

FILM FESTIVAL POLITICS AND SPECTATORSHIP (NETWORK AFFECTS)

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ABSTRACT. Film Festival Politics and Spectatorship (Network Affects). The article is highly relevant for the relatively recent field of film festival research, and has a more limited relevance for the fields of film theory and philosophy of film. The originality of the article is that it aims to infuse the field of film festival research with insights regarding the collective experiential-emotional aspects of festival-events, inspired mainly by contemporary affective science and network-theory.

Keywords: *festival politics, film, spectator, image, film theory, philosophy of film*

Festival politics and films

The specific space-time complexes of film festivals may be approached by making use of all-encompassing and familiar concepts: accordingly, as a metonymic expression of ‘culture as articulation’,¹ film festival phenomena articulate social relations, bodies (both participating and represented),² and (various types of) narratives. Similarly, film festival research designates its specific object of study as being one of intersecting discourses and practices³ (– related to aspects including film-making, distribution and consumption). A certain feature does persist or re-appears – which is the ‘discursive’ gluing together or pervading the above listed and more or less tangible elements/components. On the one hand, a cultural studies approach may emphasize the politics of film festivals (be they hegemonical, as, for e.g., related to ranking within the feature film festival circuit; or conversely, their subversive/resisting potentials with regard to, for e.g. American blockbusters). On the other hand, film festival contexts engender different relationalities: film festivals with explicit political agendas/or which serve specific id(entity) politics are cases in

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¹ Fredric Jameson: *On “Cultural Studies”*, p. 30–33.

² Bodies thought in the sense that “any perceptible elements can constitute bodies with which we make connections, so all expressions are bodies as they shift from perception as signifying to affecting-relation.” (Patricia MacCormack: *An Ethics of Spectatorship: Love, Death and Cinema*, p. 133).

³ Marijke deValck – Skadi Loist: *Film Festival Studies: An Overview of a Burgeoning Field*, p. 179–181.

point. As such, we may observe that the highly experiential ‘film festival scape’ is indebted to both ideological and felt, to a certain degree personal aspects. Then, to break away from the circularity of established cultural theory approaches I propose to look at emotion complex(es) which, put in advance, may be conceived as both predispositions and responses to /triggered by festival stimuli including filmviewing and other types of social encounters.

At the outset, we should recall that the primordial role or object of film festivals is the screening and viewing of films in distinctive public settings (movie theaters, event halls, open air etc.). Such a functioning (of film festival politics, which) is significant, for it relates to a certain communality weaving together festival audiences.⁴ As most evident in festival programming, film festival politics basically serve as a kind of doubling in relation to films; it is manifested in various forms (mostly linguistic and visual) – depending on agencies and/or specific media, the latter being, as of today, increasingly ‘post-cinematic’⁵ in terms of technologies they use. Its main purpose refers to framing and presenting films in certain ways; with regard to spectators or audience, festival politics are affective to the extent that their interest lies in ‘attuning’ the audience to the particular reality of the film festival program.

The relationship between films and festivals has been described in terms of the prestige conferred by prizes received at festivals⁶; this ambiguous connection may be further explored by including the filmviewing or spectatorial dimension as well. In many ways, film festivals undergird what is being termed ‘experiential cinema’ through ‘enhanced’ screening events.⁷ For we could be puzzled by the success of films (both in- and outside of festival context) labelled as being provocative – which isn’t irrespective of the fact that, from a psychosocial perspective, they deal with or touch upon uncomfortable or negative themes. As an example, the highlights of the Hungarian and the Romanian film sections of last year’s local international film festival (i.e. Transylvania IFF) may be listed here. I won’t explore the multitude of themes or refer to dominant readings of any but will only mention a few memorable ones: surreal abortion, impurity phobia and the obviously traumatic childhood (*Free Fall* by György Pálfi); deprivation of personal freedom (*Mirage* by Szabolcs Hajdu); savageness and castration

⁴ We might add that film festivals’ historical connection with national cinemas may still bear relevance, since in parallel with film festivals as venues for showcasing local or ‘national’ filmmakers’ works, it is worth noting that, film festival audience is constituted in a way which is similar to how national cinemas address the spectators as historical subjects – in terms of “cinematic identification...as an intersubjective triad ...where the subject constitutes him- or herself as a part of the group in a social context” (Tarja Laine: *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in Film Studies*, p. 24).

