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Film festivals and migration

Marijke de Valck

Film festivals have become a widespread phenomenon since their inception at the Venice Film Festival in 1932, the first festival to be organized on a regular basis. Film festivals proliferated in particular from the late 1960s onward. Today a film festival takes place every day somewhere: the estimated total number of film festivals varies from 700 to 1,500 annually. From studies on film festivals (e.g. Dayan 2000; Turan 2003; De Valck 2007) it is clear that they (can) serve various agendas or interests – geopolitical, economic, as well as cultural. However, their main function is cultural: to screen films that fall outside the circles of regular (commercial) distribution and exhibition. It is through film festivals that niche films – more commonly referred to by scholars as well as programmers and critics by terms like “world cinema,” various “national cinemas,” “art cinema,” and “auteur cinema” – reach global audiences. Moreover, with competition programs, prizes, and press coverage, festivals are able to add value (symbolic capital) to such films and, in this way, act as stepping stones to further distribution, for example via art-house exhibition, TV broadcasting, video on demand (VOD), and DVD releases.

Social justice cinema at film festivals

Film festivals are relevant to issues of migration in several ways. First, films that address the topic of migration tend to be peripheral rather than mainstream in their appeal and therefore often depend on the international film festival circuit for exhibition and/or introduction to

ancillary markets. Whereas in commercial circuits films are predominantly evaluated on their performance at the box office, film festivals place emphasis on criteria of aesthetic value (innovative style, personal voice, authentic stories) and social relevance (topicality, social urgency, and political message).

Cinema on migration falls comfortable under the category of social concern films and is thus of special interest to festival programmers and audiences. It must be noted, however, that cinema on migration cannot be reduced to its political message alone; many productions that are selected for festivals rely on distinctly artistic ways of storytelling as well. An example is the acclaimed *In This World* (2002) by Michael Winterbottom, which won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 2003 as well as the Peace Film Award and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury. The film tells the story of two Afghan refugee brothers who travel from Pakistan to London in search of a better life. By choosing a style that uses documentary conventions and techniques the (fiction) film is ultra-realistic and arouses empathy in film viewers, thereby making its political message particularly vigorous. While films that deal with issues of migration can be found at all international film festivals, the genre is especially well represented at documentary film festivals, human rights film festivals (Pócsik 2008), and festivals that have specialized in the theme of migration, such as the Migrant Worker Film Festival in South Korea (Hwang 2010).

Migration and displaced communities

This brings us to the second way in which film festivals are related to issues of migration. There is a substantial number of film festivals that cater specifically to the (various) needs of

people(s) affected by migration. These festivals are committed to political causes that transcend borders and intervene by circulating images on the supranational level. They aim to influence identity building, for example by community outreach or countering prejudices and ethnic stereotypes, and foster what Benedict Anderson called imagined communities. Dina Jordanova distinguishes between three types of such “diaspora-linked” film festivals (2010):

- *Cultural diplomacy*: festivals organized with governmental support of affluent nations as part of regular (cultural) programs for international relations in the public sphere. Examples are the French, German, Spanish, and Japanese film festivals organized with state subsidies outside the home country.
- *Identity agendas*: festivals that have explicit identity agendas, such as fostering supranational communities (e.g. Pan-African festivals or French-language festivals), engaging in the struggle to unite a dispersed population (e.g. Jewish film festivals), establish nationhood (e.g. Kurdish film festivals), or increase identity awareness (e.g. Roma film festivals), and promoting political agendas.
- *Business and diaspora*: festivals that are supported by diasporic entrepreneurs that use the contact with their minority communities to boost local business, such as restaurants, food shops, travel agencies, or media distribution. Examples include several Bollywood film festivals, Polish film festivals, and Asian film festivals around the globe.

Globalization

Third, film festivals are components of the 20th-century trend of globalization that brought about new spatial configurations and networked forms of organization in addition to the persistent late 18th- and 19th-century nation-state model. As events they are closely connected to their location, while at the time being embedded in the international film festival circuit. They foreground the cultural uniqueness of their host city or region in the

competition over visitors and press with other festivals and events, but also conform to the rules and logic of the festival system (Stringer 2001).

As a result film festivals are located at the nexus of local–global relations. They contribute – through the circulation of “other” images – to an awareness of transnational differences *and* connections, fostering a cosmopolitan attitude in which migration is considered a natural element of life rather than a threat to sovereignty or stable perceptions of cultural identity. Moreover, festivals also generate migration, if only at a temporary level. They serve as meeting points and hubs for international communities of film professionals (filmmakers, critics, producers, etc.) whose careers are built in the transnational space of festival screenings, coproduction arrangements, international film markets, and networking or training opportunities. Film festivals thus depend upon the engagement of highly mobile international communities.

However, not all studies point to an unambiguously progressive agenda when it comes to film festivals and issues of migration. In film festival research substantial critical attention has been devoted to the unequal power relations that the global network of film festivals seems to sustain (De Valck 2007). Several scholars have argued that Western film festivals serve as cultural tastemakers for global art cinema: precisely because they function as the obligatory entry points into the circuit of alternative art cinema, film festivals have been accused of neocolonialism and of influencing the production of world cinema, for example with regard to African cinema (Diawara 1993), Iranian cinema (Nichols 1994), and Korean cinema (Ahn 2008), according to Western taste preferences. These critics point out that the needs and autonomy of migrated communities are at risk of becoming secondary to the cultural agenda of the festival as institution.

SEE ALSO: Film and migration, Africa; Film and migration, Europe; Film and migration, Latin America; Film, national cinema, and migration

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