

Creativity at Work:

## Film festival prize juries

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## Abstract

This case focuses on juries that award prizes at film festivals. Prize juries usually award a preordained set of prizes to a preselected slate of films, but on grounds or criteria that are usually up to the actual jury itself to formally or informally establish and administer. The consequences of film festival prize jury allocations can accrue to many different groups and individuals. The most obvious beneficiaries are the persons associated with the films and roles that win prizes, though what the tangible benefits of winning prizes are depend both on what prize at what festival and still is a matter of debate. The film festivals themselves and their leadership also are impacted by the jury and its decisions, as these build or erode legitimacy and publicity for the festival. Likewise, the jury members themselves may receive a number of benefits from their jury work, as elaborated on below.

## Keywords

Prizes, juries, deliberation, film festivals, corporeal judgment, evaluative processes

# Film festival prize juries

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## Contextualizing film festival prize juries

This case focuses on juries that award prizes at film festivals. Prize juries usually award a preordained set of prizes to a preselected slate of films, but on grounds or criteria that are usually up to the actual jury itself to formally or informally establish and administer. The consequences of film festival prize jury allocations can accrue to many different groups and individuals. The most obvious beneficiaries are the persons associated with the films and roles that win prizes, though what the tangible benefits of winning prizes are depend both on what prize at what festival and still is a matter of debate. The film festivals themselves and their leadership also are impacted by the jury and its decisions, as these build or erode legitimacy and publicity for the festival. Likewise, the jury members themselves may receive a number of benefits from their jury work, as elaborated on below.

Despite the relatively large interest in film festivals (de Valck 2007; Iordinova and Rhyne 2009; Mezias et al 2011) and prizes and awards in the film industry (English 2005; Dodds and Holbrook 1988), surprisingly little scholarly research has been carried out on how the decisions about which films and individual efforts to be rewarded are arrived at (one exception is de Valck and Soetman 2010). This is a bit paradoxical, as festival prizes are a central aspect of film festivals, and a central motive for film companies to participate in festivals; even withholding release of films or speeding up production in order to be able to get films shown in competition at significant premier festivals.<sup>i</sup> One factor that might explain this paradox of the significance of festival juries and the dearth of academic research on them can have to do with the coupling of the high visibility of juries and its members (that is, who

sits in juries is usually highly publicized by the festival and the jury is frequently seen and visually depicted at the festival site and in media reports) and the closed doors and secretive nature of the work of the jury. The visibility gives the impression of familiarity, comprehension of and confidence in the jury. The closed nature of jury work heightens the sense of mystique, suspense, and surprise about what may emerge, leading to (publicity generating) speculation where nobody outside the jury itself really knows what is going on, and even jury members may be still very much in the dark about the final result right up to the final decision. The closed nature of jury work also makes it difficult for researchers to access the actual process of jury work first-hand. Jury work can thus be likened to sausages, to appreciate the end result, you shouldn't, and probably don't want to, know what went into it. In this chapter we get into the sausage or black box of prize-jury work, in order to examine the following issues: what role juries play at festivals, how selection of jury members takes place (compositional issues), what and how directions to juries impact their evaluations and work, how individual evaluations of films and artistic contributions to be rewarded are made, and how the collective process of evaluation and awarding takes place. As direct access to actual jury processes is virtually impossible, as it is invariably a closed-doors process, we rely on accounts of these processes from jury participants to investigate these issues.

This 'case study' is not a true case study. It is rather a composite synthesis of 12 Danish filmworkers' experiences of sitting in roughly 70 film festival prize juries ranging from 'A' to minor festivals, and including both documentary, fiction, short, and genre film juries. Most of the twelve have sat in juries at at least one well-recognized film such as Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, Sundance, Busan, San Sebastian, Karoly Vary, Amsterdam, or Copenhagen (the latter two are renowned documentary festivals). Thus, what is reported on here is not a single process, or even restricted to a single film festival's jury processes (as in de Valck and Soetman 2010, who focus on one festival, but multiple jury processes over time), but rather a historic and multi-site episodic 'phenomenon' that is internally heterogeneous, with both convergent and divergent aspects. Like most phenomena, there are both objective facts (i.e. who sat in the juries, which films were awarded which prizes, which films competed, etc.) as well as a myriad of subjective interpretations. In the following 'case' on film festival prize juries, multiple opinions are expressed some of which are contradictory. This can have to do with different experiences at different festivals, differing opinions about degrees or levels of phenomena experienced, as well as differing subjective opinions about the desirability of phenomena encountered or experienced. To make the text more 'case-like' each substantive section contains composite vignettes based on the accounts given in the interviews. These vignettes are directly based on quotes and descriptive information from one or more of our informants. None of the substantive content is fabricated, but in some cases similar observations are synthesized from different interviewees. The vignettes allow us to consolidate

information that was given at various stages of an interview with a single informant, as well as illustrate points that traverse the experiences of different informants.

### **Juries: composition and deliberation**

The central characteristic and reason for convening juries is to be able to gain a reasoned assessment and verdict from a group selected on some form of representational criteria, on a specific given topic or matter. Two things are thus of central importance – the composition of the jury, and the process whereby it reaches its judgment. With regard to composition, juries tend to be of two types, expert juries or peer juries. Peer juries are convened to gain an assessment of what conforms to the norms of the given social group that peers are drawn from. Expert juries are convened to make assessments that require knowledge, insight, or experience that exceeds common or lay understandings, but also recognizes that purely technical assessments (which could be made by a single trained individual) are not possible, and thus several individuals with similar, complementary or divergent expert backgrounds are convened.

Most research on jury processes focuses on one, or sometimes both of these issues – the impact of composition in terms of ‘peeriness’ and representation on jury outcomes and processes, and the ‘quality of deliberation’ understood in terms of the opportunity to make arguments and have the content of arguments rather than other individual or social factors impact the outcome of the jury process. Habermas’ (1990) famous ‘ideal speech’ situation is a prototypical normative model of how deliberation should take place. What most all juries have in common is the expectation that a reasoned assessment will take place via deliberation.

Film juries are an interesting mix, being at one and the same time both ‘peer’ and expert in composition, as the peers of filmmakers are generally experienced experts in a variety of realms of filmmaking. On the issue of composition, relative consensus among our informants can be seen on several topics.

