Review


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Film festival studies, now a well-established field of research within film and media studies, has provided, over the last fifteen years, methodologies of research and theoretical frameworks to understand festivals as a crucial component of film cultures in the world. The major lesson that film festival scholarship has taught us is that festivals are more than the films they exhibit, thus inviting researchers to shift the attention from an exclusive focus on film texts to broader conditions of circulation, exhibition, commerce, and spectatorial experience. Historiographical approaches have brought forward the unique histories of film festivals as institutions that promote cinema as a form of art and constitute a self-sufficient circuit of distribution and exhibition. In particular, the theorization of film festivals as a circuit has allowed an understanding of the sociocultural and geopolitical dynamics of global cinema. Moreover, from a material perspective, the festival circuit has also been analyzed as a formation “upheld by the various stakeholders—filmmakers and studios, journalists and press agents, agencies, tourists boards, cinephiles and others.” Finally, sociological and anthropological approaches have also invited us to consider festivals as events that, through their peculiar temporality and material conditions of exhibition, provide an exceptional experience of film viewing as well as modes of socializing. This last aspect is particularly important for identity-based festivals, such as queer film festivals, in which the curatorial focus of the films exhibited is as equally important as the sensuous aspect of a community coming together. In this respect, two recent monographs on queer film festivals constitute fundamental contributions to queer cinema studies in general and film festival scholarship in particular: Stuart James Richards’s *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* and Antoine Damiens’s *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness*.

Both authors situate their research in conversation with the main tenets and approaches of film festival scholarship, while at the same time they make critical intervention in the field, developing original theoretical frameworks and methodologies. Specifically, Richards, “to address the inherent objectives of the queer film festival’s social empowering capacity and financial sustainability,” combines attention to organizational structures and funding mechanisms of three large international queer film festivals with an analysis of what and how films are programmed (p. 14). Damiens, instead, by focusing on smaller, ephemeral, almost forgotten queer festivals in North America and Europe, puts into question the “conceptual apparatus” of film festival scholarship that “does not adequately apply to the vast majority of festivals: its theoretical and methodological tools, devised for international festivals, do not necessarily account for smaller events” (p. 23). Notwithstanding the two books’ different aims, approaches, and selection of objects of study, they both attest to the understanding of queer film festivals as crucial space in which historical and contemporary sexual politics and cultures are played out.
Richards’s intellectual quest starts from a straightforward research question: “in the exhibition of films at the queer film festival, can economic value and social empowerment coexist?” (p. 2). The question stems from the observation that queer film festivals, from underground and radical forms of media activism linked to social movements, have developed into “an elite film institution,” becoming crucial actors in the promotion of normative models of gay and lesbian identities. To address this conundrum, Richards adopts the heuristic framework of the social enterprise and applies it to three case studies: the Frameline San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival (Frameline), the Melbourne Queer Film Festival (MQFF), and the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF). The social enterprise is defined as “a non-profit organisation that will engage in economic strategies to fulfill its social mission, where the social entrepreneur will engage with various income streams to create sustainable social transformations” (p. 1). These aspects of the social enterprise allow Richards to untangle queer film festivals’ compromise with neoliberal economic and cultural policies from the social and cultural intervention that they still make. Indeed, the social enterprise’s aim of creating social change fits nicely with queer film festivals’ specific mandate, since the 1970s, of exhibiting films that focus on queer themes and representation and of providing queer audiences a safe space to come together. Yet large international queer film festivals, such as those studied by Richards, increasingly correspond to the logic of the creative industry, depending on private sponsorships, serving stakeholders that have financial interests, and consequently integrating a commercial mandate within their organizational structure.

The neoliberal reshaping of queer film festivals is situated in relation to the depoliticization of gay and lesbian rights movements and the festivals’ assimilation within conservative institutions. This arc that Richards succinctly describes in the introduction, along with the clear-cut explanation of the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity introduced in chapter 1 and developed in chapter 4, constitutes the major theoretical backdrop against which the festival politics of programming are confronted. In this respect, also particularly crucial are some terminological clarifications on the uses of the word “queer” that Richards provides, individuating two main areas in which the term is deployed. First, in the phrase “queer politics and theory,” which was “born out of the limitations of the gay and lesbian liberation movement,” queer means a poststructuralist critique of that movement’s fixation with rigid identity categories (p. 3). Second, queer can be used to describe an “open-ended community whose shared characteristic is … an anti-normative positioning with regard to sexuality” (p. 4). However, Richards, by defining his objects of study “queer film festivals,” indirectly makes us aware that the use of the word “queer” has expanded to include cultural projects that do not necessarily make an open critique of heteronormative/homonormative ideologies. The large festivals analyzed by Richards seem to prefer the use of the term “queer” to present themselves as fostering progressive gender politics, while often conforming, in their programming, either to rigid identity categories of gay and lesbian or, more broadly, to normative representations of gender and (homo)sexuality.

