

Queering film festival studies

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In recent years, two monographs have been published about queer film festivals, consolidating the wide range of articles, book chapters, and other work by scholars such as Skadi Loist and Ragan Rhyne. Stuart James Richards' *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Antoine Damiens' *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020) take very different approaches to the topic. The former focuses on well-established queer festivals to examine how they faced the challenges of decreased arts funding during neoliberalism and survived. Richards uses stakeholder analysis to understand the changing configuration of players and power but also attends to the films screened. Where Richards adopts the social enterprise model as a variation on the now standard methodologies in the burgeoning field of film festival studies, Damiens uses his research to reflect back on the field, its conceptual approaches, and its methodologies. He excavates neglected characteristics of queer film festivals before queer theory to argue that film festival studies as a field is in danger of taking neoliberal frameworks for granted rather than critiquing them vigorously and opening new possibilities.

My own history with queer film festival work goes back to the early 1980s student events at UCLA that eventually grew into Outfest in Los Angeles, long after I left. A decade later, I was involved with the earliest iterations of what became the Melbourne Queer Film Festival in Australia. I remember the debates around the dangers of 'co-optation', as we called it then, and the anxieties that accompanied the transition to professionalisation. It would be easy to reanimate those old arguments and pit these two books against each other, but I will argue in this review essay that they complement each other: with very limited overlap, there is more to be gained from reading them side by side to understand where both queer film festivals and film festival studies are coming from and where they might go in the future.

Richards' *The Queer Film Festival* focuses on the transition from community arts organisations to non-profit organisations in the neoliberal era. His case studies are Frameline in San Francisco (founded in 1977), the Melbourne Queer Film Festival (MQFF, founded in 1991), and the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGF, founded in 1990). Neoliberalism was well underway when the latter two festivals were established. Richards defines neoliberalism as 'a paradigm shift in social, cultural, political practices and policies towards a use of the language of markets, consumer choice, and individual autonomy to shift risk from governments and corporations onto individuals' (p. 12). He notes the creative industries approach to culture as the sector-specific manifestation of that shift, and that these film festivals have to operate within it. As a result, they face a tension:

These festivals provide space for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community to access films otherwise unavailable. However, in order for the festivals to achieve their social missions, they must achieve financial sustainability. (p. 1)

The project of Richards' book is to trace how his chosen case study festivals navigated the transition away from government funding towards greater reliance on corporate sponsorship and ticket sales, and to analyse their programming to understand whether they are able to fulfil their social missions. The analytical framework he deploys for this is the social enterprise. As Richards points out, a social enterprise is a non-profit organisation, the model dominant among film festivals today. But it is a particular kind of non-profit 'that will engage in economic strategies to fulfil its social mission, where the social entrepreneur will engage with various income streams to create sustainable social transformations' (p. 1). Many different types of film festivals are grounded in commitments that place various kinds of social, cultural, and political goals above growing revenue. Therefore, Richards' adoption of the social enterprise model is an important contribution to the growing toolbox of methodologies being deployed in the field.

After a chapter tracing the history of each case study festival's engagement with neoliberalism, Richards' second chapter is titled 'The Queer Film Festival as Social Enterprise'. Here he examines Frameline, MQFF, and HKLGF in relation to six themes that arise from the broader literature on social enterprises. First, a social enterprise needs a leader with a vision of the larger mission of the event. Richards finds that each festival has had a succes-

sion of such figures, who have also had high profiles in the local queer communities. This prominence helps them to understand what the community needs and to communicate how their event is meeting that need. Second, there must be a 'gap in the market'. For queer film festivals, this is not only the lack of exhibition opportunities for queer independent films, but also the possibility to bring the local community together physically to create and share queer culture and imagine their connections to a larger world. Third, social enterprises are innovative in filling the gap in the market, and indeed, each event has been creative in finding ways to grow and reach larger audiences. For example, in the case of Frameline that has included setting itself up as a distributor; launching a completion fund to support independent queer film production; holding free screenings for the local community every month; and setting up the Frameline Voices free screenings project on YouTube to reach out worldwide and to younger audiences. The sixth theme is that social enterprises have ways of evaluating their own success. While each festival emphasises ticket sales and financial health, they also conduct focus groups and use other methods to assess their fulfilment of their wider social mission.

