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Pink programming across Europe: exploring identity politics at European LGBT film festivals

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ABSTRACT

LGBT film festivals curate programs that are expected to cater to LGBT identity politics, conform to normative cinematic standards of European film festivals and consider the manifold desires of their target audiences. Since programmers are crucial to this process, the present study investigated European programmers' approaches to identity politics. The analysis of in-depth expert interviews with 24 film programmers from 17 film festivals in 17 European countries revealed that most programmers aim to create festivals that are as inclusive as possible. They knowingly use traditionalist and queer programming strategies to negotiate between various stakeholders within particular societal contexts. According to the interviewees, using both approaches does not hamper the political and emancipatory work of LGBT film festivals; they are able to program both mainstream films about outdated and overrepresented identities as well as critical films with underrepresented themes. Nonetheless, funding, audiences and societal contexts affect certain programming practices. Many festivals provide entertainment to appease sponsors, generate press coverage and please loyal audiences. Additionally, certain national and urban contexts may affect the way a festival promotes itself and its identity politics to the societies in which it operates.

While LGBT film festivals[1] were originally countercultural sites to screen LGBT-themed work, they have evolved into established, successful cultural events. This has led organizers to curate programs attentive to LGBT identity politics that meet the normative cinematic standards of European film festivals, whilst taking into account the manifold desires of their target audiences. Not only do LGBT audiences want to see themselves represented, they expect certain narratives to be featured in the program, represented in a manner that does not upset or surprise them (Rich 2013). Additionally, as Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt point out, festivals have to cater to identities that are 'continually expanded, revised, and contested' (2014, 217). Moreover, as Skadi Loist (2011) notes, organizing LGBT film festivals is a precarious form of cultural work, as many festivals are run by non-profit organizations that depend on public funds and private sponsorship. The pressure on festivals has increased significantly in countries where a discourse of neoliberal austerity decides the way public

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funds are allocated. Unpaid or underpaid staffs are expected to meet high professional standards and appease all stakeholders, even where roles are unclear. It is remarkable that despite these complex working conditions, the number of LGBT film festivals has increased.

Thus, it seems that choices and compromises are inevitable, for which film programmers play an important role: they are responsible for selecting films, curating the program and shaping discourses that accompany the program, sections, sidebars, events and films. Roya Rastegar (2012) highlights the discursive power of programmers: they shape cinematic trends through selection criteria and production funding schemes; constitute particular communities of audiences through their selection of films, events and marketing; and develop a distinctive identity for a particular festival by framing how the festival will be experienced. In response to Rastegar's call to focus on curatorial practices of film festivals, this study attempts to explore programming practices for LGBT film festivals. In this article, I discuss European programmers' approaches to identity politics. Loist (2012) argues that identity politics embedded in programming strategies by LGBT festivals gravitates towards either more traditionalist or queer approaches. Traditionalist programming features predominantly positive and inclusive representations of the LGBT community. However, the emancipatory potential of these films is often hampered by an emphasis on homonormative, white-washed and commodified tropes. These films mainly represent white, middle-class LGBT individuals who want to participate in institutions, practices, norms and values that constitute heterosexual ideals and sustain a neoliberal perspective of society, at the risk of giving up sexual freedom and ignoring structural societal inequalities in exchange for (limited) civil rights (Duggan 2003). Further, traditionalist programmers often dismiss films that employ radical and transgressive approaches to representation and aesthetics. Queer programming strategies, on the other hand, aim to be countercultural and engaged in activism and deviate from the heteronormal. Such strategies aim to resist categorical and separatist identity politics in both the program and experience of the film festival and, to this end, are employed to curate programs that facilitate intra- and intercultural dialogues.

I argue that a festival's identity politics should be read as the result of a careful negotiation between various stakeholders within particular societal contexts. As illustrated in previous case studies of LGBT film festivals (e.g. Jeongmin 2007; McWilliam 2007; Andersen 2012), urban, regional and national contexts interfere with how programmers work and how festivals present themselves. This led me to assume that there are divergent discourses on programming in Europe. Europe is often misconceived as a uniform and (mildly) progressive space. On the one hand, some European countries have passed inclusive LGBT legislations such as non-discrimination, same-sex adoption and same-sex union or marriage laws. On the other hand, homophobia and transphobia still exist and neoconservative forces in many European countries have successfully halted LGBT legislations, reinforcing self-censorship by LGBT individuals.

