WOMEN’S FESTIVAL 2.0 BETWEEN GRASSROOTS GLOBALIZATION AND NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM: THE BIRDS EYE VIEW FESTIVAL

Women’s film festivals are significant instances of feminist creativity within the framework of cultural industries. Most of these festivals emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s as grassroots events associated with women’s cinema and the women’s movement. During this period, women’s film festivals brought together activities promoted by feminist collectives and coops such as film- and video-making workshops for women or special screenings and distribution circuits for films directed by women or feminist cinema. From this perspective, they were committed to what Ruby Rich defines as feminism’s “broader strategy to claim a larger world for women” using new art and social forms.

Creating opportunity and visibility for women’s cinema within the film market and in the public sphere is still a priority for women’s film festivals today. As Skadi Loist stressed in a keynote address at the 2012 edition of the Frauen Film Festival in Dortmund, the mandate of women’s film festivals is to “provide a space for work by, for and about women […] create a community, […] offer a place for networking, discussion and collaboration [a] counterpublic sphere [which] has the advantage of setting women’s work apart”.

Over the years, women’s film festivals have been consolidating a niche position in film culture, separate from mainstream or traditional channels of film promotion and distribution, as well as from the big film festivals’ circuit. The fragmentation of practices and new directions within women’s cinema and the women’s movement have also been contributing to guarantee women’s film festivals discrete profile. In spite of...
the fact that a Wellywood Woman blog post recently identified as many as ninety and five women’s film festivals active in 2013, mainstream media and even specialized publications (including contributions within the emerging area of film festival studies) tend to disregard women’s film festivals.

Especially since the advent of social media women’s film festivals have been gaining more visibility, both within the circuit of international film festivals and in the public sphere. The World Wide Web is facilitating these festivals’ mandate to circulate women’s cinema and to create networks for women both within specialized sectors of the film industry and in the public sphere. Simultaneously – and to varying degrees – the Web 2.0 generation of women’s film festivals is partaking in the marketing systems of global communication and neoliberal economy. While most of these festivals still forward a gender-focused agenda, their orientations point at what Rosi Braidotti views as a common tendency within neoliberal ideology: “the replacement of feminism by the less confrontational policy of gender mainstreaming”7. In particular, the recent proliferation of Web 2.0 platforms promoting women’s cinema raises issues regarding the geo-political perspective from which they are conceived and the geo-cultural contexts and economic categories which they address through their alleged purpose to reach a global community. Web 2.0 activities and services offer women’s film festivals new possibilities of addressing women’s participation in film and global digital culture. Yet social media often blur the boundaries between master narratives of neoliberal, conservative self-affirmation and counter-narratives of grassroots, collective collaboration.

The Birds EyeView festival (BEV) typifies the latter tendency. To varying degrees, the BEV fluctuates between grassroots globalization and neoliberal economy, operating across the formal and informal channels of film distribution in Britain and in the international media industry. Like most women’s film festivals today, the BEV is an instance of creative industry insofar as it forwards women’s artistic and professional agency in the cinema through social media. The BEV uses digital platforms not just to promote its events and activities, but also to create or consolidate professional links among female practitioners in film and media production and distribution.

by the festival’s founder and director Jackie Buet to address the matter with her in an open debate on stage. The debate took place at the 2008 edition of the festival and can be accessed on the Europeana portal at the following address: http://www.europeana.eu/portal/record/2022116/urn:axmedis:00000:obj:0c547ef7_bf3f_4d64_a59b_cb7d821c7e19.html.


To name just a few: the Mostra internazionale de Film de Dones in Barcelona established since 1993; the Turkish itinerant festival Flying Brooms Women’s Film Festival, founded in 1997; the Seoul-based Women’s International Film Festival, also founded in 1997; the Vancouver International Women in Film Festival, which opened in 1999; the Moondance Film Festival, also inaugurated in 1999 in Boulder Colorado as a response to Sundance; and the more recent San Francisco International Women’s Film Festival, created in 2004 and Athena film festival, inaugurated at the female Barnard College in 2009. For a more complete list of women’s film festivals, see the aforementioned blog post on Wellywood Woman, available at: http://wellywoodwoman.blogspot.it/p/womens–film–festivals–around–world.html, last updated on 20 October 2013.
I. PROMOTING FILMS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION:
FILM FESTIVALS AS CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

As Brian Moeran and Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen explain in their introduction to the collection *Negotiating Values in the Creative Industries: Fairs, Festivals and Competitive Events*, festivals are a special type of creative industry: rather than circulating or producing goods, they “provide a venue for the (re)enactment of institutional arrangements in a particular industry’s field and for the negotiation and affirmation of the different values that underpin them”\(^\text{10}\). Film festivals encompass the entire range of business and modes of production and distribution of cultural goods associated with creative industries, which include (using Terry Flew’s categorization) original creative production, creative content production, creative experience provision, and creative service provision\(^\text{11}\). They include a vast range of values and networks, bringing together heterogeneous actors and generating distinctive forms of production and distribution\(^\text{12}\). Ramon Lobato, in his book *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (2012), defines them “a complex of networks with their own logics, strategies, and ambitions”\(^\text{13}\).