The fifth aspect of the social enterprise, which I skipped, is perhaps the most interesting one. This is the fear that corporatisation causes 'mission drift'. Some would argue that the prioritisation of ticket sales as a measure of success by all three festivals is itself evidence of this problem, but Richards sees this more as a tension. After all, increased revenue has the potential to fund fulfilment of the mission, as in the example of Frameline's free outreach activities. Richards also analyses Frameline's willingness to take money from questionable sponsors, such as the Israeli embassy, which is actively promoting the country as gay-friendly in order to draw attention away from the Palestinian issue. Where Frameline defends itself by saying it is not supporting a political cause but queer filmmakers, Richards notes that 'this viewpoint ... is indicative of neoliberalism's depoliticising of contemporary LGBT culture' (p. 130). HKLGFF faces similar vicissitudes. Lack of revenue has often made it impossible for the organisers to subtitle films in Chinese, forcing them to rely on their audience's ability to read English. This reliance, in turn, makes it difficult for them to engage less well-off or highly educated audiences. Furthermore, HKLGFF has only been able to grow its annual box office by moving to high-end cinemas located in the International Finance Centre (IFC) Mall and offering a majority of films tailored to the tastes of upscale gay male audiences, especially expats. This has made it even harder from them to

reach the full LGBT community, many of whom would feel extremely uncomfortable in the IFC Mall.

Having argued that it is through the programming of queer independent films and the exhibition environment that queer film festivals strive to fulfil their social missions, it is logical that Richards devotes his two remaining chapters to these aspects of his case studies. ‘Queer Film Festival Programming and Homonormativity’ focuses on the parallels between programming and the growing divide in the queer community itself between those who aspire to and prosper under neoliberalism and its emphasis on material wealth and those who are excluded and alienated. In programming, this is matched by the gulf between the so-called queer ‘Indiewood’ productions that ape mainstream values and aesthetics and more challenging but often less audience-friendly films. The former are often higher production value dramatic features that sell the tickets needed to sustain events like Frameline, MQFF, and HKLGFF, but the latter are more likely to satisfy their social mission. Analysing programming over a number of years, Richards discerns three lines of tension between films that: emphasise depoliticisation and consumerism versus those that are focused on political engagement and innovative form; prefer domestic settings versus wider community settings; and select characters that tend to be white, middle-class, and mimic mainstream values and lifestyles versus characters that are more diverse. Accommodating both directions is difficult for the case study festivals, yet also essential if they are to serve their increasingly fractured community.

Richards’ final chapter, ‘The Space of the Film Festival’, draws on Ragan Rhyne’s work to consider the venues of the festivals and the activities that surround the screenings themselves as generating a potential counter-public, albeit one increasingly less counter in spaces like the up-scale IFC Mall in Hong Kong or the Castro Theatre in San Francisco. Nevertheless, Richards points out that in upending the even more up-scale and mainstream regular atmosphere of those venues, HKLGFF and Frameline do produce, in the Bakhtinian sense, a carnivalesque event in both spaces. Overall, in *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics*, Richards focuses on established and long-running festivals and their operations as social enterprises under neoliberalism to emphasise their positive potential despite the challenging environment. Writing *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* just a few years later, Damiens displays less patience with dominant models. He proclaims himself ‘concerned with analyzing the effects of festival studies’ theoretical and methodological frameworks’ and ‘guided by the belief that festival studies is

currently at an impasse: as a self-referential field, it not only constantly reproduces a particular type of scholarship, but also drastically limits our understanding of what festivals are and thus of what their uses can be within film studies' (p. 18). Like Richards, Damiens has conducted extensive archival research and interviews, but the result is a self-reflexive challenge to the field that advocates for a 'critical film studies' rather than an analysis of any particular event, and each of his chapters tries to open up new possibilities.

Reading the title of Damiens' first chapter, 'Festivals that (Did not) Matter: Festivals' Archival Practices and the Field Imaginary of Festival Studies', in the context of this review produces an immediately apparent contrast with Richards' book. Richards' case studies are major events with longevity that have archived their own histories – the kind of events that are widely accepted today not only in queer film festival research but in film festival studies in general as the ones that matter. Damiens questions this assumption and focuses instead on the short-lived, ephemeral events that have often left no more of a trace than a single flyer in an archive folder. In the early years of liberation movements and other activities, these events were often held by organisations with other priorities, such as porn theatres or political movements. They were often one-off events held to support other activities, and, if financially successful, were more likely to inspire the founding of more conventional film festivals than be repeated in their original form. He ends the chapter by quoting José Muñoz to signal a different vision for research into queer film festivals and their role in film festival studies in general: 'Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (p. 67).

