United Slates:
The Evolution of the American Film Festival System

By

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Introduction

In season 2 of HBO Max's *Gossip Girl* reboot, the episode "Y Lu's Mamá También" finds the wealthy and well-connected young New Yorkers at a new type of event, rather than the galas, debutante balls, and art gallery openings where they typically orchestrate scandals and reveal secrets. Teenage cinephile Aki, whose phone password is "2046" after the eponymous Wong-Kar Wai film, volunteers at the Tribeca Film Festival, where he flirts with an older film student and moderates a Q&A, and the other main characters converge at the festival for various reasons ranging from celebrity hunting to forcing public reconciliation with an unsupportive actress parent. Like most environments in *Gossip Girl*, the Tribeca Film Festival is little more than a spectacular setting that facilitates the plot structure. But its utility as shorthand for a major public event speaks to the familiarity of film festivals in American pop culture, just like Lisa Barlow's self-branding as the "Queen of Sundance" on *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City* or social media trends like the Taco Bell Film Festival.[1] In the 1940s, festivals started as showcases for national artistic accomplishments on an international stage. Since that time, festivals have endured and proliferated around the world enough to establish clear associations of celebrity, promotional opportunities, and an exciting sense of ephemerality.

While prominent American festivals are among the most frequently referenced in popular culture, the range of film festivals in this country extends far beyond the most familiar events, and even smaller festivals receive a share of attention. A number of independent films and other media have satirized the ambitions and failures of the festivals that lack strong industry representation or recognizable guests. In Dennis Hopper's final posthumous film, *The Last Film Festival* (Linda Yellen, 2016), a Hollywood producer, director, agent, and actor, among others,

[1] Brianna Wellen, "What is the Taco Bell Film Festival? And who is behind it? An investigation," The Takeout, January 24, 2022, https://thetakeout.com/what-is-the-taco-bell-film-festival-2022-1848398824.

travel to smalltown Ohio for the O'hi Film Festival, the only event that accepted a trouble project. At this fictional festival, films screen in rundown school classrooms, mostly to small, sleeping, or entirely absent audiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a film with the ambition to reflexively ridicule festivals found little success with them, and critics were similarly unkind. *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Sheri Linden wrote, "The winks at showbiz desperation and pompousness range from the tired to the paltry as the glamour contingent meets the wannabes."[2] Documentaries have also critiqued the contemporary American film festival landscape, with *Official Rejection* (Paul Osborne, 2009) exploring the immense challenge of finding meaningful business opportunities for new filmmakers at festivals and *Narrowsburg* (Martha Shane, 2019) highlighting a memorable case of fraud enacted, in part, through an upstate New York festival.

Regardless of their perspectives on the viability and value of festivals, these examples and countless others point to the dynamic breadth of the American film festival system, even if the opportunities offered by such events vary dramatically. From red-carpet events with global coverage to community gatherings supported by local sponsors, not every festival has the same impact or purpose, although they all perform some function for the films and filmmakers they include – even if the measurable business outcomes pursued by independent filmmakers like those of *Official Rejection* remain elusive. Many different types of festivals happen in the United States every year, mostly produced by independent organizations. Scholars such as Marijke de Valck have detailed how festivals began as national showcases for film hosted in glamorous European cities[3], but how did they expand to include small, local events that lack the broader

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[2] Sheri Linden, "'The Last Film Festival': Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 30, 2016, *https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/last-film-festival-review-931397/.*

[3] Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

attention and coverage that marks international film festivals? How did a seemingly stable system emerge in the United States, an environment with little consistent government support for the arts? Are there researchable factors that contributed to the emergence of distinct circuits within this system? And what do the various types of festivals offer films and filmmakers that other methods of independent distribution and exhibition do not?

This project aims to trace the evolution of the American film festival system with the many shifts that have led to the contemporary situation, addressing the origins and features of an important set of festivals with substantial connections to the mainstream film industry and festival models that have proven influential. Festivals perform unique roles in the exhibition landscape by presenting films in a context marked by discourses of discovery and quality, boosting the profile of films and filmmakers by programming them, but also through their critical reception and the distribution of awards. The American festival system includes globally recognized events like Sundance and Telluride, but it also includes hundreds of smaller festivals that rarely enjoy attention beyond their local audience and press. In this project, I analyze specific forms of festivals that proliferated and became prominent in the United States, in addition to major examples that influence the rest of the system. American avant-garde and experimental film festivals, while a fruitful object of study for an important area of film culture, are not the focus here. Instead, I consider festivals that have some connection, even if sometimes tenuous, to the industry and, more importantly, to each other. In other words, I am interested in the system's internal connections (between festivals) and external connections (between festivals and the industry). In individual case studies, I explore how these events are produced and presented to potential audiences, sponsors, filmmakers, and other stakeholders.

Specifically, I intend to examine how festivals balance financial pressures, inside a system with little government or institutional support for the arts, with other goals. All festivals are arts organizations that seek to present films outside of ordinary circumstances, and many have additional political or activist stances. The precarity that these events endure and the financial imperatives required to exist are particularly evident in the *production* and *self-presentation* of festivals, so I emphasize those factors throughout as a way of focusing my analysis of the events. Production shows the challenges of creating a festival in this environment, and self-presentation often reveals tensions between the needs for continued financial stability with artistic goals. I do not intend to set up a dichotomy between artistic films and commercial films, as commercially inclined films like genre works demonstrate great craft. At the same time, festivals realistically specialize in films that often have a more limited audience than mainstream American releases, introducing a sometime difficult dynamic for festival organizers as they need a large enough audience to financially survive while often presenting films that may challenge a local audience. Various roles and stakeholders are involved in these events, including organizers, volunteers, attendees, filmmakers, distributors, sponsors, and industry guests. I focus here on decisions and strategies of organizers in producing a festival and framing it for the stakeholders involved.

The majority of film festivals are locally created, planned, and managed, unlike many mainstream film exhibition practices that are organized across different locations, such as theater chains. This quality creates immense variety in almost all aspects of film festivals, from the organization and programming of the events to their size and space. Film festival studies has grappled with how to consider this cultural phenomenon that is not formalized or regulated, but instead highly variegated and localized. This challenge has led to an emphasis on case studies in

the scholarship, with relatively few projects that address relations between festivals or festivals within a larger environment. Scholarship about film festivals and the film industry more broadly lacks historical analysis of American film festivals as a whole system that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. This project traces the evolution of the American film festival system through the development of significant festivals and types of festivals, with an emphasis on the production of festivals and their self-presentation.

I argue that the various categories and circuits of festivals in the United States developed to serve the needs of different types of filmmakers and audiences, while also attempting to replicate the functions of globally recognized international events in new, often localized contexts, leading to complex negotiations over priorities, responsibilities, and ownership. In my case studies, I consider the goals that motivated the creation of festivals and what factors contributed to their viability as new events that would often last for decades. In all, I examine how a seemingly stable set of major festivals and replicable models emerged since the early 1960s by exploring moments of invention and crisis, ultimately establishing a vast system that serves various functions for films that screen at festivals and the industry more broadly.

My interest in this topic stems, in part, from my initial experiences attending film festivals. As a college student in Birmingham, Alabama, in 2010 in 2011, I went to screenings at the Sidewalk Film Festival in the city's downtown theater district, where I watched new independent narrative films and documentaries by notable emerging filmmakers like Joe Swanberg and Adam Wingard. At that time, Birmingham had no year-round arthouse cinema, and the mainstream multiplexes rarely showed films outside of major Hollywood releases. In this context, it was a novel experience to join enthusiastic, engaged audiences in packed venues to watch new films like *Project Nim* (James Marsh, 2011), an unsettling documentary about

chimpanzee experimentation, or Swanberg and Wingard's mumblecore sex comedy *Autoerotic* (2011). While I was familiar with the names of major film festivals like Sundance and Tribeca, I was surprised that many of the same films showed at a festival in a small city like Birmingham that had a dedicated following of its own. Based on my experiences at Sidewalk and other regional festivals I later attended like the Wisconsin Film Festival and the True/False Film Festival, I became intrigued by festivals' role in providing new independent films to audiences across the country, especially at events that received little national press coverage but provided their communities with access to films that otherwise would not receive theatrical screenings in the area. This specific interest remains at the root of this project.

As I read the work of festival scholars including Mark Peranson and Skadi Loist, I developed an interest in festival functions that also appears throughout this dissertation. Peranson's distinction between business-oriented festivals and audience-focused festivals introduces a fundamental divergence that appears in some festivals, distinguishing those that support notable business activity, like formal markets, and those that primarily exist to show films to audiences.[4] More recent work has provided additional nuance in reflecting on the basic functions that festivals perform. Skadi Loist's Film Circulation project, for example, examines a key feature of the contemporary film festival landscape that I will reference throughout this project.[5] Films premiere at major festivals then screen at others, frequently in smaller sub-circuits and in various countries. While Loist and her team examine international circulation, beginning with the programs of six major festivals and tracking hundreds of films across all of

[4] Mark Peranson, "First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals," in *Dekalog 3: On Film Festivals*, ed. Richard Porton (London: Wallflower, 2008), 23-37.

[5] Film Circulation: Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network, Skadi Loist, Zhenya (Evgenia) Samoilova, et al., 2017-2022, http://www.filmcirculation.net.

their subsequent screenings, I will instead approach the topic in a more granular way by thinking of circulation as a way to demonstrate the connections between larger festivals in the United States, like Sundance, South by Southwest, and Tribeca, that often premiere new films before they go on to screen at smaller events around the country. In the chapters that follow, I generally refer to four major functions: 1) distribution (the formal practice of films making distribution deals at festivals), 2) contextualization of films within social and political discourse, 3) promotion of films for later awards and box office success, 4) circulation through the festival system. Scholars have mentioned numerous functions of festivals in past research, and countless other functions emerge through the global landscape of festivals. I contend that these four functions are especially important for festivals in the United States, and I employ this approach throughout the analysis of my case studies to demonstrate the shared relationship through similar functions that appear at American festivals, even if their relative importance varies.

While American festivals represent only a subset of a global phenomenon, this context contains a substantial variety of festivals and a rich history of distinct circuits, goals, and programming practices. This geographic framework also allows me to analyze the longer history of film festivals through a specific region, instead of attempting to grapple with a single period, as a global analysis would require. Festivals remain inherently international events, frequently offering one of the few opportunities to see foreign films in many communities, so the global nature of festivals will be a necessary feature of my analysis. This focus on one subset of festivals, the American context, will allow me to uncover how distinct circuits emerge within a specific area and how these circuits function differently – all within an unlikely context. Film festivals in the United States maintain a variety of funding sources, often compiling a patchwork of sources depending on institutional structure or local factors like venue availability and

government involvement. In the United States, the range of festival funding sources includes ticket sales, sponsorships, grants, submission fees, program advertisements, and individual donations. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, arts organizations, including festivals, faced a precarious situation, with little ongoing support from the government or grant-making organizations, forcing festival organizers to revise strategies every year to appeal to audiences, sponsors, and grant makers. Despite these circumstances, festivals have remained a significant force in the film industry for decades, even as they have expanded to become a dispersed system of film circulation that operates independently and unevenly, subject to local planning and decision making. This project will examine the American film festival system to generate new knowledge about the ways in which festivals have developed throughout their history, with new models and practices emerging in reaction to the gaps in both filmmakers' opportunities and audiences' exposure to types of films that cannot be found at the multiplex.

Literature Review and Methods

Major trends within festival studies have examined the relationships between festivals and three major topics: social or political discourse, place, and the film industries. Within these trends, scholars select objects of study that range in scope, but case studies of single festivals are common. Some works also involve more than one of these topics, but they typically emphasize one more than the others. This project draws primarily on literature focused on the relationships between festivals and place and between festivals and the industries.

Studies of the relationship between festivals and social or political discourse may deal with specific discourses or questions of impact at a more general level. In the introduction to their edited volume on activist film festivals, Sonia M. Tascon and Tyson Wils discuss the potential of film festivals to engage with activist discourse on a broad scale, whether in

successful or problematic ways. They write that the festival context "may be conducive to a deeper/reduced engagement with the questions of power and the relationships of power inherent in the production of images, their exhibition and their spectators."[6] They argue that these festivals offer a different appeal for their audiences than general festivals, by addressing a particular activist topic. Scholars often take these specific topic festivals as their objects of study, like documentary, feminist, queer, Black, or Asian American film festivals. Melinda Barlow's study of the New York Women's Video Festival considers the event's connections with feminist discourse of the 1970s, finding that the festival was an outlet for women who took control of video technology and used it to represent their own experiences.[7] Scholars studying Asian American festivals have mostly emphasized their fundamental activist functions or later industrial influences, like the cultivation of the Asian American feature film in the late 1990s.[8] Erin Franziska Högerle examines Asian American festivals as sites presenting and mediating memories of migration for Asian American audiences, filmmakers, and festival organizers.[9] Other scholars in Tascon and Wils's book examine documentary festivals, demonstrating this

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[6] Sonia M. Tascon and Tyson Wils, introduction to *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject,* ed. Sonia M. Tascon and Tyson Wils, (London: Intellect, 2017), 3.

[7] Melinda Barlow, "Feminism 101: The New York Women's Video Festival, 1972–1980," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003), 2–39.

[8] Vanessa Au, "Using the Tools of the YouTube Generation: How to Serve Communities Through Asian American Festivals," *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, eds. Lori Kido Lopez and Vincent N. Pham (New York: Routledge, 2017), 74–82; Brian Hu, "The Coin of the Realm: Valuing the Asian American Feature-Length Film," *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, 63–73; Jun Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

[9] Erin Franziska Högerle, *Asian American Film Festivals: Frames, Locations, and Performances of Memory* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

tendency to consider the relationship between political discourse and film festivals through a certain category of festival, rather than festivals in general.[10]

Because of the emphasis on the festival's engagement with discourse, aspects of the festivals outside of the film screenings are often privileged in these studies, especially politicized spaces. To consider the connections between erotic film festivals in New York, San Francisco, and Amsterdam in the 1970s and discourses of sexual liberation, Elena Gorfinkel discusses both the hardcore programming of the festivals and the non-film events, like lounges and parties that contributed to the sexualized atmosphere.[11] In his book on queer film festivals, Stuart James Richards argues that these festivals maintain the possibility of social empowerment, even when their programming is less radical and more mainstream than might be anticipated, because the festival itself is a space for the interaction and solidarity of the queer community.[12] This research exemplifies how festival scholarship can work within multiple trends, as these studies of social discourse lead the scholars to consider the importance of space and place. Such work on the relationship between film festivals and political or social discourse offers a critical investigation of festivals' engagement with contemporary issues, using programming as evidence to tease out these connections in combination with non-screening events and the spaces of the festival. The discourse in question is typically the central object of analysis for these projects, even as the films might be briefly discussed as evidence.

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[10] Lyell Davies, "Off-Screen Activism and the Documentary Film Screening," in *Activist Film Festivals*, 39-57; Ezra Winton and Svetla Turnin, "The Revolution Will Not Be Festivalized: Documentary Film Festivals and Activism," in *Activist Film Festivals*, 81-103.

[11] Elena Gorfinkel, "Wet Dreams: Erotic Film Festivals of the Early 1970s and the Utopian Sexual Public Sphere," *Framework* 47:2 (2006), 59–86. JSTOR.

[12] Stuart James Richards, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

When scholars consider the relationship between festivals and place, they often incorporate questions of cultural policy specific to the location being studied. This work tends to approach festivals as arts organizations, focusing on the context in which the festival is produced and how that impacts the festival as an event, rather than the specific films or types of films they show. Brendan Kredell's study of the Toronto International Film Festival examines the festival's history through its relationship with Toronto's cultural policy. He identifies a shift toward an instrumentalist view of culture, conceiving of culture as an engine to fuel economic growth.[13] William Cunningham Bissell also discusses the role of a film festival in relation to the local economy, arguing that the Zanzibar International Film Festival supports the refashioned, commercialized tourist economy by presenting a highly filtered version of the city's culture and history.[14] Studies of festivals and place, like those by Kredell and Bissell, often investigate festivals as entities that contribute to local development, mixing their artistic and economic value.

Some studies of festivals and place address geographic context at a larger scale, like Kirsten Stevens's book about festivals in a single nation, *Australian Film Festivals: Audience, Place, and Exhibition Culture*.[15] Stevens examines the relationship between festivals and other institutions, like the anti-Hollywood film society movement of the 1950s, as well as their relationship with Australian culture more generally, like the festivalization of culture that

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[13] Brendan Kredell, "T.O. Live With Film: The Toronto International Film Festival and Municipal Cultural Policy in Contemporary Toronto," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 21:1 (2012): 21–37.

[14] William Cunningham Bissell, "When the Film Festival Comes to (Down)Town: Transnational Circuits, Tourism, and the Urban Economy of Images," in *Global Downtowns*, ed. Marina Peterson and Gary W. McDonogh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 160–185.

[15] Kirsten Stevens, *Australian Film Festivals: Audience, Place, and Exhibition Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

accompanied the proliferation of film festivals in the 1980s.[16] She positions her work as a decentering of festival studies from its focus on European festivals, allowing her to examine the particular qualities that contributed to the development of a film festival network in Australia. Stevens's work suggests the utility of the local audience as a research topic for scholars studying festivals and place. The expectations of the audience and the more general reception of the festival might contribute to programming choices or even major restructuring in the organization, like Stevens finds in the Melbourne International Film Festival's near collapse in the mid-1980s.[17] Diane Burgess similarly examines festivals in a national context in her study of Canadian festivals. Through this analysis, she argues that "the festival comprises a cultural intermediary operating in the gap between production and consumption."[18] Place offers a valuable lens for festival research, as it introduces these questions of governmental policy, organizational management, and audience. This approach can also facilitate analyses related to cultural topics like national identity, such as Roya Rastegar's study of American film festivals. Rastegar emphasizes racial dynamics in American film culture and the role of national identity in the development of film festivals in the United States, while examining alternative relationships between festivals and identity demonstrated through contemporary programming practices.[19] Such research questions differ from my project's focus on the historical factors that facilitated the emergence of a festival system, but these studies of festivals and place are helpful models for

[16] Stevens, 21, 104.

[17] Stevens, 127.

[18] Diane Louise Burgess, "Negotiating value: a Canadian perspective on the international film festival," (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2008), https://summit.sfu.ca/item/9173, 37.

[19] Roya Zahra Rastegar, "Cinematic Spaces of Freedom and the Challenge of American Film Festivals" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2011).

my research, as they similarly examine the relationships between individual events and a larger national context.

The relationship between film festivals and the film industries is one of the most frequently addressed questions in this scholarship. Like the other questions, this research has been applied to single festivals and larger categories, as well as the festival phenomenon as a whole. For example, Dina Iordanova has considered this question broadly in "The Film Festival as an Industry Node."[20] She studies how international film festivals have extended beyond their original nature as an exhibition platform, discussing their participation in production financing, networking, and distribution. Christian Jungen considers the relationship between a single film industry and a single festival throughout its history in *Hollywood in Cannes: The History of a Love-Hate Relationship*. Jungen argues that the coexistence of art and commerce is constitutive and fertile for the festival, through the consistent presence of Hollywood stars, filmmakers, and films at Cannes.[21] Other scholars have looked at more specific aspects of festivals' relationship with the industry. In "Transforming Film Product Identities: The Status Effects of European Premier Film Festivals, 1996–2005," Stephen Mezias and his team study the impact of winning a prize at the Berlin, Cannes, and Venice film festivals on a film's eventual audience. This research primarily positions the relationship between the festivals and the film industries in the economic terms of a film's success during its later release. Mezias's work also reflects the tendency to focus on the largest international film festivals in research about festivals and industry. As these examples suggest, studies of the relationship between film festivals and the film industries vary widely in scale and object of study, from single festivals to the international

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[20] Dina Iordanova, "The Film Festival as an Industry Node," *Media Industries* 1:3 (2015), 7–11.

[21] Christian Jungen, *Hollywood in Cannes: The History of a Love-hate Relationship* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 19.

film festival circuit, but they all maintain an interest in how a complex, seemingly non-commercial phenomenon connects with the traditional industry.

Compared to the trends of studying place or social and political discourse, industry scholarship more frequently attends to the films that screen at festivals. Attention to the films' movements from one festival to another and from the festival circuit to theatrical distribution offers a method to consider how festivals participate in circulation, which is usually managed by industry practice. Mezias's study of the impact of prizes shows this tendency, and Jungen also incorporates this approach, suggesting that festivals cause films to gain or lose value through their promotion and reception, briefly identifying examples of failure and success throughout his book.[22] In "Crossover Dreams: Global Circulation of Queer Film on the Film Festival Circuits," Skadi Loist considers how film festivals function for queer films, teasing out the relationship between community-based queer cinema and auteurist art cinema that seems to use queer plotlines to generate interest.[23] While this relationship may seem oppositional and exploitative, Loist identifies the complex exchange that occurs between these two types of cinema on the festival circuit. She traces the trajectory of specific films to examine the complexities of this relationship, especially Dee Rees's *Pariah* and Celine Sciamma's *Tomboy*, both from 2011. Loist finds that the film industry contributes to both connecting and separating queer film festivals and international film festivals as distinct circuits, often valorizing exposure at international festivals over the smaller, community-focused events. She writes, "The examples of *Tomboy* and *Pariah* show the underlying market logics that combine and exclude the realms of

[22] Jungen, 308.

[23] Skadi Loist, "Crossover Dreams: Global Circulation of Queer Film on the Film Festival Circuits," *Diogenes* (2016): 1–17.

IFF and QFF circuit, queer cinema, and arthouse exhibition."[24] Following particular films allows Loist to successfully uncover festivals' complex relationships with the industry, which vary for different types of films and festivals. This type of work that connects the film festivals and industries demonstrates the value of festival films as an object of analysis, since this approach can point to the impact that specific festivals can have on the trajectory and visibility of films.

Major book-length studies of film festivals as a comprehensive phenomenon adopt different frameworks for their analysis, demonstrating multiple trends within the field. In *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, Marijke de Valck traces the historical periods of film festivals through case studies of the Berlin, Cannes, Venice, and Rotterdam film festivals, emphasizing geopolitics, business, or culture as theoretical categories for each case study. She employs Latourian Actor-Network Theory to study the various performances, agendas, and presences at festivals. This frame allows her to incorporate human and non-human entities, from the individual filmmakers and sales agents to the entire nations and studios that are part of the festival process.[25] Incorporating all of these actors allows De Valck to conceive of festivals as a complicated network. She writes, "I will show how the international film festival circuit combines the local and the global, the city and the nation, and the space of the media with the place of the event in a network configuration that is complex and self-sustainable by offering various film cultures (products and people alike) a variety of ways of plugging in."[26] For de Valck, films are one part of this intricate network that makes up a film festival, and she primarily uses them as a method of introducing topics, based on their relevance

[24] Loist, 10.

[25] de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 34.

[26] de Valck, 18.

to her thematic categories. For example, she addresses Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and its distribution prospects at the Cannes Film Festival to shift her analysis to the economic functions of film festivals. As this example suggests, de Valck's study incorporates the major trends of festival scholarship, like the relationship between festivals and the industry in this case, while maintaining the broader framework of Actor Network Theory.