⁵ Steven Shaviro: *Post-cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, Boarding Gate and Southland Tales*, 2010.

⁶ Marijke deValck: *Film Festivals From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

⁷ Sarah Atkinson – Helen W. Kennedy: *Introduction – Inside-the-scenes: The Rise of Experiential Cinema*, p. 141.

(*Aferim* by Radu Jude), estrangement and the haunting memory of having witnessed a crime (*One floor below* by Radu Muntean). These can be considered *regional* examples of contemporary cinema which through specific narrative and stylistic elements challenge spectators in emotional terms. However, I won't venture into the complexities involving film creation, artistic and marketing choices, or the accelerated reception which is so typical of our present; essentially, what these examples have in common is drawing the attention to the fundamentally asymmetrical relationship of the spectators with the medium of the film, whereby moving pictures or film-images dominate or get hold of their viewers with the latter lacking power to respond on an equal footing.⁸ Therefore, in my opinion, festival politics – intertwined with the above-mentioned plethora of post-cinematic technology usage – are designed to guide the audience or show a way out for them from the space of the cinema, or from the effect of images which cannot be emptied 'from excess and residue of meaning'.⁹ If films/images are treated in such terms, alternative programs and interactive facilities have their place on the analytical map as well (here interaction goes beyond its social science understanding so as to include the potential to interact). In other words, re-balancing is sought outside the screen but still inside a film festival's own ecosystem.

Spectators and images

The 'ideal spectator' is very much central in any cultural production endeavours; Then, although film reception studies usually deal with real flesh and blood spectators and (their) responses, this hypothetical spectator has implications for both practice and analysis; spectatorship as a concept pays attention to both external or contextual factors and internal or psychological workings,¹⁰ but in a rather important move it brings in the intersubjective perspective.

British film scholar F. Colman concludes that "the spectator is beholden to the spectatorial situation (as a type of spectator, within a spectacle, or as a positioned subject)".¹¹ Festivals are interested in moulding spectators in their own ways; if so, such an enterprise is not for its own sake but most often gets supplemented with the familiar notion of the 'festival communities', which stems both from spatiality or local-groundedness of any film festival, and from the truism that movies trigger similar emotional responses across diverse audiences. So, consistence of/or uniformity across emotional responses may well support authorial or intended meanings, that is, it draws the attention to viewing/looking and other sensorial perceptions as (acts

⁸ Alexander Galloway – Eugene Thacker: *The Exploit: a Theory of Networks*, p. 123.

⁹ Patricia MacCormack: *Cinesexuality*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Carl Plantinga: *Spectatorship*, p. 249.

¹¹ Felicity Colman: *Film Theory: Creating a Cinematic Grammar*, p. 79.

of) ‘infolding’ the conventional qualities of film-image, which seems, however, to be entangled with parallel effects, and namely the *strength(s)* and *duration* of the film images.¹²

Insofar as spectators do respond the same ways, this raises further questions: do (uniform) spectatorial emotions transforming the viewing act have any real-world outputs, that is how do they play out, for e.g. in different festival spaces? While any consistence or a festival crowd seamlessly attuned the same way(s) acknowledges the dichotomy of similarity and difference among film audiences¹³, I want to suggest that similar emotional attunement expose relational/ relating potentials across (the) festival audience of various backgrounds, and in doing so, may eventually point to networking features of film affects.

First, an approach to spectatorship as essentially being about emotional feelings and responses to images/events on screen has been highlighted through examples in the first subchapter; furthermore, film theorist Thomas Elsaesser observes that contemporary, so-called mind-game films appeal to savvy media-consumers (or cinephiles) because the former “(...) are experienced as pleasurable, while also perceived to be relevant.”¹⁴ This observation already hints at the fact that film spectatorship is a complex phenomenological experience in both cognitive and affective terms (i.e. related to both meaning-making and body-level processing of various sensorial inputs); the festival as filmviewing context enlarged in terms of duration contributes to the heightening of senses.

