfect. There's a false dichotomy that exists between the multiplex and the film festival world, where one is business, the other art. If anything, one can say that in their local contexts, international film festivals are *too* successful, as the real spectre haunting the film world is declining attendances at so-called arthouse theatres year round, *especially* in screening facilities that are being built and run by film festivals. To state just one example of many, the North American premiere of Straub-Huillet's *Quei Loro Incontri* at the Cinematheque Ontario in Toronto, home to arguably the world's most successful film festival, drew a meagre audience of twenty or so people, albeit on a cold winter's night. Audiences surely are more willing to take chances during film festivals, a factor of the system of passes and, also, economics: ticket prices at film festivals, even not taking into account passes, are usually lower than at regular screenings (though not in Toronto, where they go for twenty bucks a pop!).

Festivals have a number of advantages over regular arthouse screenings, in that festivals are *events*. And we are currently living in an event-driven culture (as opposed to, say, a quality-driven culture). Because they are events (if not spectacles, in the Debordian sense), festivals have a greater promotional budget to attract audiences (especially special interest audiences, like local immigrant communities), they can market themselves as a focal event in the city, and locals (as well as tourists) take vacations around the time of festivals. Film festivals are not exclusively for cinephiles – they provide the opportunity for bingeing, so why should we be surprised when the attendance lags during the rest of the year. Not to mention that regular screenings of arthouse films find themselves competing with other film 'events' – documentary festivals, Asian festivals, queer festivals, children's festivals, mental health festivals, green film festivals, you name it. Just as many kinds of festivals, one could say, as choices of coffee at Starbucks, with just as much marketing involved.

Yet the best thing about film festivals is that they provide the opportunity for audiences to see films that, otherwise, they cannot see. Although content, or even aesthetic criteria, should be left out of this kind of discussion, inevitably it finds a way in through the back door. So why not let it in?

For argument's sake, let's say there are fifty outstanding films per year, films that any programmer or critic, personal taste aside, would agree are films that any self-respecting international film festival should show – works that will stand the test of time, or take the pulse of the time, *Ass* excluded. The expansion in the number of festivals worldwide, the busy calendar, especially in the fall, and the type of system that has organically developed over the past decade or so, restricts where these fifty films will play. Most of the time there is only one English-subtitled print of a film in the world – a film can only be in one place at one time, and, for reasons elucidated below, sales agents and/or producers often only want certain films to play in one festival per territory. Moreover, there exists a common preconception that an international film festival's priority is to show the very best of the year's output in world cinema/arthouse cinema (to be, as the Toronto International Film Festival used to be called, a 'Festival of Festivals'). But it's quite possible that no one festival is able to fulfil this lofty, yet quite achievable, goal, and that, indeed, it's nigh impossible for most festivals to even have this as a goal.

## Two ideal festival models

Festivals here are seen as political actors, and by this I mean they are subjected to pressures from interest groups and that festivals exist in relation to each other, and, one could even argue, are in a constant struggle for power. In the course of this struggle, relationships of exploitation have come into place, where two kinds of film festivals coexist in an essentially core/periphery relationship. And the way it works may be ass-backwards: first you get the power, it seems, *then* you get the money.

These two *ideal* models encompass, on the one hand, characteristics typical to the operation of the film festival itself and, on the other, interest groups that must be appeased for the continuing support and success of the festival – and these interest groups influence what films and what *kinds* of films are going to be screened at a festival; the two charts (on pages 27 and 28) kind of relate to each other dialectically, as change in one leads to change in the other.

First, how can we characterise these two models, one I will call the 'business model' or, depending on my mood, the 'behemoth', the other being the 'audience model?' These models are ideal, but derived from my experience

of both going to film festivals and working at film festivals. In particular, my viewpoint is coloured by working for the Vancouver International Film Festival, which likely slants this non-neutral information and breakdown in a specific way, though there's no sour grapes in this analysis: in fact, each kind of festival is subject to different kinds of external pressures.