The first is the basic observation that juries are convened for only one occasion (i.e. only one particular film festival, which is to say that they do not return together in subsequent years) and usually for only one section, classification, or competition (that is to say that at a given film festival there may be several competitions in various categories or sections where a group of films compete against each other, but not [generally] across sections, categories or competitions). In other words, the films that a jury evaluates are distinctly demarcated and a jury is rarely asked to award prizes in two or more competitions at the same festival. This means that juries are ‘one off’ arrangements, with a very well-defined field of competitors to select from, and generally focused on one competition. Juries do however usually award multiple prizes within the competitions they judge. The categories for the

various prizes follow occupational, and often gender lines, such as best screenplay, best director, best music, best cinematography, best male and female lead and supporting actors, as well as what is usually the most prestigious prize, best film. Being able to award multiple prizes in different categories can give rise to what is discussed below as 'compensatory and distributional awarding,' that is, awards are not given strictly categorically, but sometimes in a descending process of compensating worthy films that did not get a higher award. In other words, a film may be given a 'lower' award in another category to demonstrate support for the film. Just about all interviewees also had examples of this compensatory distribution being a vital tool for the group to eventually agree on a final set of winners, where members of the jury felt they have had a say, though, for example agreeing to award one film with one award, in exchange of another film receiving another award. Some interviewees mentioned a strong negative opinion of this type of negotiation, especially when it entailed compensating for events outside the specific competition (such as giving a type of 'lifetime achievement award' to a particular filmmaker or making up for a 'wrong' decision in previous years). In connection with the distribution of the awards, most interviewees reported the jury starting out 'from the top', with firstly coming to an agreement on the most prestigious awards, usually 'best film' and 'best director', followed by the less overall prestigious awards for particular occupational contributions. Thus, the best film award is usually the centerpiece around which the other awards are arrayed, again giving support to the abovementioned fact that awards are not always given strictly categorically, but that awards are often given in relation to prior, more prestigious decisions, in a compensatory or 'fair' distributional manner.

Second, juries are composed on a principle of breadth. This means that the organizers of film festivals seek to ensure a wide degree of representational breadth on juries. The most common categories for breadth are occupational (i.e. securing that one has a broad group of occupations represented, from film distributors to directors, editors to actors, film critics to composers, etc), sex (males and females), age, and ethnicity / national origin. Composition of some juries may take into consideration genre specializations, and 'commercial' versus 'art' traditions or reputations. Most informants report compositional criteria being both used in their own selection (i.e. 'I was the female editor on that jury') and a relatively high degree of success on part of most jury conveners in attaining diversity in juries. A number of reasons were given for seeking to attain diversity. The first is the simple matter of having as many perspectives on film and film-related performance as possible. This means occupational, as well as 'cultural' perspectives that might evolve in distinct national, regional or genre environments. As the overarching criteria for awarding prizes, 'best', is a very vague term, perspective diversity is one way of ensuring that a variety of interpretations of what 'best' is comes into play. Another often stated reason for seeking diversity is 'power-based.' Diversity is sought to 'balkanize' the jury, so that no single perspective,

occupation, or socio-demographic group can dominate the process, at least from the outset. These are the 'work process' reasons for diversity. As one interviewee mentioned, there are public expectations and public relations reasons for diversity as well – 'it has to look good' for the press, public and industry.

It was also stated that conveners of juries have a stake in making sure the juries function well, and that the jurors have a positive experience which then reflects well on the festival as a whole and creates long-term goodwill. This leads to considerations (if possible) about who can and cannot work or collaborate with whom, and persons with known animosities towards each other are not placed in the same jury, as well as not selecting what one informant termed 'notorious assholes' for juries (though apparently some 'less notorious' ones get through sometimes).

If the festival leadership has strong preferences or desires with regard to rewarding a particular film in competition, or a type or genre, a jury may be composed to increase the odds of an outcome in accord with the festival leadership's desires. One respondent mentioned being consulted once about the likelihood of someone known to our interviewee of supporting a particular type of film by the leadership of a festival, and then noticed that when the rely was that the person would probably not be disposed to such a film, the person in question was not selected for the jury that year. So apparently jury composition can in some cases at least be done strategically, though this far from secures a given outcome. This example may also be interpreted to indicate that it is at this stage that festival leaderships seek to exert influence, as more proximate intervention in the awarding process is more apparent, illegitimate, and dangerous.

One 'structural' feature of juries is that they almost invariably have an appointed foreman or chairperson. What this role entails formally and informally varies from festival to festival, incumbent to incumbent and jury to jury, and examples of both authoritarian and 'facilitative' chairpersons were reported. This is one of the few, if only, formal differentiations or divisions of labor reported in juries. Informal divisions of labor and expertise arise surreptitiously, often along the lines of occupational expertise, experience, reputation, or accomplishment. On this point it should be remembered that in most aspects of film production, there are role hierarchies that are well-engrained in work processes, practices, and culture, so that on the one hand, an appointed leader or chairperson is not an alien concept, but who the chairperson is may run counter to established occupational hierarchies or hierarchies of the national film industries that the incumbent comes from. At the same time, juries are usually expected to operate on participatory, deliberative and possibly even consensual principles. There is thus a sub-theme of a tension between 'leadership and democracy' present in most jury settings based on the presence of a chairperson with a sometimes ambiguous role. However, there is an escalating responsibility of jury work: the jury is expected to deliver decisions about the prizes it is charged to distribute, and it

is the responsibility of the jury's chairperson to ensure that these decisions are made.

Another structural issue has to do with the number of jurors in the jury. Juries usually comprise of at least three members (the lowest odd number above one) and rarely come up to double digits to facilitate face-to-face interaction and dialogue. Another more practical reason for limited numbers is that jury work is often voluntary and requires, as one respondent stated 'ripping a whole week or more out of my work schedule' which can make it difficult to enlist a high number of jurors, especially to less glamorous festivals. Juries also tend to comprise of an odd number of members, so that in the cases where consensus cannot be reached, a decisive vote should be able to be taken.

