The Sandwich Process:
Simon Field Talks About Polemics and Poetry at Film Festivals

JAMES QUANDT

‘I’m rather grey’ was Simon Field’s typically droll response when asked how I would recognise him at the 1993 Toronto Film Festival, since we knew each other only via missive. Then film curator and distributor for the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, Simon was a daunting colleague whose taste and expertise extended from the most recondite experimental cinema to the wild-ass baroquetry of Japanese B-director Seijun Suzuki. When Simon ascended to the role of director of the Rotterdam Film Festival in 1996, the ‘happy few’ atmosphere of that event – a sort of seaport cinephile salon with small films and blessedly few industry types – changed dramatically. In the eight years he remained in the position before decamping in a fog of regret and rumour – was he pushed, many wondered, by parochial powers who wanted a more home-team, Dutch-speaking director? – the Rotterdam festival turned from an intimate mid-winter gathering whose compact programme reflected the tastes of one man, and where directors, critics, curators and the film-going public rubbed shoulders at communal dinners in the tiny Central Hotel, to a vast event where, as at Rotterdam’s hitherto anti-models (Toronto, Berlin), many curators got to exert their penchants, and hits from
the festival circuit played in multiplex cinemas to throngs of eager audiences. It became, to use one of Simon’s favourite phrases, a more plural festival, incorporating everyone from Ernie Gehr to Claude Chabrol. The latter’s *Rien ne va plus* furnished a scrap of scandal when Simon gave it pride of place at the 1997 festival, the local stalwarts outraged not because it was a weak film, which it was, but because Chabrol simply did not qualify as Rotterdam material, his renown contradictory to the modest, exploratory tenor of the festival established by its legendary founder, Hubert Bals, in whose long shadow all successive directors laboured. Simon was a purist but also a pluralist, and the festival benefited from his capacious taste. (Dinners, however,
maintained that old Rotterdam vibe, even in more exclusive settings. At one repast for Takeshi Kitano, a young assistant succumbed to either jet lag or the city’s tokable pleasures, passing out face first in his plate, black mane set ablaze by a candle. As the reek of singed hair mingled with rijstaffel and we leapt to douse the flames, Kitano looked on impassively, bored or bemused it was hard to tell.) The heartfelt plaudits and tears that accompanied Simon’s farewell at Rotterdam were a measure of the respect and fondness which he stirred in filmmakers, critics and cinephiles.

When we recently met for this interview on an unseasonably cold mid-September Saturday in 2007 over stale sashimi and gumboot grilled squid, I hoped that our vexed positions – Simon as (then) director of international programming for the Dubai Film Festival, I as an employee of the Toronto festival – would not stanch honest discussion. No doubt because he has played so many roles in the film world – curator, critic, distributor, festival director and, most recently, producer (of the prodigious New Crowned Hope cycle) – Simon revealed an expansive insight into the functions of festivals, and an ability to see issues from various viewpoints. I counted more than a dozen instances in which he used the phrase ‘on the other hand’, most edited out in the following text, but a sure indicator of Simon’s complex perspective. Though he prizes polemics and is known for his impeccable principles, he expressed surprising leniency over some issues that critics of film festivals have batten onto, paired with an acerbic understanding of how power too often obviates poetry at events supposedly dedicated to an art.

James Quandt: You have just come off back-to-back festivals, Venice, reportedly the oldest in the world, and Toronto. How do the festivals, the respective experiences, compare, and how have they changed over the time you have been attending each?

Simon Field: I have been attending Toronto for something like twenty years, since I was a programmer at the ICA. I haven’t been attending Venice as long, only since the time I went to Rotterdam as director. In terms of changes, I’m much more aware of the Toronto changes. Venice clearly shifts under different directors, for instance the feeling how under Marco Müller there is a cinephile element that was not so strong
before, but that’s obviously debatable. He was preceded by the very estimable Alberto Barbera. There haven’t been enormous changes in scale there, perhaps more emphasis on Hollywood, getting caught up in the cycle of those international release schedules. But that of course brings us straight back to Toronto, which has clearly got substantially larger since I first came. To my mind, the whole conception of the galas and special presentations has begun to dominate the festival, they have become more of a priority and Toronto, whether it likes it or not, has got caught up in the marketing procedures, particularly of Hollywood but also of the independent American cinema machine. Some of the auteurist emphases of the older festival have begun to get a little lost, though if you look at the 2007 edition it has Lav Diaz, it has Manoel de Oliveira. The masters are there. In the time I have been coming, it has become a much bigger machine, emphasising more and more its premieres. It’s become much more self-conscious about being one of the most important festivals in the world; it’s more preoccupied with its own rhetoric, celebrating its rhetoric. On the other hand, they have had for some years the ‘Wavelengths’ programme and now have this ‘Future Projections’ programme, so that while it has become a showcase for Hollywood and its release patterns, there’s an attempt to pay more attention to the avant-garde. But I’m not sure what’s happened to the films in the middle ground, what lies between.

JQ: An acquaintance, who’s been attending the Toronto festival for twenty-five years, recently told me this was the year she decided she was giving up because it has become so caught up in star-fucking that she was fed up with it. I responded that she can just ignore the glitz, it has nothing to do with her, and she can find her own festival. She’s particularly interested in documentaries, and there’s a strong slate here. The cliché is that with festivals this size, anybody can find what they’re looking for. Why even be concerned about Hollywood and the galas at a festival this size, or at Cannes for that matter?

SF: In the Netherlands, there’s what they call the ‘sandwich process’, how you use bigger films to get audiences to support your festival and its smaller – but equally important – films. They become not an alibi so much as a support system. You need the profile in the press, which comes.
with the big films and the films that are being sold to local distributors. They become a rationale that drives the festival, at all sorts of levels: they are the films the audiences often want to see, they represent the interests of the studios and the independents; they are, sadly, what the press wants to cover. The danger is that the balance begins to shift. How do you keep that balance? In the case of Rotterdam, we were not troubled by stars because we were not on the circuit, we were not part of the machinery. In Toronto, it has begun to affect the tone of the festival and one of its roles, a role of which much is made here, to educate and inform, and the problem is how to maintain that balance when, for instance, all films are described as fabulous, and when some parts of the festival disappear beneath an overcrowded programme. The noise of the ‘upper’ part of the festival drowns out other areas. When you get the feeling that rhetoric, and the marketers have taken over, you begin to be concerned that the marginal films aren’t at the centre of anyone’s interest.