Each of his other chapters takes on this mission to queer film festival studies through studying queer film festivals by challenging other common assumptions in the field. The second chapter, 'The Queer Film Festival Ecosystem: Symbolic Economy, Festivals, and Queer Cinema's Legs', rethinks the idea of the festival circuit. Damiens questions the assumption that different cinemas are confined to specific circuits, in this case queer cinema on the queer cinema circuit. Instead, he argues that queer cinema is shaped by two different cultural value systems, one focused on identity building and the other on cinephile values. These different value systems together shape queer film festivals as events. But they also enable the films themselves to travel in and out of different types of festivals, including larger international festivals as well as queer ones. Damiens borrows from Lisa Henderson's work and calls these journeys 'queer relays'.

Damiens' third chapter claims that the professionalisation of both queer film festival and queer film studies has led to an assumption that one is either an academic or a festival programmer, or an activist. He contrasts this compartmentalisation with the crossover roles that were more common until the 1990s and challenges us to think about how our scholarship is informed by festival programming. Here, I think Damiens' account may only be applicable in North America. Writing from the UK, I see a different neoliberal pattern where government funders demand research 'impact'. As a result, our universities are desperate for us to crossover into the film festival world and produce anything they can call 'impact' – actual scholarship may be optional.

Like Richards' chapters on programming and the space of film festivals, Damiens' fourth chapter, 'Festivals as Archives: Collective Memory and LGBTQ Temporality', is also interested in what gets shown and where. But, while Richards emphasises political disputes around complicity with consumerism and resistance to it, Damiens places greater emphasis on embodied affect. He argues that the curation of films links queer histories together in the moment of projection to create affective experiences in the present of the event. These experiences then constitute the festival event as an archive of feeling, to use Ann Cvetkovich's term, that is simultaneously cultural memory.

Those feelings, as Richards also notes in his chapter on programming, reach out globally. Richards speaks of an imagined queer global community, and Damiens focuses his final chapter, 'Images+Translation: Imagining Queerness and its Homoscapes', on this phenomenon as well, showing how the programme of the festival imagines the queer world. Indeed, he goes on to note how Richards' research has shown that the same core films dominate queer film festival programmes around the world each year (p. 223). But he also cautions against thinking this globalisation constitutes homogenisation; each audience experiences the same film differently. For Damiens, the reverberations, as he puts it, of these different screenings multiply the possibilities of queer worlding, and so he ends on a note of optimism.

Reading these books has been a thought-provoking journey for me, pushing me to reach back into my own memories before neoliberalism. I remember why it was not possible to sustain the purely voluntary events that I was involved with in Los Angeles, and later in Melbourne. Burnout is real. In the face of limited or non-existent state funds, professionalisation and engagement with the social enterprise model were necessary to create paid jobs for programmers and festival directors. But I also have to acknowledge that the

professionalisation of queer festivals coincided with my own declining involvement and, more recently, even attendance. How queer can a fully professional festival be? Reading these two books has made me think about how important a certain haphazard quality is to make a queer film festival attractive to me.

Perhaps we can understand these two books as products of their times. Although only separated by a few years, Richards' research was undertaken at a time when neoliberalism and the creative industries paradigm was so dominant it was difficult to imagine any other model. Damiens' book has been published after Trump, Brexit, and other such right-wing populist shifts exposed not only that 'trickle-down' was a lie but also that neoliberalism can no longer sustain itself politically. *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* comes at a time when the search is on for new ways of thinking outside that neoliberal paradigm. While Damiens' book is deeply researched and discusses numerous festivals and films, anyone wanting detailed analyses and histories of individual major queer festivals and how they thrive in our existing neoliberal world would be better directed to Richards' *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics*. On the other hand, if you want to queer the field of film festival studies and reach back before neoliberalism to imagine the future of both queer film festivals and film festival studies, Damiens' book is the one for you. But I hope that you want both and that you will read these two excellent monographs together, as I have had the good fortune to do.

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