Introduction:
On Film Festivals

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It is difficult to pinpoint why film festivals trigger confessional impulses in critics saddled with the responsibility of writing about these intermittently gratifying, frequently maddening, events. In the anthology you are about to read, one article is an outright memoir while several of the others include lengthy autobiographical interludes. In some respects, film festival communiqués can be considered a form of travel writing. Yet instead of producing Baedekers chronicling famous sites in foreign climes, the best festival reports inevitably chart quasi-Proustian journeys into the interior. The films viewed in marathon sessions are occasionally, like Proust’s madeleines, conduits of bliss. All too often, however, they merely resemble stale biscuits. In any case, for the travelling, but necessarily sedentary, cinephile, describing the contradictory bundle of experiences engendered by most film festivals is profoundly personal.

The importance of harnessing the personal (although hopefully non-narcissistic) voice was uppermost in my mind while commissioning the essays, memoirs, interviews and impassioned polemics included in this volume. This priority was at least partially designed to offer a distinctive alternative to the largely pedestrian film festival reports found in newspapers and
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even film magazines – as well as the decidedly uneven commentary on film festivals that has appeared in book form in recent years. Most of the writing on festivals by mainstream critics is inordinately celebratory. To a certain extent, this is attributable to the fact that magazine festival reports, even in highbrow journals, are at least partially written as ‘payback’ – for either airfare, accommodations, or in the case of the snootier festivals, the mere privilege of receiving accreditation and standing in interminable queues. A panel sponsored by FIPRESCI (the International Federation of Film Critics) at the 2008 Oberhausen International Short Film Festival introduced the possibility that critics risk surrendering their integrity and losing their independence by becoming ‘embedded’ within the industry and the festival circuit. Even a book such as Kenneth Turan’s Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made (2002), despite some accurate observations concerning the more gruelling aspects of attending Cannes and Sundance, is relentlessly upbeat – as well as essentially conformist in its aesthetic predilections. Turan, for example, chides Sundance for its supposed ‘anticommercial bias’, whereas Robert Koehler in his piece in this volume on cinephilia and film festivals castigates the same event as a ‘horror show’ that does everything in its ability to marginalise any vestige of innovative cinema while remaining obsessed with a facile, if marketable, brand of ‘indie’ filmmaking.

All of the somewhat jaundiced, but certainly not jaded, contributors to this volume view the myriad contradictions of the contemporary festival milieu with a bracingly ambivalent mixture of affection and informed revulsion. The pleasures of ‘binging’ on five or six films each day is often negated by the irksome feeling that one’s ‘coverage’ is designed to prop up the edifice of a hollow spectacle. Major film festivals are now much more than venues for screening movies and encouraging camaraderie among cinephiles. Megafestivals such as Cannes, Toronto and Berlin have metamorphosed into ultra-hierarchical corporate entities in which the most glamorous, although not necessarily the most artistically distinguished, films are displayed in competitions that receive the lion’s share of media attention while more audacious work is ghettoised in sidebars that are usually only covered with any depth by specialised film magazines. A fierce passion for the cinema tempered by a sober awareness of the threat of the economic bottom line and film festivals’ version of realpolitik imbues many of these essays. Mark
Peranson’s ‘First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals’ examines ‘festivals as political actors’ while identifying the interest groups that now set the agenda for the international dissemination of art cinema. Even the realm of auteur cinema is now beholden to the vicissitudes of the market; Peranson identifies sales agents – a category ‘that didn’t exist a few decades ago’ – as movers and shakers whose power nearly approaches the scope of government agencies. As a programmer at the Vancouver International Film Festival, an event known more for its innovative programming than for outsized glitz, Peranson comes down on the side of ‘audience festivals’ which attempt to serve the needs of the public during an era where the corporate model of the ‘business festival’ is becoming increasingly dominant.

