

***Coming Soon To A Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals***

Edited by Jeffrey Ruoff

Published by St. Andrews Film Studies 2012

Reviewed by Cynthia Close, Published in *Documentary* magazine, 2012

In the opening pages of this book we are told that “there is a field of film festival studies and it is burgeoning” and, contradictorily it is also “a neglected area of scholarship.” Whether either or both of these statements is true, does not lessen the need for an examination of the art, politics and economics behind film festival programming.

Jeffrey Ruoff, a film historian and associate professor of Film and Media Studies at Dartmouth is uniquely positioned to explore this area of film scholarship when he states unequivocally “My understanding of cinema has been shaped by film festivals”. I would have to agree that in deed my own evolving ideas about films and the role the cinematic experience continues to play in many cultures is totally dependent on those films I get to see only because they were screened in the context of a film festival somewhere in the world. Ruoff tells us there are now “several thousand” film festivals throughout the world. This number is big enough to impress and vague enough to defy corroboration.

We learn in the introduction that the 1932 Venice International Film Festival was the first. This seems logical for a city that had recognized the importance of the arts to its image and economy as far back as 1895 with the opening of the Venice Biennale. After WWII other European cities quickly followed suit, but there was no major film festival in the U.S. until the launch of the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1957. As the ripples of its influence flowed eastward, it was followed by the New York Film Festival in 1963 which became a staple screening venue for those documentarians and independent filmmakers who flourished as a result of the development of sync sound, lighter and cheaper equipment and the Cinema Verité movement.

By the 1970’s film culture had spread beyond Europe and North America with the advent of the Cairo International Film Festival in 1976, the Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1977 and the Havana Film Festival in 1979. By 1984 the spread of film festivals seemed so ubiquitous that the concept as depicted in a New Yorker cartoon by Mischa Richter showing tourists ascending a mountain to an isolated village and declaring “What this place needs is a film festival” drew a knowing chuckle from its informed audience. Ruoff includes it as an illustration making the point.

The fact that festivals are live events, a time for celebration both inside and outside the theaters is not lost on business associations and offices for tourism. Opportunities abound for promoting a city, state, or country, no matter how off the beaten path. Some film festivals may be the ONLY reason for going to a particular place at a particular season of the year. Ruoff points to the 2010 Mill Valley Film Festival in northern California as an example of successful, balanced programming, but the book is not narrowly confined to those festivals that come most easily to mind such as; Sundance,

Tribecca, Berlin, Cannes etc... There is a chapter by Skadi Loist on programming LGBT film festivals, a chapter by Sangjoon Lee titled *The Rise and Demise of the Asia-Pacific Film Festival 1954-1972*, and lastly chapter 13; *The Spirit of the Hiroshima International Animation Festival 1985-2010* by Sayoko Kinoshita.

Film scholar Marijke de Valck begins with an overview of programming practices from the 1930's to the present. She highlights the important fact that countries, individual governments see international film festivals as a vehicle for the showcasing of national cinema. In the chapter by the independent film scholar Gönül Dönmez-Colin this is certainly the case as she analyses the Istanbul Festival, which offers an annual review of Turkish films. The Thessaloniki International Festival, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2009, is discussed by Toby Lee in Chapter 6 and in her dissertation for Harvard where she is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology and Film & Visual Studies. Lee digs deeply into the political ramifications of the Thessaloniki Festival inside Greece during a time of economic, social and cultural crisis.

Gerald Perry is a film critic from my hometown of Boston. He's also a professor in the Department of Communications at Suffolk University, the programmer and curator for the Boston University Cinematheque and a long-time film critic for *The Boston Phoenix*. I am most familiar with his point of view which he made clear in his 2008 feature documentary *For the Love of Movies: The Story of American Film Criticism*, which he both wrote and directed, an act of sheer bravery for a film critic. In Chapter 2, *Memories of a Film Festival Addict*, Perry is at his most personable, the writing somewhat like a cross between a travelogue and memoir. He carries us along on his joyful jaunts from his first innocent discovery of the 1976 World Film Festival in Montreal, to Havana in 1979, followed by the 1980 New York Film Festival, Jerusalem in 1988, Berlin 1990, Provincetown 2001, Toronto International Film Festival 2001 (which is where Perry was on 9/11), the Midnight Sun Festival in Finland 2002, Cannes 2003, The Bangkok International Film Festival 2005 (held in spite of the fact that the Thai coastline had just been inundated by a tsunami), and wrapping up his chapter with The Bergman Film Week, held in Sweden in June 2010. It was held on the island of Faro where Bergman filmed, lived and died.

Each of the chapters bares the imprint and style of its contributor. There are 13 in all, including Ruoff who in Chapter 9 *Programming the Old and the New*, interviews Bill and Stella Pence about the Telluride Film Festival. Bill, as a vice – president and part owner of Janus Films from 1965-78, pioneered the distribution of foreign films and with Stella headed national theatrical sales. He played a valuable role in the creation of Janus' extensive library of film classics that evolved as the foundation of the Criterion Collection. In 1979 they founded Kino International, while now under new management, still successfully distributes films in all media today. The Pence résumé in the film world is long and deep. Bill became the Director of Film at Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College in 1983, where he continues to program. Stella is a trustee of the Flaherty Film Seminar, they both are advisors to the Chuck Jones Center for Creativity and helped Turner Classic Movies create and program the TCM Classic Film Festival. The focus of the interview is the highly respected Telluride Film Festival that Bill and

Stella co-founded in 1974. Bill served as co-director/President and Stella as managing director for 33 years. The questions are direct, straightforward. Both Stella and Bill provide informative and self-deprecating responses; such as when asked about the excitement of attending Cannes Stella replied, “I don’t think Cannes is exciting, I think it’s terrifying, frenetic beyond belief.” They name names, tell great anecdotal stories and ultimately reveal their love of film.

There are many lessons to be learned from this book, not only for academics seeking to explore the roots of this ever expanding international cultural phenomena but also for filmmakers and tastemakers who not unlike the tourists pictured in that 1984 New Yorker cartoon, look around and think, “what we need in this town is a (another) film festival.” There are stories of success and failure; festivals that have lasted for decades and festivals that have inspired societal change for the better. The one consistent thread is that starting and programming a film festival is a complex business that requires dedication and long hours of often unpaid labor.

As an addendum Jeffery Ruoff has provided an extensive list of URL’s of all the festivals cited along with all the works cited in the book. This information will be useful for those who were inspired by the discovery that in spite of social media, in spite of digital distribution of film to our TV’s and PC’s, the desire of real people to sit in darkened theaters together at real events continues to grow, made possible in every country around the world by film festivals.