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Reflections on the Community-Based Film Festival

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Douarnenez Film Festival: Togetherness at the town's square

'Descending' Programming

The management logic of cultural businesses, across Europe at least, has created a situation where film festival programming is frequently extricated from the community. Planning for cultural events is done elsewhere, usually in a bigger 'hub',

* In this text, I am accounting personal experiences and impressions. Should the festivals that I refer to come to claim that they have a wider/different range of community involvement, this is perhaps the case. Just I have not had the opportunity to witness it.

and then delivered to the concrete venue in a descending fashion. Often this is because, in the logic of cultural management gurus like Richard Florida (2009) who believe that all creative ought to congregate in large centres, programming requires a certain 'expertise' that, in its turn, is concentrated around larger 'urban hubs'.

I can think of a number of examples of such 'descending' programming, but two come to mind prevalently. The first is the film festival in Thessaloniki, Greece's second city – a large international event that takes place in November. TIFFF (<http://www.filmfestival.gr>), in existence for about 55 years now, is largely programmed by a team based in Athens, the capital (and currently led by an artistic director, Dimtris Eipides, who is known to spend more time in Toronto than in Greece). The Athens team plan everything with the assistance of two-or three locals, and then descend to Thessaloniki just days before the opening of the festival, stay there for the duration of the event, then pack up and leave two days after the closing gala.

I have attended the festival several times now, yet have not been able to come close to knowing much of the community or understanding its dynamics: a pity, as Thessaloniki is the centre of an important multicultural area, and the home of the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the region (obliterated during the Holocaust). Indeed, one could say that people like me have come here for the films and the festival and if I wanted to understand the fabric of the city, I should plan a separate trip. And yet...My host, who is one of the veteran programmers, has never really spent any significant period of time in Thessaloniki, so whenever I ask a question about local life, he explains we ought to seek an answer from some of the local

people. He is an Athens-based expert; his knowledge of Thessaloniki has largely come from the media; all he knows locally are the routes between the hotels and the cinemas. And then, whilst he is there, he never really has time to explore. His routines alternate the hectic reality of the makeshift festival office with running between festival venues to introduce films, and at night he is usually busy entertaining foreign directors and critics until late night at one of the festival-affiliated taverns.

The other example of this ‘descending’ delivery of cultural content that is curated elsewhere is *goEast* in Wiesbaden, Germany (<http://www.filmfestival-goeast.de>), a specialist event of highest quality surveying Eastern European cinema that has been taking place since 2001 and is remarkably competently programmed. The team is based in the nearby cultural ‘hub’ (Frankfurt), and expands to a further network of regional scouts and consultants based in Berlin and across Eastern Europe. Once the programme is put together, the festival team + guests pack up and descend on Wiesbaden, where they spend a few April days socialising mainly with each other. The local community’s involvement takes place mainly in the context of Q and A sessions after the screenings.

Both these examples concern extremely successful festivals, programmed to the highest standards of expertise and of great international visibility. I admire the work of the programming teams and the excellence in the delivery of the event. Yet I cannot help feeling there is something profoundly wrong in the core of this model, where cultural content is curated and packaged remotely and is then simply ‘delivered’ to a receiving community. For such model to work smoothly it has to minimise and even eliminate involvement with the locals: because, to allow non-

professionals to mingle in the programming of a specialist event means jeopardizing its success.

However, nowadays (and especially in view the growing practice to stream content across borders), the films that show at a festival can be seen in multiple contexts. It is no longer necessary to go to a specialist film festival to see the films. More and more one goes to a festival for the socialising and the togetherness. The cohesive power of an event is in its ‘liveness’ (Harbord, 2009), and no longer in its expertly programmed content. ‘Like music festivals – Mark Cousins wrote – film festivals should realise that, especially in the age of online, it’s the offline communality of the film festivals, the fact that we are all getting together to do the same thing, that is part of the source of their joy.’ (Cousins 2012)



Douarnenez Film Festival: Debates Tent

Does 'Content' Need To Be Curated?