Finally, on the matter of composition, prizes and juries, it was noted by many that juries are selected and convened to attract publicity and media attention. Therefore, some 'headline names' are included in juries if possible for these reasons. While 'celebrity' status may carry over into the jury and jury work, branch-internal prestige and admiration was generally reported to structure the informal pecking order and deference and alliance processes in juries more so than popular notoriety or acclaim. As one of our interviewees note with regard to Cannes, 'all the men on the jury are celebrities, and all the women are really smart.' The general norm is that jury-members do not get paid directly for participating in the jury work, but rather enjoy the level of luxury and prestige that the festival can afford. Nevertheless, a couple of interviewees noted, that the very prestigious jury-members, opposed to the rest of the group, are paid for their time at the festival, including their work with jury.

With regard to deliberative processes, most respondents stated that there were no substantive or qualitative rules given by the festival organizers to inform the jury's work. It was reported that some organizers go great lengths to support coherent deliberative processes, by such things as providing transcriptions of the jury proceedings so that what was said earlier can be recalled in an indisputable manner, or having someone present during the deliberations who can give clarifications on technical details or formal rules. However, most respondents stated that it was up to the jury to decide for itself on both procedural and substantive issues. With regard to procedural issues one respondent stated that there were 'no rules' - i.e. it was up to the jury itself to decide how it wanted to operate, how it was to proceed, aside from which prizes can and must be awarded, and when they need to reach their decisions by. The jury could decide about the levels of consensus aimed at, when and how often to meet, whether to promote plenum discussions and suppress discrete discussions among jury members or not. With regard to substantive issues, it was again stated that defining, identifying and rewarding what was 'best' was entirely up to the jury and its members. Only substantive categories, such as occupational roles, that are fairly distinct and clear within the industry structure the awarding process. However, as

discussed below many hierarchies and substantive conceptions of what should be rewarded and what constitutes good and great, the foundational elements for making the comparative judgment 'best' (and worthy of mention), exist both collectively and discretely among jury members. To give a more substantive 'feel' for how many of the abovementioned processes play out, the first of a series of vignettes is presented below. Again these vignettes are stylized syntheses based directly on descriptions and quotations from our informants.

### **Vignette on jury composition and deliberation procedure**

*Sitting at the table he looks around. It is like the Benetton commercial of filmmaking, each one of them – to the extent possible, differentiating in what continent they originate from, their occupation in filmmaking, their gender and age. He could almost picture the people in charge of recruiting the jury: "Well, If we pick her, we can cross out, Asian, woman and producer, and if we pick him we can cross out writer, director, American and male. " The one thing they have in common, besides an apparent appreciation for filmmaking is that they are 'a name' in the industry – an old well-established name or a new interesting name, usually who have also recently been involved in a successful and / or prestigious production – all of which is relevant for boosting the festival's image as being up to date in the industry. The jury president at the end of the table welcomes them and lays out the ground rules for the meeting of the day. His experience tells him that people will be complying to the 'raising your hand to speak' and the constructive diplomatic focus on the positive qualities of the films, for the first hour or so. As the group gets more familiar formality dissipates and eventually also even politeness. Which in his opinion isn't necessarily a bad thing as an honest and open discussion is aimed at. The night before most of the group had gathered for an unofficial welcoming dinner, and based on this people were already quite comfortable in each others presence. The group was already beginning to discover or get confirmation of what genres people are leaning towards, who were the loud ones, who one might connect with etc. A very good start for healthy discussion he thought.*

*"As you know we will have two shorter meetings following the first and second third of the films – this being the first of these two – where we will deliberate and agree upon a shortlist of 3-4 films, which will go on to be discussed at the third and final deliberation".*

*Everyone around the tables nods in agreement. Its almost impossible to keep the entire line up of films in one's head, and let alone evaluate, discuss and compare them against each other cumulatively, if its been a week since you saw the first, and only a few hours since you saw the last.*

*Lets try to keep the initial meetings at 3-4 hours and the final deliberation at 4-5 hours. The goal of course is to reach a shared agreement, but there is no point in wasting anyone's time by discussing pointless candidates. The group nods again. They all heard stories about juries who had been sitting up all night, trying to agree on a winner. Having members walking out in protest or mere frustration. Ending up*

*taking a vote and agreeing on a winner, that was no one's favorite. Definitely not a desirable outcome!*

## **The jury work process**

### *Group formation*

The jury process starts with what in social psychology would be called basic 'group formation,' entailing learning both the formal and informal expectations on and of the group and its members, and getting to know the individual members. This process is usually planned for and facilitated by the conveners in terms of both explicit information to the jury as well as social opportunities for group members to get to know each other. Prior knowledge about the members, the festival and jury work plays a significant part in this initial phase (as illustrated in the vignette above). It is in this phase that some of the basic issues are clarified and informal status orders are explored or developed.

### *Viewing the films*

Juries are usually charged with viewing a rather long slate of films and by rule do so together as a group. This is a temporal and sequential process, usually stretching over several days, sometimes more than a week for larger festivals. In general, the films are viewed together with the other jury members, and often also with a broader festival audience, which may also include the filmmakers, cast, and crew of the film. Sometimes a single film is seen per day, sometimes multiple films are viewed, especially for documentary, shorts, or other film forms briefer than full-length features. It is generally the festival program that decides which films are seen when, and in what sequence. It was remarked however that it is possible for jury members to see films on DVD or special showings under extenuating circumstances, though this is usually a solution of last resort, reserved for emergency situations or to accommodate the needs of especially prestigious jury-members, whom the festival has an extra interest in catering to. This means that sometimes films can be seen in different sequences and settings, sometimes even at the jury member's home. As a rule however the jury acts as a unit and the films are seen collectively, publicly, and in the same sequence. Many comments were made about the viewing process. One group of comments focused around the composition of the group of films in competition. The actual jury members are not involved in the selection process. This is usually done by a committee or individual in or appointed by the festival management, and frequently these individuals or committees work over a number of years, in contrast to the 'one-off' nature of the juries. Some respondents noted that it is possible to see the orientations or likes and dislikes of the programming committee or individual in which films they have chosen for the festival and competition, and what they omit. As with jury

