

Creativity at Work:

# Film Festival Research from an Organizational Studies Perspective

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## Abstract

The annual film festival is a very European institution invented more than 60-70 years ago. As a research topic, however, film festivals have received surprisingly little and scattered attention within organization and management studies. Film festivals have recently met a mounting interest among film and media scholars. This article provides an introduction to the growing literature on film festivals and argues for a threefold research agenda within organizational studies by looking at film festivals as arenas of emergence, analyzing the role of film festivals within the global film industries, and studying film festivals as organizations. By suggesting this research agenda we intent to draw the attention of organization and management scholars to a hitherto overlooked and potentially promising area of research for organization and management studies.

## Keywords

Film festivals, field configuring events, cinema, events.

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## Introduction

In this article we seek to make a case for film festivals as both an object and a site for organizational research. Since the 1980s film festivals in all parts of the world have proliferated (Iordanova, 2009). Film festivals range along a continuum from major international events with global media and industry exposure like, for example, Berlin, Venice, or Cannes International Film Festivals, to strong regional events, for example, the Hong Kong International Film Festival, and to initiatives programming events targeting geographically or thematically confined audiences like, for example, the annual Grenoble Mountain Film Festival. In 2003, FIAPF, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations, has estimated the overall number of international film festivals at 700 to 800 ([www.fiapf.org](http://www.fiapf.org)), and their number has probably further increased over the last decade -- industry experts estimate that nowadays up to 3500 film festivals are held in the world each year. In the light of growing importance of film festivals, film and media scholars have begun to focus their attention on festival events. Earlier contributions have echoed perspectives traditionally held by film and media studies, for example, the role of festivals in the construction of national cinemas and festivals as transnational spaces confronting global cultural production with national cinematographic traditions (e.g. Harbord, 2002, Mazdon, 2006; Elsaesser, 2005; Evans, 2007), but more recently a growing emphasis has been put on issues that resonate with research traditions in the field of organizational studies together with a demand for stronger theorization to move beyond monographic case study research on film festivals (e.g. Rhyne, 2009; Cheung, 2009).

Film festival research in general is still in its infant stage, except for a longer standing tradition in tourism and marketing research dedicated to festival impact on host cities and regions (see, for example, Getz & Andersson, 2009). Recent exchanges and research projects in which we have recently been involved (e.g., Mezias et al., 2008; Mazza & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2008; Ooi & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009; Ruling, 2009a; Mezias et al., forthcoming; Ruling, forthcoming) have confirmed both the theoretical interest of conducting research on film festivals as well as a high receptivity and space for bridging research traditions between film and media, cultural, and organizational studies (Iordanova & Rhyne, 2009; Loist & de Valck, 2010).

Film festivals provide a fascinating setting for organizational research. The particular nature of the film as a cultural product distinguishes film festivals, for example, from theatre festivals or art fairs (see, for example, Caves, 2000; Harbord, 2002; Moeran & Strandgaard Pedersen, forthcoming; Anand &

Jones, 2008). Festivals serve as sites for the public construction and exhibition of often both financially and culturally important film projects at various stages. The underlying tension between artistic work, epitomized by the auteur tradition, on the one hand, and the realm of mainly commercial film on the other (e.g. Wyatt, 1994; Mathieu & Strandvad, 2009) is mirrored in festivals' programming strategies, attendees, and in the co-existence of festival and market sections in many large events (for an early analysis of festivals' programming strategies see, for example, Benghozi & Nénert, 1995).

Film festivals as research setting are rich in symbols that take value beyond a given event, for example the red carpet, the award ceremony, and the largely scripted roles of journalists, photographers and television in the festival. Many of these elements serve as templates; they form a sort of general festival language and provide both orientation and legitimacy (Mazza & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2008). Conversely, film festivals also thrive on the notion of events as allowing the unexpected to take place, the 'liveness' of the festival (Harbord, 2009). In other words, film festivals provide 'arenas of emergence'<sup>1</sup> and create room for various sorts of institutional entrepreneurship.