JQ: I think the festival would argue, because they have been very concerned about this trend and this criticism, that they have attempted to address it by, for instance, starting the festival daily, their own publication, and making sure that at least ninety per cent of it is directed towards the films that don’t otherwise get much coverage, the smaller films. They have made a concerted effort to compensate for the media’s attention on stars and Hollywood.

SF: Which is absolutely correct. We tried to do the same thing with the Daily in Rotterdam because a similar problem occurs there. Veteran visionary directors of the independent cinema like Werner Schroeter and Tonino De Bernardi are now marginal directors even at a festival like Rotterdam. You have to ensure they get that coverage, but as a festival gets bigger it becomes harder and harder to create that attention – which filmmakers does one choose to feature in the Daily among so many deserving cases?

JQ: To go back to Lav Diaz, what do you do as a festival director with a nine-hour Filipino film? At the screening yesterday, there were about ten people in a 34-seat cinema. A question that always arises is how to present a film like that so it has an audience, so that people don’t feel that they are giving up three or four other films to see it.
SF: I don’t think there is an answer to the last part of your question. All of us become intoxicated with the attempt to see as many films as possible, but that’s also one of the consequences of a festival becoming gargantuan. After I left Rotterdam, I had the fantasy of doing a festival of perhaps 25 films. What people always talked about nostalgically at Rotterdam was the time when the audience would have seen most of the films at the festival together, you know, ‘I remember sitting on the steps of the Lanteren cinema with Fassbinder.’ It’s tinged by a certain sentimentality, but the point is valid. We need more of the Telluride types of festivals, where there is a tough gatekeeper. If you present a Lav Diaz in a festival like that, it’s very different from one where there are 350 films. It does affect the likelihood of people wanting to see the film. I always defended the size of Rotterdam, using the same grounds you described earlier, that people can find their own way through the festival. Some people go to see films from developing countries or experimental cinema, and then some of the audience sees maybe ten films which are essentially previews since they’ll go into distribution before long. I always defended making that kind of mixture – following that ‘sandwich’ formula – a polyphonic festival. But when I left and went back as a member of the public, I realised how that size was disadvantageous. You run into problems even if you have a daily to support filmmakers, like De Bernardi, but whose audience is fifteen, twenty people.

JQ: You raise something interesting, which is the difference between your perception of a festival as a director and the same event as a member of the public. When you were director at Rotterdam, did you try to see it from the other perspective?

SF: Yes, we were all concerned about that, but it’s very hard to cut down a festival, for several reasons. You have a very large public who want to see the films. You have a certain number of theatres you want to fill. In the case of Rotterdam, you also have programmers, all claiming they have several fabulous films they must include. We did discuss the matter of size at Rotterdam and when I left, Sandra den Hamer\(^1\) did try to cut it down substantially. They did reduce the number of films, but the festival didn’t seem any smaller. If you take the catholic approach, you’re showing the diversity of cinema for different motivations and different
audiences, but at the time it’s very hard to contain. This explains not just the growing size of festivals, but the growing number of them.

JQ: There’s an old New Yorker cartoon of two men surveying a rocky crag in the middle of nowhere and one of them saying, ‘What this place needs is a film festival’, and it seems like that has become true, and I don’t mean Telluride. Variety reports that the number of festivals in the world is reaching 500, though that number seems small – there must be 500 annual festivals in Toronto alone. What explains this proliferation?

SF: Cities or countries want to have film festivals, cultural organisations see it as a focus for sponsorship, or for bringing glamorous people: there are reasons that people who are not film-involved want a festival. Producers and filmmakers obviously desire a showcase for their films. There is also the cinephile motivation. Do I think it’s a good thing? It’s a circular discussion. For instance, if you’re in Des Moines and the chances of seeing a wide range of international cinema are very low, who are we to refuse that public the chance to see films from Thailand or Russia? Even if it’s a mainstream festival, many of those films don’t get distributed, so it seems rather cruel to suggest that those festivals shouldn’t exist. On the other hand, there is a bad side to this proliferation. When we talk about Toronto, Rotterdam, Cannes, they’re all competing with each other and we know now that Toronto is very much preoccupied with world premieres. Rumour has it that it prevents other festivals from getting films, which is characteristic of every festival that wants to have premieres, to stop others from getting them first. This cannot be good for filmmakers, or help their films getting seen widely. If you’re an Iranian filmmaker, for example, and you put all your eggs in the Berlin basket, which means your film can’t be shown in Rotterdam, in whose interest is that? The festival can say, of course, that it is in the interest of the filmmaker because if it’s a world premiere, the press come to see it. It’s quite clear that for a certain kind of cinema now distribution is through festivals and not through theatres.

JQ: Does the proliferation of festivals serve film culture?

SF: The answer has to be both yes and no. We’ve moved more and more into an event culture. Despite whatever is said about DVD, people do want to be part of a gathering, and they look to a gatekeeper such as a
festival curator to determine that experience. And as a festival gets bigger, that gatekeeper role gets lost.

JQ: By gatekeeper, you mean people are looking for a curator’s ‘seal of approval’?

SF: Yes. It’s one of the interesting debates about the proliferation of DVD: how do people know what they should look at when they’re very busy and have so many demands on their time?

JQ: Cinematheque programmers joke that as our vocation becomes quickly extinct, our future will be as house-to-house consultants on programming home theatres.

SF: ‘It’s Mr. Quandt at the door, mom!’

JQ: ‘Tell him to go away! We don’t want any more Pedro Costa!’

SF: But the event thing is very important, in gaining momentum to get, for example, press coverage. Critics will write about a film in a festival they would otherwise ignore during the year.