composition, the composition of the field of competing films is also reported to be based on a principle of diversity – to put on display and in competition an array of different types of films, and films of ‘varying quality.’ This latter comment is quite interesting, as some respondents argue that the field of films in a competition is composed in such a manner so as to produce contrasts, rather than an even or level group of films. This is done to make some films stand out in relief to others. Some informants argue that this is intentional, to include mediocre as well as great films. Others argue that this variation in quality is a side- or inherent effect of other processes. These types of explanations range from the success of influential production companies in getting their films into prestigious festivals and competitions despite mediocrity, to an effect of trying to attain other types of diversity, such as regional inclusion or commercial considerations. In elaborating on the varying quality of the films in competition, and why this is perceived as a somewhat acceptable ‘part of the game’, one of the more interesting comments, was that there simply are so many festivals, so many prizes – all assessing diverse qualities - and that creating films is an expensive, complex and long processes where lots can go wrong to bring down overall quality. Almost all jury members remark that it is extremely difficult to make a good film, and that even at the ‘A’ festivals there are a lot of bad films as well. As one interviewee stated, ‘If you look at theatre, the reason why the same 25 pieces get played again and again everywhere is that it is incredibly hard to write good drama. In film we have this idiocy that we do not reuse things, we produce new things each time.’ In other words, truly good films are very rare, and even the best festivals are hard pressed to fill a competition field with only good and great films. This may be why awards are given to ‘best’ rather than ‘great’ films, as even in a field of mediocrity, one film or performance can be elevated over others.

One insightful comment about the selection of a group of films is that selecting a field of films that reflect and individual’s or committee’s tastes or sentiments can have an unintended opposite effect. As we will see below, novelty is one of the central evaluative criteria used by film juries. A high degree of novelty and distinctiveness is valued. If a programmer or committee selects several films that are novel in a wider population, but resemble each other in some manner, the juxtaposition of these, possibly otherwise novel or innovative works, against each other can lead to a diminished impression of novelty and innovation. Each jury member brings with her or himself their own wider points of reference, but in evaluating a common pool of films, the composition of this pool will create its own proximate references and comparative impressions. Thus what might otherwise be a fairly mundane film may in the company of similar innovative products stand out as unique.

Another group of comments focused on the sequence in which the films are shown at the festival and to the jurors. One respondent stated, ‘allot of people have theories about this ... whether it is best to lie early, in the middle, or at

the end...’ The jurors also seem to have many different ideas. Some argue that the programmers actually place films of different quality in different positions, others believe that positioning has an impact on sales and reviews, but not jurors. Others claim that it does impact jurors, either because at certain positions in the sequential flow the jurors have contextually relevant reference points, while others believe that jurors have such sophisticated judgment and have seen so many films, that they are not impacted by the order in which they view the works. If one position must be put forward as beneficial, it is towards, but not at the end of the competition.

A third focus is on the public nature of the viewing process. Several commentators stated in various ways that seeing films is a social process. That is to say, one experiences a film with one’s personal senses, but that sitting in a theatre with other persons, and being able to see, hear, and sense their reactions undeniably has an impact on one’s own reactions, experiences and opinions about the film. This may be connected with both the contagion of emotion (Parkinson & Simons 2009) or more conscious processes. On this point, some interviewees mentioned noticing and paying attention to their fellow jury members’ reactions, as they often sit together as a group, while others also mentioned general audience reactions, and even the presence of the team behind the film, as affecting their experience of watching the film. Finally, and possibly the most profound comments on the process of viewing films has to do with the corporeal dimension of this process. All respondents mention physical and emotional dimensions of viewing or experiencing films. The phrases vary but the basic analogies are of ‘taking in’ a film, being ‘moved’ or ‘left cold’ or ‘indifferent,’ being ‘hit’ or ‘impacted’ or not. These emotional and embodied reactions connote very individual and personal experiences. As one respondent put it, its all about ‘I feel, I experienced, I believe.’ The challenge then, in most cases is translating this personal, emotional and embodied experience into interpersonally communicable language – first initially intelligible to oneself, and then by rule subsequently to a group that comprises of heterogeneity with regard to mother tongues. This process of externalizing feelings and translating the corporeal aspect of the cinematic experience is naturally difficult, but according to many informants made easier by two factors. The first is that many of the emotions felt in viewing films are ‘universal’ emotions and reactions, meaning that though experienced individually, such feelings and reactions are not unique, and that there thus is a vocabulary in most languages to capture, discuss and convey such experiences. Thus it’s a matter of translating into one’s own linguistic equivalents. Films then can be discussed in terms of whether or not and the degrees to which they evoked a given emotion, feeling or sensation at a given point, as well as the ‘authenticity’ of the experience. That is to say did the viewer feel natural or manipulated into experiencing the feeling or emotion – was the experience ‘contrived’ or ‘true?’ The second factor is that among those experienced in film production and viewing, there is a technical, occupational vocabulary or jargon that is widespread across industries that

supports cinematic dialogue internationally and inter-culturally. Finally, in the trade-off between precision and basic comprehension, there is always recourse to metaphor.

*Recording, sounding and registering opinions*

An important link between the viewing and deliberation process is the time and activities that take place between viewing and plenum discussions. This liminal time is probably the most extensive, unregulated, and discretionary expanse in all 'jury work.' It is likely that just as highly significant as it is, it is also easily overlooked, as it is here where initial perceptions and opinions can either be affirmed or disputed or disconfirmed in initial social contacts with other jury members (akin to watercooler or coffeeroom conversations and casual chat at workplaces\*).

Many of our respondents reported writing notes both during and after screenings, in order to remember what they saw, what they felt, and prepare their comments for further conversations, both in and outside plenum deliberations. While this may be a particular Danish or Scandinavian trait, it was reported as not uncommon, and quite indispensable in defending one's opinions and arguments in subsequent discussions. Being able to give specific examples and exact references to nuances in the films, were reported to weigh heavily in the deliberation processes.

While writing notes is an individual process, the period of time between seeing the films and group-wide discussions are filled with dyadic and larger constellation discussions about the films. As this time is generally unstructured and left to chance; who engages whom in dialogue and about what is up to the members themselves. However, there is agreement that it is taboo to discuss one's own and the opinions of the rest of the jury with outsiders during ongoing jury work, something that is also respected by outsiders, even if they are very interested parties. As one informant noted, 'people are courteous enough not to contact the jury during the process.' Discussions during moving in and out of the theatres, in hotel lobbies and hotel rooms, at receptions and dinners all form and disperse impressions and ideas among the jury members and formal and informal 'alliances' or common understandings begin to emerge in these unmanaged social spaces. Some respondents report seeing or engaging in internal 'lobbying' during these periods, whereas others hop over these periods or spaces in their accounts of jury work, and / or simply describe it as being frowned upon or just unsporting to engage in such activities.