To collect data on European programmers' reflection on their practices, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 film programmers from 17 film festivals, organized in 17 European countries (see Table 1).[2] The interviews were conducted in person or via Skype between 19 March and 13 June, 2016. In this article, I demonstrate that programmers in a European context developed several, and sometimes contradictory, programming practices. Although the interviewed programmers curated festivals of different sizes, approaches and thematic focus, they all have to deal with stakeholders' differing needs. Therefore, I discuss and illustrate various approaches to identity-based programming. First, I describe the festivals' politics of representation; I explore the identities – on the spectrum of gender and

Table 1. Overview interviewed programmers.

Programmer	Interview	Festival, program or award	First edition	City	Country
Angelo Acerbi	Skype	TGLFF – Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival	1986	Turin	Italy
Predrag Azde-jković	Skype	Merlinka	2009	Belgrade and Sarajevo	Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina
Michael Blythe	In person	BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival	1986	London	United King-dom
Agnès-Maritza Boulmer	Skype	Everybody's Perfect: Geneva Inter-national Queer Film Festival	2010	Geneva	Switzerland
Kevin De Ridder	In person	Pinx	2013	Ghent	Belgium
Karola Einecke	In person	TranScreen Film Festival	2011	Amsterdam	The Nether-lands
João Ferreira	In person	Queer Lisboa – Festival Internacion-al de Cinema, Queer Porto – Festi-val Internacional de Cinema Queer	1997	Lisbon and Porto	Portugal
Roisín Geraghty	In person	GAZE International LGBT Film Festival Dublin	1992	Dublin	Ireland
Pau G. Guillén	Skype	Zinegoak	2004	Bilbao	Spain
Carole Kalil	Skype	Paris International Lesbian & Femi-nist Film Festival	1989	Paris	France
Rasmus Lybæk	In person	MIX Copenhagen: LGBT Film Festival	1986	Copenhagen	Denmark
Oksana Mil-meyster	Skype	Paris International Lesbian & Femi-nist Film Festival	1989	Paris	France
Esra Ozban	Skype	Pembe Hayat KuirFest	2011	Ankara and Istanbul	Turkey
Penelope Pegram	Skype	Paris International Lesbian & Femi-nist Film Festival	1989	Paris	France
Luka Pieri	Skype	LGBT Film Festival/Festival LGBT Filma	1984	Ljubljana	Slovenia
Brian Robinson	In person	BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival	1986	London	United King-dom
Bartholomew Sammut	Skype	XPOSED International Queer Film Festival	2006	Berlin	Germany
Emma Smart	In person	BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival	1986	London	United King-dom
Michael Stütz	Skype	XPOSED International Queer Film Festival	2006	Berlin	Germany
Nevan Solagna	In person	MIX Copenhagen: LGBT Film Festival	1986	Copenhagen	Denmark
Wieland Speck	Skype	Teddy Award (award at the Ber-linale)	1986	Berlin	Germany
Bilge Taş	Skype	Pembe Hayat KuirFest	2011	Ankara and Istanbul	Turkey
Bard Yden	In person	Oslo/Fusion International Film Festival	1990	Oslo	Norway
Bohdan Zhuk	In person	Sunny Bunny (program at the Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival)	2001	Kiev	Ukraine

sexual diversity – that programmers aim to include and why. Second, I show how program-mers balance the politics of representation with a demand for cinematic and artistic quality, in addition to entertainment. In both sections of this article, I demonstrate how they deal with target audiences and the societal contexts in which they operate.