The following sections develop our introductory reflections in three broad directions. The first section discusses film festivals as arenas of emergence and asks *what* happens at a film festival. The second section looks at *what* is the relationship between film festivals and the global film industries. The third section focuses on film festivals as organizations, highlighting issues of strategic agency, festival identity and institutionalization. The final section highlights the interest of film festivals as sites for organizational research and summarizes the main ideas of this paper.

Our research note aims at providing an introduction to research questions relevant to the study of film festivals. We wish to point to issues and questions, which we think to be particular pertinent from an organizational studies perspective. For a more detailed review, especially concerning the film and media studies literature on festivals, we recommend the complete and well structured online-research bibliography compiled and regularly updated by Loist and de Valck (2010), together with a recent volume edited by Porton (2009) and the new annual series of film festival research yearbooks edited by Iordanova (Iordanova & Rhyne, 2009).

### **Film Festivals as Arenas of Emergence**

Film festivals are situated at the crossroads of multiple institutional logics; they are "curiously intense, yet hybrid events" (Harbord, 2009: 40) at the intersection of art, commerce, technology, culture, identity, power, politics and ideology. Film festivals bring together multiple constituents and reflect divergent set of values. They are "site[s] of dwelling and travel", at once rooted in specific cultural and institutional contexts, and acting as places of global

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'arena of emergence' has been suggested by Joseph Lampel during the Creative Encounters workshop on trade fairs and festivals, Copenhagen Business School, September 2009.

"travel and exchange" (Mazdon, 2006: 23). Film festivals can be understood as temporary organizations in which values, both economic and aesthetic, are constructed and attached to films, to forms and processes of film making, and to industry actors. They contribute to the social construction of value and status and provide arenas for contesting prevailing field structures. Festival events constitute 'sites of passage' (de Valck, 2007), unique moments in the dynamics of film as a creative field by providing spaces in which innovation both from the core and from the periphery of the field becomes visible, while they contribute, at the same time, to enacting and reproducing existing routines and relationships.

Conceptually, film festivals lend themselves to be framed from the vantage point of 'field configuring events' (Lampel & Meyer, 2008), "temporal organizations [...] that encapsulate and shape the development of professions, technologies, markets and industries" and in which "people from diverse organizations and with diverse purposes assemble periodically or on a one-time basis, to announce new products, develop industry standards, construct social networks, develop industry standards, construct social networks, recognize accomplishments, share and interpret information, and transact business" (Lampel & Meyer, 2008: 1026).

Most film festivals are set up as a nexus of multiple events including competitions (main competition and various sidebars), 'master-classes' with celebrated filmmakers, exhibition of thematic programs (e.g., retrospectives or country-specific shows), showcase presentations and workshops (e.g., large studio's work in progress, TV channels' programming strategies, or new technological developments), markets for co-production, distribution, and recruitment, and sets of social events (e.g., receptions and parties), which contribute to providing participants with sense of an emerging agenda within a particular field. Next to (re)defining values, festivals thus play an important role in field participants' learning processes, allowing to frame them as temporary 'ecologies of learning' (Levitt & March, 1988; RÜling, 2009b).

Festivals are places of power and power relations that are characterized by complex and often hidden relationships between multiple constituents, for example between distributors and agents on the one hand and festival organizers on the other (Peranson, 2009). Power in the festival context is both symbolic and material. Film festival events are materialized in physical space, which constrains and enables movement, encounters, and the crossing of boundaries between multiple categories of field participants. Through their organization in time and space, film festivals both construct and rely upon intricate mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Films which are exhibited during the festivals are selected into various categories of competitions and additional programs. Programming and jury selection operate choices not only in the selection of films, but also by attributing time slots and theatres. Festival participants including film professionals, media representatives, cultural policy actors, and the wider public are put into a large number of accreditation categories which typically materialize in badges of various colours providing access to different spaces or different moments of the event. In sum, film

festivals are complex phenomena made up from and encapsulating multiple activities and events within the main event. We would argue that such sites – whether framed as ‘arenas of emergence’, ‘field configuring events’ or ‘ecologies of learning’- provide an exemplary occasion to study on-site dynamics and multiple logics in relation to the reproduction, creation and contestation of values and categories within the industry.