JQ: How many festivals in the world pay screening fees? They don’t like to talk about it, it’s kind of a dirty secret, and how does that affect the system of distribution and exhibition? There’s a sense that film festivals are rapidly replacing year-round exhibition.

SF: The latter is certainly the case. Having had the experience of producing *New Crowned Hope*, we were working with some of the most important filmmakers in the world, but for their work to get sold theatrically has become increasingly difficult. I don’t think that’s a consequence of the growth of festivals. Other factors are cutting into arthouse distribution and cinema circuits. There is an alternative circuit of festivals growing up, and the majority of those 500 festivals are now having to pay rentals. The bigger sales agents will let films go free to a festival they regard as creating a showcase or a sales potential, and I would imagine that Sundance, Toronto, Cannes, Rotterdam generally don’t pay rentals. Many of the rest do. For instance, I know that *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* and *Syndromes and a Century* got maybe fifty or sixty festival bookings. *Grabvica*, a film which won the Golden Bear in Berlin, had something like a hundred bookings in one year. You need staff to tend to the bookings and prints, so they’re quite justified in charging rentals. It’s also becoming another source of income for films that aren’t selling as broadly as they once did.
JQ: It used to be the case that European festivals were largely supported by the state, but increasingly that funding is going and they’re having to scramble to make it up, and some festivals are doing better than others at it. To use that globalising term, ‘it’s a new world’, and it has been difficult, at Berlin in particular. In an open letter to you about your departure from Rotterdam, the Dutch critic Hans Beerekamp wrote, ‘The festival risks becoming a management-driven event, with enough bums on seats, happy sponsors and happy distributors.’ Having gone to Rotterdam for years, I laughed and wondered what he would make of North American festivals! Do you think sponsorship has an effect on film festivals, the way it does in museums and symphony orchestras? Did it affect Rotterdam in any way?

SF: Rotterdam was and is very lucky in having strong institutional and government backing. One-third of the budget was grant aid, one-third was public, and the rest was one-off grants and sponsorship. It was getting harder and harder to get sponsorship even while I was at the festival. Sponsorship did not shape the programme in Rotterdam. The sponsorship department always wanted one or two films they could show to sponsors, but they were films that were already part of that ‘sandwich’ I’ve talked about.

JQ: What about the stories we hear about major festivals in which films are selected because they are ‘bundled’ by producers or sales agents or companies with desirable films? In other words: ‘Yes, you can have that film for competition, but you also have to take this one’, and it’s not a film the festival wants, or is even embarrassed to show. There was a famous instance at Rotterdam where a major Dutch distributor who handled a whole slate of films you had selected for the festival made the deal contingent on showing one film you didn’t want, and you had to negotiate. Is it inevitable that every festival faces a situation like that?

SF: It doesn’t happen very often. In Rotterdam, as I’m sure happens at other festivals, if you have a sales agent or distributor who wants to showcase his films, then they can put pressure on you, but there’s always going to be degrees of negotiation, particularly if a distributor has a number of films you want. But I would be very surprised if a certain amount of trading-off didn’t happen between festivals like Cannes and Toronto.
and powerful sales agents or studios. I sometimes wonder what happens with, for instance, a company like Mongrel Media that has a very substantial slate of films here in Toronto.

JQ: Since you bring it up, Mongrel kept *Taste of Cherry* the year it won the Palme d’Or at Cannes out of the Toronto festival, arguing that its audience would be used up at the festival, that even in a city like Toronto the audience for a film like that is limited and that everyone who wanted to see it would do so at the festival and nothing would remain when it opened commercially. They stuck to that decision despite remonstration, and the festival lost a very important film.

SF: That is a very common discussion. It probably doesn’t come up with Cannes, but certainly with Rotterdam it did, and having been a distributor, I have some sympathy with their view. If you show a film in Rotterdam’s Pathé cinema and then in two smaller cinemas, there is the possibility of a thousand people seeing it. With a lot of these arthouse titles, the potential audience is maybe five or six thousand, and you can really understand when someone says that is going to eat into their profits. Festivals argue that they’re showing all the important films of the year and feel bereft if one is denied them. I know some festivals have always paid some percentage of the box office to the distributors or the sales agents and that may happen more and more, and that somewhat compensates. A distributor who puts a film into this festival or Cannes or Rotterdam doesn’t see any money from it. The question is what do they get from it? You know the Toronto market better than I do, but I expect the situation is quite common.

JQ: There certainly are films that I do not consider as a limited run at the Cinematheque after the festival for those very reasons. Believe it or not, it’s an important factor for us at the Cinematheque for a limited run to be a Toronto premiere, because it hasn’t lost its audience to the festival.

SF: You’re exactly in the position I’ve been talking about.

JQ: Festivals are becoming more numerous, but they’re also becoming omnivorous – they seem to want to do everything. Cannes has added a large classics or restoration sidebar, for instance, which presents a real conflict for someone like me who would rather be there, but is in Cannes to see new films. The Bologna festival already exists for exhibiting resto-
rations. Other festivals, perhaps taking their cue from Rotterdam and its ‘Exploding Cinema’ programme, which was very important for you when you were director of that festival, have added either sidebars of avant-garde or experimental cinema, as the New York Film Festival has done for some years and Toronto more recently with ‘Wavelengths’. Toronto also added a sidebar of film/video installations this year. Why does cinema need to be ‘exploded’, and do you think more festivals should go in this direction?

