

**FILM FESTIVALS BEYOND THE FILMS:
GLAMOUR, STAKEHOLDERS, CORPORATES**

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GLAMOUR

A few years ago I had to stay overnight near Newark airport, before continuing an intercontinental flight into the US. At the hotel lobby I picked up a glossy magazine, which was published on the occasion of a Chinese film festival that was taking place locally. I wanted to see what was included on the programme. The magazine was mainly in Chinese and the only places where it switched languages was where it mentioned the English names of the celebrities in attendance and the brands advertised. It was full of glossy photos of beautiful young actors and actresses, posing in front of a makeshift ‘phot-opp’ wall that displayed the logos of a variety of brands that had sponsored the event. Then, there were many even glossier adverts. To my dismay, the magazine did not contain any explicit listing of the films that were playing at the festival, nor any schedule. It may well be that the films were mentioned, in passing, in the context of the commentary to the celebrities’ photos -- but it was in a language I could not understand.

No space in this magazine was dedicated to films as such. There were no stills from any films nor anything that would remotely resemble a film review. The magazine may have been published on occasion of a film festival, yet things were crystal clear: the film festival was merely the occasion. The real subject of attention was brand promotion – through celebrities and advertising – not film.

This episode, as drastic as it was, just confirmed things that I had already observed and commented on in my scholarship on film festivals over the past decade: If we want to understand the forces that drive film festivals and determine their specifics, it is not the films where we need to start with. In fact, as I have argued, in order to make meaningful pronouncements on the film festivals, we need to take the content out, separate the films, take them out of the equation, and focus on the container. In the past, I have used the metaphor of ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ to express this idea, maintaining that we need:

to study how the film festival structures and narrates itself, what are its components, what is the play of power between its participants and how is it re-enacted in the time and space of the festival and even beyond. Once such an understanding has been settled, it will lead us to further studies analysing how the festival inscribes itself into the context of its locality and how it insinuates itself into the global galaxy of other festivals. To employ a technological metaphor in this technological age, such examination focuses on the festival’s ‘hardware’ (venues, hub), and the ‘software’ (films, sidebars), as well as the ‘interface’ of its components (the coverage, the party). (Iordanova, 2013: 11).

In this plea, I am following in the footsteps of Andre Bazin who, as early as 1955, spoke of ‘the festival as religious order’ and called for a deeper exploration of the rituals and the tribal behaviour that came along with it (Bazin, 2010 [1955]: 14).

If I am to apply this approach to the magazine example I mentioned, the numerous photos of celebrities and the adverts were just another ‘software’ element in a context where the

ritualistic interplay of the sponsors' commercial interests were determining the 'interface' and were dictating the character of the festival as a showcase for building brand power. The films had somehow slipped out of attention and were relegated to the periphery. The shift of attention away from the films allowed for these other factors to be so clearly revealed, in this particular example.

Such unabashed focus on celebrities and brands at this small Chinese film festival in New Jersey is not limited to such insignificant one-off events, however. Very similar patterns can be observed – after some scrutiny – at much bigger and prominent film festivals. No magazine would omit the films if it is about covering the Cannes Film Festival. It is a fact, however, that the Cannes film festival photos that are published in mainstream media mainly focus on celebrities, and often come along with brand advertising (or commentary containing the names of designers celebrities are wearing). It is no coincidence that the most extended articles on Cannes are found in publications such as *The Financial Times*, which sends not only its film critic but also its fashion editor to the event – and it is a common occurrence for the article that discusses fashion and trends to take more square inches of the coverage than the commentary on film. Celebs and their dress and adornment, climbing red-carpeted steps, opening ceremonies, galas and brand-sponsored parties are as much elements of 'the festival as religious order' (Bazin) as the films.

If we are to unpack this, one good example related to Cannes would be the festival's relationship with the French jewellery brand Chopard. In 2014, Chopard crafted a new version of the award statuette, the Palme d'or, one that was made in 'fairmined gold' and that the festival has been handing over to winners since that 67th edition. Chopard's flagship store of at Place Vendome displayed a replica of the Palme' d'or on its central vaulted window.

