The Curatorial Crisis in Independent Film

How do the spaces in which we watch films shape the way we see and make meaning?

From their beginnings in Europe as showcases for national cinemas between the world wars to their global proliferation over the past 30 years, film festivals have played a significant role in actively defining, shaping, and bringing together communities. Film festivals in the U.S. were first established as nation-building projects in the post-WWII era, and were developed against the backdrop of the Cold War and the freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Within the fast-emerging field of film festival studies, research on American festivals—in particular, scholarship that accounts for the racial and gendered politics underlying U.S. film culture—has thus far been scarce. Film festivals in the U.S., however, are unique sites from which to investigate how the politics of cultural production, representation, and spectatorship coalesce within a cultural space.

Over the past 20 years, film festivals have become one of the most powerful filters through which independent and international films reach public audiences. Lately, however, the world of independent film finds itself in the midst of a curatorial crisis. Film festival curators (officially called “programmers”) often bemoan the glut of independent films submitted to festivals, marking the downside of technological advances—that is, anyone can (and, so the joke goes, everyone does) make a film. The increase in production poses a curatorial challenge: thousands more films are made each year than can be catalogued or archived.

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Curators have emerged as a significant force in defining film culture on local and global scales by cultivating public notions of quality and taste. Sundance Film Festival programmers sifted through 4,042 submitted films in order to emerge with the 112 official selections for the 2012 festival. The decisions on what films to include or exclude from the festival program directly impacts public access to independent films because curators determine the films that distributors see, and possibly buy, for theatrical, DVD, or online release. The film industry relies on festivals as a necessary curatorial mechanism for managing the exponential increase in annual film production.

In a recent blog post, producer Ted Hope noted that more curators—specifically ones with “taste”—are needed to define the future directions of our cinema culture (http://blogs.indiewire.com/ted-hop/). But how can curators account for the social, economic, and cultural differences that structure our tastes? How can festivals resist reinscribing hegemonic film cultures perpetuated by much of commercial cinema, in order to expand the palate of public taste to recognize different approaches to storytelling and aesthetics? Challenged by these questions, and inspired by my experiences collaboratively curating and revitalizing the historic Women of Color Film & Video Festival in Santa Cruz, I shifted my doctoral research to focus on the curatorial processes of various cultural spaces and institutions.

Women of Color Film and Video Festival in Santa Cruz was founded in 1992. Festival participants have included Julie Dash, Cheryl Dunye, Lourdes Portillo, Alma Lopez, and Osa Hidalgo de la Riva. This image comes from the 14th festival in 2008.
Methodological Approaches for Film Festival Research

Multiple methodologies can be used to study contemporary film festivals, which vary in shape and function, adopt different organizational forms, and serve diverse missions within a range of contexts. In my research, I explore feminist curatorial interventions made within both smaller grassroots-organized, community-based film festivals and larger, higher-profile festivals that attract industry professionals. Studying the curatorial processes of film festivals reveals cinema to be more than a cultural text reflective of society. Exhibition and curatorial practices illuminate the social relations that circumscribe the modes of cinema’s production and its frames of reception.

The highly subjective practices of curatorial work shape the atmosphere and identity of festivals by mediating between the films and audiences, and by definitively framing both the conditions within which audiences come together and how they see and engage with screen cultures. Individual programmers imprint their own personal interests on festivals, playing an active part in the ways festivals shape film culture and communities. My initial attempts to interview programmers proved tricky. My questions were designed to excavate some of the unspoken negotiations involved in the process of film selection and to explore connections between what films are programmed and which audiences attend the festival. I quickly learned that festival workers describe the work of programming very differently from how they practice it. Responses felt scripted, akin to the generic responses programmers provide the press about their search for the “best” films and the “fresh new voices” they are committed to highlighting. The compromises and considerations required of the selection process are tightly guarded because they are intertwined with interpersonal relationships and investments that are rarely articulated explicitly, even within the organization—let alone to the press, the public, or an inquisitive researcher.

Participating in the process of film programming and curating became necessary in order to generate more nuanced arguments that could capture the contested and complex terrain of programming work. After codirecting the Women of Color Film & Video Festival in Santa Cruz and curating a number of community-based festivals in the Bay Area, I moved to Los Angeles to observe and participate in the practices of higher-profile festivals. I worked in different capacities with the programming team at Sundance and then as a short-film programmer at the Los Angeles Film Festival. I was also offered the opportunity to pursue a curatorial fellowship in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Independent Study Program. I worked collaboratively with three curators to conceptualize a multimedia exhibition; we were responsible for researching and selecting the artworks and films to be included, presenting the exhibition proposal for approval by the Whitney Museum’s board of curators, and overseeing the installation of the exhibition. Most recently, I worked as a programmer at the Tribeca Film Festival, where I focused on American independent and Middle Eastern film. As a feminist film curator, critic, and scholar, I am convinced that film festivals can flex their curatorial muscle to expand the parameters of our taste and film culture, fanning the flames of the radical, independent spirit of American film.

Cinematic Spaces of Freedom

The positions we occupy in relation to film culture significantly inform the way we understand and approach festival practices. As a young woman, I remember reflecting on the Combahee River Collective’s groundbreaking statement in . This line in particular reverberated through me: “If Black women were free, it would mean that
as the recent retrospective of the L.A. Rebellion films illustrated, filmmakers from historically disenfranchised and misrepresented communities have long challenged the circulation of racist stereotypes and posited alternative images that envision a more just society. Film is not powerful or transformative in and of itself; rather, communities that strategically work together are the mobilizing force for activating cultural work in ways that generate revolutionary movements and social change. What are the historical and contemporary cultural spaces that have opened terrains on which artists and activists collectively engage film and new media toward a larger project of freedom? What curatorial methodologies enable artists and audiences to experiment with different modes of storytelling and aesthetic sensibilities that exceed nationalistic constructs around identity? Film festivals can be what Robin Kelly describes as one of the “very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces.” By drawing on the potential for love, imagination, and culture, film festivals can facilitate coalitional alliances that might shift individuals into collective consciousness and energize movements toward social and political change.”

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