SF: ‘Exploding Cinema’ existed before I got to Rotterdam, largely because of Kees Kasander. It was partly to do with technological developments and being open to new ‘genres’ of work, by which I mean the video promo, which was beginning to be taken seriously, but also the beginnings of digital media and the presentation of films in art galleries. I expanded on that, partly because I had my own interest in the visual arts, partly because of my experience at the ICA and the discussions there about how digital art was changing delivery systems and artistic conceptions. So I think in the case of Rotterdam it was absolutely essential for a festival whose essence was innovation and new directions in cinema to be open to those new directions. There is, as you suggest, a question about the coherence of the programming. I think some programmers in this area think it’s automatically interesting if the work is digital or new media. ‘Evidently, something is happening, Mr. Jones, and you don’t know what it is.’ You get it with all kinds of crossovers with advertising or music that can be unprincipled. On the other hand, I do think some of the filmmakers we have worked with over the years, Michael Snow is an example, because they have their feet in both worlds, have explored how to present cinema in different formats. There are many Snow pieces that are made for the gallery but can be absolutely considered ‘cinema’. And other filmmakers, Guy Maddin comes to mind, who have jumped over the fence between cinema and art, for reasons that might have to do with prestige, or exploring different ways of presenting work or formats, and a festival like Rotterdam has to respond to that. That’s why we broached the question of ‘What is Cinema?’

JQ: Historically, film festivals have played a role in establishing and, conversely, stalling or damaging directors’ reputations and careers. Certain
Japanese studios were attentive to Western festivals (Venice especially) so Ozu, Mizoguchi, Kurosawa became known, but other Japanese directors were not shown, so remained obscure outside of home. But I am more concerned about, for example, how Theo Angelopoulos was not shown at NYFF or TIFF. Richard Roud was reportedly against him, and I think that established a tradition. So the Angelopoulos retro at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1990s was the first intensive look at his work there, and did much to establish him in the pantheon. Whatever one thinks of him, he’s important. Ditto Werner Schroeter. Toronto promoted Lothar Lambert (who he?) with a retro, but did not show Schroeter. The New York Film Festival also ignored him. He is still largely unknown in North America as a consequence, though he’s one of the greatest directors ever. On the other hand, Toronto promoted Bob Swaim and Pierre Jolivet as the next big French auteurs, but who cares about them now? At the same time, Philippe Garrel was never shown, except at the Montreal festival, so he also remains in obscurity here. The examples could go on. I don’t know if Rotterdam has consistently ignored anyone important, but it does have a perverse allegiance to certain filmmakers, such as Tonino De Bernardi. Then Cannes seems to feel obliged to put every new Kusturica in competition, each more intolerable than the last…

SF: I doubt whether we can make anything significant out of the second part of your argument, about preventing great filmmakers from being celebrated or the audience they deserve, because in a way, there are always figures in the history of cinema who won’t get the attention we think they deserve. Festivals can be blamed to an extent, but it’s part of a whole process, which films are written about. Critics can also ignore important films.

JQ: But isn’t that where critics see films, at festivals? So that becomes a circular, self-perpetuating process.

SF: Yeah, it does. But the negative examples are more difficult to talk about. Festivals can be negative to a whole type of cinema. Most festivals are negative to the directors we consider the best in the world. To me it’s the other side of the argument: can they over-promote people? Or keep people in circulation who should not be?

JQ: Names?
SF: (Laughs) I’m sure you can provide your own list, much more caustic than mine. There’s also the matter of the principles of curating a festival. At Rotterdam, the ‘Filmmakers in Focus’ programme was very important in drawing attention to directors who were underestimated, not just by the public but also by the critics, because two out of three of the directors would elicit questions from the Dutch critics: ‘Who on earth is this person?’ The attitude being if I haven’t heard of him or her it must be a bad choice. But I think that makes it a good choice.

JQ: Which again points out the importance of film festivals in establishing, or not, a director’s reputation because many of the retrospectives you organised went on to be shown at many other venues, including our cinematheque. Anne-Marie Miéville, Fukasaku, I can name any number of the ones you did which introduced several of us curators or programmers to their work. I agree that cinematheques also play that role, and can also revive a reputation, but they play a smaller role than festivals.

SF: Not smaller necessarily. I think there is an analogy between what is done at cinematheques and what can be done at festivals. Festivals should have a parti pris, they should have a type of cinema they want to support and to propose, of course that’s a very Rotterdam ‘position’. It’s not the London Film Festival position. Toronto had it much more early on when it did director or national spotlights. It has now taken a slightly different angle with its special events, which has more to do with political debate.

JQ: The spotlights were very important, but certain things run their course. I can’t speak about internal decision-making at the festival because I’m not privy to it, but wasn’t there a general sense that a single country can’t produce enough good cinema on an annual basis to warrant a national spotlight every festival?

SF: I agree, it is a problem.

JQ: To return to cinematheques, it would seem a natural thing that film curators or programmers become festival directors, as you did, moving from the ICA in London to Rotterdam, though I think the positions involve very different talents. I would hate being a festival director – the politics, the administration, the diversion of attention from programming to many other areas in which I have no interest or competence.
How did you manage the change from programming a single space throughout the year, with the rhythms and concentration that entails, to a vast international festival, much less one held in a country in which you did not reside?

SF: I was very lucky in that Sandra den Hamer had a lot of experience, so I could concentrate on programming. The fact that we both became equal directors in due course reflected the importance of her contribution. What concerns me is the attitude that festivals can have general managers who are not cinephiles. That is not the case in Toronto or Rotterdam. It’s a terrible idea to have a ‘cultural manager’ for a festival.

JQ: When you were at Rotterdam, was cinephilia or film knowledge a criterion for hiring people, even in areas such as administration or finance? Does it matter?

SF: It does, but I was not involved with hiring and firing. It was an interesting problem, that people would come up through the festival and want to do other things.

JQ: Everybody wants to be a programmer!

SF: Exactly, and they think they can do it, which explains the quality of some programmes.

JQ: Can we talk about models of curation? Some festivals, like Cannes or Venice, concentrate selection in the hands of one or two people, so one feels a consistent vision or taste at work. The New York Film Festival has a small committee, anchored by two or three permanents, and an equal number of rotating members.

SF: Don’t get me started.

JQ: Others, like Toronto, really divvy up the programming into areas of interest and expertise, either by genre or geography, and try to maintain a kind of polyphony of many strong individual, curatorial voices. Which mode do you prefer? Rotterdam has a team of curators, less clearly defined in their purview than in Toronto. They seem to be all over the map, both metaphorically and actually. Which model do you think works best, or is it a festival-by-festival basis?