For the benefit of people who might not have heard about Vancouver, let me detail some basic facts: the festival shows about 220 features each year to an audience of about 150,000 people, making it the second largest in North America. Besides screening the most Canadian features of any festival, there is also one of the largest East Asian programmes outside of Asia within an international festival (about forty programmes of Asian features and shorts a year). This includes a competition for first- or second-time filmmakers (past winners include Lee Chang-dong, Hong Sang-soo, Jia Zhangke and Koreeda Hirokazu). One of the niche goals that the festival established a while back was to serve as a kind of conduit to East Asia – for a lot of directors, coming to the festival marks the first time they've travelled outside of Asia, or their home countries. Yet despite these not insignificant accomplishments, I gather that most non-Canadians only have one Canadian film festival in their minds.

Examples of the business festival, then, would be major festivals with markets or de facto markets (Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, Pusan), plus, to a lesser extent, the largest festival in a country, while examples of audience festivals would be the greater number of the world's festivals, the one in a city near you (I could say Vancouver, but I could also say anything from Seattle to San Francisco to Vienna to Buenos Aires to any number of festivals under discussion in this volume). Once again, these are ideals: most festivals fit somewhere in the middle, combining elements of both types. It's also the case that festivals can move from one column to the other, typically the second to the first (for example, one could argue that Tribeca, buttressed by the support of American Express, is trying to do this, and that Pusan did this extremely quickly, creating both a film fund and a market while barely having enough time to grow facial hair).

<b>BUSINESS FESTIVAL</b>	<b>AUDIENCE FESTIVAL</b>
High budget, operating revenue not primarily audience/ticket sales	Low budget, a good deal of operating revenue comes from attendance
Premiere oriented (world or international)	Not concerned with premieres
Major corporate sponsorship	Limited corporate sponsorship
Guests present for most films	Limited number of guests
Market/business presence	Little business presence
Large staff	Small staff
Major competition	Minor competition
Film-fund/third-world investment	No investment in films
Retrospectives	Few retrospectives
Most films are submitted	Most films are seen at other festivals or solicited
Hollywood studio involvement	Little Hollywood studio involvement
Always expanding	Content to remain the same size

**Chart 1. Two models for understanding film festivals**

The second chart, overleaf, lists the separate groups that each have a vested interest in some part of the operations of the film festival, which influence what films screen at what festival – both what kind of films, and what films precisely, as far as things like premiere status is concerned; note that the interest groups are all interrelated, as when you are appeasing one, you're ill-treating another, so it's impossible to look at them in isolation. I've also numbered them in ideal importance, so that the distributor would be the first most important interest group in the business festival, and fourth in the audience festival (in this schematic).

<b>INTEREST GROUP</b>	<b>BUSINESS FESTIVAL</b>	<b>AUDIENCE FESTIVAL</b>
<b>Distributor/ Buyer</b>	1. Domestically, use as launching pad for soon-to-be-released films, take advantage of festival/presence of talent to hold press junkets; buyers attend festivals looking to acquire new films (leading to the need for a premiere-heavy lineup)	4. If distributor believes in good word of mouth creating audience, use to launch newer releases; buyer may attend to acquire in specialty areas (i.e. if festival is strong in documentaries, particular national cinemas ...)
<b>Sales agent</b>	2. A place to promote and sell films to distributors	5. Used as a revenue stream to fund their presence at business festivals
<b>Sponsors</b>	3. Need to be appeased, often with presence of celebrities	2. Need to be appeased, with 'sponsor films', more commercial films with stars or audience friendly
<b>Government</b>	4. Promotion of national cinema	3. Promotion of national cinema
<b>Audience</b>	5. Lesser concern, belief is they will see anything that has been branded by the festival and not complain	1. Major concern, but also underlying truth that tastes often vary from programmer to general public
<b>Critics</b>	6. Junkets for mainstream critics, 'artier' films for special press	6. Need to concern themselves with local critics' reactions as they are promotional tools for selling tickets
<b>Filmmakers</b>	7. Attend because of work, a chore, do major publicity	7. Not as much work (more like vacation), engage with audience, meet other filmmakers. Often younger filmmakers.