Politics of representation

Although all 17 LGBT festivals aim to represent identities that are considered under- or misrepresented, the diversity of representation varies across festivals. Two festivals limit their

focus to specific identity categories. The TranScreen Film Festival, Amsterdam features films with and/or made by trans or genderqueer persons. Films are taken into consideration if they are sincere and nuanced and transcend the transitioning trope. The Paris International Lesbian & Feminist Film Festival shows films about lesbian and/or feminist identities and themes. This festival only programs films that have not yet been screened in France and are made by persons who identify as women. They justify their selection criteria by constructing their festival as a challenge to the omnipresence of male filmmakers. Their commitment to resist a patriarchal culture is emphasized by their policy to only allow persons who identify as women to attend the festival. They argue that the creation of a women-only space for the duration of the festival guarantees its visitors a safe space. As Oksana Milmeyster explained:

> It was also the desire to create this kind of safe space: a cocoon, where for four days of the year we can completely [and] a hundred percent be ourselves, without having to look over our shoulder and censor ourselves, [where we] feel that we are part of a community, and have this space that regenerates our identity and that gives us energy.[3]

Even though the TranScreen Film Festival employs more flexible selection criteria and is open to all audiences, the festival was launched to provide a safe space where trans and genderqueer persons could collectively watch films that narrate untold stories of their communities. Programmers of both festivals justify their approach by stressing that most LGBT film festivals do not sufficiently cater to these audiences. However, it should be noted that this niche approach explicitly adopts activism-related organizational principles and practices. Most other festivals that explore multiple gender and sexuality identities have to negotiate their approach and identity politics more carefully.

As such, some LGBT festivals restrict their scope even though they support diverse representations of gender and sexuality. A few programmers implicitly indicate that they only look for films with gay, lesbian or trans identities. They reiterate more traditionalist programming strategies. For example, they use a quota based on these three identity categories, a practice employed by Pinx, a small-scale LGBT festival in Ghent. Their practice tends to disregard bisexuality: only a few programmers explicitly refer to bisexual identities. When they do, they stress that it is difficult to find films on bisexuality and argue that they understand that filmmakers may find it difficult to represent bisexuality in film. Programmers from MIX Copenhagen: LGBT Film Festival emphasize that they put in extra effort to find films that represent bisexuality. For example, their 2015 edition opened with *Margarita with a Straw* (Shonali Bose 2014), a film revolving around a female bisexual Indian student in New York who has cerebral palsy.

MIX Copenhagen is a good example of an LGBT festival that wants to be as inclusive as possible. Such festivals are interested in reaching diverse audiences by programming mainstream films that please general audiences and niche films that relate back to topical or sensitive issues of identity. They deliberately use traditionalist and queer programming strategies to ensure that many identities on the spectrum of gender and sexuality are represented. This can be observed in the way programmers search for films that explore the varied ways in which sexuality can be experienced and expressed. Besides programming more traditional, mainstream lesbian and gay films, programmers refer to films that depict BDSM, fetishism, chemsex[4] or alternative forms of cohabitation or relationships. A few programmers point out that this may result in the rare inclusion of films with heterosexual persons, but only if they explore desires and practices that challenge heteronormativity. One such film, cited twice, is *Yes, We Fuck!* (Antonio Centeno and Raúl de la Morena 2015),

a documentary about sexual practices of people with disabilities. For Michael Blyth, this film fits BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival's program as 'it's inherently queer in what it's doing, but it's not a gay film'.

For some programmers, an inclusive approach necessarily explores how gender identities are shaped, performed and experienced; for most programmers, this means including films with trans persons, whereas others use a broader definition of gender diversity and emphasize an interest in films that feature persons who identify as genderqueer or non-binary, as well as those who perform as drag kings or queens. Agnès-Maritza Boulmer stresses that her festival, Everybody's Perfect: Geneva International Queer Film Festival, pays particular attention to intersex individuals. According to her, they remain underrepresented in media and face issues different from those of LGBT people. She also believes that the festival satisfies intersex audiences, as they are represented on screen and that it informs a broader audience about intersexuality.