## **Film Festivals and the Global Film Industries**

The second orientation we would like to highlight moves beyond the discussion of on-site festival dynamics to the role played by film festivals within the global film industries. "A very European institution" (Elsaesser, 2005:84), the annual international film festival goes back to the 1930s. The development of early film festivals in Europe was related to the high fragmentation of the European film industries as compared the highly concentrated and vertically integrated studio system in the United States (Caves, 2000). After the Second World War, the strong development of European film festivals can be understood in the context of European post-war regeneration and rebuilding (Harbord, 2002). Next to their traditional function as showcases of national cinema and ideology -- the role of the Venice festival as a platform for fascist aesthetic and ideology lead to the creation of the first Cannes film festival in 1939<sup>2</sup>; and the 1950s creation of the Berlin film festival also served as a political statement in the context 'cold war' in the then divided city (Jacobsen, 2000; Harbord, 2002; Mezias et al., forthcoming) --, festivals play several important roles in the organization of the global film industries. Film festivals, thus, initially began as a European phenomenon, but rapidly proliferated to other parts of the world (for an overview see Mazza and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2008).

Today, many large international film festivals (e.g., Cannes and Berlin) host markets for co-production deals, distribution rights, licensing, film related services, etc. But even without formally established market events, film festivals play an important market-making role in allowing industry actors to develop an acute sense of developments in formats, technology, categories, aesthetics, etc. Audience reaction and press coverage serve as indicators for trends and reception.

Film festivals provide opportunities to meet other film professionals. As one of us argues in a recent case study of the Annecy International Animation Film Festival, the development of collaborative projects and the corresponding project firms is structured by the existence of an implicit 'industry event agenda' (Rüling, 2009a). Regular industry events provide occasions for industry professionals to meet and set milestones for the advancement of joint projects. By functioning as temporary clusters, film festivals play an important role in the establishment of the global "knowledge pipelines" (Maskell et al., 2006), which

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<sup>2</sup> The first Cannes film festival was originally scheduled to take place in September 1939, but was cancelled after the German invasion of Poland and did not start up again until 1946 (Turan, 2002:18-19).

bridge the gaps between local film clusters and global project and collaboration networks.

While festivals were initially serving as showcases (mainly for national cinematic production), some scholars have recently argued that the international film festival circuit is today serving as an alternative to traditional distribution (Elsaesser, 2005) or theatrical exhibition (Iordanova, 2009) a trend that has also be observed within other cultural-creative industries (see e.g. Tang, forthcoming).

Last but not least, festivals play an important role as gate-keepers and entry points for new or peripheral field actors. Participating in the official selection of a major festival provides a film and its director, producer, actors, as well as the underlying genre, aesthetic styles, etc. with significant media coverage and contributes to identifying a film in terms of relevant field categories. This impact, however, depends on the type of event. Empirical research on the impact of European premier film festivals, for example, shows differences among film festivals in their ability to impact box office success (Mezias et al., 2008) -- in comparison with Berlin and Venice, winning an award in Cannes appears as "the most commercially valuable endorsement" (2008: 19). The same authors also identify the twofold nature of winning an award at a festival as signals towards audiences (leading to a higher number of admissions) as well as towards industry professionals (enhancing the probability of future nominations). In sum, film festivals serve as leading events establishing the reputation of film professionals (i.e. film directors, actors and producers), of their products (i.e. their films) as well as of the filmmaking companies, within the global film industries. These processes of signalling and reputation building seem to take place through different 'circuits', in accordance with the system of hierarchies that can be observed between the various and huge number of festivals existing today. In this way, we find, festivals and the 'circuits' provide a promising area for organization researchers studying local and global linkages.

