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Telluride: A Bright Star in the Festival Galaxy

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- For those who cherish art cinema, Telluride Film Festival is America's best known and most celebrated film festival. It is the quintessential cinéphile film festival in the USA, and a prototype of destination festival in the galaxy of festivals. It has been spoken and written about a lot in popular media, yet it has never the subject of a monograph. This is the first study to explore Telluride's multi-faceted contributions to the cultural life of the United States and beyond.

- There are many books dedicated to film festivals, usually hefty volumes that go deep into history and offer a wealth of details about cultural diplomacy, films and filmmakers. This is perhaps the first book that is dedicated to a specific festival yet stays short and focused: a unique format that, I believe, has specific advantages.

These are the two features that make Jeff Ruoff's book special. It makes new research material public and, in that, it contributes to a new understanding of a venerated cultural institution. It presents all this in a new format that makes it easily adaptable to various contexts.

A prototypical cinéophile/destination festival?

Although the Telluride Film Festival started small in 1974, its ambitions were grand. Co-founded by people professionally engaged with art cinema exhibition, distribution, and preservation, the festival's standards were set high. Global film stars descended into tiny Telluride, Colorado (population then 1,000) for a four-day celebration of film art, and then kept coming back, bringing along more and more film people. Sticking to its own idiosyncratic model, which dispenses of such traditional festival rituals as red carpets, competitions, juries, press conferences, photo calls, and rigid accreditations, and which keeps the programme unannounced so that it is a surprise to audiences who have to come trusting, the Telluride team promoted an idealist, 1970s egalitarianism among attendees. Yet the festival became one of the most prestigious events of its kind. Ruoff discusses how this all worked over the forty years of the festival's existence.

In the early days Telluride would show only a handful of movies, screening just one film at a time, so that everybody present could see the same film and discuss it, a perfect platform for cinéphiles to bond. The festival recognised the importance of venues, and so it capitalised on the restored vintage Sheridan Opera House, and later on in other specially built venues. Its curatorial practices stood for continuity in film art and encouraged a dialogue between old and new films. Telluride screened many repertory, classic, and silent films, proportionally a much higher percentage than any other festival in the world in the 1970s. This highly acclaimed approach triggered a revival of the interest in film heritage which eventually led to the creation of specialized festivals such as the celebrated Pordenone Silent Film Festival in Italy (founded in 1982) and the acclaimed Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, Italy (1986) – both of which have since become top destinations of choice for global cinéphiles.

Cannes, Berlin and Venice may be the main festival destinations for industry professionals. Telluride, which has no market attached and no official business section, was the first cinéphile ‘destination’ festival in North America where the majority of its attendees would travel to from out of town. Other American festivals of the era – such as the San Francisco International Film Festival (founded 1957), the New York Film Festival (1963), the Chicago Film Festival (1964), and the now defunct Filmex in Los Angeles (1971) – were principally attended by their native, urban audiences. In its early years, the Toronto International Film Festival (1976) exclusively catered to local audiences, too; still today, the vast majority of attendees at the Montreal World Film Festival (1977) are locals. The success of Telluride, which showed it is possible to attract influential and attentive audiences to far flung

locations, lay the foundation for another out-of-the-way destination festival in the Rocky Mountains, Sundance, founded in 1984 in little Park City, Utah (population then under 4,000).

And even though Telluride has never spelled out any specific business agenda or industry-related ambition, Ruoff shows that it is a festival that has got more clout and leverage with industry than many much bigger festivals around the globe.

In this, Telluride is unique. Indeed, it is not a traditional ‘business festival’ in that it does not do business the way Cannes, Busan, and Toronto do, nor is it a typical ‘audience festival’ in that it does not serve local, largely non-professional audiences. Yet it is a key destination on the festival calendar, attended by many industry heavyweights and adored by the audience it has developed, a highly cultured and devout group of sophisticated cinéphiles that keep coming back season after season.