Throughout the book, the model of the social enterprise, drawn from management and marketing scholarship, intertwines with queer theoretical approaches to the study of film and media. Chapter 1 constitutes the introduction in which theoretical frameworks and methodology are outlined. After that, the book is made up of four other chapters, each one applying a well-defined conceptual framework to the three case studies. Thus, in chapter 2, Richards identifies
cultural policy and creative industry as the concepts that frame his detailed analysis of the history of Frameline, MQFF, and HKLGFF. The inception of each of these festivals is situated within local histories of gay liberation movements and queer cultures, as well as within specific national and regional mechanisms of funds and cultural policies. Moreover, for each festival, Richards individuates a periodization of their different historical phases, sketching a trajectory in their organizational structures from a grassroots, or, in the case of HKLGFF, niche, ethos to the model of the creative industries, which includes increased professionalism and the acceptance of neoliberal economic standards. Thus, these festivals are now major events that play a crucial role in defining the respective cities in which they take place as innovative creative cities. The historiographical method adopted by Richards is in conversation with film scholar Ragan Rhyne's periodization of the queer film festival phenomenon through various phases, from the establishment of the festivals to their commercial growth and global expansion, and their primary complicity in the development of a “pink dollar” economy (an expression that describes gay and lesbian consumerism). However, Richards makes his original contribution in two ways: refusing to accept the description of the film-festival-as-a-circuit as an always valid and applicable model (an argument shared by Damiens, too) and tying the economic growth of queer film festivals to the programming choices of the festivals themselves in chapter 4.

Chapter 3 delves into a detailed definition of the social enterprise, identifying six key aspects of this management model and demonstrating how each of them applies to the three case studies. Methodologically, Richards draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with festival staff members, quoting in particular interviews with festival directors to corroborate the argument that the social entrepreneur is a fundamental figure in the cultural and commercial success of the organization. Yet Richards also reports anecdotes and draws on his insider knowledge gleaned through internships at Frameline and MQFF and through a fieldtrip as a festival attendee at HKLGFF. Corporatization—a specific process of the social enterprise that describes an organization taking on sponsorship agreements—is a hot topic both within queer academic circles and grassroots communities that have heavily criticized the co-optation of Pride parades by capitalism. In this context, Richards leans toward a rather lenient viewpoint on the presence of private sponsors. For example, he justifies Frameline's sponsorship agreement with the Israeli consulate because it eventually allowed the festival to be sustainable while preserving its social mission and providing access to a wide range of films. The risk behind such an argument is the detachment of queer politics and cultural intervention from anti-colonialist, anti-apartheid, and anti-capitalist struggles. However, Richards's overall project of illustrating the main principles of the social enterprise through case studies has the broader purpose of recommending a management model that can foster social empowerment even within neoliberalism.

With chapter 4, Richards shifts the attentions toward the films exhibited in the three festivals to assess to what extent the neoliberal turn in festival organizing affects programming and curatorial choices. The main argument of the chapter is that “the analysis of the queer film festival as a social enterprise and the identification of homonormative trends in the programming share a common relationship to neoliberalism” (p. 144). Through a quantitative examination of the films programmed, Richards comes to the conclusion that the major consequence of the neoliberal restructuring of queer film festivals is the festivals conforming to homonormative identity politics that maintain hierarchical and binary constructions of masculinities and
femininities. In the chapter, he proposes a close reading of some films at these festivals, distinguishing commercial features characterized by homonormative representations from documentaries and art-house films that deconstruct hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, for each of these categories, Richards compiles lists of films programmed at each festival that give a clear visualization of the major trends in festival programming. He also pays attention to other forms of textual productions that contribute to defining the overall vision of the festival: for example, he examines how festival programs put forward queer diversity and how the film stills selected for festival promotional materials usually put forward white masculinities. Finally, Richards takes into account how the decisions on what films will be projected in the various exhibition spaces of each festival contribute to create hierarchies among the films themselves. For example, at Frameline, lesbian and trans films are shown in different theaters than the ones where gay homonormative films are shown.

