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Film Festival Form

A Manifesto



The Oberhausen Manifesto helped launch the New German Cinema; the Danish Dogme 95 manifesto brought new ideas to, and detoxed, 90s cinema. The film festival world could do with a manifesto too ...

In Italy in the 1930s, Mussolini launched the world's first film festival, Venice, to celebrate fascist ideas and aesthetics. To counter this, two alternative festivals were launched, one in a former fishing town, Cannes, and one in the «Athens of the North», a centre of the Enlightenment, Edinburgh.

Now there are thousands of film festivals. They are a cultural idea that is spreading like a Richard Dawkins meme.

As the elite of the festival circuit clink another glass of champagne at party after party to salute a venerable old festival or the launch of a new one, it would be no surprise if their smiles were a little strained. Masked by glamour and ubiquity, the world of film festivals is, in fact, in crisis. There are too many of them chasing world premieres and film celebrities.

But they are also chasing a too narrow idea of what a film festival can be.

Marco Muller says that film festivals should «reveal what the markets hide». Toronto International Film Festival's Piers Handling called this counter-market an «alternative distribution network». In «European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood», Thomas Elsaesser says that this network has created «symbolic agoras of a new democracy».

Muller, Handling and Elsaesser each think that the purpose of a film festival is to act counter to the mainstream, cookie-cutter cinema that prevails in most parts. To show a broader geographic, stylistic and thematic range of films than is usually available to audiences.

GREAT!

Except that that's the content of a film festival, just as the content of Picasso's «Guernica» is the bombing of a town, like the content of The Smiths' «There is a Light That Never Goes Out» is the suicidal intensity of love, like the content of SINGIN' IN THE RAIN is the rapture of love.

What's exciting about «Guernica» is how its black and white, graphic, epic, mythic imagery shows us the tragedy in a new way. What's exciting about the Smiths song is the daring of the word and music cadences and ironies («to die by your side, what a heavenly way to die»). What's exciting about SINGIN' IN THE RAIN is that camera rising up to look down, from where the rain is falling, from where we think of the spirit to be, at this man who is so in love that night-time rain feels great.

In other words, what's exciting is their form.

Film festivals are undergoing formal torpor. Too many of them use the same techniques – a main competition, side-bars, awards, late-night genre cinema, prizes, VIP areas, photo-calls, etc.

There's a simple way of shaking film festivals out of this torpor: we should think of them as authored, just as films are authored. We should think of them as narratives – stories lasting ten days or two weeks, just as films are narratives. We should think of them as shows being produced on stages, where each has a mise-en-scène just as a film has a mise-en-scène. A film festival is a shape, a response to the lay of the land and light of a city, or to a flood in Pakistan, or the threat to bomb Iran.

The people who run film festivals must think of themselves as storytellers and stylists. They must ask themselves what the narrative structure of their event is, and its aesthetic. Most of all they must, as the best filmmakers do, challenge themselves to do things differently.

It's about time that, in the spirit of Dyonisus or Guy Debord or Rilke or Patti Smith or Djibril Diop Mambety or Ritwik Ghatak or Samira Makhmalbaf, film festivals realise that they are poetry not prose.

Too many film festivals in the world are enthralled by their function as the alternative shop window for film industries. Film festivals should be more sceptical about business and industry. They should be the conscience of the film world.

There should, therefore, be no red carpets at film festivals. No limos. No VIP rooms.

These things will begin to strip out the excess and ponceiness of film festivals – their mannerism – and return them to something purer and more beautiful, inclusive and alive.

Festival directors should use their most discrepant ideas: their funniest, most moving, sexiest thought about films. Start a film in one cinema and finish it in another – the audience runs between. Get Godard to recut Spielberg.

Festivals should be radically about joy, about countering alienation, about telling the world of money and commodity that – ha ha – it doesn't know the secrets of the human heart or the inexpressible, stupendous need to be with other human beings.

Film festivals should be naked in front of the innovative, divine, political, honest facts of life. They should lob a thought bomb to show that cynicism is a false lead, art is amazing, cinema is, as Roland Barthes sort of said, «light from a distant star».

And there's the whole issue of festivity itself to restore to the centre of the world of film festivals. Like music festivals, film festivals should realise that, especially in the age of online, it's the offline communalty of film festivals, the fact that we are all getting together to do the same thing, that is part of the source of their joy. **Mark Cousins**

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