## **Film Festivals as Organizations**

The third perspective on film festivals that we would like to sketch out here concerns the study of festivals as organizations. Film festivals as organizations depend on and need to manage multiple stakeholders relations including those with filmmakers and producers, journalists, film financiers, lawyers, distributors and studios, tourism and ancillary industries, policymakers, funders and festival managers (Rhyne, 2009; Harbord, 2002).

Given the growing number of festivals, establishing and maintaining a festival event on industry and audience agendas and anchoring it in the film festival landscape is an important strategic task. As it is the case with creative industries in general, the film business is characterized by a very high degree of uncertainty -- the 'nobody knows' principle (Caves, 2000). While this situation on the one hand sustains the role of festivals as in-vivo encounters during which trends and values are constructed or contested, festival organizers

themselves face a highly unstable environment in which they need to inscribe their strategic choices and engage in competition for scarce resources including films, attendees, media attention, funding, etc. In such a situation, many festival organizations currently seek to move beyond single festival events to play a more active role within their respective environments, for example, by acting as brokers between field constituents, selecting and featuring early stage projects, setting up online communities (Rüling, 2009a).

Accreditation of festivals is an interesting phenomenon in the management of film festivals. The International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) grants its accreditation to about fifty large international film festivals. While accreditation, in FIAPF's own words, gives "producers, distributors and sales agents the guarantee that they will commit to festivals with a true international dimension, endowed with a strong and structured organization, involving industry professionals" (FIAPF, 2006: 4; quoted in Mezas et al., 2008: 8), more critical authors hold that accreditation mainly allows both festivals to tap into a stable supply of films and production firms to ensure festival exposure of their films (Iordanova, 2009). Interestingly, several highly visible and prestigious international events including, for example, Toronto, Sundance and Rotterdam International Film Festivals, have been able, through the development of a clear profile and networks within the film industry, to ensure high quality programming *without* accreditation by FIAPF.

The role and function of festival accreditation points to another important issue in the strategic management of film festivals: while it seems generally accepted that films need festivals, the opposite holds true as well -- festivals also need films (Iordanova, 2009). The prestige of any given festival will depend on its ability to attract prestigious films and film celebrities (in the form of 'star' actors and 'star' directors). In the case of the Annecy International Animation Festival, for example, the festival managers have recently developed a long-term strategy around animation feature films in order to reduce the risk of losing important productions to more generalist and glamorous high media exposure festivals, like for example Cannes. And in the case of the top European feature film festivals like Berlin, Cannes and Venice, numerous stories circulate about some festivals having been able to persuade filmmakers to withdraw their film from one festival to include it in another leading event.

Programming is a central process in the creation and the management of film festival identity. Programming defines the orientation and hence the identity of a festival. As several recent studies have argued, programming poses particular challenges for identity-related festivals, for example gay and lesbian, or Jewish film festivals. In these particular contexts, programming indirectly involves both community and artistic identities, which constitute an additional element that needs to be balanced by festival organizers. An interesting example is provided in a recent study of the Vienna Jewish Film Festival and the difficulty in establishing the boundaries of the category of "Jewish film", while at the same time managing relationships with the local Jewish community (Segal, 2009).

Two additional domains of inquiry which we would like to suggest here concern the management of human resources and organizational knowledge within and across festival organizations. Festival organizations are often characterized by fluctuating membership, temporary collaboration and high turnover. Dealing with high turnover, and sustaining the experience, knowledge and identity of festival collaborators is a fundamental issue. In addition, the tension or simply the differences between multiple categories of collaborators -- permanent, fixed term contractual employees, volunteers, -- need to be carefully managed, and knowledge flow as well as preservation need to be secured.