Chart 2. Interest groups and their importance at film festivals

Taking all of this into account, it's easy to see why even the biggest festivals don't show those fifty films: because the furthest consideration from most of these interest groups' collective minds is aesthetic accomplishment. Sponsors, for example, require films that will be entertaining and not marred by annoying subtitles; major distributors want to acquire, or promote, films that will be box-office draws; the government entities want to promote their national cinemas, and God knows how many out of thirty Canadian features will be in the top fifty films of the year. The hope still exists in major cities that the missing ones of the mythical fifty will return as theatrical releases or receive limited engagements in a cinemathèque or art theatre – one recent advancement from the Cinemathèque Ontario is a series called 'Toronto Premieres', which essentially means 'great films that were "rejected" by the Toronto film festival' – but using that terminology ('rejection') doesn't quite explain why they didn't show up. Yet few institutions can even afford to put together such a series because, for the most part, if you're dealing with sales agents, you're going to pay through the nose. (And as long as twenty people are coming to see a Straub-Huillet film that costs all those Euros to show, that series will be short-lived).

### Who the hell are sales agents, and why should you care?

Most of the actors in the charts above are well-known, and the type of influence and the reason they exert it self-explanatory, but there might be one protagonist that the general public doesn't recognise, the actor who holds the most cards in the system as it currently exists. Perhaps the defining actor in the current political economy of the film festival is the sales agent, an entity that didn't exist a few decades ago. Sales agents arose because the festival distribution system required them. As film festivals are concerned, sales agents – whose main purpose exists to sell films for domestic distribution either theatrically or on video or DVD (or, increasingly, for direct download) – have come to serve the function of government agencies; for example, Unifrance used to be the entity that film festivals would deal with if they wanted to show French films – now by and large it's the sales agents (this example is pertinent as most of the powerful sales agents are in fact French). Meanwhile, Unifrance continues to exist, but has concentrated its



efforts on the business festivals, or holding particular events to sell French films to distributors. This is not to say that government agencies have disappeared; their role has changed to that of promoter or facilitator. Telefilm Canada, which both funds and promotes Canadian films, is a key supporter of the large Canadian film festivals in terms of contributing to their budgets and, in exchange, the festivals (including Toronto and Vancouver), feature nationalistic showcases for the year's homegrown output. In addition, at many festivals worldwide they have a significant presence as a promotional entity – most significantly, for good reason, at the business festivals.

The big sales agents – Wild Bunch, Fortissimo, Celluloid Dreams (a.k.a. 'The Director's Label'), Films Distribution, Pyramide, Bavaria-Film – control the art film market, often investing in the films at production stage. They decide which festivals a film will play at, and often demand fees from festivals to cover 'their costs', costs that include participation at business festivals who generally aren't required to pay these screening fees. In other words, in a system with these rules, it's not a question of what films a festival 'can get', as if by dint of the programmers' sheer will-power, programming acumen, stamina, bribery or whatever, the films will appear in the line-up. It's better to see the deck as stacked the other way – the sales agents and distributors decide what films will play where. (And, for some reason, some sales agents decide to give coveted films to many festivals; in truth, it's a crapshoot how this plays out in reality.)

In this system, then, where a film plays is a question of power (or perceived power) as much as a question of money; so, for example, Toronto, which has both power and money, does not pay screening fees, and can essentially have its pick of whatever films they want – you'd think that they could pretty much show the fifty films and still have plenty of room left over for films that are meant to appease the other interest groups (such as middling gala films with celebrities for sponsors, challenging art films for snooty film critics and cinephiles, and so on). The reason, however, why they don't, is as much aligned with the need to appease other actors as it is to mere questions of taste, and the need to have world premieres (rather than, say, films that debuted earlier in the year way back in Berlin). Smaller festivals with less money are encouraged to screen 'older' films, films of arguably less artistic merit, and are expected to pay through the nose for them – the standard

request these days is €1,000 for two screenings of a film. Essentially there seems to be a kind of a core/periphery system of exploitation, where the ever-increasing screening fees are becoming more and more essential to keep the system afloat. Yes, the larger festivals have more guests, and that is an expense, but this is a system that also allows for the sales agents to make fancy press booklets for Berlin, Cannes or Venice and throw lavish parties at those festivals (though a lot of that cost is passed back onto the producer).