A few years back I was involved with a large international film festival that had fallen on the rocks. The CEO of the producing organization was wondering what was going on. The previous artistic director had quit half a year before the event, and the CEO had brought, as an emergency measure, a friend who was a seasoned producer of musical events. The newly appointed AD worked faithfully to ensure that the festival gets hold of all that was 'hot' on the circuit and, all in all, the programme that he ended up with was in no way worse than what other festivals of similar stature were showcasing that year. He had worked hard and, even within such a limiting timeframe, had managed to 'steer content' in the right direction and thus 'rescue' the festival.

But his effort to ensure the city and the festival were getting the same content that was the rage at other venues, remained unappreciated. On the contrary -- prior to the event there was intense word of mouth, all hostile. Rumors circulated locally, prophesizing a disaster. When the actual time for the festival came, local media eagerly engaged in publicly assassinating the curator, who saw himself compelled to resign his position soon after the ill-starred incident.

What was the problem? Wasn't it that, to program an event nowadays, one did not even need a curator, the CEO wondered? Wasn't it enough to check what was playing the 'circuit' and make the motions to bring it to our venue? What had gone wrong? After all, the AD had made all the right moves...And what he got in exchange? A self-fulfilling prophesy of failure...

On reflection, the key failure of the AD was that he had failed to connect with the local community. He had made sure to come out and honestly disclaim any interest in film early on. In lieu of professing love to cinema, he foregrounded his technocratic credentials – he knew all about the world of ‘new media’ and how to deal with ‘content’ and he was not going to pretend he did not particularly care for cinema. He had dropped retrospectives and did not bother with events that would bring in local filmmakers, and in general had passed by on all the little bells and whistles that make a film festival a venue for the local cinephile community to come together. Whilst based in town and not ‘descending’ from somewhere else, the man had managed to alienate the members of the local film society, who were all grumbling against him; in a city of half a million it does not take long for such grumble to reach local media (and it is usually the same local journalists who feed the national broadcast and print media).

Bottom line is that ‘content’ does not really need to be curated. The very same ‘content’ that the disastrous event featured could have been programmed by an involved artistic director to great acclaim –the praise, then, would not have been for the content as such, but for the curator’s emotional intelligence, for his appreciation of film and for his respect to local cinephilia.



Douarnenez Film Festival: Dinner meal at the communal kitchen

Togetherness at the Town Square in Douarnenez

Over the years, I have heard myself saying a number of times that my favourite film festival is the one in Douarnenez, a small sardine-fishing town in Brittany, France (<http://www.festival-douarnenez.com/>). Normally such statement triggers a puzzled reaction – most of my friends have never heard of the place and have no idea what would make a person like me, who has had the opportunity to visit all conceivable types of festivals, favour this one so much.

So what is it that makes Douarnenez' Gouel ar Filmoù stand out among all the others? Very simple – it is a festival entirely rooted in the community of this town's ordinary working people who have programmed and run every aspect of this remarkable event over its 39 years of existence. Registered as a community organisation in which locals participate on volunteer basis, the festival has several jobs that are paid for by the local council and are interchangeably occupied by locally-based individuals. One of

the programmers was Caroline Troin, formerly a local surfing instructor. Erwan Moalic, a key player, is a former schoolteacher and now, having stepped down, runs an organisation involved with promoting Breton cinema. Cristian Tudorache, another programmer, is an immigrant from Romania who previously sold eyeglasses in London (he met his Breton wife at the Glastonbury music gathering). Another member of the team a few years back was a young woman who had been taken on for on the job training, underwritten by a regional unemployment-reduction scheme.

Working on the general theme of ‘minorities’ the festival focuses on a different main theme each year – which theme precisely it will be, is decided at a general and widely attended meeting that takes place around the end of September (not long after the festival itself has closed at the end of August). Community members who plan to propose a theme at this meeting are supposed to have done some preliminary research and make a well-argued case aiming to persuade the others why would it be that the theme may be of interest for the community and the festival’s next edition. My informant, Stefan Moal, for example, had made such a pitch some years back, when the proposed (and successful) theme was to feature New Zealand’s Maori culture. Back then, he had to research and present information both on the minority itself and on the related films, then make a case to the group. When I visited the festival last summer, in 2013, people were already discussing the theme for 2014, and the people of the Indonesian archipelago seemed to be on everyone’s mind (not least, perhaps, as they had seen *The Act of Killing* at a community screening a few months earlier).