Posters showing the new statuette were disseminated all over Paris. And whilst no reference was made to any films whatsoever, Chopard used this piece of politically correct PR to gain massive coverage in all luxury magazines and figured highly on the agenda in all media coverage that related to the festival. In this context, Chopard's behaviour (and gain) was particularly important for understanding the dynamics of the Cannes film festival as glamour showcase and at least as important as some of the high profile films that graced the screening schedule. It may well be that the new Palme d'or and the opening film, *Grace of Monaco* (Olivier Dahan), a similarly glamor-driven oeuvre starring Nicole Kidman, may have received more coverage in the media than the actual award-winner for that year, the Turkish film *Winter Sleep* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2014), which remains little known and seen. The premiere of *Grace of Monaco* was an opportunity for stars to feature Chopard jewellery; Nicole Kidman herself is known to have been a Chopard model on many other occasions. Thus, even if the event may be a *film* festival, the importance of the film is more or less of equal in weight to the presence of celebrities and the glamor-creating sponsorship and PR work of brands.

Cannes, of course, is the world's biggest and most prestigious film festival. It is based in France, a country which, historically and presently, is home to the art of cinema. Film art is in high esteem here and there is a long tradition of cinematic admiration by respecting and knowledgeable audiences. In such context, films never get completely obscured or overshadowed. An episode like the one I described above – where the films were simply left out of the coverage of the film festival for the sake of covering brands and celebrities – would simply be not possible.

But not all countries, and certainly not all festivals, have such tradition of veneration for cinema. The most lavishly financed and produced film festivals nowadays are based in the Arab world, and many are staged in places which do not have a long tradition or cinematic culture (see Iordanova and Van de Pier, 2014). In fact, places like Dubai and Qatar have only very limited audiences for film – but a great appetite for glamorous public events. So it is not a wonder that some of the most lavish film festivals took place here in the past decade, sponsored by the likes of BMW and Audi and luxury fashion brands.

I would like to zoom in on another festival where glamor and brands play a key role: The film festival in Marrakesh (Morocco), a sumptuously financed event that often features Arab or Indian cinema but also serves as playground for global (mainly French) brands and celebrities. The cinematic content is programmed almost entirely out of Paris, and a good range of films figure on the programme. Nonetheless, films are not particularly central to the show. Using the film festival as red-carpeted catwalk is key. This is revealed – for example – in a short video interview featuring bombshell Monica Bellucci who attended the festival in Marrakesh in 2012 – a year when the event was dedicated to celebrating Indian cinema. In coming to the screening of an Indian film, the actress is clearly arriving for a photo call. It is at this moment, when she is preoccupied with ensuring that her better side is turned to the camera and light works in her favour, that the Indian reporter accosts her and invites her to make statements on Indian cinema. She responds with bland lines like ‘Indian actors are famous all over the world’ and ‘I would love to come to India.’ When she is asked to name some of her favourite Bollywood stars, it is clear that she is not able to come up with any names and avoids answering by saying she loves ‘so many’ of them (see Singh, 2012). The festival may be about Indian cinema, but a celebrity like Monica Bellucci is not there for the

Indian actors nor for the films they star in – it is for the opportunity to be seen, impeccably groomed and made up, beautiful and desired.

STAKEHOLDERS

In order to understand the way a film festival operates, one of the first acts should be to switch the attention away from films. Films matter enormously, of course, but it is a wide range of other factors that must be scrutinised in order to understand what gives a film festival its distinctiveness. First and foremost, one needs to analyse the unique configuration of a festival's stakeholders. Then, one needs to study how the film festival structures and narrates itself, what its components are, what constitutes the play of power between its participants and how this is re-enacted in the time and space of the festival and beyond. Once a solid understanding of stakeholders configuration has been established, it can lead to further studies analysing how the festival inscribes itself into the context of its locality and how it insinuates itself into the global galaxy of other festivals.

Who are the stakeholders and what is the stakeholder configuration? In the case of film festivals these include sponsors, partners, board members, guests, audiences, venues, journalists, and so on. It is the specific stakeholder configuration, the relations between all players that take part in the festival and pursue different (and sometimes even seemingly incompatible) agendas, that largely determines what will be the selection of films, what will be the relative importance of the films in the general context of the event, which filmmakers will be invited/featured, what concurrent events will there be, what will be the social programme, the dress code, the accommodation and meals schedule for the event, the

marketing, the media coverage sought, and so on. All these elements, taken together, give the festival a unique profile and create the festival's 'narrative'.