Chapter 5 carries forward a reflection on the space of the festival, theorizing how the festival as an event suspends conventional configurations of the space in urban contexts. For example, drawing on literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory on the carnivalesque, Richards argues that Frameline disrupts the connotations of the Castro neighborhood in Los Angeles as a predominantly white male gay space by bringing in lesbian and trans audiences to the festival screenings. Yet not only does Richards consider theaters as crucial to the spatial experience of the queer film festival, but he also stresses the importance of ancillary spaces, such as lounges and bars, that extend the spectatorial cinematic experience and potentially offer broader social empowerment.

By defining queer film festivals as social enterprise, Richards emphasizes several times throughout the book that these festivals “are more than just commercial entities” and that they respond to the LGBTI audiences’ needs to access queer cinema and to come together as a community (p. 99). “The very essence of the queer film festival is literally a celebration of community,” writes Richards, arguing that the public dimension of the festivals allows queer audiences to constitute themselves as a counter-public (p. 22). In this respect, even with the advancement of neoliberal cultural policy that has transformed queer film festivals into top-down nonprofit organizations, the audience plays a crucial role not only in negotiating the meaning of the films screened but also in criticizing the festivals’ alignment with corporative neoliberal ethos. Understanding audiences as a stakeholder in the festival environment, during his fieldwork, Richards conducted interviews with audience members. Yet, overall, their voices are not actually put forward in the book; most of the quotations reported belong to managerial figures working for the festivals.

The methodological centrality of fieldtrips and of the blurring of the observer versus participant position in Richards’s research on contemporary configurations of queer film festivals resonates with Damiens’s “labour of love” in conducting research on LGBTQ film festivals and refusal to “claim the objective position of the scholar-as-observer—doing research on rather than with and at festivals” (p. 28). Surely, Damiens’s fieldwork is different from the one performed by Richards. Given the historical focus of Damiens’s research, his fieldwork mostly consisted of archival research trips, at both institutional archives and private or community-based collections. Moreover, Damiens openly reclaims the importance that his own networks of friendship and
Damiens necessarily had to rely on conversations with scholars, curators, and cinephiles who participated firsthand in the organization of those gay and lesbian film festivals from the 1970s onward. Thus, even though Damiens did not conduct formal interviews with festival organizers, his insider knowledge as a queer scholar, as well as his voice and embodied perspective, informs all aspects of his research.

Damiens’s book is explicitly conceived as a methodological intervention within film festival studies, opposing this field’s monolithic interest in large international festivals and questioning its established methods that de facto preclude the possibility of examining festivals that function on different scales. Even the literature on queer film festivals has mostly focused on the “largest, oldest and most important LGBTQ film festivals,” says Damiens. In this context, it becomes difficult to account for smaller events that might not constitute crucial historical nodes in the development of global film culture but that, nonetheless, maintain the spatial and temporal dimensions of festival events and play a crucial role in the formation of queer cinephilia, queer film criticism, and queer scholarly approaches in film studies. Taking as objects of study “forgotten, minor LGBTQ film festivals,” Damiens notably undertakes a rumination on the mechanisms of the formation and preservation of historical records and of knowledge production determining which objects of study are considered most relevant and which ones are instead overlooked (p. 23). Damiens situates his endeavor of excavating ephemeral festivals in line with the historiographical project of women’s studies (mostly drawing on the work of feminist historians Denise Riley and Joan Wallach Scott) that, in countering the erasure of women from history, has questioned conventional methods of writing history. The application of the methodologies of feminist historiography, which, as Damiens recognizes, might seem “anachronistic” in a study of film festivals, illustrates well the author’s objective of “queering festival studies,” that is, of exploring novel approaches in creating academic knowledge on film festivals. The project of “queering festival studies” is coupled with the commitment in “queering festivals,” that is, in privileging identity-based festivals as objects of study against the dominant focus on the international film festival circuit (p. 25).