Further, *Yes, We Fuck!* highlights a third aspect of this inclusive approach: the recognition that gender and sexuality are intersectional with other identity axes such as class, race, ethnicity, religion and dis/ability. Programmers who underscore their intersectional approach often mention that they actively look for work with and/or by queer, trans and intersex people of colour (QTIPoC). The programmers of BFI Flare made their commitment to films with QTIPoC explicit, despite the limited number of films available. To facilitate searches, they ensure diversity among their team of programmers. One programmer belonging to the QTIPoC community has worked with them since 2015 and is responsible for scouting for films with QTIPoC. However, not all programmers are equally willing to program a film with QTIPoC. For instance, they explain that the predominantly white audiences whom they cater to may show little interest in the everyday lives of black LGBT persons. Yet, Roisín Geraghty from the GAZE International LGBT Film Festival, Dublin challenges this reluctance. She attempts to select films that have something that the festival's white audiences can connect with:

> [At BFI Flare], I saw an amazing Indian film called LOEV (Sudhansa Saria 2015). I loved it and I think that's kind of the perfect film. I know my audience will love it, but it's not about white men. So that's the compromise. Again … it involves finding that balance.

Geraghty also states that programming films about ethnic minority identities is also a way to connect to and attract a city's diasporic communities.

A common way to articulate a festival's inclusivity is through a festival's name. Remarkably, few festivals studied here use the term 'LGBT' or 'queer'. Merlinka (Belgrade and Sarajevo), Everybody's Perfect and Zinegoak (Bilbao) all refer to alternative names that represent the festival's films, mood and objectives where the backstories vary. For example, Predrag Azdejković notes that Merlinka was named after Vjeran Miladinović Merlinka, a transgender sex worker and actor who starred in *Marble Ass* (Želimir Žilnik 1995), a Serbian film that won the Teddy Award in 1995. Merlinka was killed in 2003. Merlinka's name was chosen as a way to commemorate the person and underscore the festival's political and emancipatory goals. Older, established festivals that used more straightforward identity markers found the polysemy of symbolic names attractive and changed their original names: London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival became BFI Flare, CGLFF-Copenhagen Gay & Lesbian Film Festival became MIX Copenhagen and Skeiver Filmer – which is Norwegian for Queer Films – became Oslo/Fusion International Film Festival. According to Loist and Ger Zielinski (2012), programmers felt the pressure from the organization and LGBT

communities to renegotiate gay and lesbian labels. Further, a more symbolic metaphor (i.e. flare, mix, fusion) appeared to be a more appropriate fit to the content they were already programming. The metaphors also helped defusing recurring demands by audiences within LGBT communities for a name change as metaphors include emerging identity categories and previously disregarded sexualities. Nonetheless, some festivals use identity labels as a secondary header to make their identity-based programming explicit.

The few festivals that prefer the term 'queer' over 'gay and lesbian' or 'LGBT' mainly employ queer programming strategies. They show films that challenge audiences, question heteronormativity and either feature queer aesthetics or use those that can be read as queer, even when main characters do not identify as LGBT persons. A good example is the small-scale XPOSED International Queer Film Festival in Berlin that offers a platform for queer filmmakers and interprets the term queer subversively: the programmers stress that they are not interested in common LGBT content. Bartholomew Sammut explained:

> We don't like the little boxes. And queer also means strange, it does not necessarily reflect sexuality. So there are certain films in the program that have nothing do with sexuality because they are just strange or weird or fucked up. And we love them, so we have to show them.

The interviews reveal that within the European context, queer, as a denominator, yields different interpretations and practices. Kevin De Ridder of Pinx dismisses the term queer for being too niche in Belgium, where he finds that the term is unable to draw audiences. Luka Pieri (LGBT Film Festival/Festival LGBT Filma, Ljubljana) is reluctant to use queer, as it cannot clearly convey his festival's aims and therefore prefers LGBT. However, Bilge Taş (Pembe Hayat KuirFest, Ankara and Istanbul), points out that in Turkey, the term queer draws LGBT audiences and/or those interested in alternative cinema while avoiding a right-wing or conservative backlash because there is a lack of awareness of its meaning in Turkish society. This is telling of how important societal contexts are; while only a few in Turkey interpret queer as connoting sexual and gender minorities, many in the United Kingdom do. However, not all audiences interpret queer as an inclusive or resistant identity position. Upon asking whether the programmers of BFI Flare considered using queer when they changed their name in the early 2010s, Brian Robinson stated that an older generation still remembers the pejorative connotation and homophobic intent behind the word:

> People we worked with in smaller cinemas across the UK on a touring program said that they would not put a poster up for a queer festival, because 'queer' is almost like 'nigger', a pejorative word used to marginalize a particular group. The notion of reclaiming it in a powerful way for the gay community did not reverberate at all with people who were in their fifties and sixties, who really felt the word 'queer' as a slap in the face, as a violent thing.

Almost all programmers believe that their programs reflected the diversity they intend to represent. However, they differ regarding the approach to guaranteeing diversity. Some programmers use a quota (e.g. Pinx, Zinegoak), whereas others use organic methods to yield balanced programs (e.g. XPOSED International Queer Film Festival, Oslo/Fusion International Film Festival).

Some programmers are aware that their gender and sexual identity may affect programming. Some festivals employ a programming team rather than a single programmer to avoid biased programs that include films with very similar perspectives on identity politics, an emphasis on one particular identity or an unbalanced and unfair representation of an identity-related issue that may only be visible to members of a particular community. Although individual programmers report receiving support when clarifying doubts or deciding on

particular titles, those working in teams value the division of responsibilities: they find it easier to manage the increasing submissions, watch titles together and confer regularly on the program. Nonetheless, team strategies across festivals are not uniform; for example, BFI Flare programmers each have a specific identity for which they are responsible, MIX Copenhagen programmers collectively watch and select titles for the festival.

A careful balancing act

So far, I have argued that festivals orient themselves more towards traditionalist LGBT identity politics or queer identity politics, or in many cases, adopt both politics in deciding to focus on particular identities and themes. However, film festivals generally program films that they consider to be artistically relevant or innovative; consequently, LGBT film festivals are prompted to create a balance between the politics of representation and cinematic and artistic demands. Most programmers consider both aspects as important. They attempt to maintain quality standards while ensuring representation of the target identities in the final selection. Many programmers admit that this quality is hard to define: some describe it as a feeling or a taste developed over the years, while others refer to high production values, professional acting and/or an innovative or creative approach.

Programmers' methods to determine cinematic and artistic quality in films differ. Some start by selecting films based on their artistic qualities, resulting in a sample from which films are selected while ensuring diverse representation within the LGBT community. Others categorize all submissions based on the film's main identities and then examine its cinematic and artistic quality for the final selection. Interviewees who use the latter approach emphasize that this method ensures the inclusion of otherwise disregarded sexual and gender identities. For Emma Smart (BFI Flare), this makes identity-based festivals different from international film festivals:

> I think that any film festival – maybe not major ones – but any film festival like ours, [that is] a queer or feminist film festival [and includes] people of colour … addresses the surrounding politics. Sometimes the only way to achieve this is through work that may not be quite polished but is still vital and very important; and I think we're very good at showcasing work that others might not showcase, because we have this ability.

Programmers who consider quality a first priority argue that they would rather program a 'good' film about an issue or an identity already represented in the program than a 'bad' film about a pressing or underrepresented issue. Angelo Acerbi (TGLFF– Torino Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Torino), Kevin De Ridder (Pinx) and Bohdan Zhuk (Sunny Bunny, Kiev) view this method as a way to avoid losing audiences: according to Acerbi and Zhuk, audiences are not likely to pay to see a film of questionable quality and De Ridder fears that audiences may feel alienated when the represented issue does not concern them.

