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Virtual futures and cinematic pasts at the 65th Melbourne International Film Festival

The annual Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) ranks among the oldest film festivals in the world. Launched in 1952 by enthusiasts seeking to watch films that were otherwise unavailable in Australia, MIFF emerged as one of the earliest examples of audience-driven film festivals in the world. From a modest program of 8 feature films and 79 shorts in 1952, MIFF has expanded over its long history to become not only the largest film festival in Australia but within the Southern Hemisphere more broadly.[1] Running from 28 July until 14 August, the MIFF 2016 programme boasted 345 films, including 92 shorts, curated into some 20 specialty programme streams. A 'festival of festivals' in many respects, the MIFF programme offers showcases of international festival programmes. Sections such as the new Headliners, composed of films that received premieres and awards at A-list festivals, highlight the event's long-established role as a purveyor of international cinema culture. Yet as is the case with any event that has endured for so many years, the secret to the festival's longevity is not simply an ability to capture the international cinematic zeitgeist and bring its fruits to Australian shores. It is rather the festival's ability to adapt to broader social and cinematic changes that has allowed it to prosper over such a long time.

Celebrating its 65th edition in 2016, MIFF has maintained its early interest in screening films otherwise unavailable to local audiences, offering a selection of the kinds of Australian and international films that are still less likely to find commercial distribution. While in more recent years MIFF has also incorporated an increased industry sidebar, including a co-financing market (37° South), director's development program (Accelerator), and film critic's lab (Critics Campus), at its core the festival remains an event presented for audiences, with a focus placed on the festival's screening pro-

gram and public appeal.[2] However, if MIFF seems a festival tied to its history as an audience-centred event it is also not content to accept its status as a simple conduit of international cinema.

With its 2016 program MIFF built on an interest fostered over recent years by artistic director Michelle Carey in exploring the potential of cinema and its place within the festival space. Looking forward, MIFF 2016 contemplated new technology and its place in defining the cinema and shaping practices of film culture with a dedicated virtual reality program. Looking back, MIFF offered a range of retrospective programs that highlight the enduring value of curatorial work at festivals in an age of increased cinematic availability and algorithmic recommendations. Meanwhile, the digital nature of the festival's present asserted itself through the ubiquitous presence of smart phones and the increasing importance that social media holds in connecting the festival and its audience. MIFF 2016 highlighted the changing face of film festivals and the cinematic cultures with which they engage.

Virtual futures

In 2016 MIFF introduced a new program section devoted to exploring not only the technical but also the narrative developments triggered by the increased experimentation within and accessibility to virtual reality (VR) technology. On the participatory side, the event offered audiences the chance to don headsets and engage with a series of nine VR experiences, while integrating these presentations into its larger program as just another type of 'screening'. Allowing patrons to book tickets, cue for sessions, and then delivering content remotely, MIFF hailed its presentation as 'the first time a major film festival presents virtual reality 360 video in a manner consistent with the way it presents cinema content'.[3] A series of panel sessions and Q&As framed these VR experiences. Offering a glimpse behind the curtain into the production environments of new VR works, these panels also probed larger questions of what futures exist for both producers and consumers.

At a fundamental level the VR showcase raised a number of questions about existing ways of looking at films and their place within the festival. As the programme notes explain, 'for filmmakers and film-goers alike, virtual reality is rewriting the rules of how we create and consume entertain-

ment'.[4] With the inclusion of VR in the programme, alongside several other recent festivals to feature the technology (Tribeca, Sundance, Sydney, Toronto), larger questions about the future form of film festivals are opened. As *Variety* critic Anthony Kaufman noted with reference to Tribeca's VR offerings,[5] film festivals are no longer limited to a presentation of film. Leaving aside the obvious issue that celluloid film has now largely disappeared from the cinema and festivals alike,[6] film festivals are increasingly engaging with an expanded definition of cinema that is far more inclusive of technological advances than the category of *film* festival might once have suggested. Alongside the VR programme, in recent years the festival has showcased everything from television series to a range of alternative exhibition formats including 3D, dome projection at the Melbourne Planetarium, and vertical cinema. Through its exploration of new modes of filmmaking and moving image practice MIFF engages with processes of re-writing the conception of where film festivals sit within broader image and media cultures.