Especially since the appearance of independent distribution and the progressive move towards a global film market, film festivals are increasingly acting as market makers\(^\text{14}\). Cannes, Sundance, and many other film festivals today advance audiences’ knowledge and access to films while increasingly acting as market makers. According to Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, while the success of a film festival can be assessed quantitatively or qualitatively, from the point of view of festival management it “is indeed all business, the business of selling art and culture”\(^\text{15}\).

Media converge helps film festivals generate new markets and spaces within the film industry and the public sphere, set the interface of local and global activities, actors, and interests\(^\text{16}\). Digital platforms are indeed a main source of promotion for film festivals and an alternative strategy of programming: some festivals are now entirely conceived for Internet consumption\(^\text{17}\). Social media are bringing together independent, institutional, and

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\(^{13}\) W. Pang, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, (13).


\(^{16}\) Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, (143).

mainstream contexts and circuits of film promotion and exhibition. Henry Jenkins, in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, prompts for a positive approach to media convergence, suggesting that it may lead to a “reconfiguration of media power and a reshaping of media aesthetics and economics”\(^\text{18}\). Jenkins’ positive view of convergence culture has been subject of discussions and debates within media and cultural studies, also in relation to film festivals\(^\text{19}\). Marijke De Valck, in her article “‘Screening’ the Future of Film Festivals? A Long Tale of Convergence and Digitization”, both joins and challenges the “contemporary convergence debates” to address the impact of “the increasingly multimedia corporate environment” on film festivals\(^\text{20}\). De Valck, while auspicating that developments in this direction may keep the balance between the sharing culture of digital economy and the niche offer of film festivals, believes that

[...] we are faced with the contradictory situation that the physical characteristics of the film festival network are at the same time its weakest link – keeping film-makers captured in a subsidized ghetto – and indispensable to its success as an alternative distribution and exhibition circuit for films that have (niche) artistic value and/or socio-political relevance\(^\text{21}\).

What de Valck describes as the contradictions of festival networks in the digital age has been the predicament of women’s film festivals from their very inception. For women’s film festivals, trying to maintain a niche status while remaining viable within the global film market often means having to enmesh grassroots practices and neoliberal ideologies operational across different actors and networks of the global media industry. In encouraging women’s participation in global digital culture, women’s film festivals need to carefully monitor the economic interests and ideological manipulations implicit in globalization, including those lurking beneath the anti-hierarchical and post-managerial rhetoric of the World Wide Web.

### 2. Women’s Film Festivals, from Grassroots Activism to Neoliberal Networking: The Birds Eye View Festival

The Birds Eye View (BEV) festival is an all-women film festival based in the UK. The festival was co-founded in 2002 by Rachel Millward, an independent researcher for film and television, and Pinny Grylls, a documentary filmmaker who had studied Anthropology and Archaeology. The two women met in Oxford during their studies and in 1999, when they were in their mid-twenties, founded “Invisible Films,” a production company dedicated to booster the presence of women filmmakers in the film industry\(^\text{22}\). Millward and Grylls launched the Birds Eye View festival in 2002 as a showcase of short films by

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\(^{18}\) H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (3).


\(^{20}\) de Valck, “‘Screening’ the Future of Film Festivals? A Long Tale of Convergence and Digitization”, (17).

\(^{21}\) de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, (22).

British women filmmakers, compiling a mail list of potential contributors to which they sent out a call for submission. At the same time, they solicited funds to various institutions and commercial companies. As Millward recounts, “the purpose of the BEV was to address the imbalance in the film world, without falling in to the trap of being very exclusive and becoming ghettoized” and “to create a new platform for [their] peers.” The screening took place at the Curzon Soho theater in London. The initiative was a big hit and the audience’s response was impressive. While Grylls soon decided to abandon the festival to continue her career as a documentary filmmaker, Millward went on and has been directing the festival since. The BEV became a national event in 2003 and an international competition in 2005, and has been running yearly every Spring, with a hiatus in 2012 as a result of the government’s cut in public funding.