By curating programs that feature several films with overrepresented identities and issues, programmers participate in preserving the dominance of films by and about white gay men in the LGBT film festival circuit (Gamson 1996; Rastegar 2009). All programmers are aware of the omnipresence of white gay men but some reiterate how difficult it is to find films of quality with characters that are not white, cisgender male and/or homosexual. Films with bisexual characters are considered rare. Yet, some also consider it difficult to find films with lesbian characters and themes. The programmers of the Paris International Lesbian & Feminist Film Festival argue that this may be partly explained by the dominance of gay

male programmers. They strongly disagree with the statement that well-made features with lesbian content are rare but acknowledge that there are fewer films made on lesbian and feminist themes and/or by women due to issues regarding access to important networks within the film industry. They argue that women generally experience difficulty in financing and developing a reasonable professional network, which is a sociocultural critique that is echoed by Emma Smart (BFI Flare) and Nevan Solagna (MIX Copenhagen).

This critique also applies to LGBT films that feature ethnic minorities and films shot in non-Western countries; and even when produced, they are not always featured at a festival. This may be explained by a latent hesitance to program non-Western LGBT films; some programmers question whether audiences would be interested in stories about identities and issues that they do not usually encounter. Importantly, identifying LGBT-themed films from African or Asian countries also depends on programmers' network or access to local filmmakers. Wieland Speck (Teddy Award, Berlin) reported that he finds films with minority representation by travelling and relying on a delegate system, that is, a system in which local delegates encourage local filmmakers in making specific films that may be of interest to European film festival audiences. It should be noted that Speck programs for the Berlinale, a festival with sufficient resources, considered a key platform for showcasing or premiering an LGBT-themed film.[5] A few programmers use different criteria for non-Western films, as filmmakers in certain countries work within a less developed film industry, have little access to finances and cannot publicly tackle the topic of gender and sexual diversity. As such, a fiction film or documentary about an underrepresented theme may end up being selected even when production values are low. João Ferreira (Queer Lisboa – Festival Internacional de Cinema, Lisbon) explained openly:

> If the film is really badly made in cinematic terms, but the issue is very interesting, we can feature it. If we think that … no other film addresses this issue and that it's something that's really going on, our audience will want to be aware. If it's a very honest film, it's worth showing … we'll discuss whether or not it's good enough for the competition, and if not, we can have a special screening with a debate. We'll find a way to get it in.

Many programmers expressed that they were hesitant to program American films, as they align themselves with international film festivals that go beyond the standard Hollywood productions. For festivals in East European countries where online piracy is rampant, the reluctance is also practical. To ensure that audiences would consider attending screenings, programmers only select films that have not been leaked online. In contrast, national LGBT cinema is appreciated widely. Programmers extend extra effort to showcase national LGBT films. They foster local talent by encouraging them to make LGBT features: some offer workshops and seminars with filmmakers, others present awards to emerging talent (e.g. Queer Film Fund, XPOSED International Queer Film Festival) and/or fill slots with only nationally produced short films. Predrag Azdejković (Merlinka) believes in supporting LGBT films made in the former Yugoslavian countries:

> We automatically select the queer film from the region. Only if it's a complete disaster, we won't screen it. Because we need to encourage this: if there are bad ones, in time, there will be enough good ones … If young students shooting a queer film know that their work will be screened at Merlinka, they can eventually write it on their CV. And I think in time, there will be more films.

Besides curating a program that carefully negotiates both politics of representation and quality standards, programmers also attempt to balance political activism and entertainment. In particular, established LGBT film festivals have been criticized for turning into

commercial events built around commodified gay and lesbian identities (Rastegar 2009; Rich 2006). Several interviewees provided extended accounts of their festival's political character. For many, the festivals are 'political', as they attempt to increase LGBT visibility through cinema, ultimately contributing to sociocultural and political emancipation of LGBT people. They consider film to be a powerful medium, among the most direct art forms. Roisín Geraghty (GAZE International LGBT Film Festival) describes it as 'the easiest art form … that can move people, maybe change people's perceptions, and sort of make people think'. She feels that her opinion is supported by the fact that the GAZE International LGBT Film Festival helped provide nuanced information available to the public in the year leading up to the marriage equality referendum in Ireland. The festival organizers decided to tour *The Case Against 8* (Ben Cotner and Ryan White 2014), a documentary that recounts the federal lawsuit that succeeded in overturning Proposition 8, better known as California's ban on same-sex marriage. In cooperation with Access Cinema, they programmed the film in 20 art centres in Ireland, using it to reflect on the Irish context. According to Geraghty, it was crucial to access rural areas, as the urban environments in which many festivals are organized are often progressive bubbles. She describes the experience of screening the film to start a conversation as a powerful tool to further LGBT emancipation. This opinion is shared by programmers who tour selections of films within the country, as well as among those who are considering this method of programming. Bohdan Zhuk (Sunny Bunny), who curates an LGBT sidebar within the Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival (Kiev), is considering a toured program throughout Ukraine. He believes that people are more likely to change their minds on gender and sexual diversity if they are informed through film and talks rather than government legislations.