Collateral processes, incidental and significant to the ways in which the jury work takes place, are also reported as transpiring during these periods, where personal and career ambitions are discussed and pursued among jury members. Linking back to the observation above that there are no formal procedural rules for how the jury work is to take place, there are consequently no rules for the nature of interpersonal conduct among jury members with

regard to pursuing personal gain in addition to or at the cost of 'objectivity' in one's jury work. It seems to be a matter of individual discretion and group or cultural norms. Many informants reported being contacted and even subsequently working with persons whom they met or solidified relations with during jury work, though also frowning upon those jury members who sold out their integrity and all too obviously sucked up to potential employers, collaborators, or celebrities.

To carry over the final thoughts from the preceding section, the activities of this phase, writing notes on one's experience and opinions, and communicating them to others are the first opportunities to translate and appraise the satisfactoriness and persuasiveness of one's translations, formulations and arguments.

### **Vignette on the viewing and initial sounding process**

*Dana is tired, it's been a long day and it's not over yet. The movie they are watching is okay, but the stuffy air and dark of the theater is slowly lulling her usual sharp focus to sleep. The film critic in the group, an older gentleman to her left, is snoring gently. She looks embarrassed toward the row in front of her where the team behind the film is seated, hoping they haven't noticed the critic dozing off. They regularly take quick peaks over their shoulder, in the hope of getting just a hint of the jury's verdict, any small signs of disappointment, amusement, enthusiasm, indifference. She thinks she sees them demoralized starting to whisper amongst one another... or maybe it's in her head – she gently pokes him in the side, with her elbow, waking him up with a groan. The row in front of her quiets down again.*

*She focuses back to the screen after doing her bit to uphold the honor of the jury by internal policing and keeping the critic awake. This has brought her out of the flow of the film. She now begins to wonder if it is due to the film itself not capturing her interest sufficiently, or her desire to not have the critic embarrass the jury in front of, or rather behind, the film team. 'Focus now!' she thinks. She looks over at one of her co-jury members sitting next to her on the other side, and she notices, firstly with a snitch of embarrassment, that she has tears in her eyes. She feels awake again, feeling that she has missed something, but getting back in the desired state of surrendered focus, trying to give way to the movie and let it touch her. Letting go of the formal behavior, the official jury role and the program of the day, she leans back in the big soft theater chair and focuses with dedication on the strong closing scene on the big screen.*

*Leaving the theater she glances at the other jury members, noticing hidden sniffs and wet handkerchiefs being stuffed into pockets. She makes eye contact with a few, and exchanges a mutually agreeing and pleased smile.*

*Later, back at the deliberating table, the attention turns to that film. Everyone agrees that it was special, except the one member who had seen it alone at his hotel room the night before, due to conflicting obligations at the festival that afternoon. He had not felt that the film had anything new to offer, and had been struggling not to fall asleep*

*towards the end. Dana began to wonder what she had felt, what she should have felt, and what she would have felt if not disturbed during the screening.*

### **The plenum deliberation and awarding process**

As noted above, deliberation is usually divided up into *étapes* in order to break up the total amount of films and information to be processed. For feature films it was often reported that after 3-5 feature films a meeting would be held to discuss those films, usually resulting in a consensus about which films should be accorded further consideration and why, and which films should be dropped from further consideration, at least provisionally. Several interviewees noted that they had experienced an even more decisive, and some might claim more brutal approach, where the films not being mentioned by anyone in the group as being in their top list would simply not be discussed further, and were hereby definitively out of the 'race'. This process of 'quarter- or semi-finals' would be repeated until the entire field was initially treated. After this the final round at which the ultimate decisions are made would take place. At this stage evaluative criteria and evaluative processes explicitly come to the fore.

In the following three vignettes evaluative criteria and processes are illustrated. They revolve around three of the most common evaluative criteria discussed by our informants: novelty and subtlety; genre hierarchies; and individual versus collective performances. Outstanding individual performances or contributions from, for example editors, cinematographers or composers are attributed to the members of the cast and crew directly, whereas outstanding collective performances from these cast and crew members, as well as the overall novelty and impression from the film are attributed to the director, and rewarded with best film or director awards. In the vignettes, how these evaluative criteria are deployed in the broader evaluative processes can also be seen. These issues are analytically revisited in the discussion section that follows these vignettes.

### **Vignette on Novelty and Subtlety**

*"Okay, what we're discussing here is whether to reward a great work of superior craftsmanship, or the original one which - technically - is far from perfect". The photographer looked around the table.*

*"I just think", the producer sat up in her seat, "that it's worth rewarding the smoother experience. Sure, it's familiar, but that's also why it's not such a struggle to sit through it". She pauses, and realizes that her peers are unconvinced. "I can spot a great success among the real audience, and I don't see the*

point in rewarding a film that nobody will see. But sometimes boring people to death seems like a bloody winning criteria in itself".

The director leans in, "This is exactly why we should honor this film. People need to see this. It's a hell of a picture, a hell of a picture!" He shakes his head, as if he's struggling to comprehend the greatness of the work.

"I agree", the writer adds, "the way it elegantly opens the door, but leaves the decision to enter up to me. It doesn't tell me what to expect, but invites me to explore how far I dare to enter - into the space, which is already inside me. I didn't even realize it until now. Pure magic!"

"I'm not sure I got your lyric passage, but I think I agree" says the actress at the end of the table who has been quiet up until now. She takes a sip of her coffee, slowly puts down the cup, and pauses for dramatic effect. "Watching this film was torture. The characters are ugly and horrible! This is - by far - the least audience friendly film of the bunch". She nods in agreement towards the producer, then glances around the table at the assembled jury members. A proper tone must be held, but no one wants to be bored. "BUT I also think this is a ground breaking merciless play with the art off filmmaking. That death scene! I felt I was the one dying! I can't explain why because it's just the way I feel, but this is the one that should get the award for best film".