Once the theme is agreed upon by the group, it becomes an assignment for the team programmers, who get on to work – research, travel, networking, viewing, discussing. In the course of the year, they routinely resort to assistance from the wider

community. Each one of the people involved in programming capacity do this job for a few years and then step down; they all come from a variety of backgrounds, normally not in film, and identify as cinephiles.

The most wonderful time is the moment when, in August, festival guests and loyal audiences from around France and Europe, descend on the town. Please note – it is not the festival that descends to the locals here. Precisely the opposite – the festival, created and run by the locals, welcomes visitors from all over.

Almost everybody in town (pop. 15,000) is involved with the event at one point or another. The square turns into a perpetual site of networking and fun, filled with wooden tables and long benches, always occupied by people engaged in conversation with newly found friends. Under the nearby gazebo there are political debates, and then great music and dance until late at night. Everybody eats together on the main square – the cooking, done by community volunteers, is also done here, and the food evolves around traditional Breton recipes with fresh local produce and fish. The guests who return year after year mainly come from Paris and elsewhere – leftist intellectuals, anthropologists, documentarians. It is a perfect ‘third place’ (Oldenburg, 2001), marked by conviviality of highest order – politically engaged, lively, creative.

And, the best feature perhaps – if you are a guest you get to stay at the houses of local people. The town, a working class place that houses three well-known sardine cans factories (the famous brand *Le Connetable* is also based here; <http://www.connetable.com>), is not particularly rich in accommodation opportunities, so community members volunteer to open up their homes to visiting filmmakers,

actors, and other guests from around the globe. Needless to say, this is the way in which great friendships are forged. Please visit this photo album from the festival's 2013 edition (dedicated to the Gypsies, Europe's largest transnational minority), where you can see scenes of all the community's involvement in the event's preparation, delivery, and aftermath (including me in one of the photos☺)

<http://fr.calameo.com/read/002398266a2c6cef77fd9>



Douarnenez Film Festival: Party dance.

‘Invasion’ or ‘Birthright’?

As things stand at this point in time, the grassroots of a festival become more important than ever. Thus, when I was recently asked what is it that I believe is the most important trick to launching a successful new film festival, I heard myself replying: engaging closely with the local cinephiles. Indeed, I am planning to put my energies where my mouth is and have committed to lead the development of a new

festival in Perth (Scotland). If the funding application is successful, my first step will be to meet with the people from the local cine club and try talking them into getting a close involvement with all programming and management aspects.

This summer's Yerba Buena Center's initiative fits perfectly well in my line of thinking here. Joel Shepard's early resolution to 'not be the only curatorial voice' and his further thinking that extends from the 'original impulse but takes it to a deeper, different level' has resulted in the immensely enjoyable programme of this summer (2014). The wide-ranging tastes of local cinephiles – covering deliciously obscure ground, from Mexico through to Taiwan and Korea, from early films by Ophuls to documentaries, is an invitation to reach out, to get to know each other, to share, and, essentially, be alive together.

Shepard calls it a 'unique experiment in film curating' and the event has ended up with the title "Invasion of the Cinemanaics!" Bit why an 'invasion', I wonder? I would rather substitute this for 'Birthright'☺

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SIDEBAR

Well, I also want to share something else that is not precisely about the programming at Douarnenez. But, after all, the name of this journal is *EatDrinkFilm*, so I hope you will indulge.

In 2013, I was sent to stay at Stefan's – a 49 year-old who teaches Breton language at the University of Rennes and is also fluent in English. The three-story house had two refrigerators — one large and one small. The large one stood empty the whole time I was there. The small one only held the things we were eating for breakfast:

wholemeal French bread, Breton butter with large salt crystals, and confiture des Mures/Cerise Noir.

‘What are we going to eat tomorrow, Stefan?’, I would hear myself asking late at night. And he would answer: ‘We will see in the morning...’

Around 10 am, Stefan would go to the nearby market, and bring along whatever he had picked out of the catch of the day and some vegetables that he would use in preparing a meal later that day. The fresh fish would be placed in the fridge just for a few hours before it would be prepared and eaten, along with the tomatoes and the figs for the salad. The fridge would then stay empty again, till the next morning...