The political can also be discerned in the ways programmers challenge their audiences. Thus, the political can be interpreted as provocative, critical and queer. Programmers use films as a means to expose and deconstruct heteronormativity and traditionalist identity politics within and outside LGBT communities. One such route to achieve this is by programming feminist or queer porn. Bard Yden (Oslo/Fusion International Film Festival) argues that since porn has become much more inclusive and challenges existing structures of power, it should not – by definition – be considered misogynistic. Audiences may appreciate porn differently by watching it as a group in a cinema theatre during a film festival. Further, they are challenged when titles are controversial because of their sensitive themes, ranging from specific fetishisms and drugs-related sexual practices to paedophilia. The decision to include such challenging topics is difficult; for example, some programmers decided to not feature a film on paedophilia, *Daniel's World* (Veronika Lisková 2015): a few presumed that their country was not ready to handle a film that portrays a more nuanced perspective of paedophilia and one programmer criticized the film for appropriating a gay liberation rhetoric. Yet, some festivals programmed the film, including MIX Copenhagen; however, their programmers were divided on its inclusion. Nonetheless, they considered that the film largely depicts the struggle of the title character in a sufficiently nuanced manner, which was likely to enrich social debates on the topic. Moreover, certain festivals program work that may deliberately upset audiences they do not fit – or may confuse – their normative expectations. The programmers of XPOSED state that they are wary of films that only feature gay male content and use compensatory strategies. For example, they would consider showing a lesbian porn short before a gay male feature to make audiences look beyond their own identity category.

Nonetheless, many programmers argue they need to provide entertainment as well. For bigger and well-established festivals, this implies inviting celebrities, having a red-carpet opening and organizing parties on site and in the city. Angelo Acerbi calls this the 'package', aimed at attracting LGBT and heterosexual audiences and private sponsors. Acerbi points out that TGLFF has grown into a large and expensive festival and to ensure low ticket prices while maintaining quality standards, they rely more on sponsorship, as funds received from the city, region and state do not suffice. This concern is shared by almost all interviewees. Smaller festivals are also compelled to program light-hearted and accessible films – especially the opening and closing film – in order to generate press coverage and free publicity and attract unfamiliar or curious audiences. Many programmers acknowledge that some films feature outdated storylines (e.g. coming-out narratives) but are aware that these films are liked by audiences who guarantee the festivals' commercial viability. Rasmus Lybæk (MIX Copenhagen) states that he is often annoyed when other festivals program films featuring white, gay and vulnerable men, but acknowledges that these films sell tickets.

A few programmers state that entertainment or cinematic and artistic quality is not a concern for their festival since its main goal is sociocultural. These festivals aim to help build and/or fortify LGBT communities, empower LGBT individuals and create public awareness around LGBT issues. Predrag Azdejković (Merlinka) constantly emphasizes how Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other countries in the region lack strong LGBT communities. For him, the film festival is a tool to encourage community building and empower LGBT people:

> The goal of the festival is to empower and encourage LGBT organization and to do more for LGBT visibility in Serbia, using culture, and film mostly. Sometimes filmmakers don't like to hear this, but we organize the festival to empower the LGBT community and not so much to promote LGBT film, which is rather a secondary reason to organize this festival.

