



Review: Marijke De Valck (2007)  
*Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*  
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Film Festivals are a vital element of the film business and are central to the international debate on film production and distribution. Too often when talking about films we omit the place where everything happens, where the event originates synergies between directors, producers, journalists or simple spectators. From its very origins, cinema has been associated with the festivals; the two are indissolubly linked in a history made up of many moments of contact. It is important to remember that film festivals worldwide are characterised by common features (which are remarkably similar to those of ancient Greek celebrations), including their recurrence, the opportunity for meetings and encounters, and the opening and closing ceremony. In the past, they were often considered an occasion for celebrating national culture and identity; nowadays, the festivals aim for an international dimension and a direct effect on the market.

In spite of their evident importance in the film business, film festivals have rarely been the topic of academic research, and very little published material exists on this

subject. For this reason, De Valck's complex book provides valuable insights into a field which has been seriously neglected. Omitting non-academic works, such as festival guides and catalogues, the book provides an exhaustive bibliography that includes publications of many types and diverse scope: from those published in cooperation with the festivals' organisers, to those devoted to issues of national identity or experience; from anthropological aspects, to the socio-economic sphere. As the author elucidates at the outset of her discussion, 'This book aims to offer a comprehensive introduction to the film festival phenomenon which will include both a historical overview of the development of film festivals and a cultural assessment of the workings of the present-day international film festival circuit' (14).

The book is simply organised in four chapters, each offering an incisive analysis of one of the four film festivals on which the author chose to focus: Berlin, Cannes, Venice, Rotterdam; but the real heart of the work is the very accurate and detailed Introduction that carefully prepares the reader for the following study.

The four festivals are four different case studies, focusing on different aspects of relevance to the phenomenon of film festivals: geopolitics, business, and culture – the latter with a special focus on the press and the audience. In the author's own words:

The first case study on the subject of geopolitics will offer the opportunity to zoom in on the festival organisation. In the second case study, which concentrates on business, the film professionals will be the focus of attention. The third case study deals with culture and takes a closer look at the involvement of the media. The fourth case study also deals with culture but focuses on the experiences of the festival public and festival programming. (16)

In the Introduction, the author convincingly accounts for her methodological choice, which discards the 'classic' approaches based on semiotics, structuralism, linguistics, or psychoanalysis, to focus on the more current preoccupation with the spatial and temporal dimensions of the contexts in which films circulate, profitably utilising Jonathan Crary's theories of 'attention', 'spectacle' and 'experience'. The author's aim in opting for this method is clear: 'I will show how the international film festival circuit combines the local and the global, the city and the nation, and the space of the media with the place of the event' (18).

Moreover, in the same section of the book, a historical prospective is introduced that divides the development and evolution of film festivals into three main phases: the

first, which commences in 1932, the date of the first edition of Venice Film Festival (the first to be organised on regular basis), and ends in 1968, the year in which Cannes was shut down by the artists' protests, is described as the avant-garde era, when the films 'were not treated as mass-produced commodities, but as national accomplishment, as conveyors of cultural identity, as art and as unique artistic creations' (24). The second phase is characterised by independent festivals often focusing on specialised and thematic programmes linked to experimentation and politics and motivated by passion and ideology (Pesaro Film Festival, Italy); this phase ends in the 1980s. Finally, the last phase, the modern one, is dominated by the global economy and the creation of the international circuit of film festivals, which turned these cinematic events into an institutional, professional and global phenomenon. Today 'there is a film festival every day somewhere in the world; estimated numbers vary from 1200 to 1900 festivals each year'.

De Valck argues that film festivals are 'sites of passage', a concept that she combines with the study of the 'obligatory point of passage' (theorised by Michel Callon, John Law and Latour) and with the anthropological notion of 'rite of passage'. Festivals are an obligatory passage because they are events, called 'actors' by the writer, that have become important and almost indispensable to the production, distribution, and fruition of many films, and without which an entire, extensive network of practices, locations, and employment would collapse. Film festivals are, of course, part of this network; they belong to the cinema industry and are fundamental to the film business that wheels around them (38). 'Passage', in general, is also a notion that refers to spatial sites and temporal passages, determined urban locations (cities and buildings), and a well-defined hierarchy within the international film festival circuit, which results in a different value and 'weight' for a film that is screened and may have won prizes at a festival. They are also sites of passage, through which the filmmakers can be introduced to the festival network, which may be of vital importance for their careers.