SF: This was always a discussion at Rotterdam because when I arrived there was this disconcerting obsession with Hubert Bals,5 and how Bals supposedly saw all the films and judged them with his stomach, his gut reaction.
I always argued that the programming couldn’t be done that way any more, because one person couldn’t have the expertise in so many areas. It’s important to work with people who have special knowledge. The role of the director is like organising a set of colours in a painting, and your individual curators or programmers are the colours. That said, there was a tendency for it to be all over the map because people would see films from different areas, though at that time I was the person who was doing basically all the Asian films.

JQ: Let’s be honest. Any given year turns up ten, maybe twenty good-to-great films, if we’re lucky. Yet as you point out festivals keep growing in size, show dozens, hundreds of films and make the case that each one is important or great or a masterpiece. Ideally, shouldn’t every festival be a boutique festival like NYFF?

SF: It depends on what you think a festival is for. You can have the New York model which, aside from the avant-garde section, is designed to select the most important films of the year, with a certain coherency of taste. But then they end up showing many films – in what these days is a small festival – that will be theatrically released in coming weeks. The festivals that interest me are the ones that have a partisan approach, that emphasise certain kinds of cinema. At Rotterdam we tried through ‘Filmmakers in Focus’ to establish what the heart of the festival was along with the competition, but at the same time putting a wide range of cinema into the main programme, to take people places they normally would not go: to a gallery or make them look at Catherine Breillat or whatever, and you can do that only in a big festival. Though I have the ideal of a boutique festival, perhaps forty films or fewer, so that the audience can potentially see two-thirds of the programme, a family-sized festival a little like Telluride with an idea of progressive cinema. That’s one idea of what a festival can be used as an educational tool. Some niche festivals, such as those concentrating on Asian cinema or a genre like science fiction, also aim to be informational, saying this is what’s going on in that area, and the films don’t have to be masterworks. But in the end I don’t think the boutique festival is a good idea.

JQ: It’s too limiting?

SF: Yes. And how many films in the New York Film Festival open three
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weeks later? That’s an example of a festival which semi-takes its responsibility but is not polemical. I feel that there could be more space for making an argument about what someone has called ‘a certain idea of cinema’, pushing the boat out for certain films and approaches to filmmaking. New York does this, to a certain extent – but in a rather well-behaved Upper West Side sort of way.

JQ: The first time I met you, some fifteen years ago, you said over lunch that Toronto audiences were a bit high on themselves. What did you mean?
SF: I don’t think I was being very fair.
JQ: Did being a festival director in the interim change your view?
SF: No, because some of the same thing is happening in Rotterdam. What I meant at the time was there is a way that is milked by the celebrity programmers. Someone introduced a film this morning: ‘I am Noah Cowan’s assistant.’ Why we needed to know that, I’m not sure. I was being rather sarcastic back then about the way the Toronto audience had become rather self-congratulatory, which creates this buzz, because whatever they’re shown, they love it. I was being unfair, and it’s a great credit to the festival that they’ve built up this very enthusiastic and passionate audience. In Rotterdam, as the festival built, the audience also became very proud of being part of the festival, and that’s a good thing but can become self-indulgent. It’s promoted by Toronto with this ‘we’re the greatest festival in the world, you are the greatest audience in the world’ mutual arse-licking that’s not very attractive to watch.

JQ: Some festivals depend on general audiences, like Berlin and Toronto, both for income and excitement. It’s a bit of a myth that Cannes is an industry-only festival – throngs of the general public get to go – but I think films still have their reputations made by the critics at Cannes, not so much by audience reaction. Do festivals that rely on audiences differ from those that don’t, the way competitive festivals differ from ones that aren’t? Does it skew the programming in any way?
SF: Rotterdam certainly had to take its audience into account. If you can get a very committed audience then in theory you should be able to take many more risks. You aim to persuade someone who can’t get into a Todd Haynes film to see a Pedro Costa instead. My ideal of a festival-goer in Rotterdam was someone who would be trusting enough to take
that risk. But we also have to talk about other publics, the international public, the critics, the filmmakers themselves.

JQ: Cannes programmes more for the critics than the public, and it occasionally puts difficult films in competition which often get hostile reactions from the critics.

SF: One of the terrible things about cinema is that it is simultaneously a business and industry and an art. There are enormous entanglements or confusions of criteria. For instance, in the UK, the traditional orientation of financial people is entirely towards the wider market and the more accessible film, and people no longer recognise the possibilities of visionary film or small-scale, small-audience work, whereas in the other arts, those possibilities are readily recognised. Let me give you an example of what we are seeing more and more in the trade papers – Variety and Screen International’s reaction to a young Japanese director’s work, the idea that Naomi Kawase’s films are slow and not going to be seen and therefore should be disregarded on those criteria.

JQ: There is the Variety polemic that comes out each year in Cannes that makes that very point: the cinephile world has become so hooked on Hou and Kiarostami, and the festival is not showing the cinema most of the world wants to see so what the hell are we all doing here?

SF: And not accepting that it’s their job to make that gap closer, but the gap is actually getting much wider.

JQ: That polemic is made in Variety yet it still has some of the smartest film critics in the world, with great knowledge, and even within the constraints of Varietyese, they manage to write very well.

SF: That’s absolutely true. Some are very cinephile, but they’re often constrained to do very short reviews. It’s very hard to make a coherent argument for auteur cinema if you’re only reviewing the films one by one. Screen International is different in that regard.

JQ: Toronto has often been pushed to become a competitive festival, the argument being that it will never equal Cannes without a competition. Piers Handling has always resisted this, feeling that it would have a great distorting effect, that the festival would lose a lot of its sense of democracy, and there would be this undue attention on the competition. I’m very glad he has resisted.
SF: I agree. This issue of the value of competitions interests me because of course we have the Tiger awards in Rotterdam.

JQ: That feels like a very different kind of competition to me.

SF: Well, it is, it’s part of the polemic. It’s already worrying that Toronto is so obsessively emphasising its premieres. It’s such bullshit, and the danger of a competition is that one has to insist on world international premieres.

