Coming Soon to a Festival Near You:
Programming Film Festivals
edited by Jeffrey Ruoff
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Book review by Will Fech

After a long hibernation on the periphery of cinema scholarship, film festival studies has recently enjoyed a surge of activity. Groundwork laid in the 1990s paved the way for influential books on the subject, including a series of *Film Festival Yearbook* anthologies, Marijke de Valck's *Film Festival: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007), and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong's *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (2011). With swarms of fests cropping up globally, the time seems right for new lines of scholastic inquiry. *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals* may not inject radically new insights into the field, but it does expand its contours in valuable ways. Editor Jeffrey Ruoff, Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Dartmouth University, has compiled a healthy bounty of essays and interviews focused on the sociocultural implications and behind-the-scenes hair-pulling associated with film festival programming. The result is a compelling if uneven anthology that will hopefully spark additional dialogue into this burgeoning field.

Festivals disseminate national culture and political dialogue as well as regional and local history. They also serve as alternate outlets for media exhibition and distribution. *Coming Soon*, then, has to move beyond this terrain and offer new perspectives. Ruoff posits early on the idea of the festival programmer as "auteur, critic, [and] historian" (7). No longer mere task-master cinephiles hidden away in screening rooms, programmers actively shape cinematic history and media discourse. Variables such as which films to screen, what events to host, and which stars to coax into appearing all fall to the programmer (at least to the extent that distributors and sales agents allow). In this light,

festival programming demonstrates variations of artistic intent. Ruoff thinks that "[programmers] … fulfill the role of cultural gatekeepers, who triage world film production, guiding audiences through the multitudes of movies produced annually" (3). It's easy to agree with this, so the real journey readers take is witnessing the nuances and intricacies that Ruoff bases his conclusion on. This is unfurled over thirteen chapters organized into three somewhat porous parts: "Finding Audiences for Films," "Finding Films for Festivals," and "Programming Identity and Themed Festivals."

The growing impact of programming is put in the context of how radically festivals have evolved over the decades. *Coming Soon's* opening chapter, written by de Valck, offers a survey of these changes, detailing the three major phases of festival history. I'll outline these periods briefly since much of the book hinges on this narrative. The first phase, stretching from the 1934 Venice festival (the world's first) to the upheaval at Cannes '68, saw festivals as extensions of European-style cultural showcasing. Programming was left to national government committees who submitted films which painted pretty domestic pictures at a time when pre- and post-World War II nationalism muscled artistic concerns out of festival line-ups. Predictably, filmmakers and critics grew tired of such interference that did not embrace formal experimentation or political critique.

It took until the late 1960s for radical change to occur in festival programming. In this second phase, festivals began organizing themselves not according to government mandates but to cinephilistic beliefs in artistic expression and political obligation. The Pesaro Film Festival, an Italian fest founded in 1965, helped change the game in two ways: it did away with passive acceptance of government-sanctioned films by only selecting works thought to be of high artistic or political merit; and it opened space for festivals to host discussions, publish essays, and invite academics, critics, and activists to participate in festival events, offering "a rich discursive context in which cinema could flourish as an intellectual and cultural passion" (30).

The third and current phase of programming according to de Valck is characterized by an institutionalization of the festival circuit. Since the 1980s, filmmakers and

programmers have recognized the alternate distribution networks contained in festivals, so niche studios specifically make "fest films" that have few prospects outside of this network. Festival directors have taken more initiative to connect with marketers, financiers, and policymakers to handle an industry increasingly reliant on commercialism. The standardization of the circuit means that festivals are ravenous to host premiere screenings and gala events in competition with other festivals.