In her book *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong studies film festivals through their role in the production of knowledge about film. Wong claims that festivals "provide an important institutional framework for the study of issues of cinematic taste, power, industry, and postcolonial global relations."[27] She identifies four key structural features of festivals that allow her to ask what film knowledge is, who controls it, and how it changes over time. These structural features are festivals' showcasing a complex range of films, cultivating new talents and work from all over the world, intersecting with other discourses and institutions in the wider construction of film as a field of knowledge, and raising questions of who defines value and for whom.[28] Like de Valck, she also addresses the general trends of film festival scholarship, with chapters on film industries and public spheres and a case study of the Hong Kong International Film Festival that extensively incorporates the local context. Her analysis throughout the book recognizes the multiplicity of festivals, with references to issue-based festivals and regional festivals, instead of only focusing on the international film festival circuit. Although she references different types of events, Wong primarily studies major festivals. She writes:

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[27] Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 18.

[28] Wong, 14.

> This book will spend less time on the vast range of these different kinds of festivals than on more complex "A"-level and major regional festivals; however, it recognizes that these festivals constitute part of the fabric of a complicated film festival world. However small or broad, they are connected to other festivals in terms of the circulation of films, texts, and film knowledge. Sometimes they may share personnel if the festivals have the financial means, and they certainly overlap in potential audiences. And even the smallest festival keeps the idea of a festival world present and alive." [29]

I seek to understand festivals of various sizes, goals, and strategies in relation to each other by examining their production and self-presentation, to consider how they collectively constitute a relatively stable system in the national context of the United States.

Scholars have addressed festivals as arts events that are produced within specific conditions, from their geographic locations to their discursive contexts, and they have also granted sustained attention to the ways that festivals work for, with, and against the film industries. Scholars also tend to separately discuss small festivals, as in the studies of activist festivals and social or political discourse, and large festivals, like de Valck's book or Mezias's work on festival prizes. Antoine Damiens' *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* is an exception, offering a useful example of a project that seeks to acknowledge festivals of various sizes, including those that lasted for only a short time instead of long-lasting events.[30] For projects that consider festivals with a range of programming strategies, there is little research that considers the relationships between the different sizes and types of festivals, leaving an opportunity to research the various categories of festivals and how they are related through the films that travel through the circuits in different ways, as well as `shared strategies of production and self-presentation.

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[29] Wong, 52.

[30] Antoine Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

My use of the word "system" to refer to the collective range of festivals in the United States also draws on other work within festival studies. Scholars have debated how to discuss a group of events that share a practice but demonstrate immense variety. Ragan Rhyne has examined the methodological and theoretical challenges with the term "circuit" in conceiving of the international film festival network, writing, "… if we are to speak of a festival circuit at all, it must be understood as being materially and discursively constituted through the negotiation of varied, and sometimes conflicting, motivations of stakeholders, including filmmakers, financiers, journalists, ancillary industries and policymakers."[31] This problem of numerous stakeholders with different needs and goals points to the challenge of employing a term that can suggest consistency or uniformity when describing the film festival phenomenon. The term "circuit" might imply greater standardization and limitation than exists in a deeply varied set of events like American film festivals, which are unregulated and constantly shifting. Skadi Loist has also pointed out that the use of the circuit metaphor draws primarily on the business side of festivals.[32]

In this project, I refer to some distinct sets of festivals as "circuits," because of the limited number of events and a relatively standard trajectory that many films demonstrate, while I describe American film festivals as a whole as a "system." I employ the word "system" as Wong applies it in her work. She uses the term in the sense referring to a set of items that involves change and activity, instead of fixed processes, when she writes, "Festivals constitute a dynamic

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[31] Ragan Rhyne, "Film Festival Circuits and Shareholders," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1*: *The Festival Circuit*, eds. Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2009), 9-22.

[32] Skadi Loist, "The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, eds. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (New York: Routledge, 2016), 35.

system where a specific cultural artifact—cinema—circulates and multiple actors continuously strive to redefine its meaning and place in its immediate environment, a wider film world, and larger socio-economic and political contexts."[33] I recognize the vast range of sizes, circumstances, and goals that appear within film festivals in the United States, and this use of "system" offers the connotation of a broader scope that allows for development and changing internal relationships, which are qualities that I hope to illuminate within film festivals in the United States.

Historical analysis is the central methodology of this dissertation, since my questions are centered around the development of the American film festival system beginning in the late 1950s. I analyze my case studies and their functions through the lens of festivals' production and self-presentation, as these factors allow me to consider the goals and strategies that led to programming and larger institutional choices. The production of festivals by organizers illuminates the pressures and compromises that have challenged American film festivals throughout their history, including the precarious position of arts organizations in the United States, and exploring festivals' self-presentation shows how they attempt to distinguish themselves from other festivals (and other forms of exhibition) to attract an audience. I focus on festivals from a single national context in part because of the specific geographic, political, and cultural circumstances faced by organizers. The United States, of course, has immense regional differences in these circumstances, but American festivals share a situation of little government investment in the arts and proximity to a dominant film industry.

My evidence is primarily drawn from archival documents, trade publications, and newspapers, with discursive analysis allowing me to consider the goals and strategies of each

[33] Wong, *Film Festivals*, 2.

major festival and type of festival as it emerged. I characterize the conditions that led to the current form of the American film festival system by tracing its development throughout the second half of the twentieth century, identifying the factors that contributed to the establishment and success of different types and circuits of festivals. One of my main interventions is considering the relationships between the variety of festivals that comprise the festival system. Scholars have often acknowledged different types of festivals, but they are usually analyzed as discrete events, instead of a system with shared programming strategies and goals that produce similar functions.

Research at numerous archives has aided my analysis. The Amos Vogel papers at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research contain extensive correspondence regarding the early years of the New York Film Festival, from the 1962 planning for the first event through 1968. Like the Vogel collection, the Telluride collection, with papers at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library and films and video at the Academy Film Archive, are a fundamental source for my first chapter focusing on some of the early major festivals held in the United States and their experimentation with festival planning procedures and formats. The Asian CineVision collection at New York University's Special Collections includes substantial documentation of the Asian American International Film Festival's promotion and touring in the 1980s, exemplifying a key early circuit within the larger American festival environment. I supplemented this collection with some helpful documentation of the Asian American International Film Festival in the James Wong Howe papers at the Margaret Herrick Library. The Sydney Pollack collection, also at the Herrick, provides institutional context for my analysis of the Sundance Film Festival in my third chapter, in conjunction with programs, proposals, and other documents from the Sundance Institute Archives. I also consulted

documents from special collections at the University of Utah and the University of Michigan for my Sundance research. While most regional festivals do not have available paper collections, I accessed the organized paper records at the Sidewalk Film Festival going back to the establishment of the festival in 1999, providing a representative case study for my chapter on the emergence of regional film festivals.

For various case studies, trade journals provide contextual information about the industry and coverage of festivals, especially the major festivals I analyze like Sundance and the New York Festival, and newspapers offer information about the reception of the festivals and their films. National publications that often cover film, like *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*, address major film festivals, while local newspapers aided my analysis of Asian American film festivals for my third chapter and regional festivals for my fourth chapter, since these festivals are less frequently mentioned by larger publications. Festival programs and programming information are also crucial sources. I accessed most programs through the physical archival collections outlined above, and the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine helped me access information about the early years of some case studies, especially the Sidewalk Film Festival.

Finally, participant observation at many in-person, virtual, or hybrid festivals constituted an important research method. Before 2020, in-person experiences at Telluride, True/False, the Sidewalk Film Festival, and the Wisconsin Film Festival helped me generate questions for this project, but participant observation became even more relevant to my research during the COVID-19 pandemic. As most festivals, including many of my case studies, produced virtual or hybrid editions, I quickly decided to experience as many as possible in virtual form. I hoped to consider how festival production and self-presentation adjusted in a moment of crisis that prevented the traditionally fundamental festival component of gathering in person. Beginning in

2020, I attended virtual festivals including AFI Docs, New York Film Festival, Sundance, Slamdance, South by Southwest, Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, Asian American International Film Festival, True/False, Wisconsin Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, NewFest, and Oxford Film Festival. I watched one film at some of these festivals and spent full weekends "attending" others from my couch, but they all contributed to my understanding of the options available to and experiments undertaken by festivals in this period. In my analysis of Covid-era festivals, I draw on digital ethnography methods for some case studies, especially those with elements of virtual reality, like the 2021 and 2022 Sundance Film Festivals. Between 2021 and 2023, in-person experiences at the New York Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, Sidewalk Film Festival, Wisconsin Film Festival, and Asian American International Film Festival helped me understand some of the ways that festivals returned to physical, theatrical spaces during the pandemic.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One examines the production of film festivals through internal challenges and the basic problems of collaboration between partner organizations, factors that recur through American festival history. I examine two key elements of creating a festival: programming films and supplementing screenings with guests, with case studies on the New York Film Festival and Telluride Film Festival. A few festivals including the San Francisco International Film Festival and the Columbus Film Festival were established earlier in the 1950s, preceding my case studies, but New York and Telluride offer clear examples of approaches that would become common for American festivals. The New York Film Festival was founded as a project of Lincoln Center in 1962, with the first event occurring in 1963. The festival employed Amos Vogel, shortly after the shuttering of Cinema 16, and the British Film Institute's Richard Roud as coordinators, and they

selected the program based on the "Festival of Festivals" model first used for the BFI's London Film Festival. Vogel and Roud chose from the body of films that had already shown at major European festivals, especially Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, and Lincoln Center promoted the festival as lacking the competitions and emphasis on premiere selections that characterized those events. The New York Film Festival coordinators had to make their selections based on several options that had already screened at other festivals. I argue that this approach introduces programming strategies that would eventually dominate the American film festival system, through the regional festivals that typically show films that have already premiered at larger events. Similarly, the early years of the Telluride Film Festival, which began in 1974, established another significant strain of festival planning. Before it became a site for premieres of major award contenders, Telluride first focused on retrospective screenings and celebrations of influential filmmakers from the past, a practice that dominates few festivals in the United States but appears at many of them, especially major festivals. By featuring established filmmakers and conversations with these special guests, Telluride provides an example of the focus on live events and interaction that festivals of all kinds and sizes would promote. The New York Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival offer a foundation for my argument about a set of programming models that would eventually proliferate when festivals appeared all around the country, as early examples of film circulation through festivals and the emphasis on liveness at festival events, while also introducing the basic challenges of festival production.

Chapter Two focuses on Asian American film festivals as an example of the identity-based festivals that more clearly articulated the possibilities of distinct festival circuits. While most of the scholarship on Asian American festivals has emphasized their primary activist functions, my analysis instead focuses on the example of Asian CineVision's Asian American

International Film Festival, especially its tours during the early 1980s. The history of this touring practice connects with the histories of some of the earliest and largest Asian American festivals, like CAAMFest in San Francisco and the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival. Starting in 1978, the Asian American International Film Festival brought Asian American films to a New York audience, with a primary emphasis on aesthetic, rather than political, concerns in its programming. As the festival continued and started its touring program in the early 1980s, partner organizations and press in other cities framed the festival differently, drawing attention instead to the questions of representations and pushing back against stereotypes that still frequently appear in the discourse of Asian American Film Festivals. Like the case studies from Chapter One, the analysis of the AAIFF tour demonstrates the challenges of collaboration between arts organizations, mostly festivals in this case, while also showing the possibility of distinct circuits within the American film festival system – a feature that helps understand the layers of connections and relationships between festivals.

Chapter Three analyzes the early years of the festival that would ultimately become the Sundance Film Festival in the context of the criticism that the festival has become too commercial, an argument that various writers, filmmakers, and other stakeholders have made intermittently for more than three decades. Beginning with the establishment of the Utah/US Film Festival in 1978, I examine the programming strategies and press responses to this initially American-focused festival, tracing its evolution alongside the establishment and growth of the Sundance Institute, which ultimately became the festival's parent organization. The festival's growing success – and increasing association with Robert Redford – throughout the 1980s affected the ways that the press responded to the event, and the financial and international festival success of *sex, lies, and videotapes* marked a turning point for the narrative of the

festival, at least for many journalists. Press often criticized the festival for becoming too large or commercial, even as coverage repeatedly focused on the point of finding another *sex, lies, and videotape*, rather than focusing on other films that premiered at the festival and received rave responses. This early period in Sundance's history demonstrates a complex relationship between the festival's self-presentation and its reception, as attention to the event expanded and ultimately helped popularize the concept of film festivals in the United States.

Chapter Four turns to the sudden increase in American film festivals in the late 1990s, as regional film festivals were established in small cities all over the country. Regional festivals are typically characterized by scholars and critics as festivals that focus on audiences, with networking as the primary business function offered to filmmakers, rather than the possibility of formal distribution deals. They also typically lack the national or international coverage granted to larger festivals. Festival scholars often mention regional festivals and their importance for local audiences, but the literature has not carefully addressed the circulation function they provide for films or the factors that contributed to their creation. My chapter will consider how and why this type of festival became so common, with many appearing in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. My analysis focuses on the Sidewalk Film Festival as a major case study, exploring motivations and goals of their founders. Like many regional festivals, the initial rhetoric of this festival, in marketing, promotion, and interviews, often references Sundance, sometimes directly. These connections to Sundance sometimes even extended to planned events. While the screenings of premieres and the appearances of celebrities rarely came to fruition, the regional film festival model succeeded in Birmingham and various cities in the United States, with many festivals recently celebrating or currently planning their twentieth events. The backing of local grant-making organizations and other sponsors often allowed these festivals to

begin and continue, even if the enticing dream of a local Sundance never came true for most of the festivals' founders and supporters. The festivals instead began to serve a different industrial function, as a fundamental component of the festival circulation process that most filmmakers experience, either for their entire careers or before progressing to the Hollywood system. While regional festivals will occasionally show premieres, they typically select films from submissions that have already screened at other festivals, recalling the types of choices introduced by the New York Film Festival in the 1960s and expanded by identity-based festivals in the 1980s. The self-presentation of regional festivals in their early years often draws on associations with festival success more broadly and the opportunities they present, while attempting to stress distinguishing local factors.

Chapter Five analyzes American film festivals' responses to the pandemic through the lens of festival production and self-presentation. It considers how the system responded to destabilizing circumstances, especially through hybrid festivals. I begin with brief context exploring festivals' earlier experiments with virtual extensions and alternatives, primarily through Sundance and the Tribeca Film Festival, before outlining the range of formats that festivals employed during the pandemic. My core case studies are the True/False Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival, as their organizers produced elaborate hybrid events that took different approaches to moving a festival out of shared theatrical space into home and virtual spaces. Ultimately, I find that festivals have almost entirely removed the elements of hybridity that they used during the pandemic, despite their promise for expanding audiences and access. This period highlights the possibility of alternate methods of audience engagement that could expand the meaning of a film festival environment, despite the circumstances that prevent the long-term adoption of such strategies.

Film festivals form a system that is crucial to our understanding of contemporary film culture and its historical development, as key sites for the discovery of new talent and debates over aesthetic, political, and industrial concerns. Festivals have long been important in establishing canons, setting awards agendas, and exposing audiences to new types of film, as organizers and programmers guide attention to certain titles through their curated selections. But the festival model that developed and proliferated has not remained stagnant. As festivals have expanded their scope, with major festivals' additions of sections focusing on episodic media and digital components and the emergence of festivals dedicated to new media, the functions of festivals have only grown in their vitality and range. Individual festivals, events, and incidents are valuable for our historical knowledge, but this project's attention to the evolution of a system will suggest the necessity of festivals as an industrial context with continued, increasing relevance.

Chapter 1:

Curation and Negotiation: Producing the New York Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival

The hundreds of film festivals that present feature films in the United States vary widely and across a range of factors. Their programming may focus on specific categories like queer cinema, documentaries, foreign films, or retrospective screenings. Their proximity to the film industry, geographic or otherwise, may determine the celebrity status of the filmmakers and industry professionals who appear at the event. And depending on a festival's venues, audiences may watch films in comfortable multiplex recliners or stiff chairs in a temporary screening space. Whatever differences festivals may have in their programs and environments, a small number of shared, fundamental characteristics typically appear at all types. No matter the size or scope of a festival, the festival's planning process involved selecting a group of films and screening them in a communal setting, and festivals almost always emphasize their ephemerality through events that cannot be replicated. With in-person festivals, that ephemerality is stressed through the quality of "liveness," with special guests, Q&As, and panel discussions that only occur at the festival. Even when you might be able to watch the movies later, you cannot recreate the festival screening.

These shared, fundamental aspects of film festivals first began to appear during the earliest festivals in the United States, despite the variety of events already emerging in this period. Some of these festivals began in small cities in the 1950s and early 1960s, like the Columbus Film Festival and the Ann Arbor Film Festival, but major cities also hosted festivals that remain influential forces in the industry today, like the San Francisco International Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. In these early years, festivals already showed an ability to succeed in communities of various sizes and geographic locations, and the range of

programming strategies and ways of stressing a festival's liveness also developed at some prominent festivals that continue today. For example, the Telluride Film Festival initially established a focus on retrospective screenings and celebrations of influential filmmakers with speeches and panels, emphasizing the live quality of the events that festivals of all kinds and sizes still promote. In contrast, the New York Film Festival demonstrated a "Festival of Festivals" model that prefigured the festival programming tendency of showing new films that recently premiered at larger events. This practice remains in place, especially for most regional festivals, and this iteration of festival circulation stresses the fundamentally international nature of the events through connections to festivals outside of a given country – even as increased American independent film production since the 1990s has facilitated the emphasis on American filmmaking at festivals in the United States. The New York Film Festival model also suggests the relational nature of festivals, as they create and maintain connections with other festivals by programming the same films, often resulting in similar trajectories for different films. This chapter takes these festivals as fruitful case studies for two fundamental festival traits: programming as a central practice and the quality of liveness in the events. While programming is often characterized as a curatorial, even artistic, practice, the New York Film Festival demonstrates how programming as labor operated in the reality of one organization, and the Telluride Film Festival shows how an early conception of the festival as an "event" led to an emphasis on special guests, interactive experiences, and a distinctive physical environment.

Although the New York Film Festival started out showing films that had premiered at other festivals, the "Festival of Festivals" programming approach did not simply replicate programs that had already been created at the other events. Instead, it required negotiation and compromise, between individuals working for the New York Film Festival, organizations

involved in producing the New York Film Festival, and the festivals that had hosted the earlier premieres of possible New York Film Festival selections. Some qualities of the New York Film Festival made the event's production particularly complex, but all festivals must deal with a set of stakeholders including staff, sponsors, filmmakers, and even organizers at other festivals. At contemporary festivals, people in leadership or key programming roles are often titled "artistic directors" or "creative directors." The idea of festival labor as artistic or creative suggests a generative, taste-driven process, but it does not reveal the fact that these individuals must often negotiate the complicated realities of collaborating with and appeasing various stakeholders that the New York Film Festival encountered from the very beginning.

The curatorial aspect of film programming has rightfully received substantial attention from scholars, but the constant influence of organizational, bureaucratic challenges on this labor deserves further exploration. While many studies consider programming through the lens of taste-making within film culture, Peter Bosma has acknowledged the importance of pressing internal concerns like deadlines and financial issues in his study of film curation.[1] In addition to finances and deadlines, the initial development of the New York Film Festival offers a chance to explore the broader problem of multiple stakeholders with their own agendas and concerns weighing on the programming process, providing insight into the daily reality of programming as a practice that continues today. The New York Film Festival's organizers also grappled with a key tension that continues to complicate festival planning while, in many cases, maintaining festival's financial viability—the relationship between a festival and a parent film or arts organization. Festivals often rely on larger organizations, other festivals around the world, and other institutions in their communities for practical aspects of both programming and daily

[1] Peter Bosma, *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 7.

operations, and the New York Film Festival's structure and practices suggest this from the beginning of the event.

While the New York Film Festival reveals the complexity of film programming in this study, the Telluride Film Festival suggests the importance of selecting films and supplementing screenings with additional elements to create a festival environment that is fundamentally distinctive from typical filmgoing experiences. Early in the festival's history, Telluride's organizers experimented with thematic programming to distinguish the festival and its role in film culture. This process is especially evident in the production of the tribute programs each year, which are often framed by the festival and press as an experience that cannot be replicated elsewhere. This ephemerality of the festival accompanied the nature of the small location, the mountain town of Telluride, Colorado, that could only host a limited number of visitors to produce an experience marked by exclusivity. From the beginning, Telluride was not only about the films that it screened. The festival's self-presentation emphasized tribute recipients as special guests and the conversations built around them, which could not be experienced again outside of the festival. The New York Film Festival also had special events as a programming component in its early years, but this aspect of the Telluride Film Festival was fundamental to its burgeoning identity.

Critics and scholars often discuss the New York Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival as important stops on a film's awards campaign, but their industrial significance began far earlier through the key festival features and practices that they established in their initial years. The two events exemplify how cultural prestige and ephemerality became key elements of film festival culture. As early examples of festivals circulating the same films and employing carefully curated festival elements outside of the films themselves, the two festivals offer a

foundation for my argument about a set of programming models that would eventually proliferate as festivals were established all around the country, drawing on their own distinctive features and local resources to create an appealing event that extends beyond just showing films. The American film festival system's independently programmed festivals and emphasis on liveness were established in the earliest years of festivals in the United States, offering an opportunity to consider how these fundamental traits first emerged.

Programming and Collaboration at the New York Film Festival

Declaring how the newly established New York Film Festival would be modeled after the London Film Festival, a 1963 promotional pamphlet states, "There are no judges. No juries. No starlets. No prizes. It simply exhibits the best of the year's best films, selected from other film festivals."[2] Like London's event, the New York Film Festival was planned as a "festival of festivals," collecting the most impressive films from other programs. Unlike the prestigious events in Cannes, Venice, or Berlin, London and New York did not have juried competitions or prizes. As the second major film festival in the United States, after the San Francisco International Film Festival, the New York Film Festival had to carve out some place for its own contribution to the global festival landscape, and the emulation of London's model gave it one way to be distinct from the majority of festivals, while avoiding competition with these more established events that dominated the quickly forming film festival hierarchy with their impressive numbers of world premieres. Organizers in New York could be concerned with showing the best films available from other festivals, instead of competing with their peers for more world premieres.

[2] First New York Film Festival brochure, box 32, folder 7, Amos Vogel Papers, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison (hereafter cited as Vogel Papers).