JQ: The competition in Montreal is pathetic because it gets the scraps and leftovers from the other festivals.

SF: The same thing happens in San Sébastien, the competition is not very interesting, Karlovy Vary too. The fact is that Venice, Berlin, Cannes can scoop up the best films … everybody wants to be in Cannes. Unless you have a different sort of competition, as a more polemical role like the one in Rotterdam.

JQ: Mannheim is another example. The year I was on the jury I was struck by how many strong films there were in competition that I had never heard of. They somehow managed to find a number of good small films that other festivals had ignored.

SF: And if you don’t insist on premieres, you can actually have a good competition that draws attention to worthy films.

JQ: Will any festival ever overcome Cannes in international importance?

SF: I always thought of Rotterdam as on the second tier, below Cannes, Venice etc, and it’s an interesting challenge as to where Rotterdam will go next. It’s about six or seven in the world. I reject the notion of ‘A’ list festivals, because some of them…

JQ: Montreal. For fifteen years, I went to the Montreal World Film Festival and it was a case of rapidly diminishing returns. In the early years, it was the festival to go to see the European masters – Tarkovsky, Bresson, Olmi, Angelopoulos, Rohmer, Straub-Huillet – and such directors as Philippe Garrel, because believe it or not, Toronto wasn’t showing them then. Slowly, as it lost ground to Toronto, it became major work to unearth what little treasure there was in Montreal.

SF: Toronto sucked the air out of all the Canadian festivals, didn’t it? Not Vancouver, though, which is an interesting case of a festival with a strong Asian programme and is a public festival. Rotterdam is different than the
other second-level festivals like San Sébastian and Karlovy Vary, because it managed to give itself a very particular niche role, which combined an adventurous public festival with something that attracts the industry.

One of the questions Rotterdam has to face is: what are its priorities? Toronto does all these other things, Sprockets, the cinematheque. Is one dispersing one’s energies by doing that? Festivals can diversify too much.

In Rotterdam, energy is used up trying to do distribution, when it could be used to rethink how some sections of the festival should work. You ask about Rome and Venice, and it’s quite clear how Toronto, since I first came, has earned major international status, and has become this essential meeting and market place as well as a popular festival. Berlin has become a more important market since Milan folded, but Venice will never really be able to have a market. Will Rome be able to get the films that Venice wanted and create a market around that? Venice has historical prestige, and Cannes as well, and you can’t imagine it being pushed off its pedestal.

JQ: You can’t imagine, to use the Rome/Venice analogy, Paris starting a festival in competition with Cannes. I think there should be a rule that film festivals can take place only in cities with few distractions, so one doesn’t feel guilty watching films when one should be out in museums or sightseeing or at concerts ... which counts out Berlin and Venice for sure, but fits Rotterdam, mostly, and Cannes, totally.

SF: Paris would be an impossible place to have a festival, because there are films everywhere already. Generally you’re right that festivals should be in anonymous cities with few distractions.

JQ: Festivals often push up against one another, the Montreal/Venice/Toronto/New York/Vancouver mash-up in the late summer and fall, for instance. Rotterdam almost always coincides with the Sundance film festival. Did Sundance cause problems for you – films that had to premiere there, or directors who couldn’t make both festivals and chose Sundance? Or was Berlin more of a problem for Rotterdam?

SF: The problem with films and filmmakers was that often those who went to Sundance were dreaming of Cannes or Berlin and so would not commit to our programme. From the industry point of view it was tight and people quite often flew directly from one to the other. But it should
be said that the taste of the two festivals didn’t overlap so much. With Berlin, there the problem was much bigger because we were often chasing the same films and the ‘Forum’ and ‘Panoram’a have under Dieter Kosslick become more and more insistent on premieres (to the detriment of the films at times, in my view. I understand now they won’t even let some Hubert Bals Fund-funded films also be screened in Rotterdam if they want them). But speaking to one Rotterdammer recently, they had the view that Rotterdam often got things that Berlin wanted. We particularly tried to use the competition as a tool for that. Or in certain cases (Breillat), the ‘Focus’ also worked as a lever to get the premiere of a film (Romance) away from Berlin.

JQ: How does one assemble and structure a festival? There are too many sections in Rotterdam! Also in Toronto, I have to remind myself what the difference, say, between ‘Visions’ and ‘Vanguard’ is. I frankly can’t figure out what the sections in Rotterdam connote, and it matters because they should be primarily serve as a guide through a voluminous selection.

SF: There are too many sections, and it’s an internal problem at many festivals. We’re dealing with this in Dubai. We have this section called ‘The Cultural Bridge’. There are some bridges you can build in Dubai and some you can’t, but it has been interesting to try to give some force to the idea of films bringing together various cultures.

JQ: Can you tell me what the restrictions are in choosing films for the Dubai festival, especially in terms of observing religious or cultural sensitivities?

SF: How does somebody who was in Rotterdam end up in Dubai, where apparently Peter Scarlet once said old festival directors come to die? I left Rotterdam, because both they and I thought it was time for a change, and because I wanted to become involved with production, but also wanted to stay in touch with programming. And if you’re interested in a certain kind of cinema, you can see it only at festivals. So when I was offered programming at Dubai on a modest scale, I took it. There are cultural restraints. Homosexuality is not a subject that can be dealt with. The naked body, particularly of the female but also the male body, is not allowed. These are areas of ‘cultural sensitivity’. But this is something that runs through a large number of countries, and in fact just twenty years ago, we should remind ourselves, was just as problematic in our
countries. Now we’re so awash with liberalism that we don’t realise that England had very heavy censorship.

JQ: So did Ontario.