Each case study in this book is used as an opportunity to investigate a specific topic; and three of them start with a 'film-related anecdote', respectively concerning *It's All About Love*, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Intolerable Cruelty*, films chosen by De Valck for different reasons: 'The borderline between success and failure in the case of Vinterberg; the intertwining of political and economic interests in the case of Moore; and the Janus-faced nature of the media in the case of the Coen Brothers' (203).

The chapter on *Berlinale* (Berlin, Germany) analyses the historical development of film festivals, with a special focus on geopolitical interests. It offers an overview of the dynamic transformation of the film festival phenomenon, utilising notions such as 'nation' and 'auteur', intended as intentional concepts that dominate the discourse on cinema in specific periods. Moreover, it explores how globalisation theories (Hardt and Negri with their theory of 'Empire' especially, but also Virilio and Sassen) can clarify the modalities that define the position and influence of the international film festival circuit today, from a broad point of view. Hardt and Negri's theory of the new political order in the modern context of globalisation is usefully applied by De Valck to the film festival discourse: '[It] can be used to explain the cultural order within the international film festival circuit. Both transformations are ultimately linked to passage from modernity to postmodernity and both cause a spatial reconfiguration of power' (69). In other words, festivals can no longer be seen as exclusively national events; the hegemony of old European festival has been broken by their global dissemination, in agreement with the theory that postmodernity is characterised by a systematic and inevitable process of deterritorialisation.

The case study concentrates on *Berlinale*, because, within the geopolitical game of the Cold War, Berlin was a Western outpost inside Eastern Europe until 1989: 'its foundation and development have been intertwined with Cold War politics' (42). Decentralisation is a prominent feature of the *Berlinale*, which is characterised by a dispersal of facilities and activities: 'Despite the fact that most of the major festival facilities, programs, and events are now concentrated at Potsdamer Platz, the festival location is non centred' (79). *Berlinale* has moved forward for political reasons, with the consequence that 'the layout of the festival remains a provisional solution instead of a permanent structure' (79), such as those in Venice or in Cannes.

In the case of the Festival *de Cannes* (Cannes, France) the festival phenomenon is examined instead as a marketplace; this festival was chosen here because it represents the most influential from the point of view of the market, and an event with a strong economic impact on the film industry, not only European. The author argues, however, that Cannes presents a model for the international film festival circuit as an 'alternative' cinema network. While it promotes its own image as an independent, politically-correct and leading centre for 'alternative' film culture, at the same time it shows awareness of the importance of being inside the institutionalised system of the festival network. Against

the backdrop of an exploration of existing studies of Hollywood's hegemony, the state of the European film industries can be reinterpreted to explain the rise and success of specific film festivals. The framework of this reinterpretation is based on the concept of the network, as elaborated in Latour's Actor-Network Theory. The alternative festival network is successful in bypassing distribution by offering a global exhibition circuit for festival films that are not interesting to commercial companies'. Furthermore: 'The festival aims to counterbalance Hollywood's hegemony by facilitating and participating in the transnational cinema market' (92).

Festivals are an opportunity to meet international people, to compare strategies and exchange ideas with the aim to improve the business aspect; an alternative way, therefore, to propose cinematic products (93). In Cannes, everything is part of a self-conscious marketing strategy, even the location. The epitome of this fact is the official film market of *Le Marché du Cinéma*, founded in 1959, an institutional hub for producers, financiers, buyers, filmmakers and anyone who has a good idea to promote. At any rate, in Cannes the business can also be conducted outside the official spaces of the festival: 'It occurs just about anywhere especially in restaurants, hotels, apartments, and yachts. [...] Walking through Cannes during the festival, one sees big banners hanging from balconies and boat railings that attract attention to the organisations that have taken up residence there' (114).

The *Mostra internazionale d'arte cinematografica* (Venice, Italy) is a nevent that has been analysed, in this particular case study, through a combination of the concepts of media, segregation and agenda. Based on the author's own attendance at the *Mostra*, and her in-depth analysis of festival reports published in newspapers during 2003, as well as of interviews with film critics and accredited press staff, the chapter offers an analysis of the 'value-adding' phenomenon that is generated by the media perspective on film festivals: 'the effect of media exposure can hardly be underestimated' (126).

