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Ten years of festival reviews: Celebrating a minor academic genre

Marijke de Valck & Antoine Damiens

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Writing an anniversary piece at a time when Covid continues to intervene in our scholarly practice as well as impacts on film festivals worldwide, it is tempting to yield to actuality and devote this text to reflections on pandemic matters exclusively. And truth needs to be told, it has been a blessing and luxury to have the festival reviews section as a publication space that could quickly be allocated to documenting and thinking through the crisis as it unfolded. We published a first dossier on film festivals and the first wave of Covid-19 in December 2020 and followed suit with a second round of Covid-themed festival reviews in May 2021. However, as we prepare for the third NECSUS edition since the pandemic outbreak, our original hopes that the virus would be brought under control and life would return to ‘normal’ have subsided to the realisation that there is no clear end to the succession of waves and that we likely have to prepare for living with Covid in a seasonal pattern comparable to Influenza-like illnesses. As a consequence, the festival reviews section will again shift in focus, moving away from the frontline reporting and preliminary reflections of the past two issues to reassume an intermediate position between the slow and rigorous work of academic film festival research and the fast pace of film industry trade papers and festival journalism. Covid and its impact on both the festival ecosystem and singular festivals are sure to be featured in future reviews, but this will not be at the cost of other concerns and themes.

The film festival reviews section started in 2012 with Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist as co-editors. Earlier they had founded the Film Festival Research Network to increase the visibility of film festival studies and foster knowledge exchange and collaborations amongst scholars and practitioners. The reviews

section was conceived as part of the Film Festival Research Network's larger set of publications and activities, and would continue to be headed by the duo until Skadi joined the NECSUS editorial board in 2019, when Antoine Damiens took over her position as festival review section editor. In ten years of festival reviews since the first review on the Busan Cinema Forum in the inaugural NECSUS (Spring 2012_#Crisis), the festival review section has gradually evolved. We dedicate this anniversary contribution to contemplating where it has brought us while looking at the road ahead.

A question that begs to be asked to that end is why scholars write reviews about film festivals. The benefits to the individual scholar are after all not immediately apparent in the context of neoliberal universities, where output is measured and ranked. Festival reviews are not peer-reviewed in the classical sense. They constitute a minor genre of academic writing that can be, at times, de-valued by the publication metrics used by university administrators and career advancement committees. And yet, these ten years of publications in NECSUS make clear that festival reviews provide an exciting and generative forum where both established and junior scholars test new ideas, develop their future theoretical frameworks, and explore under-theorised case studies. The vitality of the genre, we feel, is a testament to what can be gained by creating space *outside* of dominant publication logics – or put differently, by queering academic publishing standards.

The peer-review practice is a good example of how things can be done differently. Feedback is an integral part of the submission process of the festival review section, which involves at least two rounds of editorial reviewing – by the editors of the section and by the editorial board. As editors, we have come to see our role as something more akin to coaching or collegial exchange rather than the anonymous assessment central to the traditional peer review. This 'working-with-approach' has appeal to a variety of contributors: graduate students working on one of their first publications, key scholars in film (festival) studies wanting to tinker with fresh ideas or to engage with a new corpus, as well as scholars from other fields and disciplines bringing their own expertise to the study of festivals.

Looking back at ten years of festival reviews we appreciate all the more what can be harvested with such an approach. A less rigid form of scholarship affords a more inclusive platform, where scholar-practitioners, precarious scholars, and scholar-teachers outside of research universities can join the exchange alongside those in the 'centre'. As such, the festival review section participates in decompartmentalising knowledge and fosters exchange across

disciplines, fields, and institutional positions. Having a variety of contributors, moreover, is instrumental in achieving variety in case studies and themes. In this way, festival reviews are a small step towards creating new knowledge on under-theorised aspects of festival cultures and types of festivals, as well as expanding the notion of what a festival actually is. We see the festival review section not only as a space where one can prove their expertise, but also, and perhaps more crucially so, as an opportunity to learn and to bring new perspectives to the field. Our contributors have not only participated in decolonising and decentring festival studies, but also have often brought their own disciplinary apparatus to the study of festivals, thereby providing us with exciting new avenues for studying festivals. We too have learned a lot from the cases, topics, perspectives, and approaches developed over the past decade.

As editors of the film festival review section, we have thus been forced to ask ourselves major questions about the constitution of festival studies and its complicated relationship to the labour of both film critics and practitioners. As scholars working on festivals know all too well, the field of festival studies both built upon and aimed to distinguish itself from the practice of festival reports: a decade ago, it seemed necessary to insist on festival studies as a theoretical endeavour that should not be confused with non-academic forms of writing on festivals. In that framework, festival reviews were explicitly understood as a scholarly exercise that could be distinguished from festival reports: film critics aimed ‘to visit festivals in order to report on recent trends, point the public to great new films and write thoughtful reviews’, while ‘film festival scholars ... work[ed] out of sync with the imposing festival rhythm and offer meta views and frameworks for understanding festivals in broader and more specific contexts’.[1] This division of tasks enabled scholars to make a case for festival studies – to justify the need for scholarship on film festivals.