Just as the London Film Festival was produced by a larger entity, the British Film Institute, the New York Film Festival was a project of Lincoln Center. The management of the NYFF involved many other institutions with varying degrees of influence. These various stakeholders made the festival possible, but they also complicated programming and other decisions. Finding films at European festivals, and generally establishing a new major arts event in New York City, required frequent interaction between various arts and film organizations. In addition to Lincoln Center, the festival was especially tied to the British Film Institute and the Museum of Modern Art. The festival needed substantial support from outside groups in its first six years, from 1963 to 1968. In this period, it was not an independent organization; it instead relied on Lincoln Center for basic funding and staff support, which was supplemented by collaborations with other groups. After the 1968 festival, it became part of the new Film Society of Lincoln Center, an independently operated organization. To create one of the earliest film festivals in the United States, the Lincoln Center staff sought the guidance of the British Film Institute. As Alex Fischer describes in his study of film festival management, festivals often adopt the structures of existing events in order to have similar success.[3] This case study extends beyond the imitation of structure analyzed by Fischer, as the New York Film Festival became even more closely tied to the BFI. The BFI officially co-sponsored and helped organize New York's event, beginning in its first year. Richard Roud represented the BFI as the film programmer for the festival, and Amos Vogel represented Lincoln Center as the coordinator. The Museum of Modern Art also hosted a retrospective program in the first year of the New York Film Festival, and the festival attempted other joint projects with MoMA throughout this period.

[3] Alex Fischer, *Sustainable Projections: Concepts in Film Festival Management* (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2013): 11.

But as the festival continued, some of these associations and collaborations created challenges that contributed to the larger issues of the festival.

Scholars have acknowledged the collaborative processes that are often involved in creating film festivals, with some discussion of the different agendas that can complicate these partnerships, yet analyses of specific festivals often diminish or disregard the various agendas at play. For example, Lincoln Center and BFI are usually simply mentioned in passing as organizations that were involved with the New York Film Festival, with little attention to what each entity contributed to the formation of the festival and what impact they ultimately had.[4] In his study of the New York Film Festival, Rahul Hamid describes how the festival became part of the arts establishment, attributing this evolution to programming choices and its general association with Lincoln Center. Although Lincoln Center exemplifies the arts establishment for Hamid, he primarily focuses on individual programming decisions, instead of considering the impact that the festival's relationships with other organizations might have had on programming.[5] Many of the groups that create festivals and contribute to specific projects often go unnoticed in descriptions of decision-making and development, with emphasis instead directed toward the roles of individual programmers. While these individuals certainly have an impact on the daily choices that result in the festival lineup, the goals and strategies of the larger organizations can determine the parameters of a festival's programming and its eventual relationships with other institutions.

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[4] Wong, *Film Festivals*, 13, 45.

[5] Rahul Hamid, "From Urban Bohemia to Euro Glamour: The Establishment and Early Years of the New York Film Festival," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*, eds. Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2009), 67-81.

The structure of the New York Film Festival demonstrates that festivals can be connected with other arts organizations through more than just a shared interest in film, but it also exemplifies the complexity of these interrelationships between festivals and the groups that produce and support them. The nonprofit model of most festivals requires these complicated connections to exist. Lincoln Center allowed the festival to continue through this period by providing funding, but it also repeatedly delayed the move toward an independent film organization that would include the festival. And the British Film Institute shared a crucial staff member with the New York Film Festival, allowing it to achieve a higher quality of programming, yet this shared staff also generated a complex approach to decision-making and festival planning. The Museum of Modern Art originally supported the festival by providing a separate screening venue, but it later obstructed some of the festival's policies and goals. Relationships like these often enable festivals to continue annually, but the associations are also constantly shifting and sometimes ending, creating an uncertain environment for the production of events like the New York Film Festival and the countless other festivals that rely on parent and partner organizations, as well as sponsors and other festivals.

In 1962, Lincoln Center's president William Schuman announced a move toward including film in its activities and projects.[6] Lincoln Center had only officially opened that year, after planning and funding had started in 1956.[7] It was envisioned as an organization that would host traditional performing arts and provide educational opportunities for young people in New York City, focusing on music, ballet, opera, and theater. Film quickly became a part of

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[6] Eugene Archer, "Lincoln Center to Show Movies," *New York Times*, March 28, 1962, page 34, box 35, folder 7, Vogel Papers.

[7] Ross Parmenter, "Lincoln Square Plan Developing Toward World Cultural Center," *New York Times*, July 23, 1956, https://www.nytimes.com/1956/07/23/archives/lincoln-square-plan-developing-toward-world-cultural-center-opera.html.

discussions about Lincoln Center's future, in a global environment that was recognizing the potential prestige associated with film because of famed national cinematheques and European festivals like Cannes, Venice, and Berlin. Schuman's 1962 announcement noted the many possibilities for including film at Lincoln Center, but he emphasized that the programming would generally fit into the categories of contemporary foreign cinema (without American distribution) and retrospectives, from both the United States and foreign countries. He specifically recognized Paris' Cinématheque Française and the British Film Institute's National Film Theatre in London as projects that Lincoln Center might eventually emulate. While Lincoln Center aspired to include consistent, year-round programming, like the examples from France and England, Schuman also immediately mentioned the possibility of a festival that would show films that had previously screened at major European festivals.[8]

Amos Vogel became involved early in the process of planning Lincoln Center's film program, as financial problems with his film society Cinema 16 increased. He contacted Elia Kazan, who organized the first Lincoln Center committee on film, about potentially working with the developing film projects. Vogel stated, "For a long time, it has seemed to me that there ought to be in New York a festival of films, which at the same time could serve as a logical extension of a truly comprehensive film center of a type in existence in other countries, but not yet here."[9] Vogel envisioned not only a festival, but a complete center that would presumably be involved in year-round screenings and other activities, like the French and British organizations mentioned by Schuman as inspiration for Lincoln Center's plans. On April 30, 1963, Lincoln Center announced that the first festival would occur in September and revealed the contract

[8] Archer, "Lincoln Center to Show Movies."

[9] Amos Vogel to Elia Kazan, January 16, 1962, pages 1-2, box 35, folder 7, Vogel Papers.

staff.[10] Amos Vogel would work as the festival coordinator, and the British Film Institute's festival organizer, Richard Roud, would select the program. They continued working under annual contracts until 1968. Although the festival was planned for September 1963, just eighteen months after Schuman announced Lincoln Center's interest in film, the establishment of a "comprehensive film center" was repeatedly postponed until 1968.

The New York Film Festival maintained the same basic structure throughout this period. It showed between twenty and thirty new features, which were sometimes accompanied by special film events, like retrospectives, American independent films, or documentaries. The main program, which screened at Lincoln Center's 2600-seat Philharmonic Hall, comprised films selected from other major festivals, typically Cannes, Venice, and Berlin. Because of this approach, European art cinema dominated the program, while major American studio films occasionally appeared. Although it did not compete with other festivals for global premiere status of films, the New York Film Festival only showed films that had not yet screened in New York, already establishing its role as a local premiere venue for important films. Since the festival was a project of Lincoln Center in its first six years, the president, William Schuman, and the vice president of programming, Schuyler Chapin, were directly and frequently involved in its planning with Vogel and Roud.

Lincoln Center enabled the festival to continue by giving it financial security throughout its first six years, even when that support was unplanned. After the first festival, William Schuman described this problem of unplanned financial assistance in a letter to BFI, writing, "This year, despite the enormous success, we sustained a considerable deficit. The budgetary

[10] Eugene Archer, "Major Film Fete Planned for City," *New York Times*, May 1, 1963, https://www.nytimes.com/1963/05/01/archives/major-film-fete-planned-for-city-international-event-will-be-held.html.

picture for next year looks even less encouraging, because we have discovered that the Center itself absorbed a number of charges which should more properly be within the Festival budget."[11] Internal Lincoln Center documents show that the festival deficit began in 1963 and continued, most drastically through the first three years. For example, the accounting department at Lincoln Center found that the festival's deficit increased every year through 1965. The festival's annual deficit was $24,896 in 1963; $33,597 in 1964; and $68,715 in 1965.[12] In comparison, its income was $77,920 in 1963; $111,772 in 1964; and $117,031 in 1965. While the festival often almost filled Philharmonic Hall for its screenings, expenses extended far beyond the income from ticket sales and sponsors, and Lincoln Center had to pay for the difference. The Lincoln Center administration's collaboration with and guidance over Amos Vogel and Richard Roud facilitated the existence of the festival, since it could not financially support itself.

Despite the perpetual deficit in film festival funding, the idea of creating a film institute at Lincoln Center continued throughout this period, which would include year-round film screenings and educational programs, in addition to the film festival. In 1964, Lincoln Center's board of directors agreed to continue sponsoring the New York Film Festival with the goal of creating a film institute in 1966, a constituent organization that would assume the management of the festival.[13] This organization would function as an independent group, like the New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera, and New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center. All of these

[11] William Schuman to Stanley Reed, October 10, 1963, box 32, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[12] Juanita Efird to James Bjorge, April 4, 1966, box 35, folder 6, Vogel Papers.

[13] Schuyler Chapin to Stanley Reed, January 5, 1964, box 32, folder 17, Vogel Papers.

organizations were responsible for their own finances and activities.[14] The establishment of this film institute was repeatedly postponed, much to the disappointment of Richard Roud and Amos Vogel, since they were the primary film festival staff members and hoped to obtain important roles in the new organization. In 1967, his fifth year of working with the festival, Roud wrote to Lincoln Center's vice president of programming Schuyler Chapin about needing a greater salary, stating, "If I went along with all this, it was really because I thought it was going to lead to an important job with the to-be-created Institute or Society. Ever since my second year in New York, this prospect has been dangled before me, temptingly, if tentatively."[15] The frustration over a delayed permanent film organization appears throughout these six years, primarily from Roud and Vogel. Lincoln Center as a whole had substantial financial issues at this time, limiting most new projects or even major changes.

Lincoln Center faced a budget crisis in October 1968, the month after the sixth New York Film Festival, which led to reorganization of the film activities and Vogel's resignation. The board created the Film Society of Lincoln Center under a new film committee, but it would receive no guarantee of deficit funding. Vogel requested that the Film Society receive this funding, outlining the many reasons that he felt Lincoln Center was treating its film activities unfairly.[16] Schuyler Chapin acknowledged that Vogel raised important points, but he claimed they were not specific to film, writing, "However you should understand that they are points that apply to every activity which Lincoln Center has taken on, and our present financial condition is in large measure due to the fact that we, as an organization, have stretched out on broad fronts,

[14] Chapin to Reed, Vogel Papers.

[15] Richard Roud to Schuyler Chapin, February 1, 1967, box 33, Folder 16, Vogel Papers.

[16] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, October 14, 1968, box 35, folder 4, Vogel Papers.

utilizing our limited resources to the maximum."[17] Instead of receiving support from Lincoln Center's general resources, the Film Society would instead be supported by festival ticket sales and membership fees. Vogel claimed, "The inability of the Lincoln Center Board and the Rockefeller interests to provide, at the nation's leading cultural center, appropriate financing for the representation of one of the most important art forms of our days is a cultural disaster of major proportions."[18] Even though the center had covered the festival's repeated financial deficits, Vogel saw such coverage as a necessity for an arts institution. To continue working with Lincoln Center, he demanded clearer control of the festival, including the selection of administrative and programming staff; a five-year contract with a higher salary; and a commitment to year-round funding and deficit financing from the committee. The film committee rejected Vogel's proposal, and he resigned on January 1, 1969.

These changes, including the Film Society's creation and Vogel's resignation, finally created a permanent situation for film at Lincoln Center. The film festival staff no longer had to rely on annual contracts and delayed new projects. Two weeks later, a Lincoln Center Film Committee press release outlined the organization of the Film Society, with Schuyler Chapin as the executive director.[19] Richard Roud would continue as the Program Director of the New York Film Festival, and he would also serve as the Chairman of the Program Committee for the new film group, helping make selections for year-round screening series. Although it remained a constituent organization of Lincoln Center, this new film committee was now responsible for the New York Film Festival, without the deficit coverage from Lincoln Center. The film society did

[17] Schuyler Chapin to Amos Vogel, October 16, 1968, box 35, folder 4, Vogel Papers.

[18] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, October 14, 1968, page 2, box 35, folder 4, Vogel Papers.

[19] "Lincoln Center's Film Activities Reorganized Under Independent Committee," box 35, folder 5, Vogel Papers.

not receive the continued financial support that Vogel had envisioned from the beginning of his time with the festival six years earlier, and his disappointment in the amount of financial support largely led to his resignation. While Lincoln Center provided the resources necessary for the New York Film Festival to exist from 1963 to 1968, it also demonstrates the possible limitations of relying on another organization for funding, because the festival and its staff were perpetually in an uncertain position regarding the future. Since the festival did not generate enough revenue to fund all of its events and planned additional activities, its organizers had to wait for other decision-makers to approve changes and new projects.

When Lincoln Center began planning to incorporate film in 1962, they sought the assistance of the British Film Institute. As a government-supported arts organization in the United Kingdom, BFI's activities at the time included archiving, distribution, exhibition, education, and some support for film production.[20] The major exhibition projects were the London Film Festival and year-round programming through the National Film Theatre. BFI's collaboration with Lincoln Center primarily involved the appointment of Richard Roud to the New York Film Festival staff.[21] He was employed by BFI as the programmer of the National Film Theatre and London Film Festival. This job required him to travel to other film festivals, since the London Film Festival had established the "festival of festivals" model adopted by the New York Film Festival. While BFI provided helpful support for the New York Film Festival by bringing another experienced programmer onto the staff, it also presented complications for festival operations, both in financial and administrative terms. This relationship required frequent

[20] See Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Christophe Dubin, eds., *The British Film Institute, the Government, and Film Culture, 1933-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

[21] Stanley Reed to Richard Leach, November 1, 1963, page 3, box 32, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

negotiations about many elements of the festival, including compensation, the logistics of sharing staff members, job titles, and decision-making processes.

Since Richard Roud was a full-time employee of the British Film Institute, Lincoln Center paid BFI a fee in order to use his services for their festival. This fee was intended to cover the part-time replacement staff used by BFI in Roud's absence. BFI had difficulty replicating Roud's productivity in programming the National Film Theatre with part-time replacements. In a letter to Richard Leach, one of the administrative directors of Lincoln Center, BFI's secretary Stanley Reed notes that they need an increase from the 1963 fee of $3450 to $5000 in order to continue the partnership with the New York Film Festival for 1964; the previous fee could not cover enough additional staff assistance to make up for the gap in programming.[22] In order to retain Roud's services, including his important coverage of European festivals earlier in the year for programming, Chapin agreed to these demands, while noting that they contributed to Lincoln Center's budgetary problems.[23] Although Lincoln Center agreed to the increased fee, the negotiations took months, delaying the final budget of and preparation for the New York Film Festival.

While the question of compensation was resolved with the negotiations before the second New York Film Festival in 1964, BFI soon took issue with the amount of time Lincoln Center needed Richard Roud in New York, which was usually only limited to two months. Stanley Reed, who had been promoted from secretary to director of BFI, discussed this in a letter to Chapin, writing, "The fact is that we miss Richard badly when he is away and the round-the-year

[22] Stanley Reed to Richard Leach, November 10, 1963, page 1, box 32, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[23] Schuyler Chapin to James Quinn, March 19, 1964, page 1, box 32, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

programming of the Theatre suffers from his preoccupation with the Festivals."[24] Reed hoped that BFI and Lincoln Center could agree to a new schedule before the end of 1964, avoiding further delays for both organizations. But the conversation continued into the following year. The London Film Festival immediately followed the New York Film Festival, so BFI wanted Richard Roud back in London to help them prepare, even before the beginning of the New York Film Festival. Lincoln Center wanted him to remain for the duration of their festival, so he could be available to speak about the film selection. These discussions lasted for over two months, and they finally agreed in February 1965 that Richard Roud would help get the New York Film Festival started but would leave before its end, so he could be back for the London Film Festival.[25] Among other complexities, this compromise took such a substantial amount of time because Roud refused to travel by airplane, so they had to allow four or five days in any proposed schedule for his return across the Atlantic Ocean by boat.[26] Although the partnership benefited both organizations, BFI had to manage the loss of a full-time employee during one of the busiest points in its yearly activities, while Lincoln Center relied on a person who was in another country the majority of the year for much of their film programming. Because of its consistent deficits, the New York Film Festival was not in a financial position to pay for a full-time programmer, so such issues were a necessity of their situation at the time.

The negotiations related to staffing fees and scheduling concerns were typically limited to a single festival season, but some problems between BFI and Lincoln Center lasted throughout the six years between 1963 and 1968. Both Vogel and Roud introduced concerns about their

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[24] Stanley Reed to Schuyler Chapin, November 27, 1964, page 1, box 32, folder 17, Vogel Papers.

[25] Stanley Reed to Schuyler Chapin, February 18, 1965, page 1, box 32, folder 17, Vogel papers.

[26] Schuyler Chapin to Stanley Reed, March 22, 1965, box 32, folder 17, Vogel Papers.

titles every year, and these discussions involved the higher-level administration at their respective organizations, not just the two individuals. For the first festival, Roud was listed as the festival organizer, with Vogel as the festival coordinator. For the other five festivals with both men on staff, Roud was the program director, and Vogel was the festival director. The consistent titles after the first festival might seem to indicate acceptance of this approach, but Vogel, Roud, and administrators from their respective organizations repeatedly argued about the proper titles for the festival's two primary staff members in correspondence over this period.

While these disagreements were extensive, they also repeated the same basic issues, often focusing on whether their responsibilities could be easily divided. For example, in preparation for the second festival in 1964, Schuyler Chapin suggested to current BFI director Quinn that the first year's titles, festival organizer and festival coordinator, did not accurately reflect the present situation. He argued that both Roud and Vogel should be listed as festival directors, writing, "Both are involved in programming, negotiations, administration and policy-making. Both are the responsible parties for the final results. It seems plain to us that the sum total of their contributions can no longer be 'sorted out' fruitfully nor reflected in differing titles."[27] Vogel, Chapin, and other parties from Lincoln Center expressed this basic opinion repeatedly over the six-year period, but Roud and other BFI staff continually argued that his contribution to programming deserved greater recognition than simply the same title as Vogel. In response to Chapin's March 1964 letter, Quinn claimed that there was a clear division of responsibility, writing, "As I see it, Mr. Roud is Festival Director (Programmes) and Mr. Vogel is Festival Director (Administration)."[28] While a variation of this approach became the official titles for the

[27] Schuyler Chapin to James Quinn, March 19, 1964, page 2, box 32, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[28] James Quinn to Schuyler Chapin, April 13, 1964, page 1, box 32, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

New York Film Festival from 1964 to 1968, BFI and Lincoln Center repeatedly returned to this issue every year. Vogel and Roud both contributed to programming decisions and negotiations with distributors, since Vogel had to handle business in New York for most of the year.

These general titles were a consistent issue, but BFI and Lincoln Center also discussed the titles relating to more specific responsibilities. Because of numerous accusations of poor programming from the New York press, the festival moved from the two-person programming team of Vogel and Roud to a four-person committee for the fourth festival in 1966.[29] While this distributed some of the workload, it also created another topic around which the organizations could disagree about proper titles, because both men were on the program committee. At one point during the preparation of the sixth festival in 1968, Roud felt that he should receive greater recognition for his contribution to programming with a "chairman" listing, while Vogel argued that they should be listed together as the "chairmen."[30] They communicated with one another directly, but they also wrote to vice president of programming Chapin in attempts to gain his support. Chapin expressed his fatigue in dealing with the topic of titles in a letter to Roud, writing, "On the subject of your relationship to the New York Film Festival, you are quite perspicacious when you note that I am increasingly disenchanted with the number of discussions and the seeming lack of results therefrom!"[31] These letters contain threats of resignation from both Vogel and Roud, indicating the degree of intensity in these title negotiations over the six years when they worked together for the festival. While they were both part of the decision-

[29] Hamid, "From Urban Bohemia to Euro Glamour," 77.

[30] Richard Roud to Schuyler Chapin, February 28, 1968, page 1, box 34, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[31] Schuyler Chapin to Richard Roud, March 11, 1968, box 34, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

making process for programming, neither was employed as a full-time programmer, making it difficult to establish a clear, consistent dynamic.

In addition to the ongoing concern about professional titles, the organizations negotiated over the specific programming process, including who would have the most power to make decisions about the films at the New York Film Festival. When they first organized the program committee in 1966, Roud explained to Vogel that he should have more control, because he would see more of the films than anyone else in his trips to other festivals. He claimed that he must have final say as the chairman of the committee, writing, "Several things had to be safe-guarded, my international reputation and standing as the man who selects and not just the man who negotiates."[32] Roud repeatedly tried to guard his role as "the man who selects" during the three years in which they had a programming committee, from 1966 to 1968; he and Vogel created complicated structures in which they received a number of unilateral voting privileges, with Roud receiving more of these privileges. These structures changed each year, and the changes always caused disagreements. Although they first argued about unilaterals in 1966 and made an agreement for that season, both Vogel and Roud wrote letters to Chapin in 1968 complaining about the other's desired changes in the programming committee.[33] Even after their extensive personal negotiations, administrators from Lincoln Center or BFI would sometimes dismiss the choices that Roud and Vogel made together. For example, Roud and Vogel had to redesign their voting procedures because Chapin did not like the number of "exceptions" they originally agreed to in 1966.[34] Like most of the disagreements, these negotiations delayed

[32] Richard Roud to Amos Vogel, March 9, 1966, page 1, box 32, folder 18, Vogel Papers.

[33] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, January 29, 1968; Richard Roud to Schuyler Chapin, February 28, 1968, box 34, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[34] Amos Vogel to Richard Roud, March 2, 1966, page 1, box 32, folder 18, Vogel Papers.

decision-making and complicated the logistics of the festival, with new adjustments to planning and procedures every year.

Lincoln Center streamlined the staff structure in 1967, diminishing the importance of BFI for the New York Film Festival. While the programming support and model provided by the British Film Institute was initially necessary for the New York Film Festival, Roud's continued involvement with Lincoln Center led to him becoming a contract employee of both organizations, instead of a full-time British Film Institute member. Roud now worked for Lincoln Center for six months each year, beginning in April.[35] This decreased the involvement of BFI over time, because their most substantial contribution was the staff addition of Richard Roud. In 1967, Lincoln Center ceased paying the staff replacement fee to BFI, since Roud had recently become an independent contractor.[36] The only major tie remaining between the festivals was a joint advertisement in the Cannes Film Festival program. BFI initially provided a crucial temporary staff member for the festival in Roud, but he split his time evenly between the organizations at the end of this period. The shared staff structure created consistent disagreements and problems for the first six years of the New York Film Festival, even while allowing access to a larger body of films for consideration. Despite these issues, funding concerns would not allow the New York Film Festival to simply make Roud a full-time staff member and give him full control of programming. Although it was a complex setup that caused problems, the assistance of BFI was necessary for the New York Film Festival leading up to its more permanent position as part of the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

[35] Schuyler Chapin to Richard Roud, March 20, 1967, box 3, folder 16, Vogel Papers.

[36] Schuyler Chapin to Stanley Reed, March 21, 1967, box 3, folder 16, Vogel Papers.