As the festival’s web page stresses, the BEV’s mandate is to “showcase and explore the outstanding contribution of women film practitioners to cinema […] and to deliver the best of international film creative vision to audiences across the UK.” The BEV has been faithful to this mandate, selecting films from women filmmakers working within an international context – mainly feature fiction films – but also shorts films, documentary films, and animation films, as well a silent films series with live scores commissioned to female composers. The BEV takes place in prestigious film theaters in London, as well as in a selected number of regional theaters throughout the UK.

The BEV has been seeking a vaster audience and media promotion throughout the years, especially since the advent of social media: its website, its facebook page, its blog and twitter posts are important resources for promoting the festival and for consolidating or expanding a supporting network for women in film and media production and distribution. Since the shift to digital media, the BEV has been following the trend of big international films festivals to serve as a market place and a site for media events or professional networking for women filmmakers, even though conceived for niche audiences and circuits. The festival supports professionalizing initiatives such as screenwriting and project development labs or master classes, business training programs, an international delegate program, and a monthly screening club held in London. These activities carry on one the most significant aspects of the women’s film movement in the UK, which inspired organizations such as the London Film Coop, founded in 1966, or the London Film Group, established in 1972. Simultaneously, they illustrate the BEV’s progressive turn toward the industry. Workshops and panels come with registration or entrance fees that vary from a few pounds to 30 or 100 pounds, depending on the nature

24 Ibid.
25 From the BEV website at the following web address: http://birds–eye–view.co.uk/.
26 The BEV commissions the scores to established and upcoming musicians from various areas, including jazz, contemporary and disco music, and classical music.
27 About the early days of the BEV see the “history” section on the festival’s website at the following address: http://birds–eye–view.co.uk/about–us/history–people/.
28 Information about the various activities offered at the festivals are available in the section “Training” at the following address: http://birds–eye–view.co.uk/training/.
29 On the London Film Coop see in particular the Aural History project available online at the following address: http://www.studycollection.co.uk/auralhistory/index.htm. The London Women’s Film Group was founded in 1972 after a screening of the women’s liberation films at the London Film School. The collective was composed of female artists from various disciplines including Esther Ronay, Susan Shapiro, Francine Winham, Fran MacLean, Barbara Evans, Linda Wood and Midge McKenzie.
of the activity\textsuperscript{30}. They address young female practitioners with the purpose of introducing them to various aspects of film production and distribution through the testimonies of established filmmakers, cinematographers, screenwriters, film critics, and publicists. Among the new programs launched in 2013 are the “Filmonomics”, conceived to “bridge the gap between development and distribution” and teaching participants “to gain an understanding of the business behind film”\textsuperscript{31}.

The industry-oriented character of the BEV’s workshops reflects the progressive presence of women working in executive positions in film institutions and companies on the BEV’s board of trustees. Presently, the board is composed of nine women and one man. With the exclusion of two members (Sally el-Hosaini, an independent filmmaker and producer based in London, and Matthew Cain, a screenwriter and film director), the members are executives or former heads of important films institutions or film companies in the UK\textsuperscript{32}.

As Millward explains, finding subsidies has been the real challenge for the BEV and the government cuts justify the festival’s progressive links with the media industry\textsuperscript{33}. Until 2007, the festival received a quite generous amount of public funding, which reached the top in that year, when the UK Film Council’s Diversity Grant Aid awarded the BEV 30,000 pounds and the UK Art Council Film Festival Fund 58,500 pounds\textsuperscript{34}. Yet, concludes Millward, this achievement came at the same time as the credit crunch, when our growing corporate sponsorship disappeared. Over the years we have constantly worked at commercial partnerships – not easy when you can’t afford team consistency to fully develop them, and have begun to find the confidence to court individual giving – a long and time consuming process\textsuperscript{35}.

Millward publicly denounces the government politics, which in 2012 forced her to discontinue the festival and to make a public statement on the festival’s website, explaining that the decision was due to the cuts of the Film Council’s contributions to the festival, which covered 90\% off the BEV’s total expenses\textsuperscript{36}. This situation explains the festival’s recent insistence on events aimed at attracting a larger audience and promoted through social media, such as Q/A sessions with prestigious filmmakers, special appearances by female stars, opening and closing galas, screening series about fashion, video music, and children’s films\textsuperscript{37}.