SF: Dubai’s a very interesting context in which to adjust one’s perspective. My heart is basically in the Rotterdam type of festival, and I am programming much more mainstream films in Dubai. But the festival becomes an interesting instrument, for the potential meeting of east and west, the Arab world with the rest of the world. There are several Arab festivals, but the area is crying out for a very official one that can actually attract industry, that can get the Arab filmmakers and producers to look at the wider world, a conduit or gateway. The more mainstream programming which is oriented to the public also helps to nurture Arab filmmaking. Importantly, half of the programme is devoted to new Arab cinema and this has a greater profile now with the beginning of competitions for Arab features, documentaries and shorts. The international section is designed to broaden the range of films seen in the UAE. Both sections are aimed not only at the Emirati audience but also at the very large international community present in Dubai. One of the constraints is having to respect the cultural mores and assumptions of the territory. To pretend one is in London and show only what one wants to show is just rather thoughtless.

JQ: That leads me to my Deborah Solomon question which is do you have qualms about working for an event that could be seen as cultural window dressing for a repressive regime?

SF: Yes.

JQ: That’s it?

SF: (Laughs) I haven’t finished. Do the people at the New York Film Festival have qualms about operating in a culture in which they have one of the most repressive presidents of all time? In Dubai, the role of the festival is indeed window dressing, yes. But here we come full circle from our discussion earlier about the role of film festivals all around the world. They are often a form of window dressing. But at the same time, maybe it’s also a place where you can gradually shift the possibilities of what you can show and what can be seen. And this is something that is important for many Emiraties too.
JQ: Does your heart sink when you think a film will be perfect for Dubai suddenly has nudity?
SF: (Laughs) Yes. Sheila [Whitaker, a fellow programmer and one-time director of the London Film festival] and I are both very fond of describing that experience: ‘Ah this is great, it’s going so well—’
JQ: ‘Oh no, there are some tits!’
SF: Tits could be okay, but full-scale bonking, or full frontal nudity are out.
JQ: So I take it that Lust, Caution will not be the opening film at Dubai this year.
SF: We’re going to look at the edited-for-China version. Without the testicles.
JQ: There has been a lot of talk about the death of cinema, or in Susan Sontag’s essay, the death of cinephilia, but something I’m concerned about is the continuance of cinema and cinephilia, but with a diminution in visual acuity, sensitivity – people seeing films on DVD and thinking they have seen and heard them; people not attuned to the differences between digital and analogue images and capabilities; people happy to watch images or films from any delivery system, no matter how small or downgraded. Cronenberg talked about this at Cannes this year – something about his daughter watching images from all kinds of sources, cell phones and such. I remember a panel at Rotterdam some years ago that was ‘Cinema vs. DVD’, and I was in the front row because I thought, ‘oh finally, we’re going to have this discussion’, but it never happened because it was really an unquestioning celebration of DVDs, their educational possibilities, the democracy of film culture they create, but it was never broached what DVDs might do to people’s sense of visual and aural acuity. Everything’s compressed on them – you’re not hearing the film. What role should film festivals play in advancing or preserving visual sensitivity? You and I feel very differently about digital – we’ve been having that debate for years – but I’m not talking just about digital.
SF: Should festivals have a stronger educational role? If you have a Resnais, a Michael Mann, a Costa or Diaz, and you’re showing a plurality of cinema, how are you backing that up with ways to help people understand it? When I did the Ernie Gehr focus at Rotterdam, he started off doing
the standard American-style Q&A – waiting for questions, and then he realised that a lot of people in the audience didn’t have a clue about how to approach his films. I don’t know what the answer to that is. There’s the danger with a very plural festival that you’ll never help people engage with that kind of cinema because you’re too busy showing films. You can keep the gates, and put in the adventurous films, but you also need to help people understand the films. That’s becoming more difficult because there’s just this mass of stuff.

JQ: I can never trust my feelings about films when I see them at festivals.
SF: I think that’s correct, because you’re changing gear every hour and a half. The cinematheque experience is a different one. One ends up consuming film like a magpie at a festival.

JQ: Is it not worrisome that at a festival like Cannes where a film’s reputation can be made or broken in one screening, and there are any number of factors that affect its reception? I think of some semi-disastrous press screenings, Victor Erice’s *El Sol del Membrillo* and Pedro Costa’s *Colossal Youth*, for instance. They both managed to recover after the festival, largely through the championship of some critics and programmers, but it is worrying that instant reputation is made in front of critics who are tired or hungry or cranky or have just been mishandled by a guard. We never talk about these issues, because to admit them is to suggest the process is very fallible.

SF: I don’t know if I have spoken to the Cannes people about this problem, but there is always the question of whether you put a really tough film in competition, knowing that a portion of the press which is becoming lazier and lazier…

JQ: I attended the public screening of *Colossal Youth* and it was the opposite: totally respectful, totally quiet, few walkouts, prolonged applause.
SF: But the press – or portions of it – at Cannes sometimes can turn into a pack of … ummmm…

JQ: Wolverines?
SF: Even someone like Hou Hsiao-hsien can suffer at Cannes, but if you’re composing a competition, you *have* to put those films in. I think the other thing that is happening, and I don’t know what we can do about it, is that many critics are becoming – or being pressured by their publications to
become – much more consumer oriented, always asking whether a film will have a large audience. They’re in danger of becoming tainted with an ideology that comes out of Hollywood: the idea that a film has to get the biggest possible audience is starting to shape everything. Poetry has no place in that approach.

Postscript: Rotterdam 2008

‘I really like the films this festival supports’, a young American director said to a critic from Cameroon the final frosty morn of the 2008 Rotterdam film festival. The critic murmured in reverential assent, needing no description of what the filmmaker meant: the small and wayward, the overlooked or neglected, the ‘difficult or challenging’, to use the boilerplate euphemisms for the kind of work Rotterdam has always championed. Perhaps I have lost patience with the bantam and undercrafted, but Rotterdam’s traditional parti pris seemed a little pious and wearying in its latest edition. For every small discovery – such as Aditya Assarat’s Wonderful Town, which went on to be the ‘revelation’ of the Berlin festival – there were endless stretches of digital dither, interchangeable studies of youth adrift, bored, alienated or (likely) all three, minor films from once-major directors, and Nice Little Movies that evanesced from the brainpan before their end credits. More memorable, but in the wrong way, was Yuya Ishii, hailed as the Next Big Thing with four features at the festival, all made in the last year, whose unspeakable puerility made one pine for Miike.