Unlike the British Film Institute, the Museum of Modern Art was not directly involved with the planning of the New York Film Festival throughout this six-year period. Yet its relationship to the festival substantially changed over time, showing the complexity and limitations of establishing a festival's position in relation to existing film activities. The Museum of Modern Art had established its film library in 1935, and it screened series of films from that time forward, so it had a firm place in American film culture.[37] As another major arts organization in New York City that promoted film, the Museum of Modern Art did support the first New York Film Festival, working with Lincoln Center to show retrospective films. For the first festival in 1963, ten films screened for free at the museum.[38] This collaboration was part of the early announcement that officially introduced the basic information about the first festival.[39] As Lincoln Center developed its plans for the Film Society before it was established at the end of 1968, MoMA slowly shifted from a supportive, collaborative approach toward the New York Film Festival to a competitive stance. MoMA's reaction to Lincoln Center's plans, as well as its established position as an organization, limited the possibilities of both the New York Film Festival and the new Film Society, even while the groups occasionally tried to find ways to work together.

Although official collaboration did not occur with the museum after 1963, there were discussions of merging the film departments at MoMA and Lincoln Center into a new film institute, which would have included the New York Film Festival. The limited resources of both

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[37] See Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[38] First New York Film Festival brochure, box 32, folder 7, Vogel Papers.

[39] Eugene Archer, "Major Film Fete Planned for City."

nonprofit organizations were a concern during these talks in 1965. In a letter to Schuyler Chapin, Vogel notes that he has been "intentionally vague regarding the location of the Institute's offices as the space available at the Museum of Modern Art does not seem to me to be large enough for both the Museum of Modern Art film library and our film department… let alone for any of the other projected activities of the Institute."[40] As these discussions continued, Vogel acknowledged the preferable financial position the organizations would enjoy if they were seeking foundation support together, instead of separately.[41] Although there were potential positive effects from a merger, these negotiations were another factor that delayed the establishment of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, since Vogel and Chapin did not want to make decisions about the future of film with their organization until they finalized relations with MoMA.[42] These conversations lasted throughout 1965, but the merger never took place. While the MoMA perspective on why this merger failed to happen is not available in Vogel's archive, a 1967 merger proposal from Lincoln Center claims that MoMA eventually rejected the 1965 idea.[43]

In 1967 and 1968, MoMA resisted another proposed merger and even attempted to limit the activities of the New York Film Festival and the developing film society at Lincoln Center. In a letter to Vogel, the director of MoMA's film department, Willard van Dyke, claims that one of the festival's policies damaged the museum's operations. Since it began in 1963, the festival only showed new films that had not yet screened in New York City, apart from special retrospective presentations. This limited MoMA's programming possibilities, because

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[40] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, May 10, 1965, box 35, folder 8, Vogel Papers.

[41] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, December 17, 1965, page 1, box 35, folder 8, Vogel Papers.

[42] Vogel to Chapin, December 17, 1965, page 2.

[43] Museum of Modern Art Proposal, January 23, 1967, page 2, box 35, folder 8, Vogel Papers.

distributors knew about the festival's rule. Van Dyke provided the example of attempting to curate films for an animated program, but distributors would not make anything available for the museum until the festival made its decisions.[44] He demanded that Vogel clarify to producers and distributors that the rule should not apply to MoMA. The negotiations over this rule began in the summer of 1967, and Lincoln Center and MoMA were still corresponding about the details of an exception for the museum in February 1968.[45] Even when the administrative director of MoMA wrote to confirm that the festival's New York premiere rule would not apply to MoMA's programming, Vogel disagreed with his understanding of their previous agreement; he only promised to adjust the rule on a trial basis, running through the end of the sixth New York Film Festival in 1968.[46]

In addition to the local-premiere policy of the film festival, van Dyke took issue with the plans for the Film Society of Lincoln Center. The organization's possible programs included educational events for schools, evening programs of speakers and panels, regular retrospective screenings, and a film archive; van Dyke cited all of these as encroaching on the established contributions made by MoMA's film department to the film scene of New York City. He directly stated his concerns in a letter to Vogel, writing, "Basically the situation is that the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art has been engaged in certain activities since 1935 and Lincoln Center has now undertaken programs which are in direct competition with us."[47] Like

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[44] Willard van Dyke to Amos Vogel, June 8, 1967, page 1, box 35, folder 8, Vogel Papers.

[45] Richard Koch to Schuyler Chapin, February 14, 1968; Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, February 16, 1968, box 35, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[46] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, February 16, 1968, page 1, box 35, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

[47] Willard van Dyke to Amos Vogel, June 8, 1967, page 1, box 35, folder 8, Vogel Papers.

the negotiations about the festival policy, the discussions of possible adjustments to the film department of Lincoln Center continued throughout 1967, with Vogel eventually stating to Schuman, "I am coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that the Museum of Modern Art, having decided it was impossible to get rid of a Lincoln Center film program all at once, now seems embarked on an attempt to whittle down its scope one by one, with no end in sight."[48] MoMA wanted Lincoln Center to guarantee that they would never embark on some programs, such as a film archive, which Vogel saw as limiting the potential activities of his new department at Lincoln Center. In addition to the temporary lifting of the premiere rule, these negotiations culminated in Lincoln Center agreeing to generally consult with MoMA before starting any new projects in the Film Society, especially an archive.[49]

As another major arts organization with substantial film activities, MoMA factored into decision-making for the New York Film Festival and the planned Film Society of Lincoln Center throughout the festival's early period under direct Lincoln Center management, from 1963 to 1968. While they initially collaborated to allow more films at MoMA as part of the festival, the goals and projects of Lincoln Center's film program changed, creating problems between them. As Lincoln Center expanded its efforts in the film department, MoMA became an obstacle. Like the festival's operations within Lincoln Center and its partnerships with the British Film Institute, the relationship between the New York Film Festival and the Museum of Modern Art indicates the opportunities and challenges that result from working with other organizations, especially those with shared goals.

[48] Amos Vogel to William Schuman, November 2, 1967.

[49] Amos Vogel to Schuyler Chapin, February 16, 1968, page 1, box 35, folder 9, Vogel Papers.

The compromises and limitations required by the New York Film Festival's relationships with Lincoln Center, the British Film Institute, and the Museum of Modern Art show why some choices were made and why many decisions and plans were postponed. These connections provide insight into the programming process, beyond the idea of programming as artistic or creative direction. Despite the support that the New York Film Festival received from other arts organizations, relationships with these same groups cause problems for the festival and its development. These issues included delayed job opportunities, complex decision-making involving many parties, and obstacles based on the interests of more established groups.

Some of the connections between the New York Film Festival and other groups remain significant, while many other festivals regularly collaborate with or are embedded within other organizations. The Film Society of Lincoln Center still produces the New York Film Festival, as well as joint projects with the Museum of Modern Art. BFI manages both the London Film Festival and Flare: London LGBT Film Festival. Other festivals are also produced by larger nonprofit organizations involved in numerous film-related activities. The Sundance Film Festival and the Tribeca Film Festival are contained within their respective film institutes. These relationships undoubtedly create opportunities for the staff members and filmmakers involved with these festivals, while potentially complicating or narrowing some possibilities. Even when other groups do not directly support or manage a festival, the range of existing arts organizations and programs frequently makes collaboration and compromise necessary.

Ephemerality and Self-Presentation at the Telluride Film Festival

The remote location of the Telluride Film Festival allowed organizers to avoid the negotiations over territory and institutional position that complicated programming for Roud, Vogel, and others involved with the New York Film Festival, and the programming approach

employed at Telluride also prevented significant competition with other festivals, at least in its early years. As Jeffrey Ruoff details in his analysis of the Telluride Film Festival, which emphasizes its contemporary industrial importance, the event started with a focus on retrospective programming celebrating Hollywood history.[50] This programming approach was achieved, in large part, through an emphasis on special guests who received tributes, with screenings of their work and a ceremony where they received a medal. From the first festival in 1974 through the early 1980s, Telluride became associated with a rhetoric of ephemerality, which centered primarily on the experience in a small mountain town in Colorado and the interactions with notable guests facilitated by the laidback environment. Press coverage reveals some details about the unusual format of the event, and recordings of speeches and panels from the festival, as well as documents from its planning and promotion, demonstrate how these features became a core part of the Telluride Film Festival's self-presentation through its early years, especially its first decade.

The first festival took place from August 30 to September 2, 1974, in the scenic mountain town of Telluride, which, according to United States census data, had a population of just 553 people in 1970.[51] The festival was initially led by three directors, Bill Pence, James Card, and Tom Luddy, under the newly established nonprofit, the National Film Preserve. The three men

[50] Jeffrey Ruoff, *Telluride in the Film Festival Galaxy* (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2016), 62. Ruoff's analysis focuses on the history of the festival, primarily through the lens of programming, and its contemporary industrial importance.

[51] "Characteristics of the Population: Colorado," 1970 Census of Population, U.S. Department of Commerce, https://usa.ipums.org/usa/resources/voliii/pubdocs/1970/Population/Vol1/1970a_co-01.pdf, 7-12.

had extensive experience working with film-related institutions, especially repertory film and exhibition.[52] A July 25, 1974, press release emphasizes their experience with film institutions:

> James Card, noted film historian and archivist, is Film Curator for the George Eastman International Museum of Photography. Bill Pence, Vice President of Janus Films and President of Flick Theatres, Inc., is responsible for the restoration of the Sheridan Opera House. Tom Luddy, respected film scholar and long-time coordinator of the San Francisco International Film Festival, is now Program Director and Acting Director for the Pacific Film Archives.[53]

The fourteen main screenings were held at the Sheridan Opera House, a theater originally built in 1914 that Bill Pence and his wife and festival co-founder Stella Pence had purchased and renovated, as referenced in the press release. Ruoff highlights the restoration of a rolled-up curtain and hand-painted background scene as notable features of the project that helped make it a distinctive venue for a festival, within the already unique environment of the town of Telluride.[54] The films included five silent titles in addition to contemporary art cinema and an avant-garde screening with films by Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger. But the primary element of the festival promoted in press releases were the in-person tributes and film screenings dedicated to three special guests: Hollywood actress Gloria Swanson and the directors Francis Ford Coppola and Leni Riefenstahl. Each of the tribute recipients were panelists in seminars at Elks Park, across the street from the Sheridan Opera House, and other films they were involved in screened at a second venue, the Telluride Lodge, throughout the festival. In this way, multiple aspects of the Telluride Film Festival centered on the three guests and their contributions to the event.

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[52] Ruoff, 9.

[53] July 25, 1974, press release, file 10, Telluride Film Festival records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter cited as Telluride records).

[54] Ruoff, *Telluride in the Film Festival Galaxy*, 4-5.

The presence of Riefenstahl as a tribute recipient at the festival attracted much attention and generated significant criticism, as the German director was widely known for her Nazi documentary *Triumph of the Will* (1935). The screening of that film was well-attended, but the recognition of her work, in an environment intended to celebrate legacy, was divisive. As Ruoff states, "Telluride helped rehabilitate Riefenstahl's reputation as a gifted filmmaker, even as it fueled controversy about her political legacy."[55] As protestors from the surrounding area came to the festival to denounce Riefenstahl and the tribute focused on her, this element of the event received attention from national press, and it contributed to the outsized attention that a new festival in a tiny Western town received in its first year, which introduced recurring parts of the discourse around Telluride and festivals more generally.

Press coverage of the 1974 Telluride Film Festival already emphasized the unique, ephemeral quality of the event through references to its beautiful, remote location, which most attendees would visit solely for the four-day festival, and special guests, especially those connected with film history. In his *Washington Post* article about the festival, Michael Webb claims that even with the range of films and the location, "what made the festival so dramatic were its guests."[56] Like many journalists who covered the festival, Webb recounts moments that underscore the relaxed environment. Describing one of the seminars in the park, he writes, "Coppola, rapidly becoming a rich and influential figure in the New Hollywood, came on as a great teddy bear, interrupting an outdoor seminar to tell his small daughter to please quit taking fruit from the speaker's table." Such incidents appear frequently in reports on the early years of the Telluride Film Festival, as the environment presented a marked contrast with prominent

[55] Ruoff, 19.

[56] Michael Webb, "Telluride's First Film Fest," *Washington Post*, n.d., file 12, Telluride records.

international festivals with much larger crowds and greater distance between audiences and guests. Journalists often remarked on celebrities' casual clothing in the mountain town, like the note in a Boulder magazine, *Focus*, that "Julie Christie wandered around in a holey tee-shirt and dungarees."[57] Webb summarized this as the fundamental appeal of Telluride: "That was the best thing about the festival—not merely the superb original prints of classic or forgotten films—but the moments of easy contact with the famous and the knowledgeable in the heady mountain air."[58] This "easy contact" came to characterize the festival for many audience members, filmmakers, and journalists. As speeches and interviews in later years of the festival will demonstrate, Pence and other organizers maintained tributes as a core part of the festival's self-presentation, and the remote, casual location made it possible for audiences to easily interact with guests. While the town of Telluride offered great appeal to visitors, its distance from major cities was also a liability, with regular reports of lost baggage or delayed film shipments. At least one film screening, Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, was cancelled in 1974 because the print did not arrive on time, introducing another feature of the festival that would recur often.[59]

After overall positive, national press coverage and strong attendance in its first year, the Telluride Film Festival's format remained largely the same in 1975, and the unique qualities of the experience that could not be replicated in other exhibition environments (and even other festivals) continued to be highlighted by the organizers and attendees. The main programs at the

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[57] Janet McReynolds, "Telluride Film Festival," *Focus: The Sunday Camera's Magazine*, September 8, 1974, file 12, Telluride records.

[58] Webb, "Telluride's First Film Fest."

[59] "Heated dispute and film glories unreel at Telluride," William Gallo, *Rocky Mountain News*, September 8, 1974, file 12, Telluride records.

second festival screened at the Sheridan Opera House, with three additional new films showing at the nearby Nugget Theatre. The Nugget also showed encores of the tributes and additional titles related to the tribute recipients. The three tributes again featured people with different filmmaking roles and from different periods. Tributes focused on the director Werner Herzog, the actor Jack Nicholson, and the silent film star and later prolific Hollywood director Henry King. The casual format of the festival again gained notice in the press. Describing the seminars, *Variety*'s Bruce Trinz wrote, "Discussions were lively, at times somewhat hostile and contentious, and generally rewarding as a result of the open attitudes of the panelists."[60] Seminars offered a memorable way for audiences to see and interact with the special guests in a different environment than the award presentation and screening at the main tribute.

In addition to the tributes, press releases leading up to the festival called attention to special programs that, like the tributes, cannot be seen at other venues. Two programs focused on film history, with the San Francisco International Film Festival's Albert Johnson presenting on "The American Musical," a curated series of clips ending with a screening of *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957) and underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger presenting "Hollywood Babylon." A press release notes that Anger "will personally narrate this affectionate and bittersweet backward glance at a somewhat tarnished glitter town," in the program titled after his 1959 book about scandals of Hollywood's past.[61] Such events were live presentations combining film clips with commentary, and they appeared at various points in Telluride's early years as components of the programming that would only appear at the festival. Festival descriptions and

[60] Bruce Trinz, "Name Participants Infuse Some Zing At Colorado Fest," *Variety*, September 10, 1975, 85. ProQuest.

[61] Press release from the National Film Preserve Ltd., August 8, 1975, file 26, Telluride records.

press coverage would mention the ephemeral incidents that arose from such presentations. For example, the *Variety* report even mentions that Johnson's lively commentary included singing and dancing for "The American Musical" program.[62] Like the tributes, these special presentations offered audiences at Telluride something they could not access elsewhere, setting this festival environment apart from other exhibition experiences.

The first decade of the festival instilled the tributes as a central component of its self-presentation. Programs continue to reflect tribute screenings associated with each of the recipients at the Sheridan Opera House, with encores at the Nugget Theatre and additional screenings of their work at a secondary venue, usually the Telluride Community Center. The tributes in this period regularly represented a mix of figures from film history and contemporary film movements. Many directors of European art cinema, for example, visited the festival to receive tributes. The fourth festival in 1977 featured tributes to the British director Michael Powell, mostly known for work in the 1940s and 1950s; the French director Agnes Varda, who made her first feature in 1958; and Ben Carre, a set designer who worked in film from 1900 into the 1950s.[63] The tribute recipients at the fifth festival were comedy producer Hal Roach, classic Hollywood actor Sterling Hayden, and the contemporary Czech New Wave, described in the program as starting in the 1960s. Even when the festival included other retrospective screenings, sometimes in the clip-based format typified by "The American Musical" and "Hollywood Babylon" in 1975, the tributes received special attention in program. The 1977 festival showed a memorial program to silent film director Rex Ingram, presented by tribute recipient Michael Powell and historian and filmmaker Kevin Brownlow, and the 1978 festival featured "A Golden

[62] Trinz, "Name Participants Infuse Some Zing at Colorado Fest," 7.

[63] 1977 Telluride Film Festival program, file 57, Telluride records.

Anniversary," a celebration of Mickey Mouse's fiftieth "birthday" featuring champagne and cake at a screening of four shorts with Disney's animation director Wolfgang Reitherman.[64] Such special events were listed in the program with a photograph and description, like every screening, but the organizers emphasized the tributes over other events, placing the image and text about each tribute against a bright pink or yellow background.

Descriptions of the festival and its goals, especially by Telluride Film Festival co-director Bill Pence, stress the importance of the tributes and the environment the event facilitates for its guests. Filmed at the fourth festival in 1977, a short special about the festival titled "Movies in the Mountains" from February 1978 exemplifies Pence's perspective at this time, and it also offers recorded evidence of the laidback atmosphere. In an interview alongside his wife Stella, the manager of the festival, Pence explains that they usually begin planning the tributes about eight months before the festival (i.e., early in the calendar year, with the festival taking place over Labor Day weekend), working with one person as initial inspiration then attempting to balance the program as they extend from that plan. He succinctly states the centrality of the tributes to the festival's programming, saying, " We kind of look upon the three people as a shadow or an umbrella that covers the entire festival. Getting to know those three people, you know, is part of the total experience."[65] Guests who would be possible to "get to know" at the festival are a crucial component for the organizers. He mentions that "congeniality" is one criterion, explaining, "They have to be able to mix in this kind of atmosphere." Such comments suggest that, for Pence, the production of the festival involved curating an environment, not just screenings.

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[64] 1978 Telluride Film Festival program, file 70, Telluride records.

[65] "Movies in the Mountains," Telluride Film Festival collection, Academy Film Archive (hereafter cited as Telluride film collection).

The unusual atmosphere of the festival, in a time when film festivals were already widely covered in the press as glamorous international events, appears in various moments throughout "Movies in the Mountains." A clip from a panel discussion shows tribute-recipient Michael Powell seated next to Martin Scorsese, and it cuts to footage of people in the audience as an unseen man asks a question about financial support for the arts. The clip then cuts to the speaker, showing a bearded, shirtless man sitting cross-legged in the grass and holding a microphone. Even early in the festival, the casual atmosphere, marked by accessible prominent guests and celebrities, could lead to overly familiar behavior. In a series of interviews recorded on sidewalks and in lines for screenings, a man comments on the relaxed experience, stating, "Where else could you walk up and say, 'Hey, Julie Christie, let me take a photograph of you,' and shove a camera in her face and do it." Overall, though, tribute recipients and other guests regularly praised the environment of the festival in press interviews and panel discussions, complimenting the intentional contrast with the formality of other festivals.

The selection of special guests helped create the specific atmosphere desired by the organizers, and it offered a way to distinguish the festival from others in the landscape. In the "Movies in the Mountains" interview, Stella Pence says, "One of the things we like to do at Telluride is surprise people and bring their attention to someone who has not been in the public eye. Because there are a lot of other film festivals, and at those film festivals you can see big names and big stars." Bill Pence further explains their method of producing the festival, noting that they avoid star directors or actors who "would bring a contingent of their press people and all that nonsense." The number of professionals present at most industry events would detract from the atmosphere that the Telluride organizers wanted to maintain, with the guests mingling with the general attendees on sidewalks and at panel discussions.

Like interviews, opening night speeches provided an opportunity to frame the festival and its goals in relation to the tribute program. At the fifth festival's opening in 1978, Bill Pence stressed this idea of offering surprise for audiences and bringing attention to less recognizable guests. Speaking at the front of the Sheridan Opera House, he states that they are not hyping major Hollywood films that will be available in theaters soon with their programming, and he then distinguishes their philosophy of selecting tribute recipients from other film institutions, saying: "We're also not here to load the shelf of some already widely acclaimed and highly publicized star or director with another trinket. And it's also unlikely that we will re-honor those who have already been well recognized by the Oscars or the American film institute or even been roasted by Dean Martin."[66] Pence describes their approach as, instead, paying "homage to greats and near greats who deserve recognition and have never gotten it." Some variation of this idea emerged in many of Pence's opening night speeches during the first of the festival, as the organizers balanced the need for familiar and exciting tribute recipients with people who represented discoveries from film history.

Pence also highlighted the possibility of audience interaction with the honored guests in opening night presentations. For instance, at the sixth festival in 1980, he outlined his perspective on the casual atmosphere, saying:

> Telluride is intended to be informal, friendly, and intimate. It's meant to be a place where you should sit down and have a drink with Jean-Luc Godard… Where you can share a drink with Lew Ayers or Werner Herzog, or even hopefully share a hot tub with Russ Meyer or Isabelle Hupert. And Telluride is the one place you should not be shy in expressing your interest, your admiration, or even your hostilities toward the work of our guests. [67]

[66] "1978-A. Opening Night Speeches. Tribute: Hal Roach," Telluride film collection.

[67] "1980-B. Altman Tribute," Telluride film collection.

Pence encouraged the audience to interact with the filmmakers, actors, and other figures from film history and film institutions at the festival, but he also took this opportunity to describe his ideal Telluride audience. In the same speech, he explained that the organizers "hope to attract in our audience to Telluride people who genuinely love and have a passion for film. And not folks who are here to get an autograph or seek contact with a specific director or star." Interaction with notable people was an appeal of the festival, as press coverage and the self-presentation by Pence reveal, but he also reminds the audience that the love of film itself should be central to the festival experience.

This complicated balance between appealing to audiences with prominent special guests and keeping the focus on a specific form of cinephilia—one marked by celebrating forgotten contributors to film history—also appeared during Pence's introduction to the eleventh Telluride Film Festival. An *Entertainment Tonight* special about the 1984 event includes a clip of Pence at the Sheridan Opera House on opening night as he says, "You know, over eleven years we've striven to be the least glamorous and most low-key film festival in the world, and as I look out among you, I see that we haven't really succeeded."[68] But shortly after joking that the level of glamor had surpassed their intentions, he reiterates the organizers' perspective on the festival's role in the landscape. He says, "With so much hype in the commerce of film, Telluride has always found a special niche in the non-hype and the earned excellence. It's not our place to put a rubber stamp on celebrities already well appreciated or on films well on their way." This discourse of discovery, regarding both the festival's tributes and its film programming, permeates the self-presentation of the event throughout this period. Tributes offered a strategy

[68] "1984. Entertainment Tonight. Party Night. Opera. Lewis Teague & Bob Hillman. Reactions: Harry Dean Stanton & Dean Stockwell," Telluride film collection.

for the festival organizer to distinguish their approach from other notable festivals around the country and the world, with the emphasis on renewing interest in forgotten figures from film history, and it allowed them to underscore the ephemerality of the event by centering it on the presence of special guests as much as the presentation of specific films.

