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 Altes Pfandhaus, Kartäuserwall 20

WOMEN'S FILM FESTIVALS IN DIALOGUE

Social Change?! The Status of Women's Film Festivals Today

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Dear ladies (and gentlemen), dear programmers, filmmakers, actors, women in film...

First, I want to start with a thank you to Betty Schiel and the whole festival for inviting me. I was very intrigued by the proposition to introduce a discussion, or conversation about the status quo of Women's film festivals. But then, on second thought, how to start on this vast topic? What to tell that most of you don't know about, already? I figured, I will try and systematize some of the familiar questions and discussions and see this more of an introduction to a larger discussion we will have together rather than presenting a "keynote speech".

Independently of the specifics of each individual women's film festival, I think it is safe to say they all came about because one woman, or a group of women, decided in a particular place and time to do something about the *perceived and real inequality of the sexes*, to do about the *lack of representations*, and the lack of films by and about women. The first women's film festivals started in the early 1970s, many of them are now defunct [New York (1972-80), Toronto (1973)], the oldest still running is Creteil (1979); Köln's former festival Feminale dates back to 1984, Dortmund's Femme Total to 1987. Yet, the time of women's film festivals is far from over. Many festivals have been founded in the last few years – not only in Asia or South America, but also in North America and Europe.¹ Then and now, these festivals were started by filmmakers, students or critics of feminist film theory. Women's film festivals, in their core carry an *element of activism, feminist activism*. They are fueled by a drive for social change; by an urge to create a counterpublic sphere, a place where women can meet, defy sexist (and heteronormative) social conventions, form a group or network and mobilize around issues of feminism.

This being said, and despite this common denominator for women's film festivals, there is also a *multitude of different shapes* that film festivals with a feminist core can take. The particular individual formation of a women's film festival depends on many factors, such as the social and societal surroundings, local and regional politics, the particular trend of feminist discussion in each place, the conditions for women in film in each production context, the availability of resources, the

¹ There seems to be a resurgence in women's film festivals, but also a differentiation: women's film festivals, lesbian film festivals, lesbian/women's film festivals; regional specialization: Asian women's film festivals; focus on race: Queer Women of Color film festival (SF), Intl Black Women's film festival (SF) Images of Black Women: African Descent Women in Cinema (London, UK), Network of Asian Women's Film Festival; Bluestocking Film Series (USA) (where films must pass the Bechdel Test)

commitment of women to start and continue to run a festival etc. (I am sure we can compare and differentiate festivals when we talk with numerous women in attendance.)

No matter how old or young a particular women's film festival is, there is one question that will return constantly: Why do we need a women's film festival and what are the functions it should serve? Rather than give definitive answers I want to briefly speak to 5 issues and raise a few questions around the keywords of 1) counterpublics, 2) feminist movement, 3) networking, 4) ghetto, 5) professionalization.

Counterpublic

I have already mentioned the initial motivation of women's film festivals: to provide a space for work *by, for and about women*. To create a community. To offer a place for networking, discussion and collaboration. This *counterpublic sphere* has the advantage of *setting women's work apart*.

women's film festivals can function as a "safe space" for feminist film and its reception. Films by women, films that often provide a different perspective compared to mainstream/male-centered film, often have a harder time entering certain platforms. women's film festivals offer not only a screen, but also a specific kind of reception context – through framing introductions and Q+As for these works. They enable viewers (regardless of gender) to learn, practice and experience a reception in solidarity. This means, the work can be presented and considered *outside of mainstream norms of film reception* that still often have a tendency (if they are not outright) sexist and heteronormative.

That a place for a female/feminist perspective is urgently needed, shows the *Bechdel test*. A test invented by queer-feminist comic artist Alison Bechdel in 1985 for her *Dykes to Watch Out For* series. To pass the Bechdel test, a film must comply to the following three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man (for more than a few seconds). It is surprising how few films pass the test and thus how obvious the underrepresentation of women and their lives in the movies is. This often goes in tandem with the lack of women in the position of script writers or directors.²

Feminist movement

Just like other film festivals – in a growing landscape of literally several thousands of film festivals worldwide – *women's film festivals need to legitimize their existence* towards funders, politicians, filmmakers and distributors. There are constant *threats from the side of public funders*, who would love to cut funding for an event deemed outdated to make space for something new and hip in the cultural landscape, some new pet topic or important cause. In their logic: haven't we overcome the differences of the sexes and reached equality?

² Check out: The Bechdel Test via the legendary Anita Sarkeesian at *Feminist Frequency*, who is one of the *Bluestocking Series'* selectors <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLF6sAAMb4s>>.

Another other side of criticism – one that might be harder to deal with than the old arguments from mainstream politics – is the conservative backlash to feminism that can be perceived in many places (especially in the West), a backlash coming from men as well as women.

women's film festivals have always been part of or at least existed in close relation to *feminist movements*. Thus, the discussions that took place within the movement have often been mirrored by the festivals. The counterpublic space was at times a battlefield of the movement. Remember the discussions about sexual representation, about S/M; the PorNO campaign? Lesbian feminist separatism? Discussions around heteronormativity? The exclusion of transgender feminists?