\textsuperscript{30} For an overview of the panels and workshops offered in 2013 see the festival’s website at the following address: http://birds-eye-view.co.uk/film-festival/industry-events/. Some of these panels have been recorded and are available on the festival’s website in the section “Watch & Learn”, accessible at the following address: http://birds-eye-view.co.uk/training/watch-learn/.

\textsuperscript{31} From the festival’s website at the following address: http://birds-eye-view.co.uk/training/.

\textsuperscript{32} The board includes Syzanne Alizart, former CEO at Film Agency Wales; Briony Hanson, former head of the BFI programming unit, director of the script unit of the London Lesbian and Gay Film festival and since 2011 director of Film at the British Council; Sandra Hebron, an academic turned to independent production and distribution and former artistic director of the London film Festival; Jacqueline Hurt, partner in a media industry group and a tax-based financing consultant; Geraldine Kelly, managing director of an insurance bank; and Julia Short, a PR expert and a film distribution executive.

\textsuperscript{33} Millward, “Why UK Arts Cuts Threaten Progress for Women Filmmakers”.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Millward's announcement, posted on October 11 2011, is accessible at the following address: http://birds-eye-view.co.uk/2011/10/26/no-festival-in-2012/.

\textsuperscript{37} Some examples of prestigious guests and sponsors include, among others, the filmmakers Margarete von Trotta, Mira Nair, and Susan Bier, the actresses Drew Barrymore (who presented her first feature film at BEV in 2011) Gillian Anderson, and Kerry Fox, and the model Jerry Hall.
3. CONCLUSIONS

The Birds Eye View festival points at the difficulty of clearly extricating master and counter politics in cultural film industries. For instance, the BEV’s penchant for media glamour or industrial sponsors might not have much impact on the mandate of the festival and the quality of programming. Conversely, the BEV’s implementation of digital platforms for women filmmakers around the world may reflect less a renewed manifestation of women’s cinema through the World Wide Web than the development of new master narratives for privileged groups of women working in the film industry.

Women’s film festivals’ sustainability as creative film industries within the global media market depends on their ability to maintain a balance between (paraphrasing Skadi Loist) “social and societal surroundings, local and regional politics, the particular trend of feminist discussion in each place, the conditions for women in film in each production context, the availability of resources, and the commitment of women to start and continue to run a festival”38. These conditions allow women’s film festivals to maintain a niche role and identity within global cinema39.

The task of the Birds Eye View film festival, as well as of other women’s film festivals, is to identify forms and spaces for en-gendering global media, thus transposing the activist and critical trends that have been characterizing feminist cinema since its inception in the 1970s onto digital culture. Women’s film festivals need to reinvent themselves in the digital sphere as culture- and market-makers, counter-spaces for critical debate and activism about women in film and media, platforms for critical orientation and professionalization of women in global cinema.

SUMMARY

Women’s film festivals are among the most significant instances of grassroots creativity. Most of these festivals emerged in the heyday of the women’s film movement as alternative platforms of distribution and exhibition for women’s cinema. Women’s film festivals have historically been a niche area of film promotion, vastly ignored by mainstream media. Especially since the advent of social media technologies and services they have been gaining more visibility, both within the international festivals’ circuit and in the public sphere.

This paper examines the Web 2.0 generation of women’s film festivals, from within a conceptual framework drawing on feminist film theory, media theory, and film festival studies. The focus is on the Birds Eye View (BEV) festival, founded in 2002 in London, UK. The BEV exemplifies a widespread tendency in the Web2.0 generation of women’s film festivals: that of resorting to social media to open up new spaces and opportunities for women filmmakers across different modes and contexts of media production and distribution. In following this trend, the BEV festival has been progressively incorporating market-oriented and industry-linked activities and events in its program, endorsed by an almost all-female board of trustees mainly composed of executives and top managers of important film institutions, film festivals, film companies, and financial institutions. While this shift reflects the festival’s effort to remain competitive and sustainable after the government’s cuts on cultural subsidies in 2008, it also signals a dangerous move towards gender mainstreaming.

38 Loist, “Social Change?! The Status of Women’s Film Festivals Today”.
39 As instances, Loist cites some niche film festivals which simultaneously foreground a lesbian, regional, and race agenda, such as the Queer Women of Color and the Intl Black Women’s Film Festival in San Francisco; the Images of Black Women: African Descent Women in Cinema in London, UK; the Network of Asian Women’s Film Festival and the Bluestocking Film Series in the USA, which features films that must pass the Bechdel Test. Loist, “Social Change?! The Status of Women’s Film Festivals Today”.