The themed programming model typified by this period of the Telluride Film Festival, which grew from the tributes selected each year, contrasts with the "festival of festivals" programming strategy demonstrated by the New York Film Festival, with Vogel and Roud mostly selecting films that had already premiered at other major festivals in Europe. Bill and Stella Pence attempted to expand the themed model with another event, the Santa Fe Film Festival, in 1980. In correspondence about potential guests, Bill Pence described the event as the only themed film festival in the United States.[69] Each year, the programming focused on a single topic, like the American Western in 1981 and Music in Film in 1982.[70] The last festival involving the Pences took place in 1983, with the theme "The Spirit of Zoetrope," a celebration of Francis Ford Coppola's work and his company. According to a *New York Times* description, this included films that he directed, as well as titles that he produced or distributed, like Akira Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* (1980) and Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1927).[71] Compared to potentially expansive genre themes like Westerns or musicals, the Zoetrope theme was much more limited.

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[69] Bill Pence to Tom White, January 7, 1982, Telluride records.

[70] William K. Everson, "Spirit of Zoetrope Infects Santa Fe with High Spirits and Fine Mix," *Variety*, April 20, 1983, 7, ProQuest.

[71] Chris Chase, "At the Movies: 'Spirit of Zoetrope' at Santa Fe Film Festival," *New York Times*, March 18, 1983, C13, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1983/03/18/041899.html?pageNumber=59.

Although the full festival focused on Francis Ford Coppola's company, instead of a tribute program with a few additional titles, this theme for the 1983 Santa Fe Film Festival expanded the specific thematic method of programming established by Telluride's tributes. Despite drawing on a strategy that had succeeded at Telluride, the fourth Santa Fe Film Festival was seemingly not successful enough for the Pences to maintain. The festival took a hiatus until 1987, and the Pences did not return.[72] While the specific factors that caused the early decline of this version of the festival are unclear, *Variety* did note a "spectacular deficit" from the "overly-ambitious" third year of the festival in their report on the fourth event.[73] Themed programming worked to an extent with the Telluride Film Festival, but the experiment in Santa Fe did not endure. Later festival models, especially those focused on identity groups like the Asian American film festivals discussed in the next chapter, would find ways to curate lasting events around specific themes.

The Telluride Film Festival has never been organized around one theme for the entire program, but the tributes continue as a significant part of its programming that receives press attention, especially as a potential starting point for awards campaigns. Today, the selection of tributes at the festival also relies more on contemporary actors and filmmakers than the rediscoveries of important figures from the past, with recent tributes including Cate Blanchett, Sarah Polley, and Mark Cousins in 2022 and Riz Ahmed, Peter Dinklage, and Jane Campion in 2021. But the press coverage of the festival and its tributes continues to draw on passing incidents and celebrity interactions that have long characterized the festival through its appealing ephemerality. For example, in her report on the 2021 festival, *IndieWire*'s Anne Thompson

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[72] Todd McCarthy, "Major Retro on John Huston Slated for Santa Fe Film Fest," *Variety*, July 8, 1987, ProQuest, 17.

[73] William K. Everson, "Spirit of Zoetrope," 7.

credits Netflix with throwing the best party of the festival for *The Lost Daughter*, directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal. Thompson notes that "Gyllenhaal's husband Peter Sarsgaard, who stars in the movie as a seductive academic, selected the playlist and had the whole joint, from 'The Lost Daughter' stars Ed Harris and Dakota Johnson, to Cumberbatch, Dunst and 'Red Rocket' star Simon Rex, dancing the night away."[74] Interspersed with analysis of the films and their awards prospects, Thompson's comment indicates the continued value placed on the experiences you cannot have outside of the festival environment as memorable moments that distinguish events like the Telluride Film Festival from other filmgoing. Sometimes these moments are intentionally produced by festivals, or they are simply facilitated by an environment that combines interesting or famous guests with enthusiastic audiences, but the early years of the Telluride Film Festival offer an instructive example of the connections between ephemerality and special guests as appeals of festivals. In the decades since, festivals have maintained the importance of ephemerality and guests in appealing to audiences.

Conclusion

The New York Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival were among the earliest notable festivals in the United States, as the concept and structure of festivals began shifting from the initial international model that started in Europe. Cinephiles and arts administrators adopted and revised preexisting models to bring festivals to new environments, negotiating what elements could be discarded or added to best utilize resources and networks available to them. While film festivals are often independent organizations, they rely on networks of filmmakers, sponsors, and organizers and administrators at other institutions. These complex relationships

[74] Anne Thompson, "Telluride 2021 Recharged the Film World and Anointed 2022 Awards Contenders," *IndieWire*, September 8, 2021, https://www.indiewire.com/awards/industry/telluride-2021-recharged-film-2022-awards-contenders-1234662752/.

impact film programming, staff structures, and other elements that help determine festivals' functions and roles in film culture, both locally and globally.

This chapter has stressed the complexity of the collaborations that often make festivals possible, with the New York Film Festival as an early and prominent example, and the strategies utilized to produce an experience marked by ephemerality, exemplified in the tribute programs at Telluride and the discourse around them. Both concepts remain crucial in the American film festival system. The complicated labor involved in programming films and planning events is still central to the production of festivals, especially in the environment of the United States with little government support for the arts, and ephemerality offers a way to appeal to audiences whose support is necessary for festivals to continue. As later chapters will further explore, festival models have taken varied approaches to stressing the ephemerality of the events and collaborating with other organizations, but these aspects of the production and self-presentation of festivals are essential to their nature as a distinctive sector of film culture.

Chapter 2:

Connecting Communities: Festival Circuits and the Asian American International Film Festival Tour

During the opening night of the Asian American International Film Festival (AAIFF) in New York City on August 3, 2022, multiple staff members and sponsors spoke about the importance of Asian American activism before the screening of *Free Chol-Soo Lee* (Julie Ha and Eugene Yi, 2022). The documentary, which tells the story of a young Korean immigrant who was wrongfully convicted of a murder in San Francisco's Chinatown, had premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January before screening at numerous festivals. These screenings included many prominent Asian American film festivals, such as San Francisco's CAAMFest and the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, in addition to festivals with general programming like the Milwaukee Film Festival and the Santa Barbara Film Festival. Every year, many Asian American features and short films follow similar trajectories, premiering at a major festival, whether that is Sundance, CAAMFest, the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, or another event, before going on to screen for audiences at other festivals around the country and, in some cases, internationally. Many of these films mostly screen at Asian American film festivals. Unlike other festivals connected through shared programming in the United States, Asian American festivals have even closer associations, both past and present, and the presentations before the screening of *Free Chol-Soo Lee* highlighted these relationships.

The festival director, executives from the Asia Society (the Upper East Side cultural center where AAIFF screened films in 2022), and the directors of *Free Chol-Soo Lee* all spoke before the film, but comments by John Woo, the executive director of AAIFF's parent organization Asian CineVision, suggest key features of Asian American film festivals as a distinct circuit within the American film festival system – one defined by an activist history and

enduring connections. Woo stressed the legacy of the festival and its continued activism on the occasion of its 45th anniversary. In a time of heightened anti-Asian American harassment and violence that started during the COVID-19 pandemic, he emphasized the importance of solidarity within the Asian American community, and he also underlined AAIFF's collaborations with Visual Communications, the Los Angeles-based Asian American media center that produces the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival each year. AAIFF in New York screened two programs from Visual Communications during the hybrid festival in August 2022, "Digital Histories" and "Armed with a Camera."[1] Countless festivals are connected through screening the same films every year, but AAIFF's programming of films produced by another Asian American media center and festival producer suggests the unusual level of connection between the events, which goes back to their origins.

The AAIFF website states, "Established in 1978 by Asian CineVision, the Asian American International Film Festival is the nation's first and longest running festival of its kind and the premier showcase for the best independent Asian, Asian diaspora and Pacific Islander cinema."[2] AAIFF and other Asian American festivals that were established in the following years exemplify the type of politically engaged, specialized programming that emerged in film festivals, beginning in the 1960s but expanding most widely in the 1980s, according to Marijke de Valck.[3] Describing the same development, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong argues that festivals with

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[1] "Visual Communications: Digital Histories and Armed with a Camera [VOD]," AAIFF 45, https://www.aaiff.org/aaiff45/visual-communications-digital-histories-and-armed-with-a-camera-vod, accessed August 15, 2022.

[2] "About," Asian American International Film Festival, accessed May 20, 2023, https://www.aaiff.org/about.

[3] de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 179.

programming defined by ethnic categories or thematic festivals based on other subject matter have produced "the primary changes in the festival world" since the 1980s.[4] Asian American film festivals are a major example of these specialized, in this case activist, events that have become crucial festival circuits around the world. As Woo demonstrated when highlighting the Visual Communications programs at AAIFF, many specialized circuits maintain collaborative relationships between festivals, resulting from shared goals and frequent relationships with the same filmmakers, sponsors, and other stakeholders. In other words, specialized circuits, like Asian American film festivals, more fully share their networks.

Another distinction between general programming festivals and many specialized festivals is their functions. The functions of most festivals remain unspoken in their self-presentation, like the circulation or business functions of festivals, but activist festivals have a direct goal, openly stating the function of embedding films in social and political discourse. The AAIFF website notes that the festival "is committed to film and media as a tool for social change and to supporting diversity and inclusion in the media arts."[5] Such clear statements about a festival's purpose are common in festivals with specialized programming, especially those related to identity groups like LGBTQ or Asian American festivals. Scholars have examined the activism of Asian American festivals as spaces of solidarity for their audiences, filmmakers, and organizers. In her study of Asian American festivals, which focuses on CAAMFest and the San Diego Asian Film Festival, Erin Franziska Högerle writes, "As film festivals that are dedicated to the media output of Asian immigrant and diasporic communities in the United States, Asian American film festivals constitute a platform through which memories of migration are

[4] Wong, *Film Festivals*, 52.

[5] "About," Asian American International Film Festival.

mediated, transported, and shaped." [6] She locates the significance of the events in their status as "spaces of shared remembering."[7] Others have examined the media-related activism of Asian American film festivals, like Brian Hu's study of the Asian American feature film and festivals' efforts to "counter the mainstream media's negligence and distortion of Asian American characters and subjects," even as they shifted from race-conscious to assimilationist discourses in their promotional materials.[8]

The activist nature of Asian American festivals is fundamental and crucial to their continued vitality, but they also demonstrate other features of the American festival system more broadly, particularly as an example of circulation between festivals and ways in which that function can emerge. For Asian American festivals, circulation occurred in a more formalized way for a period beginning in the early 1980s. This circulation between festivals is not formalized now, but the early process is an unusually direct example of the relational nature of festivals, as well as a fruitful case study of the challenges of festival production, mostly relating to the touring format in this case. The AAIFF website notes this shared history, stating, "The annual National Festival Tour launched in 1982 and was the catalyst for many Asian American festivals, including those in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Toronto, Vancouver, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, D.C."[9] While this festival's public history and other scholarly accounts of Asian American festivals mention the tour, there is little discussion of the tour's details, from its motivations and planning to its logistical operations and difficulties, and

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[6] Högerle, *Asian American Film Festivals*, 2.

[7] Högerle, *Asian American Film Festivals*, 3.

[8] Brian Hu, "The Coin of the Realm," 64.

[9] "History," Asian CineVision, accessed May 18, 2023, https://www.asiancinevision.org/history/.

these details represent a complex moment in American film festival history as evidence of a potential path for the system that did not continue.

The touring AAIFF not only contributed to the establishment of now-major Asian American festivals, like CAAMFest and the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, but it also exemplifies the circulation function of festivals, decades before the larger system of circulation grew out of regional festivals and their relationship with larger events. This offers a fruitful case study of negotiations within festival production. In this case, various stakeholders navigate the needs of their own audiences and organizations, while all the institutions involved share a common goal of promoting Asian American media. These festivals may still compete for premiere slots and other pressures shared by all festivals, but they also maintain elements of collaboration that highlight the shared goals of these institutions and the relational nature of the festival system. These collaborative elements, like AAIFF screening Visual Communications' films, which Visual Communications produced and premiered at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, exemplify the mutual support between Asian American media centers that Peter Feng identifies in his edited collection about Asian American media representation.[10]

While the Asian American circuit is a robust part of the American film festival system, it is notable that, like all festival circulation, this is not distribution, and even the largest Asian American festivals are not regularly the site of distribution deals, like Sundance or South by Southwest. As Lori Kido Lopez notes in her study of Asian American media activism:

> It is rare for even the most popular, award-winning films screened at Asian American film festivals to find mainstream distribution, which means that everyday film-going audiences almost never have the opportunity to see such work playing at their local theater or even being available for rental. It is not necessarily the size of the audience that limits such works but the low level of accessibility, since much of the work of Asian

[10] Stephen Gong, "A History in Progress: Asian American Media Centers, 1970-1990" in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter Feng (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 105.

> American independent filmmakers is only available to privileged audiences in specific geographic locations for a small amount of time.[11]

Seeking more distribution opportunities for Asian American media is an enduring part of the activist discourse and calls to action from festivals. Asian American media centers have grappled with this problem since they first started producing festivals in the late 1970s and early 1980s, seeking ways to expand the audience for their films beyond the privileged groups that had geographic access to their programs, which were even more limited four decades ago.

Despite the limitations of the festival model in providing filmmakers with access to commercial opportunities, Asian American festivals have remained important sites of exchange within filmmaking and activist communities, and the early years of the AAIFF tour in the 1980s offers a unique example of an intentional festival circuit that prefigures the unregulated format of festival circulation that emerged with general programming festivals in the 1990s and 2000s. The tour is not formal distribution, as it does not provide the financial rewards that such an agreement would hopefully bring to filmmakers, but it is one way that Asian American media centers and festivals responded to the problem, attempting to deliver films to audiences around the country outside of the festival's home in Manhattan. In this chapter, I examine the challenges for festival production that emerged from the touring model and how self-presentation factored into the collaborative process for the local organizations that hosted the program. Building on the examples of collaboration in producing the New York Film Festival from the last chapter, I argue that Asian CineVision's touring Asian American International Film Festival exemplifies the possibilities and limitations of formal collaboration between festivals, as the needs of local audiences and organizers complicate the ability to replicate a festival produced in other

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[11] Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 27.

circumstances. Using evidence from Asian CineVision's archival collection, I first study the roots of the festival tour in the early years of AAIFF before turning to the planning and execution of the tour and the challenges that emerged.

"The Momentum Is Beginning:" The Early Years of AAIFF

From the beginning of the Asian American International Film Festival, organizers, filmmakers, and audience hoped to see it expand, as the initial event showed the possibility of attracting audiences to specialized Asian American films and generating conversations about representation in media, one of the core concerns of the festival's parent organization, Asian CineVision (ACV). Founded in 1975, ACV is a media center serving New York's Asian American community. Their early activities included producing Chinatown Community Television and publishing the arts journals *Bridges* and *CineVue*.[12] Just two years after its founding, ACV produced their first film festival in 1978. Held at the Henry Street Arts for Living Center in Manhattan's Lower East Side from February 12 to 14, the festival was initially titled the Asian American Film Festival (AAFF) for its first four years.[13] Promotional materials emphasized free admission and the goal of supporting contemporary Asian American filmmakers. A January press release ahead of the event stated, "The aim of the festival is to inform the public about the current status of Asian American cinemagraphic [sic] expression. It is to acquaint the public with a frequently overlooked group of filmmakers, and it is to provide budding Asian American filmmakers with an opportunity to display their works."[14] This goal of

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[12] "History," Asian CineVision; Jun Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video*, 27.

[13] Some materials from this period include a hyphen in "Asian-American," but they mostly follow the contemporary practice of excluding the hyphen. In this chapter, quotes maintain the text of the original documents.

[14] January 28, 1978, press release, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '78: Promotion," Asian CineVision records, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, New York University (hereafter cited as ACV

offering a platform to Asian American filmmakers merged political and aesthetic concerns, as festival organizers framed the films from an aesthetic perspective in publicity and program descriptions.

A press release titled "Synopsis of Program" from the 1978 festival describes this approach, noting:

> The festival hopes to further the 'legitimation' and viability of Asian American films and filmmakers; however, it's program shall be determined with an eye on the aesthetic… the socio-political priorities of Asian Americans, as such, are not principal to the festival committee's film selections. While the festival program hopes to familiarize its audience with the Asian American 'milieu', Asian American problems, joys, mind, etc., it will attempt primarily to spotlight the unique artistic achievements of its participants.[15]

As outlined by this explanation, ACV and the festival programmers were more focused on aesthetic questions, in contrast with the priorities of some other Asian American media centers, like the focus on social change documentary held by Los Angeles's Visual Communications. In her study of Asian American film and video in relation to public broadcasting, Jun Okada describes this feature of AAIFF, writing that "people associated with the New York media organization Asian CineVision in the late 1970s and the 1980s, including the critic Daryl Chin, were adamant about the possibility of a more purely aesthetic inclination in Asian American film and video, particularly in its connection to American and international avant-garde cinema."[16] Programs from the early years of the festival exhibit the perspectives of organizers, particularly Chin, more directly than many festivals' programs, as AAFF guides included articles and

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records). This collection was not fully processed when I consulted it in September 2022, so I cite box numbers and folder labels when available. Although some folder labels contradict the years of the materials, I have maintained the information printed on each folder. For the small number of folders without labels, I have provided brief descriptions.

[15] "Synopsis of Program," box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '78: Resource," ACV records.

[16] Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video*, 14-15.

interviews about the films and the selections as a whole, instead of just brief introductory comments, schedules, and film descriptions, like most festival programs.

The aesthetic emphasis of AAFF is evident in the variety of programming, which Okada characterizes as "an eclectic mix of international, local, avant-garde, documentary, and fiction short films."[17] The inclusion of international films is significant here, as AAIFF today remains one of the most prominent Asian American festivals to show films from Asian filmmakers around the world, rather than focusing on North American filmmakers, and that characteristic was established from the beginning. The festival program was organized into three screenings, with a "Marathon Film Festival" composed of twenty-eight short films on the first day, a program of "Children's Film and Other Works" with fourteen shorts (seven of them from Visual Communications) on the second day, and an unlabeled program of two short films and two short features on the third and final day. Notable Asian American filmmakers appear in this first program, including Wayne Wang's early narrative film *New Relationships* (1977) and Christine Choi's documentary about New York's Chinatown, *From Spikes to Spindles* (1976).

The festival had a successful first year, according to its organizers, and this quickly led to ideas for expansion and supplemental activities to support and promote Asian American filmmakers. A letter from the "Asian American Film Committee," which included festival programmers and ACV's co-founders, reported good turnout, with a packed auditorium and people even sitting on the floor in the front of the room.[18] This letter also notes success in attracting press attention, with coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and multiple Asian American publications in New York. The committee's letter lists potential follow-up

[17] Okada, 27.

[18] Asian American Film Committee letter, February 20, 1978, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '78: Correspondence," ACV records.

programs, like opportunities for dialogue between Asian American filmmakers, an Asian American Film Archive, and a "joint effort with ACV to convert the films into video programs for wider distribution." The festival maintains this goal of providing a broader platform for Asian American filmmakers, as the previously mentioned problem of distribution has persisted. That question appears throughout correspondence in the initial years of AAIFF, as the idea of reaching new audiences with the festival and its programming began to emerge.

Unlike other festival organizers at the time, the Asian American Film Festival staff had early plans to further circulate films to new audiences in a formal, intentional process, not just through the natural circulation activity that evolved with the expansion of festivals in the United States. This was, in part, due to the festival's roots in a media center, ACV, instead of being an independent festival like Telluride or part of a larger organization with film as only one section, like the New York Film Festival. Through the connection with a media center, the festival's organizers had access to additional ongoing programs and resources, and one proposed method of increasing the festival's reach was through an existing ACV project. In a letter addressed to filmmakers who had shown films in the first Asian American Film Festival, executive director Peter Chow described the success of the event and thanked recipients for their participation, and he requested permission to use their films in a new endeavor: a special program titled "Asian American Film Festival of 1978" that would be broadcast on ACV's weekly cable show. Chow stated that, in the special, "several films from the festival will be presented along with introduction, interview or/and discussion."[19] This represents an early example of attempting to expand the festival beyond the limited audience that could attend the first festival in Lower

[19] Peter Chow to "Dear Friend," March 3, 1978, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '78: Correspondence," ACV records.

Manhattan, and as the festival experienced further success in its second year, such ideas started appearing from other stakeholders.

Taking place on four subsequent Friday nights in May and early June in 1979, the second festival, still titled the Asian American Film Festival, showed a total of thirty-nine films in the Schimmel Auditorium at New York University's Tisch Hall, which had a capacity of 500 seats. Like the first year, the programming included projects ranging from international experimental films to American documentaries, and the four evenings seem to separate distinct categories of films more clearly than the first year. For example, descriptions for the May 25 selections all categorize the films as experimental, with the first half predominantly American films and the second half mostly from Japan or Hong Kong.[20] Al Wong's *Same Difference* (1976), comprised of landscapes filmed for one year outside his kitchen window in San Francisco, showed in the first half, and Kohei Ando's *Like the Train Passing* (1978), with recorded reflections of a train passing outside his home in Tokyo, screened in the second half of the evening. While the festival has always shown films produced in America and other countries, even in this early stage they were often separated to some degree.

According to a grant report from ACV's Debbie Chang to the New York State Council on the Arts, which provided funding for the festival, AAFF received local press coverage and purchased television spots to help promote the event.[21] WNYC also produced a half-hour program about the festival that featured interviews with filmmakers, and this was broadcast nationwide. Chang reported that all of this promotion led to strong attendance, with 1200 people

[20] 1979 Asian American Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '79 Promotion," ACV records, 13.

[21] Debbie Chang to Nancy Sher, October 9, 1979, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '80 Correspondence," ACV records.

total.[22] Even with the successful attendance, the cost breakdown in this report details that the festival made just $500 in ticket sales, which represented only a fraction of operating costs.[23] Other income included a $4,000 grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, $800 from sponsors who purchased advertisements in the program, and $400 in donations for $5,700 in total income. The expenses for the festival, broken down into salaries, office space rental, equipment purchases and rentals, transportation, catalogue production, and administrative expenses, totaled $7,043.

Despite substantial support from the state government, a source that could not be relied on year to year, the Asian American Film Festival still had a deficit of over $1,300. The report does not detail how the festival made up for this debt, but, as later case studies will show, this outcome occurs frequently, and it leads festivals and their parent organizations to carry debt and applies urgency to fundraising efforts. In this case, these difficulties prevented the festival from financially supporting the filmmakers as they hoped, demonstrating one of the ways that the financial challenges of producing a film festival result in less funding for staff and filmmakers than organizers would prefer.

Sixteen filmmakers attended the second festival in 1979, with eleven from the New York area and five traveling from the West Coast, and they brought the idea of a tour to the staff's attention. The committee had hoped to provide an honorarium to each filmmaker, but this proved financially impossible, so they instead paid for out-of-town filmmakers' travel expenses and provided a souvenir – a letter opener from the MoMA gift shop engraved with "1979 AAFF." Chang reported that the festival held four receptions to help the filmmakers interact, typically at

[22] Chang reported 300 people for the first evening, 400 for the second, 200 for the third, and 300 for the last.