Perceptions are directed to the film images before the eyes (and to pertaining sounds into the ears) but – sticking to the visual for simplicity of the argument – the film image is reflected and mapped together with the memory-parts which it evokes. More precisely, the intensity as a central feature of any image – and identified above in terms of strength and duration – is irrevocably threaded together with both its content as well as with memory-images raised by it to the consciousness,¹⁵ even if the latter are diffuse or conversely, very much articulated. The emphasis here concerns not the interpretation of images, which channels the content always into conventional meanings, but, in concert with philosopher Brian Massumi via Bergson and Deleuze, the immanent potential of the image(s) to bring back immediately that which passed (and is stored in one’s memories), and at the same time, to maintain an expectation of the future so that the very present moment is bracketed. As an effect, according to his theory, the affecting potential as suspense or intensity of beings and things trigger autonomous (that is involuntary/ non-conscious etc.) reactions and these get occasionally captured in the form of conscious emotions.¹⁶ In other words, the unfolding of an

¹² Brian Massumi: *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, p. 24–27.

¹³ Carl Plantinga: *op. cit.*, p. 257.

¹⁴ Thomas Elsaesser: *The Mind-Game Film*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Brian Massumi, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Brian Massumi, *op. cit.*, p.27–28.

'image/expression-event'¹⁷ is hopelessly partial and unreachable to the senses in its totality, even if 'viewing itself becomes a distribution of intensities',¹⁸ or it is both infolding and emitting – which is presumably the case of festival-attending cinephile audience.¹⁹ Spectatorship as constructed through image perception according to the deleuzian syntheses has led to the conclusion that "[...] the material subjectivity which experiences cinema's signs is not specifically cinematic";²⁰ such an extension beyond the screen must take into account varying degrees of intensities feeding subjectivities while also acknowledge a Sartrean understanding of subjectivity as always already intersubjective in that implies relating to the world.²¹

Here I propose turning again to Brian Massumi, who – although having dispensed of psychology's subject-centredness and having kept only the becoming-subject of the deleuzian event –, emphasizes relationality in the sense of thinking bodies of all sorts as inscribed in the in-between or intersubjective space not in terms of their positioning, or fixedness, but holds that is the relations of the bodies with themselves and one another through movements and changes (and affected both by film images we should add) which define the conditions of their existence.²² While we are bound by a certain incomprehensibility pertaining to affects (regardless if we take underlying neural processes stressing the bodily felt or unfelt, or their formulation as encounter, and therefore with an emphasis on intersubjectivity), the desire for cinema rests on conventionalized theoretical insights such as that (certain) films make the viewers think, wander, or fill them so that the feeling of expectation before viewing a film betrays a predisposition, an emptying of the self to be occupied by images and sounds. Regular film-festival attendance resonates with a kind of Whiteheadian 'occasions' of showing and experiencing oneself but only to dissipate as an effect of the encounter.

Emotions and networks

Cinema is affective in itself to the point that cinematic experience becomes an emotional dialogue. Film theorists have been referring to theories of emotions;²³ as of today, we are most certain that audio- and visual elements and main characters

¹⁷ Brian Massumi, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Patricia MacCormack: *op. cit.*, p. 1

¹⁹ Dubbed as 'cinesexuals', see Patricia MacCormack: *op. cit.*

²⁰ Joe Hughes: *Schizoanalysis and the Phenomenology of Cinema*, p. 26

²¹ See Tarja Lane, *op. cit.* 17.

²² Brian Massumi, *op. cit.*

²³ See for e.g. Carl Plantiga – Greg M Smith.: *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999; for a review see various chapters by Carl Plantiga in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*. Routledge, 2009.

of films elicit so-called cinematic or fictional emotions (but which are similar to their occurrence in real-life). It can be presumed that they involve both automatic and conscious levels – meaning that they qualify as meta-emotions in the sense that filmviewers are conscious of the ‘staged’ circumstance and of themselves as watching. While one may even find or list so-called universalistic emotions coded by film genes and/or types of narratives, any seamless accept of how filmic emotional rescues might occur across the auditorium must, however, deal with a contextual understanding of emotional feelings.