Through an increasing use of modern information technology for registration, ticketing, access control, and so forth, festival organizations have access to detailed data about festival participants and they start developing new organizational practices exploiting these data. Ticketing and access control for screenings, conferences, etc. (for example through the scanning of bar codes on badges) allow the tracing of festival participants and allow festival organizations to optimize sessions or seat contingents for different categories of attendees. Furthermore, as one of the present authors has observed in his ongoing case study work on a major European festival, precise data about the attendance of festival related conferences are systematically exploited in order to set up and plan next edition's conferences and panels.

Over time, festival organizations can become genuine repositories of knowledge within a particular segment of the global film industries. Festival archives provide resources for curators and film historians, and long standing relationships with industry and public policy actors provide festival organizers with the potential of developing expert, advice and brokerage roles within film industry networks.

In sum, studying festivals as organizations, provide an opportunity to explore issues of stakeholder relations and strategic agency, and the formation and institutionalization of festival identity through programming and accreditation strategies.

## **Film Festivals as Research Sites**

In the precedent sections we have sketched out a number of issues and perspectives in relation to film festivals that we consider of great interest for organization and management studies. We would like to conclude this note by highlighting the interesting research pragmatic side in festival research (see Lampel & Meyer, 2008 for a general argument concerning the study of field configuring events). While many of the underlying theoretical issues are of considerable complexity, festivals and festival organizations are relatively easy to study. Most events lend themselves easily to quite detailed historical analysis, especially in cases where detailed festival archives and a regular coverage in various media exist and can be consulted. The research pragmatic appeal of film festivals lies in part in the particular importance of the *written* festival. Moreover, festival selections, screenings, additional shows as well as

the configuration of adjacent market and career events tend to be clearly documented. Moreover, the vast majority of large festivals produce press releases, festival videos, etc., which allow to trace the developments of a festival over time.

Beyond the entire range of possibilities to reconstruct a festival event and its history, festivals often also allow an interesting approach of the specific sub-fields of the global film industries that are linked to a particular festival. First of all, a large number of diverse industry actors are present at large festival events, and numerous exchanges among actors can be observed in situ. Moreover, formal or informal interviewing of relatively large numbers of informants is often facilitated through the particular festival setting and its inherent orientation towards exchange and interaction. In his own practice of participant observation, one of us has found it very informative to engage in informal conversation with seat neighbours before the start of screenings, and with young animation professionals while they were queuing for portfolio reviews with senior animators from large studios. In sum festivals provide unique opportunities to engage in interaction with multiple field members and also by nature produce a host of potentially exploitable data of interest for gaining a better understanding of industry related issues. A final example to illustrate this last point concerns a new study that is currently set up by the first author of this research note about network dynamics and evolution in the global animation industry. The dataset underlying this analysis comprises detailed database entries of several thousand films that have been submitted to a leading event over a period of more than three decades. Here, the festival organisation serves as an access point for particularly rich historical data on a subset of the global film industries.

## Conclusion

In this note we have set out to present our case for organizational scholars to engage in film festival research. In order to do so, we have highlighted three different orientations for organizationally informed film festival research. The first orientation considers film festivals as arenas for emergence. In line with the growing literature on field configuring events, the emphasis here is on festivals as hybrid events, crossing multiple institutional logics and serving as arenas for the determination, reproduction and contestation of multiple kinds of values. Our second orientation suggests to study festivals' impact and position within the global film industries and, more specifically, important global or regional industry event circuits. Thirdly, we suggest studying festivals as organizations in their own right. Festivals strategically compete for limited resources (films, funding, audiences, media attention, etc.), and they need to cater to multiple and diverse stakeholders within moving and highly uncertain environments at the boundary between art and commerce. Finally, we argue that film festivals are interesting repositories of knowledge that provide rich data for organization and management researchers. Festivals offer unique opportunities to engage in interaction with

multiple field members, as a large number of diverse industry actors are present at large festival events, and numerous exchanges among actors can be observed. Through their increased use of modern information technology for registration, ticketing, film festivals have access to detailed data about festival participants and produce a host of potentially exploitable data of interest for gaining a better understanding of industry related issues.

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