[23] Debbie Chang to Nancy Sher, 6, 7.

a New York filmmaker's home after screenings. These conversations often returned to resources that could help Asian American filmmakers as they struggled to find distribution and funding, and she notes that ideas included "a 'travelling Film Festival' to different parts of the United States."[24] One of the filmmakers, Fu Ding Cheng, followed up on this idea in a letter to Debbie Chang just after the festival. He expressed his appreciation for the variety of programming, and, describing his enthusiasm for growing interest in Asian American media, he writes, "When I tell people about the festival, they are all curious/sympathetic. The time has come… The momentum is beginning."[25] He also suggests that it is time for the festival to expand, perhaps to screenings at MoMA or the Whitney Museum, or even a national tour to broaden the filmmakers' base. In 1980, AAFF organizers reached out to potential host institutions to gauge interest as the third festival approached. That summer, film programmers in San Jose and Vancouver, for instance, responded that they would incorporate an AAFF series into their calendars.[26]

While they worked toward establishing a tour, festival organizers continued to plan for the third year, which again only took place in New York. The third festival moved to the Tishman Auditorium at New York University's School of Law, and it took place over four subsequent Friday evenings, starting on June 6. A *News World* profile of the festival stressed that the event was produced through predominantly volunteer labor, and the Asian American Law Students Association at NYU facilitated the venue on campus.[27] The festival showed a total of

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[24] Debbie Chang to Nancy Sher, 3.

[25] Fu Ding Cheng to Debbie Chang, June 27, 1979, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '79 Correspondence," ACV records, 2.

[26] Geraldine Natsue Kudaka to Peter Chow, May 9, 1980; Paul Yeung to Debbie Chang, July 18, 1980; both in box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '80 Correspondence," ACV records.

[27] Nels Ericson, "Films catch many sides of Asian life," *News World*, June 9, 1980, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '80 Media Coverage," ACV papers.

twenty-five films, and the "Overview of the Films" by Daryl Chin notes an emphasis on documentary, alongside experimental films. He writes:

> An important portent for Asian-American filmmaking activity is the fact that, recently, there has been an upsurge in the possibilities for the independent film, productions finding commercial release; of particular interest has been the role played by the documentary film in this access to distribution and exhibition. This year's Asian American Film Festival includes an impressive number of personal documentaries exploring the sense of social and cultural heritage.[28]

Earlier references to distribution for Asian American films in festival guides and festival-related correspondence did not acknowledge the possibility that different types of films might attract distribution opportunities more regularly than others, so Chin's recognition that documentary seemed to have more success in distribution is notable. His emphasis on the "social and cultural heritage" in the 1980 documentary selections is not to suggest that the aesthetic investments of the festival had subsided, as other programs at AAFF focused on Japanese experimental films, for example. But Chin's commentary on distribution opportunities for documentary brings up the fact that some types of films have wider appeal than others outside of the festival atmosphere, and this potential challenge appeared in the planning and responses to the AAFF tour in subsequent years.

Questions about whether Asian American media centers were prepared to help filmmakers with distribution continued, even as organizers planned to tour the fourth festival in 1981. In October 1980, Diane Li, whose short film *The Dragon Wore Tennis Shoes* (1975) had screened at the festival in June, wrote a letter to festival organizers Amy Chen and Peter Chow, asking if they had any information about distributors for Asian American films. She then

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[28] 1980 Asian American Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '80 Promotion," ACV records, 8.

described the difficulty of working as an Asian American filmmaker without distribution opportunities, writing that "it is so essential to have a reputable, central distributor for Asian American films. The commercial groups won't take then. I have learned that one can't do both filmmaker and distribution. I certainly will not make another Asian American film until I know that there will be good distribution to release it."[29] In correspondence from this time, such concerns about distribution appear frequently, and AAFF organizers attempted to offer resources to help Asian American filmmakers and those interested in discovering the films, in one case by compiling information about titles and filmmakers.

The 1981 festival presented sixteen films across four Friday nights in June. Notable titles included *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* (Duane Kubo and Robert A. Nakamura, 1980), described in the program as "the first full-length motion picture about Japanese Americans written and produced by Asian Americans."[30] With a full page in the program dedicated to this title, previously unusual for the festival's promotional materials, the description highlights the film's historical focus, with a narrative documenting "the contributions and hardships of Japanese people in America since the turn of the century" through one character's past. Unlike most short notes in the festivals' programs, this description also summarizes the efforts of Visual Communications, the Los Angeles-based Asian American media center, in producing the feature film – a major undertaking for an activist media center. For the first night of the festival on June 5, three short documentaries preceded the Chinese feature *When the Leaves Turn Red* (Tana Huada and Yu Benzheng, 1980). The first short in this program, *Jama Masjid Steet Journal*

[29] Diane Li to Amy Chen and Peter Chow, October 14, 1980, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '80 Correspondence," ACV records.

[30] 1981 Asian American Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "1982 AAIFF materials," ACV records, 6.

(1979), was the debut film by Mira Nair, now known for her features such as *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001).

In addition to the year's new titles, the 1981 AAFF guide highlighted all the films that had screened in the festival's four-year history. The introduction to the guide notes, "In this catalogue, we have prepared comprehensive lists of all the films that have been presented in the Festival since 1978 and a directory of Asian American filmmakers as a foundation for making available resources an information on the emerging Asian/Asian American film aesthetic."[31] Information-sharing is far from offering distribution, but this directory represents an attempt to connect filmmakers with potential collaborators or supporters outside of the festival audience alone, and the festival went further when they established the tour in 1982.[32] While the tour did not represent a formal distribution platform, it did assist filmmakers in reaching new audiences across the country, and it helped staff from smaller organizations discover new films and filmmakers. At the same time, this practice repeatedly faced problems, from logistics to audience expectations, that indicate the barriers that could emerge from attempts to create ongoing, organized festival circuits in the United States.

The Touring Asian American International Film Festival

As organizers planned the fifth festival in 1982, again taking place at NYU's Schimmel Auditorium, they also planned a tour to follow it. Before the 1982 festival, ACV executive director Peter Chow addressed letters to other organizations in search of local sponsors, detailing how the festival, now titled the Asian American International Film Festival, envisioned the

[31] 1981 Asian American Film Festival program, 2.

[32] AAFF staff referenced plans for an upcoming tour in a May 8, 1981, letter to filmmakers screening work at the 1981 festival, but plans did not coalesce for that year. Acceptance letter to filmmakers, box 7, folder: "A.A.F.F. '81 Correspondence," ACV records.

collaboration. He wrote, "It is our plan to further expand the visibility of this year's festival by touring most, if not all, of the films in the upcoming festival to additional sites," before noting that they have already contacted organizations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Boston, and Stony Brook.[33] The letter then outlines the responsibilities of ACV and local sponsors. Local groups would be responsible for securing venues, promoting films, managing exhibition, shipping films to the next location, and sending ACV a report on the event, and a minimum of 25 percent of their proceeds would go to filmmakers through ACV. In a letter to a potential host organization, ACV's Michael Chu noted, "Each city had the option to select from available films and add films to the program that they personally had access to."[34] From the beginning, the touring festival offered flexibility to partner groups, and this aspect became increasingly important.

Most films in the 1982 AAIFF program were available to organizations participating in the tour, but the availability of some titles changed as the festival approached. A May 26, 1982, letter draft by Michael Chu details some of the differences. A few shorts had been added to the program, so organizers in other cities could show those films, and Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* (1982) had been acquired by New Yorker Films, a commercial distributor, so it was no longer available as part of the tour package.[35] Instead, organizations could reach out to the distributor about the possibility of paying rental for that film specifically. Often cited as a major

[33] Peter to "Dear Friend," undated, box 7, folder: "1982 AAIFF tour," ACV records, 1.

[34] Michael Chu to David Mendelsohn, July 7, 1982, box 7, folder: "1981 AAIFF Tour," ACV records.

[35] Michael Chu, unaddressed letter draft, May 26, 1982, box 7, folder: "1981 AAIFF Tour," ACV records.

Asian American feature,[36] *Chan Is Missing* is a comedic mystery about a cab driver and his nephew searching for the man expected to help him obtain a cab license, leading to a complicated journey through San Francisco's Chinatown. Reviewed by mainstream critics, *Chan Is Missing* received a wider release, more promotion, and greater attention than most Asian American films of the time, so its exclusion from the AAIFF tour is unsurprising. However, it does point to a potential challenge for the organizers of Asian American festivals. They would likely want to show a new title that received coverage beyond the scope of most independent films, for its potential to attract audiences, but the additional financial obligation might prevent them from doing so. Other films in the program could have genre appeal or other potential to reach a wider audience, but they would not have the benefit of general promotion, like a film with a commercial distributor such as *Chan Is Missing*.

The 1982 AAIFF program lists the cities that were ultimately part of the tour after the New York event. Under stills from three of the films, a block on the program's cover lists New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and San Francisco.[37] The festival program included two silent films starring Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa, shown on archival prints. These retrospective titles received considerable attention from press in New York and other cities on the tour. For example, a *New York Times* article on the festival references three specific titles as major draws: the "two significant works in Asian-American film history" and *Chan Is*

[36] For example, in "Coin of the Realm," Brian Hu mentions *Chan Is Missing* as an early example of a financially successfully Asian American feature, stating that it "put Asian American cinema on the art house map" (66).

[37] 1982 Asian American International Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "A.A.I.F.F. '82 Press Releases," ACV records.

Missing.[38] In the festival guide, Chin highlights a few other prominent titles in his annual overview of the program, writing, "The reception to *Chan Is Missing* (one of the major feature-length Asian-American productions of recent years), and the quality of the documentaries (*Chiang Ching, Return from Silence, Taiko*) are signs of the vitality of the Asian-American filmmaking experience."[39] After praising the strength of contemporary Asian American films, he returns to the issue of distribution, stating, "The problem now is to find a broader base for exhibition and distribution, a problem that has defeated the independent film over its continued struggle against the commercial enterprises." Even in a year that the festival screened a prominent title with a commercial distribution deal, Chin's comment reminds festivalgoers of the continued difficulty of finding broader audiences for the films he programmed, and AAIFF's own touring format was a small way to respond to this situation, albeit one with little commercial promise for the filmmakers and substantial complexity for organizers.

An undated, handwritten outline for the tour references some of the details that made planning and executing the tour a difficult process, alongside the following schedule: Philadelphia in July, Washington, D.C., in August, Los Angeles in September, and San Francisco in late September.[40] Apart from the lists of multiple contacts in each city and administrative tasks like distributing posters and programs, this outline suggests the need to schedule the event carefully to allow appropriate time for film shipments between sponsor organizations. The tour also involved a coordinated effort to ensure filmmakers' permission to include their films in the

[38] C. Gerald Fraser, "A Spotlight on the Asian American Film," *New York Times*, June 18, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/18/movies/a-spotlight-on-the-asian-american-film.html.

[39] 1982 Asian American International Film Festival program, 4.

[40] "1982 AAIFF Tour", box 7, folder: "1982 AAIFF Tour," ACV records.

tour, with shifting circumstances that required adjustments at times, like *Chan Is Missing*'s distribution deal. ACV staff fielded questions from many organizations about the details of the tour, such as whether sponsors had any choice in the films that would screen at their festival. In one case, ACV's Renee Tajima responded to this question by affirming that sponsor organizations could finalize their own selections, offering the example that San Francisco planned to add a screening focusing on Bay Area filmmakers.[41] Based on correspondence from the early years of the tour, this openness to sponsor organizations adding films helped ACV attract participants to the tour, as this allowed host organizations to supplement the films programmed by ACV with titles that could appeal to their local audiences.

In addition to city-specific programming, some of the 1982 tour sponsors tailored promotional materials beyond the posters and programs provided by ACV. Programs and press from other cities generally reveal a greater emphasis on representation than AAIFF in New York, which continued to highlight the aesthetic dimension of its programming over its political components, especially in the program notes written by Daryl Chin. An article published by one of the festival organizers in Philadelphia demonstrates this distinction that emerged repeatedly during the tour. Philadelphia's festival had four nights of programming, with eight films – seven documentaries and *Regret for the Past* (Shui Hua, 1981), a Chinese feature film about the writer Lu Xun. Festival co-coordinator Chin Woon Ping opens his article, titled "The 1st Philadelphia Asian American International *Or, No More Fu Manchu* Film Festival," with a clear statement of his perspective on the stakes and purpose of the festival, writing, "Like Blacks and other minorities in America, Asians have long suffered from distortion and stereotyping in films." He

[41] Renee Tajima to Teresita I. Batayola, September 6, 1982, box 7, folder: "1981 AAIFF Tour," ACV records.

then details harmful stereotypes of Asian characters in Hollywood, including the villain Fu Manchu, as well as demeaning roles for women and the practice of white actors donning yellowface to play Asian characters.[42] After summarizing Hollywood's history of deeply damaging portrayals, Ping transitions to the intervention of recent Asian American filmmaking, writing, "In recent years, Asian-Americans have attempted to correct negative images of themselves by presenting the issues that more accurately depict their roles, achievements and problems in America." His description of the festival, coordinated by him, Duncan Holaday, and the Neighborhood Film Project, notes that all the screenings will be premieres for the Philadelphia area. While Daryl Chin presented AAIFF's programming primarily in aesthetic terms, Chin Woon Ping frames the touring festival in Philadelphia most importantly as a representation of Asian American lives – from the perspective of Asian Americans, rather than the commercial mainstream that had already stereotyped them for decades. He does highlight the Chinese film *Regret for the Past* as a notable title, but the introduction focuses on Asian American representation as the major contribution of the festival, instead of aesthetic exploration.

In Washington, D.C., the touring festival was presented on August 20 and 21, 1982, by Gold Mountain Radio Collective and the Organization of Pan Asian American Women, Inc. Organizers promoted the two nights of programming with six films as "The First Washington, D.C. Asian American Film Festival," and the front of the festival program notes that each screening will be followed by "discussion/workshop."[43] Like the Philadelphia festival's

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[42] Chin Woon Ping, "The 1st Philadelphia Asian American International *Or, No More Fu Manchu* Film Festival," *The University City Press*, June 1982, box 7, folder: "1982 AAIFF materials," ACV records.

[43] "The First Washington, DC Asian American Film Festival," flyer, box 7, folder: "1982 AAIFF materials," ACV records; Washington, D.C., Asian American Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "1982 AAIFF materials," ACV records.

promotion, the D.C. festival guide framed the event as significant for its representational value, in contrast to mainstream Hollywood. In the program, festival committee member Theo-dric Feng's article "Focusing on a Better Image" begins with frustrating aspects of Asian American experience that he blames, at least partially, on media representation. He lists "annoying comments or questions by non-Asians" like "Do you know karate?" "My, you speak English very well" and "Where are you from?" and continues, "Sometimes it's not easy being Asian American. One has to put up with a certain amount of ignorant curiosity born from misconceptions often introduced by the media."[44] For Feng, the festival is a response to these racist norms, one that provides the opportunity for audiences to see Asian Americans in everyday experiences. He writes that the festival was organized in "an effort to make the extraordinary a little more commonplace for the general public and Asians in the Washington area," and highlights that the films "portray Asian Americans in real terms and not as fantasy or furniture." While he mentions artistic creativity as one of the values of the programming, he primarily presents the festival as an intervention in Asian American representation.

Like many of the groups that hosted the AAIFF tour in 1982 and the following years, the D.C. organizers hoped to make the festival just one part of their media activism for the Asian American community. Feng's introduction notes that the organizers plan to "present more screenings and develop local television programming on Asian American concerns," and the festival program also includes profiles of D.C. film personalities, much like the filmmaker directory produced by AAIFF. Such resources help promote the artists within a community, and they frequently appear in programs and additional publications from the media centers and other activist groups that hosted the tour. A brief article about the D.C. festival appears in *Pan Asia*

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[44] Washington, D.C., Asian American Film Festival program, page 3.

News, a publication of the Organization of Pan Asian American Women, which helped coordinate the event.[45] In this feature, festival co-chair Wendy Lim notes that nearly 200 people attended the screenings, with many non-Asian audience members attending because of coverage in the *Washington Post*.

A report on the first tour in ACV's journal *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives* highlights successes, like the strong attendance in Washington, D.C., but it also describes common problems among some of the sponsoring groups. This report quotes a summary of the problems from Philadelphia's Chin Woon Ping as "good press, money, labor, and audience."[46] Ping's concerns seem to cover most aspects of festival organization, from promotion to finances, and this report also suggests questions about AAIFF's programming from the groups that participated in the tour. Ping shared questions from a post-festival meeting in Philadelphia, including "Why not drop the 'international' part of the festival and focus only on Asian American films?"[47] Wendy Lim from Washington, D.C., also conveyed a programming reaction from the audience: "The people wanted to see more Asian American films." While these examples are straightforward, the overall feedback about the tour, in both correspondence and published materials, only rarely criticized the AAIFF strategy of mixing international Asian programming and Asian American films. But many of the festivals would later adopt a model focusing specifically on Asian American films when they started independent festivals or began

[45] "Pan-Asia Co-Sponsors First Washington D.C. Asian-American Film Festival," *Pan Asia News*, August 1982, box 7, folder: "A.A.I.F.F. '82 Media Coverage," ACV records.

[46] "Fifth Annual Asian American International Film Festival: Multi in the Land of Mono, You've Gone a Long Way, Baby," *Bridge Magazine* 8.2, Winter 1982-1983, 31.

[47] "Fifth Annual Asian American International Film Festival," *Bridge Magazine*, 36.

programming many of their own selections, suggesting that other organizers and audiences shared the perspectives described by Ping and Lim.

Despite the challenges reported by some participants, the festival's overall success led ACV to continue the tour with its 1983 festival. The illustrated cover of the program shows a man embracing a woman, with swirling clouds and film cameras around them. The bottom right corner of the cover lists the tour stops, expanded from five locations in 1982 to eight in 1983: New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Toronto. The tour lasted through the second half of the year. A schedule lists Philadelphia in July (for preview screenings), Boston in August, Washington, D.C., and Chicago in September, Los Angeles and San Francisco in October, Toronto in November, and Philadelphia in November and December.[48] The printed program itself demonstrates the importance of the tour as a part of the festival, which had spent its first four years only in New York City. The articles and interviews in the document cover the films available in the program package generally, instead of referencing specific screenings. The New York screenings, for example, are listed in an insert between pages 20 and 21, on pages 20A to 20H. This structure reflects the priority placed on the tour, making the core program guide flexible for all the cities, rather than primarily compiled for the original festival and the first stop on the tour.

As in earlier years, Daryl Chin's essay about the program returns to the problems of distribution and exhibition, and he portrays the tour and other AAIFF activities as a response. After he points out barriers for both categories of film programmed by the festival, international and independent cinema, he writes that "the touring program, the setting up of a system of

[48] "1983 Asian American International Film Festival Tour," box 7, unlabeled folder containing Philadelphia materials, ACV records.

networks through which Asian American films can be seen in a particular context, the establishment of a critical discourse on Asian American filmmaking are some of the ways in which the Film Festival has tried to alleviate the problems faced by Asian American filmmaking."[49] He summarizes the problem succinctly as an issue of "access potential," asking "will there be ways for artists to make films, and will those films be able to reach audiences?" Chin acknowledges the success of *Chan Is Missing* but stresses that continued, intentional effort from organizations like Asian CineVision is required to allow other filmmakers to replicate that success in an environment with little institutional support for independent filmmakers. While Chin primarily positions the festival as a project facilitating and promoting the work of contemporary filmmakers, AAIFF continued to program films from the past, and this aspect of their programming continually attracted some of the most press attention, like the films with silent film star Sessue Hayakawa from 1982.

In 1983, AAIFF included a posthumous retrospective honoring James Wong Howe, the acclaimed and prolific Asian American cinematographer who worked in Hollywood for more than fifty years. Howe had died in 1976, but AAIFF worked with his wife to coordinate the films. Across two nights, AAIFF four films in the Howe retrospective: a documentary about his work, *James Wong Howe: The Man and His Movies* (Beulah Quo, 1975); a documentary that he shot and directed, *The World of Dong Kingman* (1953); and two films acclaimed for his cinematography – Martin Ritt's *Hud* (1963) and John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966). Following up on a phone call about the retrospective, the national coordinator of the festival Calvin Wong sent materials about the festival to Howe's widow, Sanora Babb Howe, including a

[49] 1983 Asian American International Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour Package," ACV records, 7.

program for the last year, press clippings, and a copy of *Bridge* magazine, presumably with the report on the 1982 year.[50] She responded enthusiastically, "You must know that I am very happy your festival will be honoring Jimmie. He deserved every honor he has been given, and they are many by now…. He would be deeply pleased for this honor, especially that it comes from his own people. He liked young people and students, and would have been one of you."[51] This process of coordinating with the subject of a retrospective at the festival, or in this case the family of the subject, is similar to the tribute-coordinating process at the Telluride Film Festival. Such retrospectives and tributes during a festival regularly require organizers to utilize and expand their networks, and they exemplify a typically behind-the-scenes element of festival production that can rewarding. The Howe program, for instance, was successful for AAIFF in attracting press attention and audiences. This process also required negotiation with Paramount Pictures for the screenings in New York, and, likely because of the need to make an agreement with a studio rather than simply receive filmmaker permission, the Howe films were not included in some stops on the tour, demonstrating an early instance of a major part of the festival being excluded from the touring version.

In 1983 and subsequent years, a smaller number of films from the full AAIFF program appeared at each location on the tour. For example, AAIFF showed twenty-three films in New York, including the four films in the Howe retrospective, and a revised agreement with Visual Communications lists fourteen films for the festival in Los Angeles.[52] Twelve of them would be

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[50] Calvin Wong to Sanora Babb Howe, March 31, 1983, James Wong Howe papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter cited as Howe papers).

[51] Sanora Babb Howe to Calvin Wong, May 2, 1983, Howe papers.

[52] Visual Communications and Asian CineVision agreement revisions, September 17, 1983, box 7, folder: "1983 AAIFF," ACV records.

delivered through ACV's tour for free, and two required separate screening fees. *Mandala* (Im Kwon-taek, 1981), a South Korean feature about Buddhist monks, would come from Asia Society, and *Willful Murder* (Kei Kumai, 1981), a Japanese feature about the mysterious death of the Japanese National Railways president in 1949, from Shochiku Film Co. In addition to the films, this agreement reflects that ACV will send publicity photographs and adaptable press clippings. The nine films excluded from the Los Angeles agreement are the four titles in the James Wong Howe retrospective, four North American shorts, and a Chinese narrative feature (*My Memories of Old Beijing*, Wu Yigong, 1983). Other than the Howe films that required negotiation with a major studio, which likely applied exclusively to New York, the films excluded from the agreement do not suggest consistent categories that were left out of the tour. Instead, such decisions were probably based on filmmaker preferences or other distribution arrangements.