In this economy, the term ‘audience’ only matters to a sales agent as a negative: meaning, the more people have seen the film in a territory, the less they can charge to a potential distributor. (Some distributors also have this policy – the alternative argument when it comes to distributors has to do with festivals generating good word of mouth). So, it’s often the case that in smaller countries (including Canada, with a population of only thirty million), it’s becoming more and more common to have a film screen only at festivals, even if those films possess arguably little commercial potential.

By keeping these factors in mind, one could confidently predict a good percentage of the competitions at the major European film festivals – as well as the bulk of the programmes at other festivals. If someone would ask me how to get a film into Cannes, Berlin, Venice or Toronto, I’d immediately recommend getting a powerful sales agent. An interesting read is always found in the Cannes opening press conference release, where (currently) Thierry Frémaux talks about some of the common themes offered up by the films, regional representation, old auteurs vs. newcomers, and so on – in essence, what you’d get as an introduction in your standard festival report, which should say something about who standard festival reports serve – but what is never mentioned in that release is likely the most important: who represents what films. Yes, there are French distributors to consider, though it is true that a lot of the films are picked up after being selected for competition (perhaps my French friends can enlighten me on this issue). But the key thing to look at is who is selling the film: in 2006, an amazing seven out of twenty titles were represented by Wild Bunch, a company that describes itself as ‘dedicated to the nurture, development and creative exploitation of the radical, the innovative, the visionary, the truly extraordinary, in cinema world wide. Our only criteria are excellence, singularity of vision and that each new project offers a new challenge, a new development. Often controversial, always provocative,

our line-up stands as our statement of intent.’ The head of Wild Bunch, Vincent Maraval, goes so far as to say he is in consultation with Frémaux, as well as Venice’s Marco Müller, throughout the year.

Within such a system, the best way for festivals to work to attract the films that they want is with, no doubt, cold hard cash. Over the past few years smaller festivals have started upping the prize money for their competitions; besides the ludicrous goings-on in Rome, where, in its first year, tens of thousands of Euros went to a film selected by an ‘audience jury’ – hell, you might as well just draw a name out of a hat. At the Gijon Film Festival in northern Spain, where I did some jury duty in 2006, I was vexed but not astonished to hear that the €25,000 prize went not to the filmmaker, but the sales agent or, if there was one, the local distributor (presumably to help promote the film upon its eventual release ... yeah, right). In other words – and I know this for a fact – there are clear-cut cases where promises and assurances are made that to get more accomplished films from well-known auteurs, a slot in competition was promised, which in turn creates a situation of imbalance, as most of the films in similar competitions are from younger filmmakers, first or second films, and so forth. (In the Gijon case, it was Tsai Ming-liang’s *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*; a wise jury will recognise the film that’s the odd duck and adjudicate accordingly.)

Is this a good idea or a bad idea? Intuitively, it’s difficult not to conclude that this hurts both the festivals and the filmmakers, who receive little benefit from these screenings, save the occasional business trip. Shouldn’t the filmmakers be the ones who reap the benefits as they actually make the films, and organise themselves in collectives (such as is often done in the world of experimental film, for example)? And as it is, when the films are sold internationally by sales agents, filmmakers – and even sales agents – make little money. (It’s hard to extract solid numbers on how much a sales agent makes from the sale of a small arthouse film: I asked a Canadian distributor for numbers on various films and they said they sign confidentiality agreements about their deals). On the other hand, in a world with so many film festivals, who else is going to be responsible for organising the screenings, print shipping and other logistics? It’s not an easy and simple job: there, I’ve even said something nice about sales agents. Despite all their power, I certainly don’t envy them, and I wouldn’t want to be one.