What are the discussions and struggles in feminism today? Today there are again different factions: on one end, there are the young post-feminist women suggesting that they are beyond feminism, love their men, and can handle having kids *and* a career (in Germany this was the Alpha-Girl wave a few years back). On the other, end of the spectrum the question is: Does feminism actively counter inequality, which also means to counter exclusions on the basis of class, race, dis/ability and other factors that are part of a system of inequality beyond the single issue politics under the sign "woman"? In this respect one indicator on how to answer this question might be the fact that women's film festivals differentiate even further nowadays, to which several Black women's film festivals or queer Women of Color film festivals attest.

For women's film festivals then, the question arises: What is the scope and context in which these festivals can do their part to bring about *social change*? Do they still see themselves as part of social activism beyond the screen?

Networking

Like other festivals, women's film festivals create a space for filmmakers, distributors, film professionals – let me call this professional field for lack of a better word: film industry. Or rather for *women within the film industry*. Festivals provide a space for networking, for interaction, transaction. The International Women's Film Festival here in Köln is an excellent example. Beyond the presentation of films to an audience, there is a multitude of events in side programs: film practice classes, educational screenings, discussions as the one we are at right now...

Again, I would argue this is a much needed space for an *alternative route of professional collaboration*. It is a safe haven for women in film, who might struggle to get their voices heard at "regular" events. It is also a place where various organizations meet: programmers from other (women's or queer) film festivals attend, exchange ideas about festival organization and programming; specialized distributors attend (e.g. Women Make Movies); specialized professional organizations (such as Women in Film & Television Germany e.V.) and specialized archives (such as Bildwechsel) use this platform; film critics and theorists with a feminist angle attend etc. It is a great opportunity for exchange and the mutual support of the sector.

Niche /Ghetto

Despite the positive intentions in highlighting the work by women, and the creation of a counterpublic sphere is that women's film festivals are accused of being niche events that *pigeonhole female directors*, put them in the *ghetto* rather than help them be equal to their male colleagues. The *accusation of ghettoization* is still unresolved – and likely cannot be resolved by women's film festivals themselves.

women's film festivals offer a wide range of strong work by women whereas the power-broker festivals (such as for instance Berlin, Cannes, Venice) often show dismal numbers in terms of participation of women. Melissa Silverstein from "Women and Hollywood" – in attendance – just pointed out yesterday [19.4.2012]³ again on her blog that this year's Cannes festival lineup has *no women (0/21)* in the main competition and only 2/17 in the section Un Certain Regard. Melissa suggests that programmers for the larger festivals should work harder and find films by women. I do fully agree with this, but I am not as optimistic that women's film festivals will be the place to serve the function of discovery. At least not the way the international film festival circuit is set up currently. women's film festivals lose the competition for premieres and discoveries. Women filmmakers, who first want to be seen as filmmakers and only secondly as women, will most likely opt for the larger festival run in hopes for wider attention. The films presented there will trickle down to smaller festivals and into niche / specialized circuits (as women's film festivals; LGBTQ festivals, genre festivals etc.). Melissa's other suggestion: introduce (voluntary) quotas, might be the way to go. Although I'm not very optimistic these will come about soon.

I am sure the question of what is the distinction of women's film festivals from to general survey festivals will be a point for discussion. Here, we should come back to the question of what women's film festivals actually want to do and what they can realistically offer.

Professionalization vs. a unique format?

What are the realities of running a large, long established women's film festivals? A festival like the one here in Köln is competing with other mid-sized festivals on the national level. Within the specialized circuit of women's film festivals it is certainly one of the biggest and oldest. Yet, the funding is under threat – and will always be as far as the general festival landscape is going. What are the options for a creative future?

Following the argument that women's film festivals cannot compete with larger festivals (on a certain level), a provocative question might be: why even try? women's film festivals – at least the ones of a certain age and growth – seem to have reached an organizational level that demands professionalization and corporatization.

Many activist festivals – also women's film festivals – have started out as collectively run volunteer endeavors. Without a doubt the (seeming) security of guaranteed funding has many benefits: it minimizes loss of organizational knowledge and memory, expertise and contacts, as is often the case

³ „Four Steps Back - NO Women Directors in Competition at Cannes“, 19 April 2012, <<http://blogs.indiewire.com/womenandhollywood/four-steps-back-no-women-directors-in-competition-at-cannes>>

at volunteer-run festivals because of the fluctuation of personnel, since people do not have the resources to work for free long-term, but instead leave to put their energy into generating a paid job and career. The secured infrastructure and organizational growth, however, often comes with many ties and demands. Funding is only granted when certain political directives are followed, if the festival bends and creates fundable side bars and programs (education, human rights, or niche marketing). Thus, in a radical (and not necessarily strictly serious) vein, one could ask: why play by the corporate rules that demand a certain style of film, a star with red carpet performance, an educational element?

Is the festival really the right format to achieve the goals? If it is networking: why not use the great networks that exist? If it is about representation: why not have a permanent platform for women's work – as provided by niche distributors or dedicated digital platforms? What can and do women's film festivals do differently than other festivals?