Quintín, former director of the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Films (BAFICI) and former editor of El Amante Cine, provides an acerbic account of the contemporary film festival ‘galaxy’. Railing against the bureaucratic mediocrity of many established festivals, Quintín unsurprisingly invokes the example of his four memorable years at BAFICI, a festival whose programming continues to reflect a cinephilic, critical sensibility, as an alternative to curatorial stodginess. It’s certainly noteworthy that several of the other contributors pay explicit homage to BAFICI and Quintín’s legacy inasmuch as his vision of a festival, suffused with what Jonathan Rosenbaum in his contribution to this book, ‘Some Festivals I’ve Known’, terms ‘experimental notions’ about programming, represents an antidote to the cautious efforts to please all constituencies (thereby frequently pleasing none) that plagues, among other events, Sundance, Cannes and Toronto.

There is perhaps an underlying anxiety, shared by critics, filmmakers and the public, that mega-festivals’ burgeoning importance (or, perhaps more accurately, burgeoning self-importance) makes them paradoxically unfestive and preoccupied with maintaining their status as ‘brands’. There are of course vestiges, even in corporate film festivals, of the transformative power of ancient rituals, allowing spectators to forget everyday banal woes and experience ‘time out of time’. On the other hand, the traditional liminality of festivals is difficult to discern in business festivals and often appears to have become transmogrified into pure spectacle. Many commentators, including
the ones in this book, tend to implicitly consider certain festivals as either utopian or dystopian – while also fully aware that most of them fall in the middle of such a continuum.

For serious film critics, a cinephile festival offers the most tangible promesse de bonheur. André Bazin’s 1955 essay, ‘The Festival Viewed as a Religious Order’, which starts off this collection (making its first appearance in English) wittily compares the pilgrimage of critics to Cannes to an initiation into a monastic order – film writers come together from all corners of the globe to spend two weeks living a life diametrically opposed to their everyday professional and private existence’ and descend upon the Riviera to worship a ‘transcendent reality’: the cinema. Yet Robert Koehler’s contribution, ‘Cinephilia and Film Festivals’, asserts that ‘any festival that matters has only one crucial task, and that is to defend cinema’ – and he makes it clear that many festivals fail to pay adequate reverence to the cinematic muse. Peranson compares the seemingly infinite variety of contemporary film festivals to an efflorescence of Starbucks while Koehler reminds us that the Seattle International Film Festival was once labelled ‘a kind of Wal-Mart of movies of any and all types that fit into some commercial category’. Even though the hegemony of the market may now seem like an irreversible process, the essay that follows Koehler’s jeremiad, Adrian Martin’s ‘Here and Elsewhere (The View From Australia)’, wryly points out that utopian schemes for film festivals sometimes congeal into lame pleas for institutional reform. To wit, Australian critic Lesley Stern’s 1981 plea for freewheeling festivals that might be construed as ‘moveable feasts’ ends with a ‘grimly ironic’ plea for her agenda to be considered by the Australian Film Institute, a body Martin characterises as a ‘relentlessly mainstream organisation’. One of the animating tensions of Koehler’s article involves the way in which the institutional frameworks of festivals both converge and conflict with the cinephile’s agenda. Film enthusiasts seemingly can’t live with the conservative aesthetic policies of most film festivals but can’t, in the final analysis, live without them.

In any case, the seasoned cinephile soon realises that many festivals’ irreconcilable contradictions are the source of their appeal. Most of the major festivals are neither sites of unadulterated cinematic nirvana or mere hollow spectacles. A certain number – especially the most popular, and therefore most controversial, events such as Cannes and Toronto – com-
bine both elements. Even the Venice Film Festival of the Mussolini era, an event that appears thoroughly corrupt and degraded to contemporary observers, screened a certain number of artistically worthy films untainted by fascist imperatives. And even the festivals most beloved by cinephiles for their integrity and altruism – Rotterdam and Vienna come easily to mind – frequently disappoint discerning critics, audiences and programmers. The delicate decisions, and myriad compromises, forced upon most film festival directors are discussed in the anthology’s lively exchange between James Quandt, chief programmer at the Toronto Cinematheque and Simon Field, former director of the Rotterdam Film Festival and currently consultant to the Dubai International Film Festival. While certain cinephiles sneer at the efforts of large festivals to balance demanding arthouse fare with more crowd-pleasing films, Field defends what is termed the ‘sandwich process’ in the Netherlands – using ‘bigger films to get audiences to support your festival and the smaller films’. This sort of savvy pragmatism is undoubtedly what fuels the success of many of the more notable festivals. The result is of course the phenomenon of the two-tiered festival: for example, large, primarily mainstream competitions at Cannes and Berlin counter-balanced by parallel events, the Directors’ Fortnight and ‘the Forum’. A more audience-oriented festival such as Rotterdam attempts to merge both the popular and the esoteric into one entity, albeit one that has considerably more space for experimental cinema than most mega-festivals. Nevertheless, Quandt, quite rightly, questions Field about film festivals’ often-thorny roles as gatekeepers; a number of groundbreaking films and directors languish in obscurity because important festivals have proved timid about showcasing innovative, if ‘difficult’, work. It makes sense that many contributors to this volume are both critics and programmers; both Field and Quandt at least implicitly maintain that sagacious programming should be understood as a form of criticism (and analogous arguments are made in the essays by Rosenbaum, Koehler, Peranson, Quintín and Christoph Huber).