It is significant then that MIFF took steps to locate its VR sessions within established frameworks of the festival setting. While acknowledging the inherently individual nature of the VR experience ('every audience member views the works individually, and their experience will likewise be individual'[7]), a condition seemingly at odds with the construction of festival spaces as sites of social engagement and communal film culture,[8] MIFF nevertheless worked to create a sense of 'togetherness' in its VR presentations. With a synchronous platform (MIFF Sync VR) devised by Worldview, MIFF delivered a range of linear 360 video presentations to groups of up to eight audiences members simultaneously. The VR experiences delivered content, including promotional messages, trailers, and a MIFF VR Intro (designed to smooth the transition for new users of the technology by emulating more traditional MIFF screenings and venues), to all participants at once, while the playback was controlled by the system's equivalent of the 'projectionist'. With all audience members experiencing the same content at the same time in a communal yet still individualised setting, MIFF created as close a corollary to the theater experience as VR allows.

However, if MIFF has mitigated the isolating effects of VR, incorporating this new mode of presentation into the communal festival model, it also clearly highlights the tension that exists for festivals in moving outside of the cinema theater. If film festivals may sometimes be about 'other' things – the range of which Dayan, Peranson, de Valck, and numerous others have

explored – for an event such as MIFF the presence of an audience engaged collectively in a communal experience of cinema and film culture is integral. The future of VR within the festival is one that offers a number of fundamental challenges for the film festival model.

Cinematic pasts

If the festival's VR program and panels directly addressed questions of what the future holds for filmmaking and film festivals then these questions remain equally if albeit more implicitly present within the festival's retrospective programs. Retrospectives have long been a feature of MIFF but have gained new visibility over recent years with an increasing number of programmes. In 2016 MIFF offered four retrospective programs, including: a twelve-film program of the works of Jerry Lewis; a tribute to the late 'actor extraordinaire' Setsuko Hara; and a representation of the International Film Festival Rotterdam program Escuela de Barcelona curated by Olaf Möller. Complementing these programs of important if somewhat overlooked[9] figures and movements was the retrospective Gaining Ground. A play on Kathleen Collins' recently restored film *Losing Ground* (1982), which was featured in the program, this retrospective offered a series of films by innovative female filmmakers working in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. Bringing together films by Claudia Weill, Elaine May, Susan Seildelman, Lizzie Borden, Sara Driver, and, of course, Collins, this program reflected artistic director Michelle Carey's more recent interest in curating thematic retrospectives, building on recent programs on psychedelia in 2015 and supernatural Hong Kong cinema in 2013.

The value of such retrospective programs and curatorial 'surprises', as David Byrne has described them,[10] has become increasingly apparent in recent years as we progress through what Jeremy Morris (by way of William Uricchio) has suggested is our 'algorithmic turn'.[11] In the face of the growing availability of films through online streaming sites and digital libraries, the role of festival programming in providing guidance and shape to cinema's past and present remains crucial. While providers such as Netflix, Amazon, and Apple, among numerous others, offer up a wide variety of content, prompting new purchases and viewings through computer-generated recommendations, these services also construct viewing patterns that increasingly fall along predictable and limited lines. As Morris explains,

'far from neutral purveyors of predictions, recommendation systems…exert a logistical power that shapes the ways audiences discover, use and experience cultural content'.[12] In relation to this, the power of good curation to open up new associations and avenues of exploration becomes clear. At its best, as Lesley Stern has argued, festival programming offers a chance for the creation of new meanings and readings of films, both in isolation and through their juxtaposition with other works that are similar and, often more profitably, dissimilar.[13] In suggesting what Byrne has described as 'the value of encountering an idea, an artist or a writer outside the well-trodden and machine-predictable paths',[14] film festivals generally and retrospectives specifically provide a necessary antidote to the restrictive and predictable paths provided by algorithmic recommendations.

Digital present

At MIFF 2016 the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies, with their power to change modes of address and engagement, was evident. As with previous years, MIFF 2016 was not simply a presentation of films but also an event composed of multiple publics and spaces located within both physical and online environments. Accompanying the extensive program of films, MIFF's website offered a range of festival extras, including blogs, podcasts, highlight clips, top ten lists, ands Q&As with special guests and people connected to the festival. The fully digitised program offered not only the chance to pick sessions and purchase tickets but to also watch trailers and create wish lists of films to see. This latter feature in particular held a new fascination in 2016, as the festival offered audiences the chance to not simply create personalised 'to see' lists but to 'curate' and share their own version of the festival experience with others via social media. The result was an avalanche of personalised lists flooding onto Facebook feeds, joining and at times downing out the usual top critics' picks which traditionally populate local newspapers, radio broadcasts, and more 'expert' online film criticism sites.