I heard more than once that the festival had lost its direction, though the Tiger Awards Competition featured its usual share of Rotterdam ready-mades, including critical favorite The Sky, the Earth, and the Rain, which won the FIPRESCI Award. Lovely and accomplished, José Luis Torres’ sophomore feature nevertheless sends troubling signals of the emergence of an international arthouse-festival formula, variant from film to film but adhering to an established set of aesthetic elements: adagio rhythms and oblique narrative; a tone of quietude and reticence, an aura of unexplained or unearned anguish; attenuated takes, long tracking or panning shots, often of depopulated landscapes; prolonged hand-held follow shots of solo people walking; slow dollies to a window or open door framing nature; a material-
ist sound design; and a preponderance of Tarkovskian imagery. (Torres’ film isn’t quite the Tarkclone that Andrei Zvyagintsev’s *The Banishment* is, but its aqueous world, tortoise-paced pans of entropic nature, and a studied composition of a suicidal girl in front of a lone, blasted tree all evoke the Russian master.) Has this uniform international aesthetic been nurtured by the festival circuit, and by such monetary bodies as Rotterdam’s wholly admirable Hubert Bals Fund? And how can such films be considered discoveries when they conform to such a familiar style?

Rotterdam has always been celebrated as one of the last festivals that determinedly and successfully incorporates experimental and ‘exploding’ cinema into its programme. Such curators as Mark McElhatten and Edwin Carels have done a superb job over the years of ensuring that both experimental film and film-related art installations are intelligently presented. But why, after decades of experience, does Rotterdam so often seem technically inept in exhibiting this material, which only further marginalises it?: films shown in mirror reverse, silent works with sound turned up or accompanied by projectionists’ voices booming from an ill-insulated booth, films shown out of focus. The technical ineptitude of the installation of Tsai Ming-liang’s

![Image of a woman and two children with durian fruit]

*The installation version of Tsai Ming Liang’s *Is it a Dream?* screened at the 2008 Rotterdam Film Festival*
recent film *Is It a Dream?* as part of the ‘New Dragon Inns’ sidebar was nothing short of scandalous. I had seen the work in its own mini-cinema at the Venice Biennale, and though it was projected there on DVD, the image was sharp, clear, precise (as was Wang Bing’s 840-minute *Crude Oil* elsewhere in ‘New Dragon Inns’). In Rotterdam, the projection of the film was so bleary, faces and objects were difficult to discern amid its swimming pixels. To account for the blur, some argued that Tsai was entering a new phase of visual abstraction, and one wonders how the director, whose only film this was at Rotterdam, felt about the installation, especially given his opinion in a *Daily Tiger* interview: ‘I am not happy about the whole DVD medium, in fact. The quality of film experience is crashing. People are now satisfied just watching a film to find out what the story is. The experience is almost being reduced to a kind of information gathering. What is going on? Who is it? My films are really for the big screen only.’

Rotterdam’s obsession with premieres, categorised according to angels-on-a-pin divisions (world, international, European) and blazoned in the festival’s website, catalogue and daily newspaper, rendered Simon’s comments

Jacques Nolot’s *Before I Forget* was one of the most noteworthy films screened at the 2008 Rotterdam Film Festival
about Toronto’s premiere fixation a little ironic. Just what did it mean to be a world premiere at Rotterdam, especially if the film were of little worth or consequence, and all the major movies came from previous festivals? Perhaps the accent on premieres accounted for Rotterdam’s explosion into Toronto-like public success this year, with lineups and sell-outs the norm, not just for *Juno* or *No Country for Old Men*, but also for unknown, esoteric or historical work (such as Shelly Kraicer’s important survey of Fourth Generation Chinese directors). The festival was still capable of providing exhilaration — a full house responding to a good, small film, such as *Munyurangabo*, that otherwise would probably never be shown in the Netherlands, for example — and of such serious undertakings as showing Jacques Nolot’s superb *Before I Forget* in the context of its trilogy, with the Pialat-influenced *L’Arrière Pays* and outré *La Chatte a deux têtes*. But the prevailing tone of hype and hubris only added to the slow erosion of that old Rotterdam modesty, and I began to feel, much as the Huub Bals supporters did when Simon first transformed the festival from intimate to panoptic, nostalgic for its simpler self.

**Notes** (provided by Simon Field)

1 Sandra den Hamer started working with the festival in Huub Bals’s period as director. She was Deputy Director when Simon Field became Director in 1997. In 2000 she joined him as a Director of the festival. When Simon Field left in 2004 she became sole director. She left the Festival in 2007 to become Director of the Nederlands Filmmuseum.

2 Kees Kasander is now best known as a producer, particularly of the films of Peter Greenaway. In 1996, he initiated the ‘Exploding Cinema’ section along with Femke Wolting when the festival was under the directorship of Emile Fallaux.

3 In 2003, when he was one of the ‘Filmmakers in Focus’, Guy Maddin presented the installation version of *Cowards Bend the Knee* at Rotterdam. Produced by The Power Plant, it was presented in Toronto in March–May 2003.

4 Among the ‘Filmmakers in Focus’ featured in Simon Field’s years as director apart from those mentioned in the discussion were Alain Cavalier, Jang Sun Woo, Julio Bressane, Oshii Mamoru, Cipri and Maresco, Abolfazl Jalili, Kamal Hasaan, Stan Brakhage, Zacharias Kunuk and Jean-Claude Brisseau.
ON FILM FESTIVALS

5 Hubert (or Huub) Bals was the legendary founder of the International Film Festival Rotterdam. He towered over its first twenty years and after his death in 1988 became something of a legend. For those interested in his life and a detailed history of those years when festivals were rather different creatures: see *Que Le Tigre Danse Huub Bals: A Biography* by Jan Heijs and Frans Westra. Otto Cramwinckel: Amsterdam 1996. The Hubert Bals Fund which supports the development and post-production of films from developing countries was named in his honour and memory.