The book is consequently organized around the two concepts of “critical festival studies” and “the festival as method.” The first phrase condenses the endeavor of bringing to light the shortcomings of existing film festival scholarship, fundamentally carried over in the first three chapters. The scarcity of historical pieces of evidence found during research conducted at several archives in France, Canada, and the United States prompts Damiens’s meditation in chapter 1 on festivals’ archival practices and mechanisms of selection of what gets preserved and what is lost. Through the metaphor of “cruising,” Damiens describes the “hazardous encounter with historical documents,” “the affective longings invested in historical research,” and “archival failures and mismatches” (p. 41). The result of this archival research is the discovery of “ephemeral” festivals that “failed or happened only once” and, for this reason, have been neglected in historical accounts of LGBTQ festivals (p. 40). For Damiens, sudden findings of traces of queer cinematic culture in archives have the “potential to disrupt or at least suspend linear, heteronormative temporality” and historiographies (p. 41). More generally, the existence of ephemeral festivals that have left few or no records, especially if compared to the documents
preserved by larger, thriving festivals, demonstrates that the existing major theorization within film festival studies—the one of the festival-as-a-circuit—is actually based on a narrow definition of what counts as a “festival.”

In chapter 2, Damiens explores the “queer film ecosystem” in which festivals coexist alongside other institutions, cultural practices, and technologies, each contributing to the emergence of queer cinema as a field. He first sketches the historical development of the queer film ecosystem in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, highlighting for each decade the spaces of exhibition (including adult theaters) and the circuits of distribution that have defined queer cinema. Then, drawing on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, Damiens argues that, within film festival studies, the understanding of festivals as “legitimising institutions” that determine the cultural value of a film has led to a hierarchization between festivals that “would assert the legitimacy of art cinema” and LGBTQ events that “would simply screen films [and] mark those films as being solely about identity” (p. 92). According to Damiens, film festival studies’ fixation on the field of cultural production cannot take into account “individual films’ patterns of circulation and valuation,” especially significant for gay and lesbian content that “belong[s] simultaneously to various regimes of cultural value” (p. 93). Thus, Damiens invites a shift in attention to the overlapping fields of cinematic cultural production and of queer cinema cultural production. This last one is structured around two extreme poles, one in which “producers [challenge] aesthetic and sexual conventions” and “queerness itself is turned into a symbolic cultural capital” (p. 94). The second pole, instead, corresponds to “the gay niche market” and in it “queerness is seen ... as economic capital” (p. 95). New Queer Cinema in the 1990s occupies the middle ground between these poles, with films that appealed to queer audiences but that were legitimized through their circulation within the mainstream festival circuit of art cinema. Similarly to Richards’s categorization of the various kinds of films exhibited in queer film festivals, the description of the field of queer cultural production allows Damiens to draw distinctions among films that make an intervention in sexual politics of representation and commercial films that do not necessarily question dominant aesthetic conventions. Another heuristic concept employed in this chapter is “queer relays,” drawn from media scholar Lisa Henderson, which describe the movement of queer content across different circuits of distribution, from specialized independent venues of film exhibition to high-brow and mainstream contexts. According to Damiens, “queer relay” helps explain the different discourses and regimes of taste through which such films as Laurence Anyways (Xavier Dolan, 2012) and Tomboy (Céline Sciamma, 2011) have circulated in France (where these two films were distributed within art-house circuits) and in the United States (where they were distributed by LGBTQ distribution companies).

In chapter 3, Damiens provides a comprehensive survey of groups, organizations, journals, conferences, reviews, and other forms of publications that contributed to the establishment of the concept of “gay and lesbian cinemas” and of queer approaches in film studies through fundamental debates, various theoretical trends, and links with social movements. In this chapter, he challenges two main assumptions of film festival studies: that festival stakeholders are discrete actors, each with their own specific interest in the festival, and two, that it is necessary to separate the roles of film critics, festival organizers, and festival scholars. Damiens retraces a history of the practices, debates, and scholarly publications, stressing that film critics active within the gay liberation movement were at the same time festival organizers and scholars.
Their organizing of film festivals became a praxis not only of community-building activism but also of knowledge production about gay and lesbian cinema. The chapter is organized by decade, each one characterized by specific debates. This account illustrates that in the 1970s and 1980s, film critics played a crucial role in developing “a history of sexual representation ... and sexuality as a form of social discourse” (p. 125). A major shift occurred in the 1990s with “the professionalization of queer cinema,” when LGBTQ festivals “increasingly relied on corporate sponsorship and philanthropy” and when, in parallel, queer theory was institutionalized within academia (pp. 136, 137). Damiens takes the careers of some prominent film critics-turned-scholars, such as Tom Waugh and B. Ruby Rich, as exemplary of these developments.