This history may be old hat for festival scholars, but it is useful for placing the remaining chapters in manageable contexts. A topic like festival programming deserves varied methodologies and geographic foci, and *Coming Soon* generally delivers, combining national surveys, up-close analyses, and intimate accounts from programmers. Unfortunately, not all of Ruoff's chapters fit their category or even have much to do with programming. The first section, for example, is meant to detail how festivals court audiences by adjusting to shifting demands of a vast mediascape. Though Marcin Giżycki's chapter on how animation festivals have adapted over the years suits this bill, Gerald Peary's chapter, "Memories of a Film Festival Addict," which recounts memorable anecdotes from a lifetime of festival-hopping, is fun but seems to have wandered in from a different anthology. Things get interesting with James Schamus's breakdown of how much a studio shells out for a ritzy red carpet gala at a major festival; his number-crunching may not be a direct line to programming, but he makes valid points about how such galas are worth their weight in television ads studios would otherwise pay for. His conclusion emphasizes how programmers can shape the marketability of movies in the "now" currency that festivals trade in. Though fascinating, this and Peary's chapter point to a drawback with the anthology: at times the distinction between festivals and festival programming becomes fuzzy, not because they aren't different things, but because the essays veer into general dialogue of the festival experience instead of pointed commentary on programming itself.

But the book settles down in its last two sections. The second portion splits time between surveys of national and local festivals, and first-person accounts from festival programmers. Though scholars have downplayed how festivals craft cultural identity in

recent years owing to our "post-national" world, Toby Lee's entry on the Thessaloniki Film Festival offers a compelling counterexample. Lee studies Greek filmmakers' boycott of the 2009 event as a means to determine how different actors used the festival to contest their perceived cultural statuses. Her study binds the festival to Thessaloniki itself and organizers' attempts to showcase the city's locality in opposition to Athenian hegemony, which had encroached on the festival's programming. Meanwhile, Gönül Döbmez-Colin's chapter moves the reader southeast to Turkey, where he reviews how festivals have nurtured film culture in a country lacking film culture and burdened by stringent censorship practices.

Perhaps the biggest draw to *Coming Soon* is its personal accounts from programming insiders. Richard Peña, director of the New York Film Festival since 1988, ruminates on the challenges facing programmers, including charges of elitism and competition with other festivals. Also, Ruoff sits down with Telluride co-founders Bill and Stella Pence to ask pertinent questions about their festival's famously eclectic program, which combines revivals, tributes, and premieres from several time periods and geographic areas in a process they liken to montage. In contrast to this overview, Zoë Elton, in surely the most fun chapter in the book, shares a breakdown of 24 hours in her life as program director at the Mill Valley Film Festival. Her tales of jetting between screenings and keeping tabs on Uma Thurman (the recipient of a tribute) help break up any stuffy scholastic monotony in the collection.

The closing batch of chapters focuses on identity and themed festivals designed to grant space to those underrepresented in mainstream media. This section, perhaps most familiar to scholars, includes close-analyses of the Asia-Pacific Film Festival, New York African Film Festival, and the Hiroshima International Animation Festival, along with a survey of LGBT-programmed festivals. It's nice to see these contributors call out programming strategies that homogenize or essentialize the groups that themed festivals purportedly showcase. Skadi Loist, for example, argues that "queer programming strategies" would at their best program mixed, non-essentialist line-ups that avoid "one-dimensional target groups" of LGBT audiences (166).

Festival aficionados will glean plenty from *Coming Soon*. The combination of macro- and micro-level approaches is illuminating, and the chapters blend peeks behind the curtain with critical analyses. The anthology offers a varied picture of programming, but one omission deserves mention. In our participatory world, where television viewers vote singers off of competition shows, it may be only a matter of time before major festival programmers cede some authority to audiences to determine what films should be screened. *Coming Soon* would be stronger if a chapter was devoted, say, to audience programming in the age of online film festivals. (Some contributors hint at this development but it's never fully explored.)

Overall, however, *Coming Soon* is a worthwhile collection on the history and present state of film festival programming. Ruoff and his contributors manage to configure programmers as influential agents in the creation of cinema discourse, a conclusion that will be exciting to monitor in the field's unfolding future.

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