For most critics, programmers and the public, Cannes, for better or worse, has come to exemplify the quintessential film festival. From the perspective of the international art cinema market (sales agents and distributors in tandem), Cannes’ blessing functions as what, especially since the publication of Naomi Klein’s No Logo (2002), has been critiqued as corporate
‘branding’. As the film scholar Marijke de Valck observes in Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia, ‘The cultural value added by festival selection and programming reaches beyond the level of personal preference and becomes more or less – according to the festival’s prestige on the international film circuit – globally acknowledged as evidence of quality. The process is similar to the way in which museums and art galleries add cultural capital to the artifacts they exhibit.’

Quintín, like many commentators, grudgingly acknowledges that Cannes is the centre of ‘the festival galaxy’. Just as Pascale Casanova maintains that ‘Paris became the place where books – submitted to critical judgment and transmuted – can be denationalised and their authors made universal’, Cannes also retains enough of the French Enlightenment tradition to make an effort to ‘universalise’ (and, by implication, make safe for arthouse consumption) such disparate directors as Abbas Kiarostami, Michael Haneke and Béla Tarr. Although all of these directors have been honoured with films in the official Cannes competition, their canonisation has been, at least to a certain extent, the byproduct of the more experimental programming of La Quinzaine de Réalisateurs, or Directors’ Fortnight – a sidebar inaugurated in 1969 as a response to criticism of Cannes’ hidebound programming that came to the fore in May 1968 – when, as every cinephile knows, the spectacle was interrupted and a group of militant filmmakers shut down the glitz machine for a year. During the 2008 Directors’ Fortnight, not coincidentally the fortieth anniversary of May ’68, Olivier Jahan’s documentary 40x15 chronicled the history of this prestigious ‘parallel festival’. Jahan documents the affinities between the Fortnight’s antinomian cinephilia and the spirit of ’68, particularly as exemplified by Pierre-Henri Deleau, the director of the sidebar during its formative years. In one of the film’s many trenchant interviews with former Quinzaine directors, Ken Loach maintains that the early decades of the Quinzaine nurtured a cherished pocket of ‘subversion’. Jahan’s film is peppered with similar fervent testimonials from directors ranging from American independents such as Jim Jarmusch to European cineastes such as Chantal Akerman and Werner Herzog.

The advent of the Quinzaine in the late 1960s also heralded the emergence of the idealistic programmer as de facto critic and this volume’s case studies of disparate film festivals highlights both altruistic festivals where programmers
aspire towards at least a quasi-utopian festival space free of commodification and dystopian events where crass commercialism, and even rampant corruption, reign supreme. Olaf Möller, who himself doubles as a programmer as well as a critic, celebrates two off-the-beaten-path festivals, Kino Otok in Slovenia and i 1000 occhi in northern Italy, that are exemplary for celebrating ‘anarchistic freedom’ and ‘a sense of wonder’. By contrast, Kong Rithdee’s article on the troubled history of the Bangkok International Film Festival examines a catastrophically mismanaged festival that failed miserably to serve the needs of the local community and its avid cinephiles. Of course, most festivals exist somewhere between these two polarities. While the Viennale is often cited for its adventurous programming, the Austrian critic Christoph Huber finds much to quibble about, as well as praise, while reminiscing about his years attending what is certainly one of the seminal events on the film festival calendar. Although film buffs might speak of festivals in terms of aesthetic epiphanies or disasters, even the smallest of them are essentially bureaucracies susceptible to the winds of critical favour and the unpredictability of market forces – something like stocks that are favoured one day and plunge the next. Stephen Teo’s analysis of the shifting fortunes of the Pusan International Film Festival, the Singapore International Film Festival and the Hong Kong International Film Festival emphasises that the fate of festivals depend upon various institutional factors that are often beyond the organisers’ control: changes in governmental policy, economic recession, and technological changes that inspire ‘real concern over whether’ these festivals ‘can be attractive and relevant to newer, younger audiences and their environment of new digital technology and inter-digital media (IDM)’.