Starting in 1983, many tour sponsors supplemented the titles offered by ACV with programming to appeal to their audiences, from local films to panel discussions. Philadelphia's festival was again held at the International House, and a festival committee worked with Neighborhood Film Project to plan the event. According to a press release, organizers added a film to the tour called *Save Chinatown*, directed by a former instructor at the Philadelphia College of Art, Jon Wing Lum. The description states the 1973 film "served as a catalyst, record and rallying point for the people of Philadelphia's Chinatown, who were threatened then with the destruction of their community by an expressway/redevelopment plan."[53] A local television channel had premiered the documentary in July 1973, and its inclusion at the festival exemplifies

[53] "Philadelphia's Chinatown Featured in Festival at International House," box 7, unlabeled folder containing Philadelphia materials, ACV records.

efforts to tailor the touring festival to audiences and local networks when possible. Organizers reported a successful screening of *Save Chinatown* and *Freckled Rice* (Stephen C. Ning, 1983), a narrative feature about an Asian American teenager living in Boston during the 1960s. [54] Over 100 people attended the screening, and they received publicity from local radio stations, newspapers, and newsletters from Chinese American and Japanese American organizations. While this screening that incorporated a local short film was successful, the festival committee described many problems in their report to ACV about the 1983 tour.

The difficulties with the Philadelphia festival ranged from finances to promotion. As the last stop on the tour, this festival started more than five months after the beginning of AAIFF in New York, so some films had different distribution arrangements by the time they screened in Philadelphia. This led to additional administrative efforts tracking down the rightsholders for a few titles, as well as larger screening fees than initially expected. Attendance was also a problem, building from issues with promotion. Only two of the eleven screenings had more than fifty people attending, and one block of short films only had sixteen people in the audience. The report conveys the organizers' disappointment "in the low attendance by members of the Asian and Asian American communities," which they propose could be because of smaller communities than in New York and San Francisco.[55] More specifically, they write, "A large factor contributing to low attendance was the lack of effective publicity and outreach." They describe the inability to screen films before the festival as one pressing reason for the

[54] Philadelphia Asian American International Film Festival Committee, 1983 report to Asian CineVision, box 7, unlabeled folder containing Philadelphia materials, ACV records.

[55] Philadelphia Asian American International Film Festival Committee, 1983 report.

unsuccessful publicity, making it difficult for them to discuss the films with press and provide the films to critics. In stressing the need for access to the films ahead of the event, they write:

> Our lack of familiarity with the films created another problem, which was how to describe and categorize the films for advance brochures. We arranged the films into programs under what we estimated to be appropriate titles. However, this was not always the case. The result was that some films got obscured under theme titles and were shown at inopportune times. "Re-assemblage" was one film which we regret did not get better exposure due to this factor.[56]

Trinh T. Minh-ha's now influential short *Reassemblage* (1982) is a critique of ethnographic filmmaking that portrays a group of Senegalese women through an uncontextualized montage of sound and image that challenges viewer expectations about documentary. It screened in a block titled "The Screening Room" with four other shorts: *The Last Game* (Ann Yen, 1983), *Sincerity* (Lambert Yam, 1982), *Shift* (Toshio Matsumoto, 1982), and *Playland* (Edmund Cheung, 1981).

The comments from the organizers in Philadelphia suggest that *Reassemblage* could have found a larger and more appreciative audience at their festival, if they had the ability to screen the film and frame it properly in promotional materials. Only one of the other films in "The Screening Room" had an experimental approach. According to the AAIFF program, *Shift* used video effects to shift and explore layers of a building, and the other films were two narrative shorts and a documentary with a seemingly conventional approach, based on its description. While many festivals program short films in blocks that mix narrative, documentary, experimental, and hybrid formats, the Philadelphia organizers' comment about *Reassemblage* points to the importance contextualizing challenge films for audiences – a necessity that they acknowledged but could not achieve because of lacking access to the films before the event.

[56] Philadelphia Asian American International Film Festival Committee, 1983 report, 4.

Other cities reported issues with promotion for the 1983 festival tour as well. The report from Boston describes three major drawbacks in planning their event: location, timing, and no press screenings, in addition to planning for better promotion in future years.[57] The Boston organizers describe distribution of press releases and flyers to university departments and special interest groups, as well as some notices about the festival in daily and weekly papers. Despite their efforts, they recommend that ACV should offer a workshop on promoting events, as that remains a major problem for groups involved with the tour. In her 1982 report to ACV, Jessica Chao, one of the organizers in Washington, D.C., requests promotional information and photographs at least two and a half months before the planned event in future years. She also describes issues with the promotional materials provided by ACV, writing, "Since this festival is organized by about 4 volunteers, there is no time nor is there money to overprint the Washington information over the poster. It would be more helpful if Asian Cine-Vision gave Washington the money for printing and let Washington make their own poster."[58] Because of their problems with the ACV posters, the volunteer organizers in Washington, D.C., obtained free assistance from a local graphic designer to create their own advertising campaign, which helped them again average audiences of one hundred people at both of their screenings.

Cities with larger Asian American media centers were able to dedicate more resources and time to expanding the festival with local efforts, especially Los Angeles and San Francisco, but their communications with ACV indicate that they faced similar challenges. Visual Communications had considered hosting the festival in Los Angeles in 1982, but ultimately

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[57] AARW to ACV/Peter Chow, October 1, 1983, box 8, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (Boston)," ACV records.

[58] Jessica Chao to Peter Chow, November 1, 1983, box 8, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (D.C.)," ACV records.

decided against it. In a letter to ACV's Renee Tajima, Steve Tatsukawa from Visual Communications explained the conclusion to not organize the festival, writing, "The primary factor in the decision is a combination of lack of time and a lack of volunteers to organize the event," and he further explain clarified that Visual Communications, which had produced *Hito Hata* and other films that screened at AAIFF in earlier years, was dedicating its "financial and labor resources" to finishing film projects, rather than supporting exhibition.[59] Like other festival organizers involved with the tour, Tatsukawa suggested that ACV start the coordination process earlier, enabling potential proposals for joint funding to support the events. He summarizes that concept, writing, "Essentially, we could all share a grant for the production of a Film Festival." Under the system employed in 1982, ACV in New York worked with filmmakers to ensure the availability of their films for the tour, and it then provided the films (other than those requiring separate screening fees because of distribution agreements) and some promotional materials to host groups in other cities. Those groups were responsible for the costs of additional promotion, venues, labor, and any other budget items in their location. For volunteer organizers, like those in Washington D.C., or organizers with other major projects, like Visual Communications with its film productions, producing the event became a significant financial burden, even after ACV managed the foundational component of the films themselves. Tatsukawa's letter offers detailed reasoning for *not* participating in the festival, but he also provides concrete recommendations to facilitate a more efficient process in future years, underlining that Visual Communications would like to organize the tour in Los Angeles and could provide references for other potential organizations that specialized in exhibition if necessary.

[59] Steve Tatsukawa to Renee Tajima, September 21, 1982, box 7, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (L.A.)," ACV records.

In 1983, Tatsukawa worked with ACV's national coordinator, Calvin Wong, to bring the tour to Los Angeles, and this became the first festival sponsored by Visual Communications, which now annually produces one of the largest events on the Asian American circuit, the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival (LAAPFF). In confirming plans to participate, Tatsukawa shared three key developments and some questions with Wong. He noted that Visual Communications would be "the principle organizer of the LA-AAIFF," they hoped to work with the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center to use its 800-seat theater, and the existence of the festival depended on Visual Communications' ability to cover the necessary costs.[60] His questions included the titles offered on the tour, the ability of host organizations to influence programming, the availability of promotional materials, and the possibility of funds to help start the festival outside of New York. Tatsukawa's questions echo those that emerged from other cities in prior years, particularly Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., as organizers repeatedly inquired about their level of control over the programming and guidance in promoting the event.

Visual Communications successfully collaborated with the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center to organize the festival in Los Angeles, and they presented the event at the Center's Japan America Theatre on October 8 and 9, 1983, following the Washington, D.C., and Chicago stops on the tour. After negotiations and updated agreements based on distribution deals and filmmaker decisions, the festival showed four programs with nineteen films total, including fifteen that had screened in New York. The titles added by the Los Angeles organizers included three recently finished short films *Gaman* (Bob Miyamoto, 1982), *The Only Language*

[60] Steve Tatsukawa to Calvin Wong, April 25, 1983, box 7, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (L.A.)," ACV records.

She Knows (Steven Okazaki, 1983), and *The Boy Who Danced with the Lion Dragon* (Sam Hom, 1983), and they also showed a special screening of a 1975 Visual Communications animated production, *Kites and Other Tales* (Alan Ohashi, 1975).[61] The program descriptions include the city of production for each film, and all four of the additional titles were made in California. Since this festival took place four months after the AAIFF in New York, it is possible that the timeframe allowed the completion of the three shorts, and the inclusion of *Kites and Other Tales* allowed the festival to highlight an early achievement of one of the local sponsoring organizations. The festival supplemented the screenings with a reception, described as a gala event Saturday evening with filmmakers and organizers. Like the additional films from California, such events allowed the festivals in cities across the country to build connections with local networks. In other words, the organizers in Los Angeles and other cities found ways to make the tour a local event, despite its nature as a tour based in and largely coordinated in New York, and this helped them establish an audience base and other relationships that could facilitate the transition to an independent festival. This transition happened in many cases, most notably in Los Angeles, with the LAAPFF produced by Visual Communications, and San Francisco.

The AAIFF tour returned to San Francisco in 1983 after the city was part of the initial tour in 1982. The festival was sponsored by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) in cooperation with the Pacific Film Archive and the Kokusai Theater. An article in *Hokubei Mainichi*, a Northern California bilingual newspaper published in Japanese and English, previews the opening of the festival with a Bay Area Filmmakers' Night comprising six new films, followed by a reception after the program that would allow the audience to ask the

[61] 1983 Los Angeles Asian American International Film Festival program, box 7, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (L.A.)," ACV records, 2, 6.

local filmmakers questions about their projects.[62] The report to ACV demonstrates a successful event with a burgeoning local following, although organizers again expressed a need for greater promotional support. James Yee's report to Peter Chow states that more than 1000 people attended over the four evenings of programming, and the Bay Area Filmmakers' Night had a standing-room-only crowd.[63] The San Francisco organizers coordinated local news anchors and actors to serve as hosts for each night of the festival, and special guests included local documentary subjects and a representative from the Chinese consulate. Like the organizers in Washington, D.C., Yee describes problems with the posters provided by ACV, leading to working with a local artist instead. He writes, "San Francisco community artists have a long and prolific history in the creation of poster art and our constituencies have come to expect a certain quality in the nature of the poster art produced here. Despite working under the constraints of a minimal budget, the decision was made to print our own posters. This decision hinged on the belief that it was possible to produce a poster with which we had a better chance of generating some income."[64] From logistics and timing to local expectations for artistic style and quality, promotional materials were a repeated concern for participants in the AAIFF, suggesting just one of the seemingly basic but necessary elements of a festival that could present problems when organizers felt they were inadequate at attracting their community members.

With the return of the festival in 1984, ACV responded to some of the challenges that emerged in the previous two years of the tour. In a letter to organizations that hosted the tour,

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[62] "Bay Area Filmmakers' Night to Open A/A Film Festival," *Hokubei Mainichi*, October 21, 1988, box 8, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (S.F.)," ACV records.

[63] James Yee to Peter Chow, February 14, 1984, box 8, folder: "1983 AAIFF Tour (S.F.)," ACV records.

[64] James Yee to Peter Chow, February 14, 1984, 4.

Peter Chow announces that it will expand to nine cities, and he stresses the importance of finalizing details early so local sponsors "will have sufficient time to prepare and promote the event," reflecting the repeated problems faced by groups in other cities.[65] He also proposes an increase in the percentage of box office shared with filmmakers, from 25 to 35 percent. Explaining this proposal, he reveals that *Turumba* (Kidlat Tahimik, 1982), a feature drama from the Philippines, showed in all of the cities in 1983 and only received $240, with the print removed from circulation to other exhibitors for six months during the event. Even with the concerns about timing and promotion, the tour assisted sponsor organizations in presenting a festival by coordinating many of the details with filmmakers, but the arrangement seemingly did not offer as much material benefit to filmmakers, at least in the case of *Turumba* and presumably other features that kept a print in the tour for the entire period.

While they attempted to revise its procedures to make the tour more effective for sponsors and filmmakers, ACV continued to confront issues related to programming. For example, a June 1984 letter from ACV's festival manager to sponsor organizations notes various persistent issues with finalizing the tour package: three films had not yet provided any response answer about participating in the tour, two films would require city-by-city rental, and two films were still making their final decision, even as the festival had started in New York.[66] In addition to the problems with films, the letter reminds the sponsors that they need to sign contracts and provide preferred dates. Like the efforts of the New York Film Festival and Telluride Film Festival organizers to finalize details with guests and filmmakers, ACV's tour planning during

[65] Peter Chow to "Friends," May 3, 1984, box 8, folder: "1984 National Tour – Boston," ACV records.

[66] Casey Lum to "Friends," June 15, 1984, box 8, folder: "1984 National Tour – Philadelphia," ACV records.

the early 1980s demonstrates the compounding effects of delayed decision making and unclear answers, with the tour structure exacerbating these challenges. One sponsor or filmmaker's delay in determining their participation could lead to decreased planning time for the rest of the stakeholders involved in the tour. This abbreviated planning, in turn, would make the promotional efforts that organizers were so concerned about more difficult to implement, and that could potentially lead to a smaller audience, as some organizers suggested in their reports. In this way, a seemingly simple issue like a communication delay reveals the amplified potential problems in an effort coordinated between cities, which AAIFF encountered repeatedly with their tour.

Conclusion

Despite the persistent challenges in its early years, the AAIFF tour continues today at just one of the many programs produced by Asian CineVision, albeit with significant changes. The recent hosts listed on ACV's website include corporate offices, such as Google, CBS, and JetBlue, and universities, instead of the media centers and activist volunteers that sponsored the tour in the early 1980s.[67] Many of the organizations that hosted the festival during the initial tours have since shifted to independently produced festivals that slowly separated from the AAIFF project – most notably Visual Communications' Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival and CAAMFest in San Francisco, named after the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) that NAATA became in 2005. Through the 1980s and 1990s, some of the organizations that participated in the early years continued to show films from the AAIFF tour, but they also further emphasized local connections and programming in both films and special events, utilizing their community networks and resources to engage and expand their audiences.

[67] "History," Asian CineVision, accessed May 18, 2023, https://www.asiancinevision.org/history/.

Sponsors began branding the festival separately, rather than just keeping the name "Asian American International Film Festival. For example, NAATA's 1992 festival in San Francisco was titled "The 1992 Asian American International Film Showcase," and the reference to its AAIFF connection appears on one of the final pages in the program at the bottom of an acknowledgements page. It lists nine titles and states that they "are part of the National Tour of the 14th Asian American International Film Festival organized and programmed by Asian CineVision, a not-for-profit media arts center based in New York City."[68] The tour progressed in the 1990s, reaching small cities including Boulder, Colorado; Madison, Wisconsin; Ithaca, New York; and Durham, North Carolina. In this period, the level of connection to AAIFF in New York varied widely, from retaining the name in full to only referencing it through credits, like the 1992 NAATA festival. Even after ten years, AAIFF functioned as more formal circulation resource for Asian American film festivals than most festivals in the United States can access, demonstrating the unusual nature of this longstanding element in the circuit's history.

The AAIFF tour exemplifies an unusual format for festival production that led to notable distinctions in self-presentation, like the greater emphasis on representation over aesthetics that emerged in Philadelphia in contrast to New York's event. The unique situation, with media centers and volunteers who hosted the festival around the United States having shared goals, made the tour more feasible. Organizers all had a larger impetus for the event, supporting Asian American artists and communities, instead of festivals' typical, more general motivation of bringing films to their local audiences. At the same time, even with shared goals that facilitated collaboration, these partnerships also presented challenges in their planning and implementation, with delays and changes affecting other cities and the need to localize promotion to appeal to

[68] 1992 Asian American International Film Showcase program, box 29, unlabeled folder containing San Francisco materials, ACV records, 9.

audiences. If complicated aspects like timing and promotion could be managed, formalized festival circuits in the United States could have become more common and successful. While such partnerships introduce their own complexity, they could address problems that face smaller festivals, like the fundamental need to access films and the amount of labor required for programming. But the unregulated and locally supported model of festivals that has emerged throughout the history of American festivals does not facilitate such collaboration. Outside of the largest festivals with national or international influence, this system requires organizers to curate programming and plan events that leverage their connections for maximum local interest. The AAIFF tour points to an alternate history that could have emerged for American film festivals, even as it reveals some of the challenges that likely prevented it.

Chapter 3:

Movie-Made Utah: The Utah/US Film Festival and the Origins of the Sundance Film Festival

Since the 1990s, press coverage of the Sundance Film Festival has continually returned to a single question, if only to quickly dispel it: Has Sundance become too commercial? During a 2002 episode of NPR's *Morning Edition*, host Susan Stamberg asked *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan if the festival had grown "too corporate," and he replied, "My feeling is Sundance feels like it's getting too Hollywood if you don't live in Hollywood," and described the continued presence of an independent, even "anarchic," side to the festival.[1] Another *Los Angeles Times* writer, Robert W. Welkos, noted the common commercialism refrain during the festival's 2002 edition, with a summary of the complaints: "Sundance, go the arguments, is getting too big and too market driven; the films are too glossy and increasingly feature big-name stars; Miramax and Fox Searchlight and now even HBO are using the festival as a launching pad for their theatrical releases and even cable TV movies."[2] And the *New York Times*'s David Carr mentioned this criticism in a 2009 interview with festival co-founder Robert Redford, who responded, "After 25 years, I've gotten used to the negative speculation that always opens the festival… It always seems like they are intent on crucifying us for one thing or another, and I sort of say, 'Well hold on. Calm down and just see some movies."[3] This idea that Sundance transformed into a commercial or corporate event suggests an earlier, purer form of the festival,

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[1] Kenneth Turan, "Sundance Film Fest," interview by Susan Stamberg, Morning Edition, NPR, January 18, 2002, audio, https://www.npr.org/2002/01/18/1136578/sundance-film-fest.

[2] Robert W. Welkos, "Experiment in Progress," *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 2002, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-jan-17-wk-welkos17-story.html.

[3] David Carr, "Can Sundance get a break?," *New York Times*, January 19, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/19/business/worldbusiness/19iht-19carr.19476629.html.

and it circulates throughout press discourse about the festival without a clear source or even named adherents, in most cases. Many writers restate this perpetual complaint as seemingly necessary context for coverage of the festival, although they will not openly agree with it themselves.

The reliance on this concept as a given feature of the festival extends to academic discourse as well, with scholars emphasizing the festival's rise to industrial prominence, especially in the 1990s. This narrative of the festival often involves the topic of Sundance's apparently overt commercial nature, and the impulse seems to stem from the career-launching success of Sundance filmmakers including Steven Soderbergh, Kevin Smith, and Quentin Tarantino and the increasingly lucrative distribution deals for Sundance films with commercial prospects. In his analysis of American "indie" film culture, Michael Z. Newman labels the period from the late-1980s through the aughts as the "Sundance-Miramax era," stressing the industrial strength of the festival and the studio and the important relationship between the two institutions.[4] The value of Sundance distribution deals also appears in scholarship focused on film studios, like Alisa Perren's study of Miramax.[5] As Newman, Perren, and other scholars demonstrate, this attention to business at the Sundance Film Festival derives from effects that the festival and the related filmmakers, companies, and sponsors had on the industry in the 1990s. But this perspective has limited the Sundance films that are acknowledged in critical and academic discourse, while also neglecting the festival's history that led to this period of industrial prominence in the 1990s. This attention to only a restricted period of Sundance's

[4] Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.

[5] Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 146–152.

history leaves the broad appeals to the festival's original or authentic form as the primary story of its early years, with little analysis of the breadth of Sundance's programming beyond the films that became financially successful and the strategies, goals, and constraints that ultimately led to the festival's status in the 1990s.

Despite the persistent references to a small set of titles and film categories because of press coverage, awards, and distribution deals, Sundance demonstrates the diversity of films that screen at festivals, problematizing a simple characterization of a "Sundance film" or even a "festival film." Summarizing the idea of a festival film becomes difficult when considering the full scope of festivals' programming, even when focusing on a major festival that has been criticized for its commercial impulses. Sundance performs business functions for films that formalize distribution deals in Park City, and it provides promotion for box office and awards success in some cases. But it also contextualizes films within social and political discourse and functions as a key site in the circulation of films on the festival circuit. Each year, Sundance launches many films that will go on to screen at numerous festivals in the United States and other countries, and the staff also programs films that previously premiered at major international festivals around the world. In this way, Sundance demonstrates the range of functions that a festival may perform through its expansive programming, which has drastically changed throughout its history. The variety of Sundance's functions warrants further consideration. Critics, audiences, and other festival organizers and programmers have used Sundance as a model, or alternatively a point of contrast, for different festivals, suggesting its influential role in the broader system of film festivals in the United States. While conventional narratives of the festival interrogate its degree of commercialism, the precise nature of Sundance's position in the

festival system remains largely unexplored. In particular, the plans and decisions that eventually formed its influential programming strategies have not been examined.

While Sundance has shown many films that experienced commercial success, the festival's broad approach to programming developed throughout the 1980s, and questions about the festival's commercialism, from staff, press, and others, began much earlier than the commonly cited examples of Sundance's industrial influence. In the 1980s, major changes ranged from the festival's name to key personnel, as the programmers shifted strategies and the Sundance Institute became the festival's producing organization. The industrial presence and visibility at the festival also increased, as Sundance adjusted its emphasis on film history and regional filmmaking to a model focused on new work and emerging artists, a key factor in the festival's reputation for highlighting contemporary American films. At the same time, the festival's programming remained emphatically varied, with a far-reaching scope and an assortment of film categories. This chapter will consider the range of the festival's programming through the 1980s, leading to the decade that is often associated with the festival's peak as an industry hub, and the institutional strategies and goals that facilitated the festival's growth and industrial prominence.

The festival's programs constitute the primary evidence for this argument by providing a core object for historical analysis, the main methodology of this chapter. These documents convey changes in the festival's strategies over time, through both the films the organizers selected and the ways they present the festival as an ongoing project. At some points, this self-presentation of the festival is direct, particularly in the introductions to the program guides that are usually written by festival directors. In this way, the programs not only offer a record of the films screened at the festival during the period of analysis, the beginning of the festival through

the 1980s, but they also provide evidence of changes and growth in the organization through elements like sponsors and special guests. While they cannot replicate the experience of attending a festival, they give a sense of how organizers framed the festival itself and their selections. In addition to the programs, press coverage of the festival, which increased throughout the 1980s, offers a way to contextualize the programming choices as they were originally received and consider the broader assumptions associated with the festival.

Through this historical analysis, I argue that the limited characterization of Sundance as a festival notable only for its industrial connections and influence disregards most of the programming and events that actually appeared at the festival as the narrative of its commercialization emerged, and it obscures the key role that the range of programming at Sundance and other major festivals plays in the American film festival system. These events establish an annual agenda for other festivals, rather than just introducing a slate of potential distribution deals. This function of premiering films that screen at numerous festivals in the United States and other countries has had a more pronounced impact on the festival system than the acquisitions that dominate press about the festival, and the availability of these films, and even those that were not accepted into Sundance's program, has played a role in the proliferation of regional festivals by supplying them with options to fill their programs. The limited characterization of Sundance stems from and reifies a narrative that became attached to the festival through the 1980s with the increasing presence of Hollywood films and representatives, even as the festival also increased its support for independent filmmakers.