The producer sits back, sighs and is about to recognize defeat. But then the film critic weighs in, "I won't say that this is a remake, but the story is pretty similar to 'film XXXXX'. It really isn't as original as you might imagine. And frankly, I think it was too sentimental in its language. I felt almost violated by the attempt to manipulate me into crying".

The writer, slightly annoyed with the older critic, attempts a retort. "Well, once again we see how difficult it is - not just to evaluate, but also to discuss film. Either you were struck or you weren't. It all depends on whether we prefer reinventing the wheel, or getting carried away".

The critic sits up, displeased with the younger 'know it all'-type writer. "A film that doesn't sweep me off my feet fails to do so because it is too manipulating... or calculating. It should stop trying be great, and start just being."

They all lean a bit back in their comfortable conference room chairs. Then there's silence, and a sudden realization that this is going to be a long evening.

### **Vignette on Genre hierarchies**

Julia is exited. The group is positively surprised by one of her personal favorites, a sophisticated comedy. She spotted several of them laughing out loud during the viewing of the film, and some of them even had it on their shortlist. And now it is down to this one and a drama. "Great sophisticated comedy is 100 times more difficult to make than just another over intellectualized drama, where you think, well yes, those are beautiful pictures and uhhh.. that's an interesting angle to shoot from, or what do I know, but different genres requires a different touch".

*"I actually lean towards this one too. It wasn't great art, but I was entertained!" The producer looks as if she is recalling the parts of film impelling her to make that statement, smiles, and so do the others recalling one of the number of great scenes of the film.*

*"But still..." the writer says with a more serious tone "a film should have more to offer. It's fun to watch a comedy and have a good laugh, but it's out of my mind the second I leave the theater".*

*"But that is like you can't compare apples and oranges, or 100 different kinds of candy. Every movie must have its own premise, and this one's is to entertain, and it does that magnificently!" Julia smiles and tries to lift the spirit again – still feeling that she has the upper hand – she keeps on, "of course we can only judge these films by our own personal taste – which can be wide. We are not here to be 100% objective. We are here to listen to each other, and figure out whether the other guy's point makes us rethink our own impression or our own perspectives".*

*The photographer feels the need to speak up. He agrees with Julia, and finds it liberating that she is willing to fight for the comedy. "I of course also experience a tendency towards the drama being more appreciated and acknowledged than the comedy, and my perspective on life simply asks me to question that. If the drama is the best film, then fine, then I won't fight it for ideological reasons, but that is not the case here – a film is not great in itself, just because it's dark and misanthropic, with no hope for a better future. Is that necessarily a more true version of the world pictured before us here?!"*

*"Interesting point..." and "hmmm...." The table nods with varying dedication, and thoughtful mumbling and scribbling on notebooks intensifies.*

*"But then again", the producer is now a bit more thoughtful in her tone, putting aside that cheerful feeling of being entertained for a second, for the sake of taking the discussion to a second level – which is supposedly also the point of them being gathered here. "On the other hand, it might also just be a case of all of us, having seen sooo many movies in the last week, that we have reached some sort of saturation point in terms of deep stories and complex dramas, making a more entertaining film stand stronger, simply because we are more receptive and thereby possibly also more positive to a different type of film, and less tolerant toward the somewhat tiring sadness and strangeness of the drama..."*

*Julia feels that she is losing the feeling of being on top of where this discussion was going, but at the same time intrigued by the producers point. The scribbling and mumbling intensifies once again...*

### **Vignette on Dramatic Performance**

*"I have never seen him play as well as he does in this film!" .. the producer raised his voice and beamed with a confident smile. The director cleared his throat.. "Well that might be, but considering the previous productions of his that I know of, I would definitely be hesitant to call this his best dramatic performance to date – far from it". "I would somewhat agree with you" the actor nodded complying towards the director, satisfied with being in an positive alliance with the man, who could possible play a*

*part in giving him his next big role. "You say this is a great movie, and I agree with you so far" Looking toward the producer and the other two jury members signaling with their crossed over arms, that they were awaiting his argument with the same skepticism as the producer favoring the film. "But from my perspective, being an actor myself, with several years of experience with this specific genre – I do not know if any of you saw me in my latest..?" he looked around the table for affirming nods. Everyone smiling politely.*

*They might be thinking he was an arrogant idiot, but no one would say, this was a diplomatic battlefield, and you did not want to publicly or officially offend anyone who might be of relevance to your career in the future. That could be done more civilized at the bar later. "Anyway.. what I am trying to say here is that NONE of the actors or actresses are performing to their fullest. We have a row of amazingly talented performers and NONE of them are delivering their best".*

*He deliberately raised his voices and put a hand in the table when emphasizing the "none". You had to speak up in this crowd, if you wanted anyone to pay attention to your points. "It would be embarrassing if we were to give best actor to this guy or any of his fellow performers for that matter, as we say: 'don't act just think!', and this guy is clearly overdoing it – Not his fault really, terrible director if you ask me... a nightmare to work with, I have heard. But that's just my professional opinion".*

## **Discussion**

In the preceding we have both presented and illustrated some of the central factors, processes, and substantive criteria involved in how juries at film festivals evaluate and award films. In the following we will analytically contextualize several of these elements. We will do so by treating them under the broader headlines of compositional factors, temporal issues, evaluative criteria, and embodied and articulated evaluation processes.

**Compositional factors.** As displayed above, there are two highly significant things that get composed by festival authorities, the juries themselves, and the slate of films in competition with each other. With regard to jury composition questions about how one is recruited to and motivation for participating in film juries; diversity of the group in terms of gender, nationality, occupational background, etc. are central. As one informant put it, there is a 'festival network' and once you have sat in a jury, especially at a prestigious festival, you can be assured that you will be offered jury work at other festivals.