Building on the website content was the MIFF smartphone application. Offering the convenience of full program details and paperless tickets, the MIFF app further encouraged audiences to experience the festival through social media. Asking patrons to 'join the conversation' with the festival's hashtag (#MIFF2016), rate the festival via the app's audience response fea-

ture, and follow the event's official Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Insta-gram feeds (which appeared on the big screen prior to each film presenta-tion), the festival app highlighted the growing awareness that 'being there' is no longer the peak level of audience participation – rather being part of an event now requires a level of documentation and reportage as well.

Fig. 1: Social media in the cinema at MIFF 2016, Forum Theatre.

If MIFF was happy to explore new frontiers of cinema through VR and its engagement with new modes of digital participation the presence of such technology within the 65th edition was still somewhat uneasy. Despite its continual entreaties to 'rate', 'follow', and 'share' the festival, the place for such behaviour remained relegated to anywhere but during the screening of films. The festival's list of prohibitions on the use of smaller screens was writ large on the big screen before each of its film presentations, illustrating that while times are changing the cinema remains a sacred space within the festival environment.
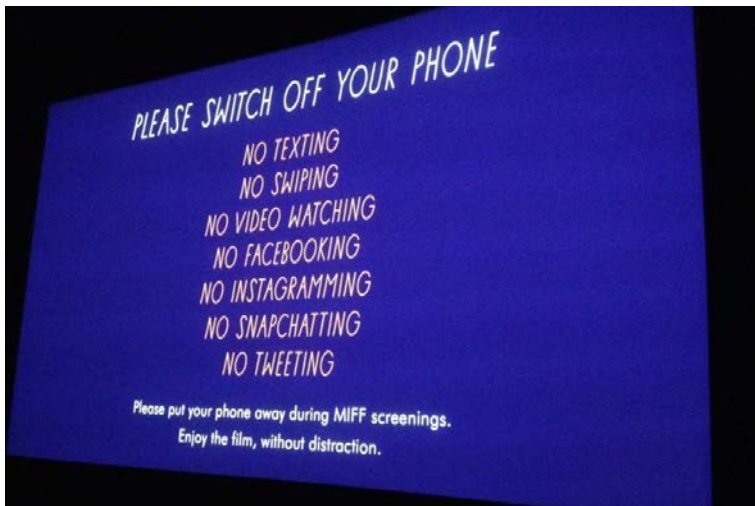
Fig. 2: MIFF 2016 'no phones' announcement.

Despite this, as an argument for how to achieve film festival longevity, MIFF 2016 offers a convincing position. Embracing changes that may eventually pose challenges to the model of film culture and exhibition that the festival format offers – namely in the form of online participation and the individualised experiences of VR – MIFF worked to find a place for new modes of filmmaking, storytelling, and appreciation through its 2016 program. It questioned what a future film festival could look like if our concept of 'cinema' continues to shift through advances in digital technology. Yet even as it looked to the future it also reminded us of the value in looking back at older forms of cinema, reminding its audience that established modes of film culture and expert curation also have much to offer in a digital future.

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Notes

[1]   MIFF positions itself as the largest festival of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere in terms of audience, duration, and total number of films. See: http://miff.com.au/specialadpackages.

[2]   Speaking in 2015, MIFF artistic director Michelle Carey emphasised the festival's role as an audience event, explaining: '[w]hat's important for MIFF is the quality of the films and putting on films for Melbournians'.

[3]   Melbourne International Film Festival, 'Synchronous 360 VR at MIFF', available at: http://miff.com.au/blog/story/synchronous-360-vr-at-miff

[4]   Melbourne International Film Festival 2016, p. 53.

[5]   Kaufman 2016, p. 34.

[6]   See Stevens 2012.

[7]   Melbourne International Film Festival, 'Virtual Reality Programme Stream' available at: http://miff.com.au/program/streams/virtual-reality

[8]   de Valck 2016, p. 2.

[9]   As artistic director Carey has previously noted (2015), the challenge for a festival such as MIFF is finding retrospective programs that are necessary or of interest to audiences yet which have not previously been showcased by the Melbourne Cinematheque, museums such as the Australian Centre of the Moving Image, arthouse and repertory cinemas, or the myriad of smaller thematic film festivals that populate the city. The event must therefore look beyond the well-known directors, personalities, and national waves to find subjects worthy yet not previously serviced by the festival's competitors.

[10]   Byrne 2015, p. 85.

[11]   Morris 2015, p. 447.

[12]   Ibid.

[13]   Stern 1981, p. 7.

[14]   Byrne 2015, p. 86.