Each film festival has a specific constellation of stakeholders; at each one of them the films, whilst a necessary component, are not the only definitive factor (and often not the most important one). Respectively, each one of the festivals narrates, writes itself in a specific way, and, to use Daniel Dayan's insightful approach – these narratives shape the festival as 'collective performance', defined by norms that are deployed and 'translated into behavioral sequences' (2013 [2000]: 47). Scrutinizing the stakeholders configuration, the rituals and the narratives - usually reflected in the rhetoric of the event, its promotion, programme, guests, coverage, as well as films - is an approach that allows us to see the full complexity of a film festival.

The 'glamor' type of film festival that is in the centre of the attention in this discussion roughly expresses the dream scenario of large corporate sponsors who are mainly interested in positive PR and high profile media presence that can translate in some tangible (and hopefully lucrative) results. Intangibles – such as films – are seen as auxiliaries. The stakeholder configuration of the 'glamour' festival – such as the Chinese glam event in New Jersey or the much larger glam event in Marrakesh -- is led mainly by corporate-savvy types who are behind the very idea of the festival. Their boards comprise of influential moneyed and/or networked individuals who sometimes may belong to film industry, but not necessarily and not only. The sponsors are large corporations who have readily entered partnership with the festival after careful calculation of the potential for significant returns in the future. The audiences are large and mainstream as the events take place at centrally-located theatrical chains (who often also partner with the festival). The programme evolves

mainly around what may be perceived as films of entertainment or blockbusting nature. The invitees may be directors but much more likely some glamorous (but uncontroversial) stars, as well as industry executives whose names no one knows but who are given star treatment nonetheless. The concurrent events m—which often upstage the screenings -- are mainly extensively choreographed parties, photo-ops, or high profile industry stage discussions, taking place at ostentatious venues and covered by heavy artillery mainstream news media, with cameras pointed at stars coming out of limousines and doing the catwalk or handshakes in the limelight. Accommodation is at top-end hotels and meals are at Michelin-starred restaurants (who may often be sponsors or partners). Glamour is of defining importance and the dress code is formal/high design fashion for the purposes of photo-ops, a quintessential cause of the event. The social programme is mainly parties as any talk on political issues or artistic matters is treated as boring. Professional PR agencies are often employed, and the publicity is through glossy brochures, dynamic web-sites, and precisely targeted press releases. The media coverage sought is high profile, and can more often than not be found within the fashion pages of newspapers or multinational lifestyle magazines.

RED CARPET: EMBRACED IN ASIA

I would like to shift the focus to some of the festivals that take place in Asia nowadays, as these are territories where the glamour stake holding in film festivals is particularly well revealed – in the context of booming film industries that are not affected by the Western austerity, such festivals are lavishly financed, often backed by corporations that have interests in film exhibition or real estate, or by tourist authorities.

Like many other Western inventions that have somehow run their course in the West itself, the red carpet fixture seems to be much more ubiquitously present at film festivals in Asia nowadays. In Europe, most festivals only roll out the red carpet over a short stretch just at the entrance of the main theatre, in view to provide photo opportunities in line with the tradition. It is only the larger festivals – those at Cannes, Venice and Berlinale that use it more substantially as they also command wider groups of accredited journalists who are not only covering cinema but also fashion and celebrity affairs. At Busan there is red carpet that runs on sidewalks all around the main festival venue, as well as on sidewalks around the malls where some of the films are screened. (Not all festivals in Asia use red carpet. Indeed, the carpet at the Tokyo International Film Festival, one of the most heavily corporate events on the circuit, is green in colour.)

Red carpet-type glamour has a much bigger role to play in the context of film festivals and related events that are being staged in the Far East and China, Bollywood and the Middle East. It is a situation where examples that have been first established on the film festival circuit around the Mediterranean – in places such as Cannes, Venice or Taormina, the glamorous town in Sicily – and in the context of the Academy Awards, are then transferred to these much newer festivals.

