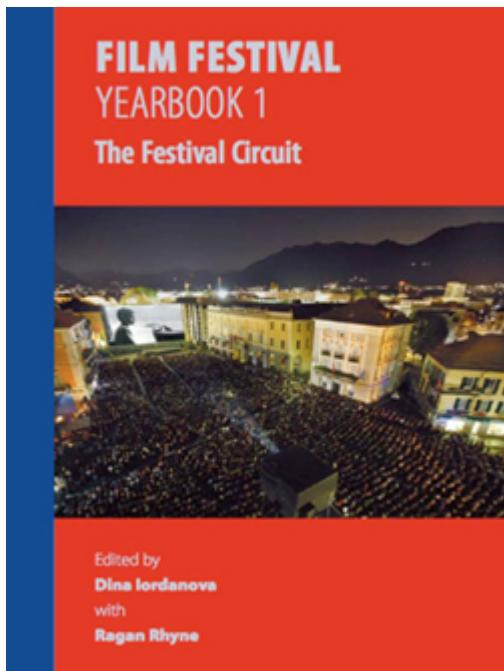


Journal Title: *Wide Screen*
Vol 1, Issue 2, June 2010
ISSN: 1757-3920
URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>
Published by Subaltern Media, 17 Holborn Terrace, Woodhouse, Leeds LS6 2QA

BOOK REVIEW

FILM FESTIVAL YEARBOOK 1: THE FESTIVAL CIRCUIT

KUHU TANVIR



Pages: 225. Price: \$25 (on Amazon)
Publisher: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2009
Series Editor: Dina Iordanova
Issue Editors: Dina Iordanova, Ragan Rhyne

Despite its foray into other disciplines, film studies has been oddly quiet and somewhat insufficient when it comes to film festival studies. With a healthy give and take between film studies and cultural studies, it is indeed curious that even though film festivals have been around for nearly eighty years and that film theory has been around for nearly half a decade, the discipline has had little to say about film festivals. This is why Dina Iordanova's series, The Film Festival Yearbooks, brought out by the University of St. Andrews, is a welcome addition to the discipline. The first issue in this series is titled *The Festival Circuit*, it is jointly

edited by Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne.

The editors, along with nearly every one of the fifteen contributors to the first issue of the *Film Festival Yearbook* addresses this gap in film studies. Despite a move towards studying exhibition and institutionalization of art—museum studies and the recent work on multiplexes being cases in point—the study of film festivals has thus far been limited to case studies of individual festivals, often comprising only organisers' reports. It is not

the aim of this project to discredit this methodology since the curatorial input in a festival is a key way of understanding it and its role in shaping appreciation for cinema. It is instead, to provide a more comprehensive approach to festival studies, one where empirical data, and organizational narratives come together with an attempt to theorise the very idea of film festivals. As the editors put it, "...while relying on individual case studies, (this volume) will foreground theoretical concerns at the intersection of arts management, cultural policy and film studies," (Rhyne, Iordanova: p2). In other words, there is an attempt to understand the role festivals can and do play in terms of providing access to films from across the world, and thereby in shaping taste and promoting a wider interest and potential in film studies and in a completely different strain, also in film commerce.