With chapters 4 and 5, Damiens shifts his attention to the concept of “festival as method,” which describes how, “as curated juxtapositions of moving images, film festivals offer a productive framework for understanding cinematic cultures.” First, in chapter 4 Damiens poses an understanding of festivals as archives, that is, as “a visual historiographical device that uniquely refracts queer cultural memory and affects” (p. 158). Thus, he analyzes festivals’ curatorial practices and “visual architecture”—all those paratexts, such as posters, trailers, and programs, that constitute thresholds to the experience of the festival—to demonstrate how festivals create knowledge and discourses on sexuality. In particular, it is possible, through curatorial choices, to get a historical sense on “the evolution of LGBTQ identity politics” in film culture (p. 165). Moreover, through a close reading of festival trailers that use the technique of collage, Damiens discusses the “cyclical and delimited temporalities” contained within festivals (p. 167). Finally, he delves into the analysis of documentaries made by and about LGBTQ film festivals. These documentaries develop original formal strategies to tell the story of film festivals, paying particular attention to the experience of festival organizers and workers.

In chapter 5, Damiens takes into account linguistic choices and translation practices within festival catalogs to explore how film festivals articulate queerness at the local/global interface. As a space where we experience globalization, festivals not only create geopolitical imaginaries through their programming choices but also negotiate localized understandings of gender and sexuality with Western-centric modes of queerness expressed through the terminology of identity politics in English. Damiens’s major case study is the Montreal-based queer film festival Image+Nation, whose bilingual catalogs present slightly different versions of how the festival brands itself in French, with an insistence on cinephilia, and in English, with an insistence on identity politics. This split actually depends on and reflects the complexity of sexual subjectivities and of gay and lesbian movements in Quebec, historically influenced by Quebec nationalism and American identity politics. Damiens’s concluding chapter attests to the crucial role played by film festivals in projecting global/local sexual subjectivities. This perspective on how film festivals have historically contributed to an imagining of the world through programming choices resonates with Richards’s argument on how the hegemonic framework of homonormativity is intertwined with international power relations that influence programming choice in queer film festivals. In particular, Richards assesses how the HKLGFF programming is dominated by gay male content, overlooks local films, and makes very little use of Chinese subtitles.

Each book makes its own original contribution to the study of film festivals, drawing on a different set of concerns within queer theory. This is mostly apparent in the definitions that each author
provides of their own objects of study. Richards defines the queer film festival as “a series of film screenings that primarily focus on queer themes ... to provide a space of the exhibition of films that would otherwise struggle to secure an audience” (pp. 5–6). Damiens, by contrast, attempts to theorize the specific temporality of queer film festivals when he writes that “LGBTQ festivals ... in curating a wide assortment of gay and lesbian films,... fundamentally join queer subjects in and through time, visualize (or evidence) queerness, and entail a specific relationship to temporality” (p. 26). Thus, Damiens situates his research in conversation with queer approaches in critical theory that have challenged normative understandings of time, linear narratives, and progressive historiographical methods. Instead, Richards seems more directly concerned with the politics of representation of sexual and gender identities in films and consequently in film festivals, thus mobilizing queer social theory.

I see both books as critical pedagogical tools that will become core texts not only in specialized courses on queer cinema but also in larger classes in film studies and media industry studies. For example, Richards’s critical summary of the assimilation of gay and lesbian social movements’ oppositional politics within a neoliberal ethos, as well as the detailed discussion of the concepts of heteronormativity and homonormativity, can be used to explain, within the classroom, how the current visibility of gay and lesbian characters in mainstream media, often heralded as a form of progressive representational politics, does not always address the political dimensions of sexuality and does not challenge dominant gender models. Instead, Damiens’s chapter on “cruising the archives” offers fruitful methodological dilemmas about adapting existing methods and theoretical frameworks to unconventional objects of study, which will resonate with graduate students’ struggles in determining and conceptualizing their own methodologies (p. 40).

Overall, both books open the field of festival studies with original and productive methods that pay attention to those spatial and visual elements in festivals that, along with programming, are fundamental aspects constructing a vision of the world, and of gender and sexuality. Certainly, Richards’s examination of the material space of queer film festivals and Damiens’s analysis of visual architecture will require further investigation in terms of accessibility and disability. If, as both authors ultimately demonstrate, queer film festivals continue to provide safe space for queer communities, it is important to always think of the kinds of body that such spaces materially presuppose.
AUTHOR BIO

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