## The ever-expanding film festival: notes from Berlin and Sundance

One significant conclusion that follows from a clear-eyed assessment of the current system is that many festivals are in fact ill-equipped to handle the change that's happening in the world because they are either resistant to change or if they do change – and many, as I said, are expanding – the drive for change comes either from within or in response to another festival's expansion. In other words, not from actual changes in the way films are made and being distributed (a massive topic better left for another time, but suffice to say I'm talking here about the Internet, video on demand and the decline of traditional cinema/arthouse filmgoing).

Premiere-heavy festivals such as Berlin and Sundance do just as much harm as good to the world of cinema. Most obviously, this harm results from nurturing a specific kind of festival film, one with potential crossover success. The major festivals always feature numerous examples of films attempting to replicate the success of more talented precursors. The more egregious of the recent crop of Sundance *Rushmore* clones, Jeffrey Blitz's *Rocket Science*, is watchable and amusing, but one would expect nothing less from a dramedy set in the cutthroat world of high-school debating. But even on paper its premise – that a preternaturally shy protagonist burdened by a hefty speech impediment would become a debater out of a misguided attraction to a conniving bitch – is simply ludicrous, and the paint-by-Anderson screenplay doesn't help. More poignant – perhaps because of the added points for being British and focusing on younger kids, who by nature are cuter – Hammer and Tongs' *Son of Rambow* mined the same vein and hit a rich ore of filmic references, adolescent friendship and, in a tolerable fashion, French-baiting.

Such feeble attempts at what's known in the biz as a 'Sundance film' – often involving emotionally damaged characters, and featuring costume design as character shorthand (ugly glasses='retard', especially on Dylan Baker), as exemplified by Ryan Eslinger's turkey, *When a Man Falls in a Forest* – are no longer the exclusive territory of the Lab that developed it: Eslinger's Sharon Stone-starring film premiered in the star-heavy Berlin competition, and will go down in history only for its press kit, clearly written by Stone or a representative. Speaking of French-baiting, Berlin saw the premiere of



*Son of Rambow*, an audience favourite, premiered at the 2007 Sundance Festival

the inexplicably popular Sundancey *2 Days in Paris*, a delusional rant from Julie Delpy's subconscious, which took pleasure in portraying the French as, depending on the moment, racist, sexist, delinquent, obnoxious and, in general, a lower life-form (Delpy's parents in particular). Back at Sundance, its mirror image, Zoe Cassavetes' Parker Posey-starring *Broken English*, still left Xan as the most talented of the siblings. The two festivals are becoming more similar than either would admit, thanks to a similar cross-colonisation: the larger a festival gets, the more weakly it is able to define its own space.

So change they must. Both Berlin and Sundance, like many of the behemoth festivals, have attempted in recent years to change the way they present themselves. Sundance's first, and most successful historical move, was to nurture the documentary through its Documentary Film Fund. Though the most impressive features in 2007 came from outside, with two cinematic Documentary Competition stand-outs *Zoo* and *Manda Bala (Send a Bullet)*, the general agreement is that the Sundance documentary crop continues to impress. Then the Sundance powers came up with the World Cinema Competition, featuring a number of forgettable films that turned up as cannon

fodder in Berlin sidebars, which can be interpreted as a strategy to attract foreign sales agents in a market-less environment, as if there really need to be more people in Park City. In 2007 Sundance felt impelled to expand its 'alternative' programming – the same alternative strand that spawned the non-experimental *Old Joy* – just like the Berlin Forum 'Expanded' last year to include art installations, pandering, as my argument goes, to the artier critics, but also giving another bone to a festival sponsor (in this case, Sony): the Frontier has spawned the dimly-lit installation bunker New Frontier (one eagerly awaits the 'Final Frontier'), and Park City, if not the world, will never be the same. (In 2008 Sundance announced the brand-new 'Creative Producing Initiative, and the world will still never be the same.)