Another way of being offered a jury spot is by working oneself up the ranks of a festival (that is, doing other significant work at a festival in previous years, and thereby earning the reward of sitting in the jury and enjoying whatever luxury and prestige the festival has to offer) or by supporting the festival in other ways such as getting good films to the festival in previous years. With regard to diversity, festivals seek diversity for a number of reasons. One is legitimacy – the jury needs to be seen to reflect the breadth of the backgrounds involved in film production, and the contributing environments (nationalities). Juries are usually public and high-profile entities

at festivals, so they have to live up to the public's, the media's and the film industries' perceptions of what is fair, balanced and representative. Also as noted above, juries are used to attract attention to the festival, so celebrities' 'star power' is not insignificant in the selection process. However, those who arrange juries seek to include as many different possible perspectives as possible to improve the breadth and quality of the decisions and their justifications. Likewise, it is probably well known to jury selectors that one of the primary benefits or incentives for jurors to participate in jury work is to have stimulating, educational and well-informed discussions with other jurors – in other words, to discuss what they do and love with others who have the same dispositions but different occupational or cultural perspectives. Similar compositional issues pertain to the selection of the films comprising the competition field. It was stated that most festivals try to capture the breadth of what is getting produced at the moment, even if within a particular genre (such as documentaries or science fiction). As one respondent put it, festivals 'want to give a picture of what kinds of films are being made at the moment.' On the other hand, some festivals may have a theme or policy that leads to a degree of similarity on different parameters regarding the films selected. As mentioned in the case chapter, sometimes this can lead to appreciating and rewarding the film that is odd and bucks the trend. So the selection decisions made about the composition field may give an indication of what the festival leadership appreciates, which can lead to acquiescence or a counter-reaction.

*Temporal issues.* Festivals are a highly temporally governed phenomenon. They take place within a well-defined timeframe, and in a situated geographic locality. As also discussed above, co-presence is central aspect of jury work, being assembled in the same place at the same time for the two central activities of jury work, viewing the films in a shared environment at the same time, and engaging in face-to-face deliberation. These are what can be termed the 'macro-temporalities' of festival jury work. There are also myriad of micro-temporalities, for example those associated with being able to successfully formulate arguments, translate personal experience into intelligible discourse and meet the arguments of others in conversational parameters, often in a foreign language. Another set of micro-temporalities have to do with the temporal dimensions of memory – what can be recalled after various degrees of elapsed time and temporally and emotionally intensive experiences. Here many of our commentators remarked that they use a very common form of memory assistance – writing notes, to be able to more clearly and accurately recall impressions and opinions that may both fade over time, but be significant in the future. Another commonly commented temporal factor has to do with the sequencing of the films viewed, with the juxtapositional opportunities sequencing creates or undermines. Finally, and perhaps most important of the temporal issues has to do with bringing the by nature open-ended process of dialogue and

awarding to a culmination by a given point in time, so that the awards can be presented at the point specified in the festival programme. Sometimes this is not experienced as a problem, as juries can reach consensual decisions rapidly if there is wide general agreement. Frequently however, the time constraints put on juries to deliver their verdict by a given time and date creates a situation or stress and pressure that can change the dynamics of the deliberation process. In such cases time itself is not significant, but time plus degrees and natures of agreement or disagreement becomes an enormously significant cocktail, impacting the manners in which disagreement is broached and agreement, or acquiescence, is obtained.

Evaluative criteria. The three evaluative criteria vignettes each illustrate a central evaluative criterion, and the ways in which these criteria are frequently framed and discussed. One of the most significant evaluative criteria reported almost universally by the jury members is novelty or originality. As Karpik (2010) notes films are at one level all films are unique or singular objects. At more sophisticated levels this criterion is expressed in several different ways. One differentiation based on novelty has to do with topic or theme. As one interviewee expressed it, 'have we seen this issue dealt with in film before?' The second aspect of novelty has to do with how topics or issues seen before are dealt with in a different manner or from a novel vantage point. Both of these can be termed types of topical novelty. A different form of novelty has to do with expressive novelty, and can be broken down into two types, an overall or holistic novelty that has to do with a visual style or telling the story in a novel way, visually or story-telling or presentation-wise. The second form of expressive novelty is in how specific, known situations, problems, attitudes or emotions are conveyed. Many of the interviewees spoke in terms of clichés and conventions in film – accepted and known symbols and codes for conveying, especially visually, complex or strong emotions. This becomes part of the communicative language of film, its standard vocabulary. Where innovation comes in, and is appreciated, is in finding an alternative manner to express these common emotions, experiences, and events in a novel manner that at one and the same time makes the point, but does so in a different manner, avoiding cliché, but remaining intelligible, which becomes appreciated by those with sufficient 'domain knowledge' to know what is conventional and what is innovative, what is on the edge, but not beyond the pale.

On this issue of novelty, one interviewee related the following incident which is partially encapsulated in one of the vignettes above. The jury had seen a film that was initially discussed as highly novel and innovative. During the discussion, a film critic remarked, 'I won't say that this is a remake, but the story is much like this or that film that was released this or that many years ago. So it isn't as original as you might imagine. And he could say that because he had such an enormous knowledge in that field.' This example illustrates how novelty, which by its nature is a comparative evaluation, can

be approached by extensive knowledge and an ability to discern and argue for how and to what extent similarities lie.

Coupled with this latter process is an often appreciated use of subtlety. This may be a Scandinavian or northern European taste, but it was often described in terms of sophistication and trusting or relying on a sophisticated viewer or audience. This moves into more general territory than the above-mentioned conceptions of novelty, which is premised more on comprehensive knowledge to be able to comparatively (across films) discern novelty, and entails an ability to read and interpret cinematic expression in terms of life and possibly also other artistic and aesthetic expressions.

Another common criterion of evaluation for dramatic feature films (as opposed to documentaries, which are not discussed here) has to do with whether the cast performs well. Are these great dramatic presentations? And is this because of or in spite of a good manuscript/screenplay.<sup>iv</sup> Here it is both the performances of the actors, but also the role of the director that is under evaluation, as the director has the ultimate artistic responsibility for the project and one of his or her primary focuses is on the actors' performances. In part this evaluation criterion is given by the nature of the prizes to be awarded, best actor and actress, as well as best director, but this criterion also plays a significant role in assessing the films in terms of the grand prize, the best film award.

Genre hierarchies were also touched on as structuring evaluation, with tragedy ranked above comedy, heavy and serious over light or farce. These were spoken of as common, though some respondents reported being very much opposed to this hierarchy, while many others implicitly or explicitly supported this hierarchy in terms of preferring films that have 'something to say,' 'something at heart,' or 'something at stake.' One of the interviewees who is most sympathetic to comedy expressed this distinction in the following terms, 'OK, this wasn't great art, but I was entertained,' revealing both an appreciation of entertainment value, while affirming the art-entertainment distinction. Coupled with the general observation and assertion that festivals are about cinematic art (though an awful lot of commerce takes place at festivals), at least in the competition and selection process, art is the paramount value.