Venice is a festival dominated by the system of accreditation, which produces an intensification of the prestigious image of the *Mostra* but also the creation of a sort of local segregation, where the spectators' access to various locations is strictly restricted, and the most prestigious areas are reserved for important people, with the category of the press being at the top of this hierarchy. From this point of view, I would add that it is easy to extend the concept of segregation to the location where the festival is set: the Lido, an

island, which with its tradition of exclusive tourist destination for the European aristocracy adds to the glamour of the event, a place outside the city of Venice, only reachable by boat. Through the adoption of the concept of 'memory sites' (*lieux de mémoire*, Nora), the question of why this old-fashioned festival continues to attract the global attention of newspapers, TV channels and the media in general since its foundation is explained by the author: 'The environment has a noticeable quality of authenticity and historicity that gives all present activities that little bit of extra flair. The historical value of the Venice Film Festival is based on cultural memories of unforgettable occasions and the numerous classic masterpieces, directors and stars, who were discovered here on the Lido' (139).

In the chapter dedicated to the *International Film Festival Rotterdam* (Rotterdam, Holland) the author tackles aspects of programming and audiences, through the discussion of a festival that, from the very beginning, concentrated on art cinema and on emerging auteurs, with a special attention for the third world, developing countries and Eastern films. The chapter sets out to, on the one hand, generate insights on the emergence of specialised and thematic programming and investigate the effects of the global spread, institutionalisation, and popularisation of film festivals on such programming. On the other hand, these trends are associated to new practices of cinephilia: 'the growth of festival attendance can partially be attributed to the arrival of new types of visitors, for whom the context of the 'festival' is at least as important as the films themselves' (188).

The choice to focus on International Film Festival Rotterdam was dictated by the fact that it is not only an internationally acclaimed specialised festival (art, avant-garde, auteurs) but also one of the largest audience festivals in the world; as reported in the book, it attracted 367000 spectators during the 2007 event. This chapter is an interesting study of the position of specialised film festivals within the global network and of the importance of public funds and sponsorships; funds that are fundamental for the contemporary film production and promotion at any level, especially for 'minority' genres such as documentaries and shorts.

The new municipal government might not have been convinced of the festival's culture project, but at least it recognised its economic relevance to the city and even went so far as to subsidise a new initiative, the Tiger Business Lounge, which was established in 2004 in order to involve local corporations and businessmen with the festival and create more opportunities to initiate new partnership'. (200)

To conclude, De Valck's describes her book as a wide-ranging and comprehensive study of (European) film festivals, that moves in a concise and interesting manner from historical analysis of festivals to specific examples in Europe and, as suggested by the book's title, from European geopolitics to global cinephilia. Global is an expression that compels the author to introduce once again Hardt and Negri's notion of Empire as the economic differentiation between Western culture and the Third World, in a risky parallelism, with a sort of supposed ghettoisation of films from developing countries in the less prestigious sections of the programs of the various festivals.

The concluding discussion underlines the difference between the two concepts of 'successful' and 'safe'. While the word 'successful' is easy to comprehend in the context, the author's use of 'safe' deserves an explanation. De Valck argues that after 1968 the festival system became more and more 'boxed-in',

a safe zone that depended on standardised input/output channels and it was closed off from the latest developments in the rest of the cultural industries'. To clarify, 'subsidised circuits have successfully sheltered filmmakers and national film industries from the power and competitive advantage of the Hollywood studios, these developments have also imposed unnecessary restrictions on the filmmakers and national film industries that are equally harmful to them, albeit in a different way. (208).

This is why the term 'safe' seems appropriate to the author to describe the festival network.

Overall, *Film Festivals* not only eases the issue of a shortage of academic publications on this important topic. Film Festivals are a multifaceted cinematic experience, and this book sheds light on many of its aspects.

De Valck does not claim to cover all the sides of the festival network: 'my assessment of the international film festival circuit and its success as network will be unable to capture all of the network's ramifications and thus, by definition, it remains incomplete. However, my aim is to map out some of the regularities of film festivals and thereby make future festival analyses easier' (43). Nevertheless, *Film Festivals* is a fascinating, incisive, original and highly recommended work that should hopefully stimulate further research in this too often neglected area.