Another dimension of the film festival that is of a similar range and standing is the list of festival parties, a complex and hierarchically structured conglomerate with connotations to power and prestige. Parties are acknowledged to be of importance at all film festivals, even though this is still to be systematically researched. An article in *Business Week* dealing with the influential Sundance festival in Utah, for example, highlighted the issue of access to parties in discussing Christopher Ryan, ‘a stout man with thick eyebrows and a puffy black

parka' who roams the ski town of Sundance and is known as 'the unofficial ringleader of the Sundance party-circuit circus' (Marikar, 2014: 36). It pictured Ryan as the man who is in full control of the 400+-long party list of the festival that was initially 'a platform for emerging directors' but has since transformed into 'a frenzy of marketing activity and product launches.' Not wanting to leave the films completely out of the picture, *Business Week* had inserted, next to this article, a sidebar listing some of the films under the heading 'Yes, Sundance has movies, too' – a line that is pretty representative for the relationship between cinematic and other interests that intersect in the space of a film festival. Similarly to glamour, celebrity appearances and red carpet, the festival parties and their organisers pursue a variety of agendas that often have little to do with cinema and where the films are only functioning as the pretext of the gathering. At large film festivals, such as the Busan IFF in South Korea, for example – Asia's foremost film festival which is comparable to the largest events in Europe – being in possession of the Excell spreadsheet that lists all the parties taking place across the space of this two week-long 400+ movies strong festival, along with the contact numbers for the respective party organisers, is one of the most prestigious vantage points into the festival space, whatever kind of deal making one may want to pursue.

In some instances, particularly seen in Asia, the balance of stakeholders has gone out of proportion in favour of corporate or tourism interests, so much so that staging a festival has become a fine balancing act and often presents a challenge for those who take on the helm as artistic directors. One such example is the relatively new film festival in Macao, which launched in 2016 and suffered from staff walk-outs even before its inaugural edition. The festival's main sponsor is MGTO, the Macau Government Tourist Office, which is also coordinating the operations of casinos in the former Portuguese colony. For the second edition of the festival in 2017, a new artistic director was appointed and asked to work

closely with a managing director, who is a tourism specialist – a senior management structure that reflects the stakeholding. The artistic director would be presenting ‘a well-curated mix of international and local films,’ and would ‘bring together interesting filmmakers and guests, and make sure logistics run smoothly’ (Mitchell, 2017). The managing director would look after the non-cinematic aspects and interests. This set up is, in many ways, reminiscent to the one of the notorious Bangkok International Film Festival of 2007 that Thai film critic Kong Rithdee has written a fascinating exploration of, describing it as a story that ‘involves plunging the reader into swamps of rumours, scorn, management scuffles, confusing shifts of power, and incidents of shameful corruption,’ (Kong, 2010: 122). Among the multiplicity of factors that conspired to see the disastrous failure of Bangkok IFF, a stakeholding that leaned too much in direction of tourist interests whilst allocating peripheral standing to the films was of decisive and fatal importance.

CORPORATES

I would like to claim that the long standing association with glamor, red carpet, celebrity sightings is specific to film festivals, much more than any other arts festivals. It is perhaps linked to the status of film as popular culture where the celebrity supplied by film is linked to a much wider media (and advertising) exposure than the more modest types of celebrity and respect that other arts – like theatre, opera, ballet, music – create. This association with celebrity and celebration has been brought to the extreme, in China and elsewhere in Asia, as I will try to show next.

Writing about film festivals in China, Elena Pollacchi remarks that ‘if Cannes, Venice and Berlin continue to attract global stakeholders, this is less because of the somewhat variable

quality of their programming and more because they present profitable marketing opportunities' (Pollachi, 2017:47). These festivals, of course, have been originally established for the sake of cinematic art, and still present marketing opportunities predominantly in conjunction with film art. Other, newer and flashier festivals, have popped up around Asia, that present profitable marketing opportunities that are not so directly linked to cinema but are more in line with direct corporate interests. The absence of worthy films is not a concern in these contexts as such festivals are 'in love with power, prestige, and glamour' than with the art of cinema (Berry, 2013). As Elena Pollacchi remarks in regard to the Beijing International Film Festival, they are particularly concerned with the impact of 'majestic opening and closing ceremonies (which the festival lists as separate events with no connection to the opening and closing films' (2017: 38). Such ceremonies may appear as 'bombastic'/'visual feast' to the Western observer (Pollacchi, 2017: 40, 41).