Any number of cinéphile festivals – which have no business components at all – are themselves destination festivals (Pordenone, the Festival of the Midnight Sun in Sodankylä, Finland). They are attended by traveling cinéphiles, filmmakers, perhaps critics, but not by studio executives, exhibitors, distributors, and other professionals. Even the New York Film Festival is principally a metro-festival for people who live in New York City. But NYFF, commonly regarded as the most influential festival for U.S. film culture – in the critical sense and closely linked to *Film Comment*, the official publication of the Film Society of Lincoln Centre which gives NYFF a broad reach among American film critics and cinéphiles – takes place in one of the media hubs of the world, with a highly influential audience of local tastemakers.

Telluride, for its part, is a destination festival par excellence – and one that has

become a destination for the industry set without formally engaging in business. By dint of close ties to Hollywood, Telluride is attended (or closely watched) by art cinema distributors and by members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and it has thus become an event on a par with Venice, Toronto and other mega-festivals. Telluride does all this without the industry trappings that turn other film festivals into complex organisations marked by detached corporate style. It remains an audience-centric cinéphile festival, with one foot firmly planted in the industry. Its presence has transformed the fortunes of its remote location, bringing economic growth and prosperity. In that, Telluride appears to be the ultimate illustration of what James English has termed ‘economies of prestige.’ It shows how proper attention to cultural values can have transformative power and impact.

A prototypical festival book?

It was at breakfast, over true espresso at a conference in Italy in 2014, on a breezy and glorious November day, that I persuaded Jeff Ruoff to write this book and thus explore, for a first time, what I now believe could become a model for other writing on individual festivals.

I had read or seen him present some of his work on Telluride, which I knew he had been engaged with for quite a few years, so I tried to communicate my view that he actually had enough to offer an authoritative book on the festival – a major cultural event in the United States, which nonetheless had not been explored and written systematically about so far. It was in the context of this conversation and in its aftermath that I gradually realised that it was not only a discussion about this specific

book, but also on the topic of what I now believe is the most suitable format for books on film festivals.

I had read a number of books about Cannes, some on Berlinale and Venice, a book on Toronto, and I had seen many other hefty volumes about other festivals. Usually they were serious tomes with plenty of historical detail. The people who wrote them were historians who loved their sources and who would go into great detail and offer a wealth of material about the context, and about films, guests, and juries. Other festival books, usually written by journalists, were picking selected topics only and were more engaged in trying to give some sense of the feel of the festival. Neither of these kinds of books could be used, however, for the study of festivals in the context of academia, and neither was particularly instrumental in assisting our understanding of the festival galaxy at large. Unlike these books, Jeff Ruoff's study on Telluride, I believe, directly works toward the purpose of understanding festivals. In a way, it represents the ideal model of what a festival book should be in order to be of interest not only to academics, but also to students, journalists, managers, and curators – both at film festivals and beyond.

The following features, in my view, make it a model to follow when writing on other festivals:

First of all, a book like this should be short. A short book is easy to read, easy to teach, and easy to embrace. It is accessible and elegant. The argument is spelled out in a clear and captivating manner. Telluride, of course, could provide the material for a

huge volume, and it surely will – one day. However, the advantages of having a concise and yet analytical study of it today are discernible.

Secondly, the book is structured around snapshots. Rather than extolling the history of the festival (now over forty years long), the book focuses on select points in its timeline – in this instance, the inaugural edition, and then another one, its 40th anniversary in 2013 – which provide abundant material for analysis and allow the author to make important observations on Telluride’s exclusive features and contributions.

Third, it brings together interviews with analysis that draws on extensive references to research into film festivals in general, thus integrating the points of view of festival insiders (programmers, organisers) and outsiders (users, theorists) in a truly fruitful manner. The interviews with the Pencses and Tom Luddy provide excellent primary source material for reflection about key curatorial and management decisions. These are then enriched by the analysis, informed by the author’s superb command of theoretical and historical knowledge on film culture at large.

Fourth, the analysis takes the focus away from the films and concentrates, instead, on matters of organisation, venues, promotion, audiences, and stakeholders. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, 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 these other factors that must be scrutinised in order to understand what gives a film festival like Telluride its distinctiveness.

And last but not least, the short third chapter here offers a succinct outline of the specific features of the festival and thus outlines its incomparable physiognomy. It is a superior distillation of all claims made in the book and of all factual material that is presented here.

If we had more short and elegant books like this one that follow the template I just outlined and offered such lists of specific features about more festivals, we could navigate the festival galaxy with more ease.