Most of the critics and programmers featured in this anthology flaunt their ‘strong opinions’ (to invoke Vladimir Nabokov’s encomium) as badges of honour. While Atom Egoyan is no less opinionated, in the interview that concludes this volume he, perhaps inevitably (embodying someone who must traverse art and commerce on a regular basis), exemplifies a more pragmatic spirit. As a director whose career has been linked to the festival circuit since its inception, he has been on both sides of the fence – on the one hand, a seemingly rarefied director of art cinema who gradually followed the route to more mainstream acceptance as well as someone responsible for at least one straightforwardly commercial film. Yet Egoyan seems to have few
doubts that his present success would have been practically unimaginable without the existence of certain key supportive film festivals. And, despite occasional annoyances and disappointments, Egoyan, like Jonathan Rosenbaum in his memoir, recalls the pleasures of festival discoveries and encounters with great vividness. After all is said and done, the search for pleasure, however fleeting or futile, is at the heart of the festival experience.

Given this publication’s long lead time, it’s inevitable that certain details will have changed, or are in flux, since the authors initially submitted their articles. For example, James Quandt and Simon’s Field’s misgivings concerning the confusing tangle of sections at the Rotterdam Film Festival were partially addressed in 2009 by director Rutger Wolfs’s decision to streamline the myriad sections into three, easy-to-remember rubrics. Yet, in the final analysis, Wolfs’s overhaul was merely cosmetic and failed to make navigating Rotterdam much easier than in previous years. Other changes in the nature of festivals may go beyond mere bureaucratic finagling. As this edition of Dekalog goes to print, the euphemistically named ‘economic downturn’ is in full swing – financial turmoil that may well undercut the hegemony of the sales agents who wield power at international festivals and change the contours of the cutthroat marketplace machinations examined by Peranson in his well-reasoned polemic.

Several people have proved extremely supportive of this project since its inception. When I was in the planning stages, both Jonathan Rosenbaum and James Quandt provided encouragement and were very helpful in suggesting names of potential contributors. Adrian Martin was on target in suggesting the appropriateness of translating the Bazin essay and proved unfailingly enthusiastic when the translation materialised. It also goes without saying that I am indebted to the hard work and good cheer of translators Emilie Bickerton and Joan and Dennis West.

I am also grateful that my colleagues at Cineaste, Gary Crowdus and Cynthia Lucia, found this anthology of interest and agreed to publicise it by publishing Mark Peranson’s article in our Summer 2008 issue. Marcy Gerstein was extremely helpful in facilitating a phone interview with Atom Egoyan, and Egoyan himself, despite a tight schedule, was wonderfully agreeable, and even proved unflappable when certain technical snafus interrupted our phone conversation. Finally, Yoram Allon of Wallflower Press,
who gave me a contract for this Dekalog installment shortly after I suggested it, endured the various snags and delays that often accompany compiling anthologies with admirable aplomb.

NOTES

1 See Alessandro Falassi (ed.) (1987) *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. In a lecture to the 10th International Women’s Film Festival in Seoul, the Australian critic Meaghan Morris demarcates something she terms the ‘festive principle’: ‘a political principle which manoeuvres between the harsh “reality principle” which institutions are dedicated to reproducing, and the “pleasure principle” which alone (I think) can over the historical long term sustain the “good” narcissism of collective self-love and shared self-respect that social movements must affirm if they are to flourish.’ Thanks to Adrian Martin for calling my attention to this unpublished lecture.