The prestige associated with festivals may be capitalized on by corporations even in the absence of an actual event. An example in point is the language used in regard to a development of newly built high-rises in Tseung Kwan O in Hong Kong's New Territories, a prime real estate playground. This is known as LOHAS park in English, whilst locally it is more commonly referred to as 'sunrise Cannes'. It is the Cannes film festival that is being referred to by this nickname, not least because the area in question is located in the proximity of the territory of Shaw Studios in Clearwater Bay, a site linked to the glorious cinematic history of Hong Kong – the reference to 'Cannes' is only by association, and it functions as synonymous to glamorous life in the limelight (Tsui, 2017). It is a situation where the referential linking to the film festival does not have anything to do with the actual festival but with the idea of prosperous beautiful living. The world's leading film festival is thus indirectly deployed in assisting property speculation.

And indeed, there seem to be more instances where property speculation and film festivals go hand-in-hand in the context of Asia's building boom. An acclaimed documentary film, *Dream Empire* (2016, Denmark, David Borenstein), captured the scale of China's real estate growth and revealed the great extent that references to Western lifestyle (and glamor) are being used as part of the aggressive selling techniques deployed by developers in targeting their newly prospering clients. The film follows around the work of a small company based in a large Chinese city, which employs Westerners to take part in show promotions of new construction. Their participation is supposed to present the newly built communities as 'international booming cities' – whilst, in fact, the properties that are being promoted are often just remote high-rise clusters that will remain under-occupied or sometimes even turn into giant ghost cities, a by-product of China's massive economic growth. In one scene of the film a group of Western extras are asked to pretend they are living in one of the apartments and placed behind a glass wall – a young woman is instructed to wear a pink negligee and mainly be occupied with her make-up whilst a young man is dressed in house pyjamas, and handed in a glass of whisky and a cigar. These 'extras' are then looked at by Chinese buyers who have come for the open day to look at properties in the new development that is being promoted. The foreigners in the 'glass menagerie' are there to play to the stereotypes that Chinese imagination operates with about the West, mainly based on images found in advertising.

It seems that the film festival – one that comes with the red carpet, the extravagant gowns, the impossibly beautiful people, the photo calls -- somehow naturally comes as part and parcel of real estate promotions. Luxury properties can gain augmented value through the alleged

proximity of high profile cultural events where the new class of Chinese home owners may get the chance to rub shoulders with international celebrities from the world of cinema.

I am wondering to what extent a recent story – of the preparation of a high profile festival in China that was supposed to be the world’s largest and most prestigious one but never came into being at the end – is part of this phenomenon of corporate usage of film events? Backed by China’s powerful Dalian Wanda Group, a multinational conglomerate with stakes in a variety of businesses, the Qingdao International Film Festival, the first edition of which was supposed to take place in 2017, was a high profile undertaking that was promising to bring films, red carpet and stars into Qingdao, the town where Wanda was originally headquartered, and a place traditionally known for the eponymous beer (Tsingtao) brewed here. Preparations were of high profile, and the festival’s ambassador criss-crossed the globe engaging in high level negotiations, thus so the non-existent festival got lots of mileage out of the media publicity that reported on its alliances with partners such as the Academy Awards or Cannes and its retention of high profile Western advisors and promoters as consultants. Wanda Group’s position within the stormy political waters of China kept changing, however, and whilst it remained a powerful corporation (including film studio interests, but also interests in real estate) it transpired that, whilst basking in the publicity’s limelight, the corporation had never applied to the authorities to license a film festival. The hugely publicised event went into oblivion and is no longer mentioned. In the meantime, Wanda substantially enlarged its global luxury properties portfolio. Significant advances in real estate sales were made in Qingdao as well. In the summer of 2017, Wanda held a Qingdao Beer Festival, capitalising on the popularity of the city’s best known brand, for which many of the celebrities that had been enlisted for the film festival, made red carpet appearances.

To conclude, I would reference Ragan Rhyne's insightful remark that 'film festivals are of relevance well beyond the study of the circulation of cinema and cinephile communities' (2009: 136). In this instance, my focus was on matters of glamour and corporate interests – all aspects that we need to keep in mind when exploring the stakeholding configurations of film festivals.

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