Finally, a frequent evaluative criterion was quite omnibus and may prima facie appear quite banal but it recurs and is important. This has to do with whether a film is 'good' or not. Almost all jury members remark that it is extremely difficult to make a good film, and that even at festivals, even at the 'A' festivals there are allot of bad films as well. As one interviewee stated, 'If you look at theatre, the reason why the same 25 pieces get played again and again everywhere is that it is incredibly hard to write good drama. In film we have that idiocy that we do not reuse things, we produce new things each time.' Also on this issue an interesting set of analogies arise in discussing what a good film is. On the one hand, analogies revolving around 'comparing apples and oranges' or 'coffee, tea, and hot chocolate' are given to make the

point that after a certain point, the uniqueness of films and the general types or characteristics they have (comedy, drama, tragedy, melodrama, fantasy, political, etc.) are a matter of basic tastes or preferences. On the other hand however, there doesn't seem to be a great deal of difficulty in separating the 'chaff from the grain' that is separating the comparatively superior from the inferior. Most informants indicate that 'reducing the field' or separating the films worthy of further consideration from those not worthy is a normal and generally unproblematic process. Or to take the fruit analogy further, it seems that a differentiation between immature, ripe and rotten fruit is possible across the board even before preferences for apples and oranges come into play, suggesting a common degree of evaluative criteria or intuitive insight at this level.

*Evaluative processes.* Some evaluative processes are governed by formal rules and steering (i.e. directions given to the jury by the festival arrangers, categories of prizes and rules for their awarding, the formal role of the chairperson, stipulations about attendance at films and deliberations, etc.), others entail individual evaluative processes (i.e. what and how do the jury members evaluate when they view films); still others are collective evaluative processes (what are common and collective criteria of evaluation, how are arguments made in the group, what do collective discussions focus on). The distributional aspect of prize allocation (prestige ranking of prize categories, compensatory awarding) and 'informal' and 'tactical' aspects of the deliberation process (such as alliance building, strategic concessions, selecting what is worth fighting for and why) all figure into what here are categorized as evaluative processes, which naturally are infused by evaluative criteria, some of which are discussed above.

Evaluative processes can be divided into two types, individual evaluative processes, and group evaluative processes. As argued below, individual evaluation is largely described as a corporeal process, with cerebral aspects as well, while group evaluative processes is contingent upon 'externalization' of such individual evaluations in terms of verbalizations of reasons, feelings, and argument – i.e. education or justification.

With regard to individual evaluation, this corporeal aspect comes up in virtually every interview and revolves around emotional engagement in the film. Emotional engagement was also expressed in a number of different ways, such as being captured, affected, hit, enthralled, all are expressions of deep personal, emotional and physical processes. Here we see truly subjective evaluation, with mind and body as the evaluative instrument. Most of the interviewees spoke in terms of a 'double view,' where at one level one experiences the film as a totality, physically, emotionally, intellectually all together, all at once, and as a whole for the film as a total work. The other part of this double view has to do with being able to dissect or break the film down into both emotional, intellectual and physically successful or unsuccessful moments, as well as apply the more domain or professional

analytical perspectives on the film to answer questions about why things worked, why they are appealing or not, whether they are conventional or innovative.

With regard to the group process, we once again see both, the general and emotional evaluations verbally expressed, but to a much larger extent, an emphasis on particular explanations and reasons. It is these discussions and verbalizations that many describe as the real payoff or reward in film jury work, along with the prestige, and being often treated to luxury of a limited period of time. As discussion and deliberation is so highly valued, the interviewees declare that they truly listen to, attempt to persuade and be persuaded by what their esteemed colleagues with other professional backgrounds have to say. In this sense, despite many stating that they have favorites that they feel and fight strongly for, the process is deliberative and frequently characterized by discovery of new perspectives and dynamic opinion formation, rather than mere wrangling, which by all accounts also goes on. This process of dynamic opinion formation is also impacted by the fact that dialogue among jury members often takes place informally and constantly, rather than just in the plenum sessions where the whole of the jury assembles to collectively discuss and eventually agree on which films or performances should receive which prizes.

## Conclusion

These are but a few of the issues that have come up with regard to evaluative processes that film prize juries go through. Probably the most significant finding or issue has to do with the corporeal dimension of individual evaluation, and how this experience is excavated and translated into something that is intelligible and intersubjectively communicable. In part this is possible because most people evaluate and experience film in similar manners, so even imprecise formulations can bring 'I know what you mean and I agree or disagree' responses. Likewise, the corporeal experience is also significantly 'intellectualized' and couched in filed or professional terms which are also shared within the community.

What is highly intriguing about film festival prize jury work is that it flagrantly contradicts the famous Latin dictum: 'de gustibus non disputandum est.' These juries trade and revel in taste and opinion, it is the core of their deliberative activities. It would be too easy to posit that decisions are made by recourse to other factors, such as interests or power. Though it is difficult or impossible to unequivocally point to the process or the means by which jury decisions are made, with apologies to Pickering (1995), the mangle of deliberation which leads to decisions includes large measures of subjective, qualitative, aesthetic taste and opinion, expressed in an intersubjectively intelligible way, a process of social exchange and individual learning and

discovery that usually renders if not agreement, at least acceptance or acquiescence on collective decisions.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Premier' festival in this sense denotes festivals where the films in competition must be premiered at the festival, that is to say not in general release prior to the festival. There are also festivals that show and have films in competition that are in general release prior to the festival.

<sup>ii</sup> When focus is on both, it can either be on them individually, or on how composition impacts process, usually in terms of how homogeneity or heterogeneity impacts the deliberation process.

<sup>iii</sup> An occupation where one sees an inordinate number of films as that is one's job, as opposed to spending most of one's time making a far more limited number of films and seeing a moderate number of films as audience or for professional reasons. Persons in sales and distribution also see many more films than filmworker in production roles.

<sup>iv</sup> Here 'degrees of difficulty' similar to judging ice skaters are weighed in – is it an inherently difficult role, or cast, do the actors overcome handicaps of story or script, etc?