With these moves, Sundance is attempting to move from being a showcase for American independent films to being another one of the festival behemoths, like Berlin, Cannes or Toronto, which in 2007 added its own shoddy programme of art installations. These behemoths are driven internally by a constant need to expand, whether or not it's necessary, creating a spiral of escalation reminiscent of the Cold War arms race, but rarely in response to the realities of a changing film world. Does any film festival *really* require, like Berlin, a 'Talent Campus?' Why the sudden interest in colonising the Third World through world cinema funds which, though certainly valuable, often end up influencing the kind of film that is made?

### Film critics and change

Besides whoring him or herself out, how does a film critic respond when faced with such a mindboggling number of options to choose from, in such a short time? (Many critics only attend such festivals for less than the full time, and also have to make time to consume mass quantities of alcohol in the evenings to forget the atrocities foisted upon them earlier that day). In reports, one often sees the comment that a festival is 'many festivals in one', and that each critic 'makes his/her own festival'. These 'many festivals' act in concert, the more obscure sidebars serving the more art-demanding critics and audiences, the more openly commercial elements – often in the form of the competition – serving the daily critics, the sponsors, the sales agents, and that amorphous entity known as 'the audience'. And there are only so

many hours in a day, so many days in a festival. A competition becomes a kind of 'mini-festival' selected by the programmers to guide critics to write their 'think pieces', and to appeal to those viewers who would rather not be confronted with the possibility of choice and the probability of originality. In the final analysis, a competition mainly serves other interest groups such as sales agents, distributors and the all-important big money sponsors, who love the presence of celebrities (especially, it would seem, in Berlin).

Over the past few years, something strange is happening: some critics are actually noticing the poor quality of major competitions, or big premieres at non-competitive festivals (like Toronto). Yet the lowest common denominator approach of most competitions is being noticed by critics who have (a) seen times when being 'in competition' meant something and (b) are daring enough to actually venture towards the better films that find their homes in sidebars like the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes. Of course, film critics have also been conditioned by this power system to minimise the aesthetic contributions of audience festivals, concentrating whatever power they have on the larger business festivals, to the point of printing plainly inaccurate information because they care more about impressing the media offices of the business festivals than reporting actual information (or, if you prefer, helping out the little guy).

While the behemoth festivals may be sowing their own seeds of discontent, it will take more than a few critics screaming in the wilderness for revolution to happen. Until the system ceases to function for those more powerful interest groups, I can't see change happening. Change will occur when those people think that change is necessary, and, for the most part – the top rung of the ladder as it were – that will be when those groups (distributors, sales agents, sponsors) aren't making money, or see that film festivals are no longer serving their needs/interests. That time might be near, as today it's possible that by the year's end one could conceivably download (or have someone send you via a file transfer system) most of those mythical fifty films, whether or not they have distribution, important sales agents or widespread festival participation (or buy them legally from other countries over the internet, if one wanted to remain above board).

In the current configuration, critics can serve an important purpose by helping people (and other critics who might not know better) understand

how the system operates, by doing something different rather than the typical journalistic festival piece that we all know, write and love – that the combination of anecdotal generalities, travel report and the occasional summation of a stand-out film in, at most, one or two paragraphs. There is another option, though, that doesn't involve selling your soul, and that has to do with inventive retrospectives, the type that places like, say, Vienna and (pre-Moretti) Torino have made a habit of doing, that gives critics something unique to write about that doesn't involve the unhealthy focus on premieres. I would discourage value judgement about festivals by and large, but if you wanted to assess a festival, perhaps you should look at what they don't show as much as what they do show. (And, as I've already noted, change the language: for example, instead of 'couldn't get' a certain film, say 'weren't given'.) Or compare festivals in each of the categories, but not across categories. Essentially, each festival should be treated on its own strengths, and with knowledge of the limits that it's under. It's not enough to look at a major festival's competition and say 'this was an off year' – the real criticism that should be made is of the system itself. All of this, combined, is what I hope I've accomplished here, as well as providing many avenues for future attack. As even if a film festival managed, by some combination of luck, smarts and circumstance, to find those fifty films and bring them to a local audience, the problems that I've outlined won't go away, and to think anything else would be delusional.