Similarly, the programmers of Pembe Hayat KuirFest emphasize that contemporary Turkish society is still homophobic and transphobic, which is why they consider such festivals crucial to creating a public environment where LGBT people can feel safe while consuming and enjoying LGBT content.

These accounts may suggest that the purposes and identity politics of LGBT film festivals are shaped by the region or country in which the festival is held. This is only partly true, as most regional differences throughout Europe are contextual and organizational in nature rather than reflective of programmers' personal discourses on programming and identity politics. Pembe Hayat KuirFest has to address both public disapproval and a lack of state funding and support. Merlinka provides police protection; in 2015, a group of masked people assaulted visitors in a cinema where the festival was taking place. Sunny Bunny encountered a similar violent attack in 2014 when one of the theatres in Kiev that screened the program was set on fire. Yet, Merlinka and Sunny Bunny programmers have put these attacks into perspective, stressing that these acts of violence are rare. They also report that the state does not intervene in programming LGBT content. However, Pembe Hayat KuirFest has to deal with Turkey's 'invisible censorship', where the state repeatedly refuses to grant mandatory commercial screening licenses and transport licenses for DCP films. These examples illustrate how programmers respond to their specific urban and national realities. In other words, they acknowledge the value of queer programming strategies, but are cautious when programming and promoting their festivals.

Conclusion

The interviews revealed that most programmers approach their festival as an event that aims to be as inclusive as possible. Programmers use traditionalist and queer programming strategies as a way to negotiate with various stakeholders and attract diverse audiences. They stress that using both approaches does not hamper LGBT film festivals' political and emancipatory intent. Many programmers emphasize that the fight for equal rights continues – even within countries where certain LGBT rights have been enacted but where homophobia and transphobia are still prevalent. Therefore, festivals seek films and events in order to highlight pertinent issues.

Nonetheless, funding, audiences and societal contexts affect certain programming practices. Programmers of established, well-attended LGBT film festivals stress that they deliberately follow a commercial logic to ensure its commercial success. Yet, success may be an overrated term, as many programmers from festivals of different sizes state that the work is done pro bono or part-time. They also recognize that finding private sponsors involves substantial effort, as many festivals suffer from lowered public funding resulting from austerity policies implemented throughout Europe. Hence, festivals program popular titles, films with well-known actors and those with 'outdated' but well-liked narratives to appease sponsors, attract press attention and please loyal audiences. Thus, films considered challenging and difficult, or that feature niche identities may be excluded from the program for fear of failing to appeal to wide audiences or attract the attention of neoconservative groups. The few festivals that defy this logic – by mainly articulating activist and/or queer identity politics – observe a decline in audience attendance. It seems that the most successful festivals are those that embrace both traditionalist and queer programming strategies.

The first LGBT film festivals were considered fora to represent LGBT identities and give LGBT filmmakers a platform that was otherwise withheld. However, some programmers primarily focus on programming films with artistic or cinematic qualities. Contemporary cinema culture has seen an increase in LGBT features, allowing film programmers to reject more titles and promote their festivals as events that showcase quality LGBT films. Yet, it is clear that this will continue to be debatable issue, especially if it is used to exclude identities in need of representation. It is therefore important to point out that some programmers look for alternatives when certain identity categories are lacking, such as programming older films that feature underrepresented identities or organizing panel sessions in which experts and filmmakers reflect on the issue.

Notes

1. Within this article 'LGBT film festivals' is used as an umbrella term to refer to all festivals that feature films with representations of gender and sexual diversity.
2. Besides LGBT film festival programmers, I interviewed a Berlinale programmer responsible for the Teddy Award, an independent award given to the best LGBT film screened at the Berlinale. Further, I interviewed a Molodist Kyiv International Film Festival programmer. He is responsible for Sunny Bunny, a sidebar with LGBT films.
3. The programmers stated that they organize off-events throughout the year that are open to everyone.
4. 'Chemsex' refers to sexual activities between men who use drugs to enhance sexual pleasure.
5. Many interviewees mention the Teddy Award and the Berlinale as crucial to prospective work for their own festivals.

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Disclosure statement

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