The common ground of contemporary psychologies and affective neurosciences is helpful here: accordingly, feelings and emotions are subpersonally determined; moreover one cannot draw a distinctive line between the intrapersonal processes reaching cognition and those which go on less consciously. Presently, affect may be termed as that which is felt, experienced as feeling, and interpreted as emotion.²⁴ So there is a processual understanding with an evident concern for emotion components; stimuli are processed and that the output of this process is somehow translated into motivational, cognitive, somatic, motor and subjective components of an emotion.²⁵ Current psychological theories rank emotions somewhat differently with regard to their functionalities; along individually adaptive functions/evolutionary claims the evolved human ‘environment’ (i.e. the social field) gained importance by acknowledging that the interpersonal occurrence of emotions may be just as relevant as the intrapersonal level.²⁶ On the one hand, going to films in a festival setting or plain movie-watching might not differ significantly in terms of either underlying emotional motivations (like joy-seeking) or emotion elicitation including the above listed subcomponents; however I suggest that that spectatorial emotions are linked to the fact that film festivals occupy tangible places temporarily, only to vanish later on.

We relate to films as we watch them or we might be distracted as well; that is what film festival crowds usually do. While spectatorial diversity is a fact, what festival politics do in effect is to tap into these relations based on differences and similarities, and connect the spectators through cinematic spaces of a festival; the

²⁴ As an attempt to sum up diverging approaches, an emotional episode could be described as having at its origins the interest or concern of the (human) organism triggered by an event (on a positive-negative scale, or in relation with the Spinozan joy-sadness poles), that is processed and assessed/appraised along the way in a recursive manner (meaning depending on whether the stimuli is known or new for the memory of that organism, see previous subchapter); as a result emotional reaction may rise, that may be experienced consciously; furthermore, it may have a valence and also hold a tendency for action; of course a host of other factors such as motivation, functionality, personality, situation and context play into it as well. See Gerald Clore – Andrew Ortony: *Appraisal Theories: How Cognition Shapes Affect into Emotion*, 2008; Agnes Moors: *Comparison of Affect Program Theories, Appraisal Theories, and Psychological Construction Theories*, 2012.

²⁵ Agnes Moors: *op. cit.*

²⁶ See for e.g. Nico Frijda: *The Psychologists’ Point of View*, 2008.

latter would refer to any physical and virtual environment constructed by and around film-images, including the technologies mentioned at the beginning and labelled 'post-cinematic'. The view resonates with what contemporary technology-infused social theories advocate – namely, the preference for the networked character of living/beings and bypassing the social group as the basic unit of the social, with the latter being an apparently painful reminder of the physical world/reality now left behind thanks to connectivity.²⁷ Obviously network -formations gained currency in all sorts of theoretical approaches; another pair of theorists (Alex Galloway & Eugene Thacker) who although think networks to different ends (i.e. to explain contemporary movements of subversion in relation to global regimes of power and control) their network-concept consisting figuratively of nodes and edges is inspiring because of a delezian insight, according to which "People are lines [...] threading together social, political, and cultural elements".²⁸ In our case, spectators who are already parts of various (sociocultural etc.) networks are drawn to film festival events; while it may seem the particular films (to be) screened at the live film festival event would constitute the nodes I believe that such construct fails in taking into account the experiential component. Thus I would argue that such nodes are constituted by affectively charged image moments which trigger and attract lines of feelings and emotions; the latter eventually 'die out' but may be re-activated/mutated by or toward other films or cultural products as movements of similar or opposing desires. That is, in my view, the emotionally affective feature serves to understand that communal events of film spectatorship thought as one-of-a-kind, ephemeral in fact fuel further engagements/relationships with human and non-human bodies/film objects. And, we may add that, on their turn, film festivals are intended not as singular or one-time series of events, but congeal through annual *repetition*, that is attempting coherence within the proliferating potential that is the global film industry.

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²⁷ Lee Rainie – Barry Wellman: *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, 2011.

²⁸ Alexander Galloway – Eugene Thacker: *op. cit.*, p. 35.

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