The first issue of this series focuses on The Festival Circuit. It is an interesting choice to begin the volume with this section that explores why this aspect of film studies has received inadequate attention, by providing a study of the supposed network that festivals are a part of. The argument goes against looking at film festivals as one coherent circuit, but rather "as an international cultural sector linked by a common economy of public and private subsidy," (Rhyne: p9). It is striking that the volume begins with a challenge rather than going the usual way and beginning with providing a base like 'What is festival studies'. It acknowledges that however inadequate the discipline, there are popular perceptions regarding festivals – as sites that promote world cinema, as circuits of alternative distribution, and as exhibitions that function on a non-profit model etc to name a few. While in certain cases this may be true, it is by no means the only aim and function of film festivals. Tracing a history of film festivals (the first one was held in 1932 by Benito Mussolini in Venice), Rhyne works towards examining the various forces and agendas that go into the making and funding of a film festival. "From the beginning, the festival was simultaneously a site of nationalist articulation, a forum for international relations, and a function of the commercial cinema market," (p11). Iordanova's piece in this section takes Rhyne's argument forward by raising questions about what is the priority for film festivals – is it to provide a platform for screening and distributing alternative cinema, or is it overwhelmed by the demands of the funders (the State being primeval in this regard). While the editors of this issue convincingly argue against the notion of a united network that binds film festivals in terms of aims, policies and limitations, Janet Harbord, whose short piece reads film festivals as events where time is central, argues a strong case for appreciating the cycle that film festivals are a part of. Harbord bases her argument on continuity—where a communication with one another, a network of global understanding is inherent in the planning and consumption of a film festival. The three opening arguments and the people who make them bring me back to why it is an interesting choice to keep this section as the opening – perhaps because it isn't the opening section of just a book, but rather of the first installment of an ongoing project. It isn't a one-stop text book, it is, at least in this first issue, a process of laying all cards on the table. The first three papers bring together people who have been and continue to be committed to the field of festival studies, and they show themselves in debate. There are, like I mentioned earlier, perceptions that have been challenged by providing newer interpretations, but there is also a review by a person like Harbord, who is one of the most cited scholars in this volume, of the fundamentals of the network of

film festivals. It encourages the reader to enter head on into the debate, instead of going through a foundational lecture on The Field of Festival Studies, which is not ignored in this volume, and is kept right at the end (section four) as an essential, but not as an introduction.

Once the opening argument regarding the fluid and multifarious nature of the structures and networks of film festivals has been made, it becomes necessary to examine individual case studies to draw certain observations and conclusions. The range of festivals covered in this section is wide, including the Annecy International Film Festival and Market (Charles Clemens Ruling), the New York Film Festival (Rahul Hamid traces its early years and examines its urban, bohemian impulse), Toronto Women and Film Festival (Kay Armitage discusses the linkages between film history and women's film festivals), among others that examine film festivals from Hong Kong (Rebu Cheung), China (Ma Ran) and Africa (J. David Slocum). Through the variety of issues explored in this section, once again, the aim seems to be to present the picture with some latitude. Issues of gender link to those of archival absences and the eventuality for the presence of women's films and scholarship on it in the discipline. This connects directly to the idea of corporotising a film festival and thereby the many agendas funding agencies (including the State) can implement through this forum. While Iordanova's work is at a larger, theoretical level, Cheung's work brings the argument down to the local when she examines the Hong Kong International Film Festival which was funded by the state for 27 years until it underwent the process of corporatisation. Meanwhile, Slocum's paper works towards an argument of how film festivals operate and are used to present certain ideas about culture, and to be more specific, a national culture.

Anecdotal accounts by festival programmers, journalists and theoreticians bring about a cross-section of opinions and issues at hand in festival studies, reemphasizing the urgent requirement for a project like this and its place not just in film studies, but also in allied fields. The third section is a combination of bringing to fore the contemporary developments in film festivals—in terms of technology or exhibition and distribution. The methodology of this section is of keenest interest to me, in particular the archival document produced by Nick Roddick of *Sight and Sound*. Not only does this bring in the perspective of a serial festival hopper (subtly addressing the enormous number of film festivals there are out there that journalist have access to), but it does so by means of collecting his columns from different film festivals. Perhaps consciously, this piece functions also as raw evidence or research material on journalistic approach to cinema. It thereby embraces a very rich and essential part of the archive available to tap into.

The last section, like I mentioned earlier, is where the editors have housed Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist's overview of film festival studies. It covers ground from the tasks and potentials of the discipline, how to approach film as a work of art, how to understand the 'economic continuum from production to distribution', notions of structure, of reception, of circuits, different regions and a lot more. The same paper also carries formidable bibliographies and reading lists (as part of the text of the paper, not just as end notes that few people read) that can come to the aid of researchers.

The first volume in this series has already made its presence felt in a field that needed it most desperately, and it is encouraging to note that the second issue of the series *The Film Festival Yearbook 2: Film Festivals and Imagined Communities* has recently been published. Edited by Dina Iordanova along with Ruby Cheung, the second issue takes forward the promise made in the first one.