Recent scholarship has started to complicate this narrative by foregrounding the role played by festival reports and film critics in shaping the discipline of film and media studies itself: from the critical writing of *Cahiers du cinéma* to the work of early feminist film scholars, festival reports have played an integral role in enabling new knowledge of film.[2] Building upon these new developments, we have fully embraced the hybrid nature of festival reviews – a genre that both aims at advancing academic knowledge and at intervening in larger societal debates. It positions scholars not as outsiders speaking from their ivory tower, but as experts on the ground who publicly comment on the evolution of cinematic cultures – who constantly learn from,

speak to, and collaborate with film practitioners and critics. Here, the fact that festival reviews are published in a matter of months rather than years, are not placed behind a paywall, are written in plain and accessible language, and comment on recent developments in the film festival world and film industry should not be seen as a curse but as a blessing: festival reviews bring academic research closer to practitioners; rather than aiming to adhere to pre-conceived notions of what a scholarly publication should be, we aim to develop new modes of collaborations between academic and non-academic contributors.

Going back to our question of why our contributors chose to work within the minor genre of festival reviews, there is another layer that needs to be mentioned in addition to the benefits of a publishing route that affords space to learn and grow; what stands out is how many reviews are the result of interest-driven labour. Ideas for festival reviews often emerge from a festival experience or from an encounter that sparked an interest. Take for example the piece on the Canadian Cat Video Festival by Diane Burgess in NECSUS Spring 2015_#Animals: following up on her curiosity about the festivalisation of the highly popular online phenomenon of cat videos, Burgess revisits the idea of communal screening that is so central to festival research, and then starts poking at it seriously with the suggestion that it is the festival experience itself that is mimetically appropriated by the cat video fest organisers. Here a casual seed can develop into intellectual reflection.

For other reviews, the starting point is more profound. Quite often, it is social justice concerns and the belief that film and festivals can make a difference that drive the commitment to write a review. Reading, for instance, in NECSUS Spring 2014_#Traces, the piece by Ana Cristina Bohrer Gilbert on the Brazilian International Disability Film Festival Assim Vivemos, one is taken along on an inclusive festival experience. This review not only aims to share this experience, but also to invite further reflections on accessibility at festivals. In both cases, authors seize the festival review as an opportunity to engage with something of interest to them. This focus on the personal and on scholars' experiences at a festival would likely not lead to a full-length blind-reviewed article. Indeed, traditional journal articles require us to make many conscious decisions that ultimately shape our research: for instance, we are asked to make an important 'contribution' to the field (thus preventing us from taking seriously smaller or more experimental case studies) and to demonstrate our theoretical mastery (often forcing us to downplay our own experience of a festival in order to appear more 'scientific'). Similarly, writing

a traditional journal article means having to strategically position our scholarship: it is about targeting specific journals and scholars, about defining ourselves through both our scholarship and the journals that publish our research, and, ultimately, about building our CV. These considerations do not necessarily apply to festival reviews: as such, the genre is far removed from the rigid corset of strategic themes, focus points, challenges, and goals that have come to dominate a large part of academic research practices. They tend to be more ‘personal’ and less ‘calculated’. They reflect scholars’ affective relationships to festivals and provide a crucial forum for building up a form of scholarship that would likely never be featured in a traditional blind-reviewed article.

We especially appreciate how much festival review contributors care about the cases they work and write on, regardless of whether the festivals and the films they screen are visible or marginalised. The concept of care has been developed in feminist scholarship on ethics since the 1980s,[3] and has been seized more recently – despite its complicated relationship to other forms of feminisms – as an alternative moral language in feminist and political theory that challenges the values of neoliberalism.[4] In such recent work, we find a conceptualisation of care that resonates well with the concerns of scholars working in media and cultural studies on issues of decolonisation and decentring. Grounded in a critique of contemporary individualism, this contemporary ethics of care foregrounds notions of vulnerability, dependency, and interdependence to call ‘for the transformation of the different segments of society, with caring values and cooperation replacing the hierarchies and dominations of gender, class, race, and ethnicity’.[5] And indeed theories of care are increasingly also found in discourses on curating, where ‘care’ is employed to articulate tactics that move beyond the neoliberal winner-takes-all system and nurture more inclusive, collective curatorial practices.[6] Interest in the question of the role of culture in caring for others and organising such care within communities through curatorial practice, moreover, acquired additional urgency in the context of Covid.[7] In this light it should be no surprise that scholar-practitioners were first to engage with the concept in relation to film festivals.[8]

For us, as editors of the festival review section, the idea (or perhaps better phrased: ideal) of care has a double appeal. It encompasses both the affective labour of our contributors, whom we have had the pleasure of working with and learning from, and our own engagement with the section as an alterna-

tive for academic publishing and an opportunity for scholar-practitioner collaboration. We truly care for this minor academic genre: ten years after the first review published in NECSUS, we want to celebrate the vital work performed by our contributors and, perhaps, to keep imagining alternative ways of doing scholarship. After all, academic labour, like festival organising, is a labour of love. Looking forward to the next ten years, we merely hope that the festival review section will continue nourishing collective conversation, doing justice to the work of festival organisers, and imagining new avenues for festival scholarship.

Authors

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Notes

- [1] De Valck & Loist 2009, p. 180.
- [2] See, among others, Jonathan Petrychyn's theorisation of the relationship between new cinema history and film festival studies (2020); see also Antoine Damiens' discussion of the role played by critics and festival organisers in enabling an academic knowledge of feminist and LGBTQ cinemas (2020).
- [3] See Carol Gilligan's seminal book *In a Different Voice* (1982) in which she poses men and women have different moral perspectives: men favoring justice and duties, women empathy and compassion.
- [4] Robinson 2015.
- [5] Held 2005, p. 160.
- [6] See, for instance, Helena Reckitt's work on shifting notions of curatorial labour in the context of affective economies of care (2016) and Sarah Pennington's discussion of the usefulness of case as a concept to consider 'neglected things' in critical design.
- [7] Singh 2021.
- [8] See Brunow 2020, and Dramani-Issifou (forthcoming 2022).