Early Programming Strategies at the Utah/US Film Festival: 1978–1979

The Utah/US Film Festival began in 1978, and it would later be presented by the Sundance Institute starting in 1985 and finally named the Sundance Film Festival in 1991. In its

early years, the Utah-based event more closely mirrored the model of the Telluride Film Festival, rather than the New York Film Festival with its largely new international programming or festivals programmed around specific topics, like the Asian American festivals discussed in the previous chapter. Like Telluride, the festival highlighted important figures from film history, programming retrospectives around their careers. After its first two years in Salt Lake City, the festival took place in Park City, Utah, a mountain resort town, like Telluride, and its programmers similarly showcased their interest in film history when the festival began.

While Telluride quickly received criticism for its interest in visiting guests rather than cultivating local audiences or supporters, the Utah/US Film festival began with considerable local involvement from film-related institutions and other sponsors, and some of its initial organizers were already attempting to cultivate local film culture. Sterling Van Wagenen worked at Brigham Young University's film studio until he was laid off during a staff cutback in 1976, and he then worked with Utah State Film Commissioner John Earle to coordinate a film festival in one screen at the Trolley Theaters' Trolley Square location in Salt Lake City, using funds from the Utah Bicentennial Commission.[6] Audiences responded favorably to the festival, which featured thirty films and critic Andrew Sarris as a guest, leading Van Wagenen and Earle to make plans for a regular event.

The first Utah/US Film Festival took place from September 6 to 12, 1978. Trade coverage noted that the state's department of development services and the Four Corners regional commission influenced the formation of the nonprofit behind the festival, which was originally announced by Utah's governor Scott M. Matheson as the U.S. Film National Forum

[6] Paul Swenson, "I Found It At the Movies," *Utah Holiday*, January 1982, The University of Utah (Marriott Library Special Collections), 48.

and the first festival specifically focused on American films.[7] Utah Arts Council's Sterling Van Wagenen became the first director and programmer of the festival, with Lawrence Smith coordinating the Regional Cinema program.[8] The individual who remains most closely associated with the festival in popular press and most scholarship was also involved in the first year, as Robert Redford was the chairman of the board of directors. Grant money provided 80 percent of the $124,000 budget, with three screens at the Trolley Corners theater serving as the festival venues.[9] The theaters at Trolley Corners were "flanked with banners, balloons, posters, and other festival frills," with contemporary press promising that "Hollywood personalities, film critics and authors" would be flown into Salt Lake City for the event as judges and panelists.[10] Local government officials helped promote the festival with appearances at key events, with Governor Matheson and the mayor of Salt Lake City attending a dinner honoring festival medallion-recipient John Wayne, who was not present.[11] According to a 1981 *Variety* article about the festival, organizers hoped to spotlight films made outside of traditional industry hubs and Utah's interest in film specifically.[12] These priorities are apparent throughout the festival's program selections and descriptions for the 1978 event.

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[7] "Salt Lake City Will Host Week-Long Film Festival," *Boxoffice*, June 19, 1978, ProQuest, ME4.

[8] 1978 Utah/US Film Festival program, Sundance Institute Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as Sundance archives), 38.

[9] Robert B. Frederick, "Plans, Problems, Participants for Utah's U.S. Film Fest, Jan. 12-18," *Variety*, November 19, 1980, ProQuest; Jack Goodman, "Festival Report: Salt Lake City," *American Film*, December 1, 1978, ProQuest, 12.

[10] "You May Spot a Few Familiar Faces At Salt Lake City's USFilm Fest," *Boxoffice*, September 11, 1978, ProQuest, W7.

[11] "Festival Report: Salt Lake City," *American Film*, 13.

[12] Frederick, "Plans, Problems, Participants."

Boxoffice's report on the festival's announcement noted that it "would examine current issues in American life as illustrated in motion pictures," with Van Wagenen stating that the festival would have a different them every year.[13] The program guide for the first Utah/US Film Festival in 1978 contextualizes the film selections with an essay titled "Movie-Made America" by Robert Sklar, author of a 1975 book of the same name. Reprinted from Salt Lake City's *Deseret News*, Sklar's essay posits that movies turned "the West" and "the city" into fantastical settings that exaggerated the conflicts of the nation, inviting audiences to imagine American identity and experience through popular cinema.[14] This argument appropriately introduces the largest film section created for the festival, with the "National Film Forum" divided into "The City," "The West," and "The South." These categories included films released throughout Hollywood's history, from *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1926) to *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971), with "Commentary" panels for each of the three sections featuring industry figures and writers. Beyond the National Film Forum, the festival also featured a smaller section titled "US/78–Regional Cinema: The Bright Hope," highlighting the finalists from a film competition for independent filmmakers working outside of the traditional industry centers in New York and Hollywood, and a John Wayne retrospective to accompany the actor receiving the first annual John Ford Medallion from the festival. Through the film categories and events at the first Utah/US Film Festival, the organization established a thematic interest in the relationship between American film and history, as well as an investment in showcasing and supporting the rising numbers of independent filmmakers working across the country.

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[13] "Salt Lake City Will Host Week-Long Film Festival," *Boxoffice.*

[14] See Roya Rastegar's dissertation, "Cinematic Spaces of Freedom and the Challenge of American Film Festivals," for analysis of the festival's representations of American landscapes in its early years.

While the regional cinema section of the festival lacked the National Film Forum's prominence, it established an early tendency toward championing new independent films, which would become the primary goal of both the festival and its parent organization in the coming years. For the first festival in 1978, a jury selected six finalists from twenty-five submission to present at the Utah/US Film Festival, with two honorable mentions shown at special midnight screenings. The finalists featured two New York City films, including Claudia Weill's influential story of female friendship, *Girlfriends* (1978), but films made in San Francisco, Portland, Austin, and Pittsburgh also appeared in this section. The two honorable mentions were produced in New York City and Custer, South Dakota. In addition to introducing the festival's dedication to new films by independent, often young, filmmakers, the regional cinema competition also revealed the festival's early devotion to facilitating local and industry connections simultaneously. The jury that selected finalists comprised two University of Utah professors, two Utah film critics, and a filmmaking student, and a second jury of "industry representatives" watched the finalists to select the winner of a $5,000 award.[15]

The various events and sections of the festival balance these dual interests of using local resources and expertise to present a festival with a national theme, and the festival's funding sources and program advertisements also reflect the locally produced and oriented nature of the event. A Utah Power & Light Company advertisement in the 1978 program promotes the company's informative films about energy, and other ads spotlight local theaters and dance organizations like the Repertory Dance Theatre, Ballet West, and Children's Dance Theatre.[16] Additional local ads highlight businesses relevant to the film festival specifically, instead of the

[15] "Salt Lake City Will Host Week-Long Film Festival," *Boxoffice*, 19.

[16] "Salt Lake City Will Host Week-Long Film Festival," *Boxoffice*, 34, 35, 39.

arts more broadly. The inside cover of the 1978 program is a full-page ad for Brickyard, a "complete production facility" in Salt Lake City, and ads for the local movie theater chain Trolley Theatres and the retrospective theater Avalon also appear in the guide.[17] Another typical feature of festival catalogs appears in letters from local officials welcoming audiences and filmmakers, in this case from Utah's governor and Salt Lake City's mayor. While the first festival program and others from the early period note film productions that have taken place in Utah, particularly in multipage lists of films shot in the state from the organization Utah Film Development, the prominent promotion of regional filmmaking declined after the initial festival in 1978, along with other changes in programming.[18]

The emphasis on retrospective programming at the first Utah/US Film Festival stemmed from the thematic investment in filmic representations of America, and some elements of this theme remained in the successive early years of the festival, particularly at the second festival in 1979. Still in Salt Lake City, the festival moved to different venues, with three locations. Audiences could see films at two screens at a Commonwealth Theatres chain, listed as Elks 1 and Elks 2 in the festival guide, and the Utah Media Center, which collected and exhibited local independent films.[19] The festival featured a wide range of films from Hollywood history broadly structured around a few sections. The National Film Forum for 1979 now focused on a broader theme than regional cinema, with the title "The Landscapes of the Mind: Fear and Fantasy in American Film." The genre selections at the festival included older Hollywood productions like

[17] "Salt Lake City Will Host Week-Long Film Festival," *Boxoffice*, 2, 33, 34.

[18] 1979 Utah/US Film Festival program, Sundance archives, 5-6; 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, Sundance archives, 24-25.

[19] 1979 Utah/US Film Festival program, 37; Swenson, "I Found It At the Movies."

The Day the Earth Stood Still (Robert Wise, 1951), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957), and *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) alongside more recent films like *The Demon Seed* (Donald Cammell, 1977) and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), and the essay by Ray Bradbury contextualized their presence in the festival.[20] The medallion award, given to John Wayne in 1978, continued to guide the programming of other retrospective screenings, with Frank Capra receiving the 1979 award and a number of his films screening at the festival. Other Hollywood films such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) appeared without clear explanation or connection to a larger theme, contrasting the inaugural year's distinct thematic sections that contextualized every film selection. In its second year, the festival maintained its initial interest in Hollywood history even without the regional theme that organized the 1978 film selections, instead introducing sections based on genres or directors, with a few films that do not fit neatly into one of these categories.

The independent film competition returned in 1979, with a June 1980 packet of documents from the festival board stating, "The Independent Competition clearly emerged as the central element of the Festival, this time upstaging even the Forum events by generating the largest local audience and greatest national interest."[21] In connection with the competition, the second Utah/US Film Festival also introduced an independent filmmakers' seminar as part of the festival — a historically key feature of the event that would only grow in prominence. Geared toward filmmakers without the resources of Hollywood companies, the seminar featured presentations from experienced filmmakers, panels on film financing and distribution, and a technical demonstration by Eastman Kodak. The introduction to this section of the program

[20] Ray Bradbury, "Boris, Bela, and Me," Utah/US Film Festival 1979 program, 7-9.

[21] "U.S. Film Festival, June 1980," file 2553, Sydney Pollack papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, (hereafter cited as Pollack papers), 4.

speaks, with some regional flair, directly to the struggling filmmaker living away from industry centers: “Fame and fortune. For all the blood, sweet and beers in Milwaukee, fame and fortune elude you. Your career in film lies in the battered camera you’ve sold to pay for your winter coat. Your hardy band of actor friends is back on local television pushing pet food and plastics… Read on, since you may be isolated and under-appreciated in your craft.”[22] In emotional terms, the festival stresses the challenge of filmmaking without industrial resources, noting that the seminar “will recognize the isolation and the frustration of the low-budget, high-talent moviemaker through a series of close encounters between the independent filmmaker and the national film community,” and this introduction also describes a newly formed organization intended to support filmmaking talent year-round: the Sundance Institute.[23]

The institute was fully established in 1981, but as the program description suggests, planning had started in earnest by 1979. A prospectus from that year outlines the motivations and model for the organization as envisioned by the original founders, with multiple options for how the Sundance Institute might support independent filmmakers. In general, the prospectus stresses the importance of film development and production as the categories that need support, instead of focusing on exhibition, with a timetable expecting a 1981 date for the initial institute program.[24] The prospectus highlights potential formats for the institute, with different ways of prioritizing the skills needed for filmmaking teams (with producers, writers, and directors working together during the institute) or individual roles. An undated version of the prospectus with additional details outlines an “intensive workshops each summer,” with weeks focusing on

[22] “The Independent Filmmakers’ Seminar,” 1979 Utah/US Film Festival program, 11.

[23] “The Independent Filmmakers’ Seminar.”

[24] “The Sundance Institute: A Prospectus,” 1979, Sundance archives, 29.

concept development and scripting, financing, distribution and marketing, and production, although the organizers primarily settled on production as the core of the institute workshops.[25] Special projects that involve exhibition, specifically the regional filmmaking competition during the festival and a cinematheque embedded within the institute itinerary, appear in the plans outlined in the prospectuses, but most of the planning emphasized productions support. The topics proposed for the workshops broadly apply to any filmmaker seeking a commercial release, but the institute board also considered what types of filmmakers they would support. The May 1980 summary of a planning conference notes discussion of who the institute would serve, from professional filmmakers to those with no experience, and Redford even suggested specific categories like filmmakers transitioning from documentary to narrative.[26] In these planning years for the institute, the prospectuses only address independent filmmakers as a category, without acknowledging the uncertainty over the level of experience expected.

The institute prospectuses reveal significant ambition in the minds of the organizers, with the list of potential funding sources including Hollywood studios, national arts organizations, and the major arts-funding foundations like Rockefeller and Ford. In keeping with the national scope of the related Utah/U.S. Film Festival and the regional emphasis of its programming, the members of the Sundance National Planning Committee, as listed in the prospectuses, represent many regions of the United States, with a balance of independent filmmakers and accomplished professionals in film, television, and other arts.[27] This strategy of supporting the production of new films, rather than only presenting finished projects, became more prominent as the Institute

[25] "The Sundance Institute: A Prospectus," undated, file 2548, Pollack papers, 1, 5.

[26] Summary of Planning Conference, May 27, 1980, file 2548, Pollack papers, 1.

[27] "The Sundance Institute: A Prospectus", 1979, 26.

grew during the next phase of the festival's history, and the Sundance Institute's maturation in the early 1980s would lead to its status as the presenting sponsor of the festival.

Cultivating New Filmmakers at the United States Film and Video Festival: 1981–1984

For its third edition in 1981, the festival moved to Park City and shifted to January, the month that Sundance still occurs, and the name of the event changed.[28] A planned shift from Utah/US Film Festival to simply U.S. Film Festival had to be revised when an attorney representing the U.S.A. Film Festival in Dallas threatened legal action, leading the board to consider names including Park City Film Festival, U.S. Film and Video, United States Film Festival, The Film and Video Festival of America, and a return to the original name, Utah/US Film Festival.[29] Ultimately the board combined two of the options under consideration to select United States Film and Video Festival. Explaining the new name in her opening notes in the program, festival director Susan Barrell states that the festival's philosophy "has always been one of active participation from all segments of the film community," motivating the addition of video to the festival's name and its programming, and she stresses the importance of continued adjustments to the event, writing, "Each year a more diverse and widely representational group of people are brought together to discuss the state of the art; the future."[30] This idea of supporting the emerging independent film community by expanding the categories and participants in the festival appears in the programming choices in the early 1980s, as the Sundance Institute and its influence continued to grow until it became the festival's parent organization in 1985.

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[28] A *Variety* article mentions that the name "changed when the Dallas USA Film Festival registered a squawk" ("Utah Fest's New Tag, Aud at Ski Resort," *Variety*, August 19, 1981, ProQuest, 32).

[29] Meeting minutes, United States Film Festival board of trustees, August 26, 1980, file 2553, Pollack papers, 1.

[30] 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, Sundance archives, 3.

The second festival in 1979 was more successful than the first edition, but contemporary press reported on the organizers' moves to install changes for the long-term stability of the event. Ahead of the 1981 festival*, Variety* published an article by Robert B. Frederick highlighting the current state of the festival and its challenges. Frederick article notes that the 1978 festival left the organization with a deficit, but the 1979 event "was successful enough to eradicate the deficit and emerge with $10,000 in the bank."[31] Sponsorships helped the festival move toward greater stability, with Frederick citing some support from Warner Bros., Orion, and Columbia in 1979. The financial status of the festival had already shifted dramatically from the first year with its eighty percent grant funding. In 1981, the festival anticipated 60 to 75 percent business donations, 15 to 20 percent grants, and 15 to 20 percent ticket sales.[32] Frederick reported that director Sydney Pollack served as the honorary chairperson and helped in the planning process for the 1981 move to Park City, and the United States Film Festival also had a festival director, Susan Barrell, working fulltime and year-round for the first time.

The board's unanimous vote to move the festival to Park City in June 1980 followed a discussion of potential problems with the location, and the planning aimed to address these issues. Meeting minutes list the major challenges as anticipated by the board: "1) there may be a problem with a large lecture facility; 2) where would the audience come from, what kind of audience would this attract, how would the audience be attracted, and; 3) would the local audience be neglected?"[33] To attract an audience, the organizers created an extensive promotional plan, with local and national outlets, and highlighted the unique offerings of Park

[31] Frederick, "Plans, Problems, Participants."

[32] Frederick, "Plans, Problems, Participants."

[33] Meeting minutes, US Film and Video Board of Trustees, June 12, 1980, file 2553, Pollack papers, 1-2.

City whenever possible. Barrell mentioned one of the benefits of the move in an interview with *Variety*, saying, "In Park City we can establish an ambiance like that which is associated with the major European film festivals."[34] While not necessarily drawing on associations with European festival glamor, the festival did stress its unique position as a festival in a resort town taking place during the ski season, with winter activities including a celebrity ski race planned.[35] A promotional brochure for the festival highlighted the ski race, which would "feature five nationally prominent skiers captaining teams of well known celebrities in an informal ski competition."[36] Other activities considered by the organizers included a dog sled race, a cross country race, ice fishing, and private skiing, as well as a tennis tournament sponsored by a local Park City business.[37] While the board seemingly never found a large lecture facility as they hoped, the new Park City venues for the festival were the Holiday Cinemas and a larger venue, the Silverwheel Theatre. The Holiday Cinemas became a festival venue mainstay throughout the 1980s, and the Silverwheel on Park City's Main Street was remodeled as the Egyptian Theatre in 1982, housing screenings or other events for decades. The Park City venues had some technical issues, with organizers trying to fix a sound leak between screens at the Holiday and installing a Dolby System at the Egyptian.[38] Documents from the board and press coverage of the festival suggest that Park City introduced challenges for the event, as a small town with relatively few venues, but it also allowed the festival to stress a unique milieu through winter events.

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[34] "Set Third Annual Utah Ski Resort Film Fest Next Jan.," *Variety*, August 13, 1980, ProQuest, 33.

[35] "'United States Fest' Now at Park, Utah," *Variety*, November 5, 1980, ProQuest, 4.

[36] "United States Film Festival in Park City, Utah" brochure, January 12, 1981, file 2554, Pollack papers.

[37] "U.S. Film Festival in Park City, Utah, 1980/1981 Program Outline," file 2551, Pollack papers, 3, 9.

[38] Swenson, "I Found It At the Movies," 52.

Changes in programming coincided with these other shifts for the festival. Following the move to Park City, the annual program typically featured fewer retrospective or regionally themed screenings than the first two years, in keeping with the emphasis on supporting new artists, and new sections included First Time Director and Sneak Previews. Some older films still screened at the festival, in sections like those honoring Henry Fonda and Stanley Kramer, the John Ford Medallion recipients in 1981 and 1982, respectively.[39] The festival mostly neglected the regional theme concept initially established by the Utah/US Film Festival, although occasional and limited returns to regional programming appeared during the early 1980s. In a striking example from 1981, the only remnant of the festival's original organizing regional theme appears in a single page listing regional shorts programs. The 1982 festival featured a "look at the best in short subject films from around the country," with short film blocks from specific geographic areas programmed by film organizations from those places, like the University of Texas at Austin's Cinema Texas or the University of Illinois-affiliated Picture Start.[40] Instead of the largest portion of the festival like the first year, the regional frame became one way for the festival to organize and position its programming, in this case through short films specifically. In this period, the festival shifted to a broader interest in new independent film, creating an event that prioritized discovering and cultivating new talent, rather than celebrating established filmmakers and genre. This dedication to emerging filmmakers ultimately led to the industrial interest and involvement in the festival that have dominated the discourse about Sundance since

[39] 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, 30; 1982 United States Film and Video Festival 1982 program, Sundance archives, 46.

[40] 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, 25.

the 1990s, as ideas of discovery and novelty took the place of the nostalgia and thematic interpretation that dominated the festival's first two years.

While the development of the festival's programming range and strategies remains the focus of this chapter, the relative lack of local programming beginning in the early 1980s did not result in a total lack of local connections. Instead, advertisements for local businesses and other sponsors appear throughout the festival programs in this period. The programs promote ski shops, clothing stores, restaurants, news stations, and other Utah-based organizations, and the 1984 festival program includes an article detailing things to see and do in Park City, from sports and arts galleries to taprooms and museums.[41] Local alcohol distributors also added national brands like Budweiser, the official beer of the 1982 festival, to the sponsor list.[42] Even with fewer references to Utah's film scene and a reduced number of Utah films in the programs, the festival still highlighted the offerings of its local community. This balance of national (and later increasingly international) programming with business ties and economic investment in Utah would help facilitate the festival's stature in the film community, as a destination for both the quality and breadth of programming and the environment of Park City in the winter.

If the ads in the United States Film and Video Festival guides emphasized the festival environment through the promotion of Park City businesses, the programming showcased the festival's growing investment in promising new filmmakers. A few special programs in this period echoed the thematic interests of the first Utah/US Film Festivals, like a 1981 series focusing on new directors titled "Modern Mythmakers" title, referring to the mythical quality of

[41] 1984 United States Film and Video Festival program, Sundance archives, 41, 43.

[42] 1984 United States Film and Video Festival program, 4.

storytelling.[43] But the independent film competition established in 1978 became a larger part of the festival with more films in the section throughout the United States Film and Video Festival period from 1981 to 1984. The 1981 introduction to the competition section notes that past festival competition filmmakers now work on larger Hollywood films, like Claudia Weill and David Lynch, suggesting that these new filmmakers might similarly graduate to bigger projects and some degree of status of the industry.[44] The competition section gained greater prominence at the festival beginning in 1982, with the addition of two more competition categories, video art and video documentary, and the division of the film category into dramatic (narrative) and documentary sections, creating more space for different types of work in the festival. The 1982 competitions included eleven dramatic feature films, fifteen documentary features, thirteen video art selections, and fourteen video documentaries. While the video selections in the program are shorter than the feature-length films, the program introduces and lists them similarly, with essays outlining their contribution to the festival overall. In a 1982 interview with the magazine *Utah Holiday*, festival director Susan Barrell stressed the industrial connections possible through the independent competition films screened at the festival. She described a recent meeting with a Warner Bros. executive who conveyed Hollywood's problems with finding enough good product, saying, "Many producers are focusing on product… The United States Film Festival gives them a place to see it. Here they see the best of the independents, along with the most experimental Hollywood films."[45] Such comments, in combination with the introduction of

[43] 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, 20.

[44] 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, 10.

[45] Swenson, "I Found It At The Movies," 51.

"experimental" studio product that Barrell described, point to the festival's developing sense of the event as a space to connect independent filmmakers and the Hollywood establishment.

In planning the 1981 festival, the board addressed this relationship, and these conversations affected the direction of programming for the event. Meeting minutes note, "The board concurred that a major function of the Festival, especially the competition and seminar, is to build a bridge between the filmmaker who has not yet, or perhaps does not want to be, associated with the major studios, and the Hollywood studios. Such a liaison could be mutually beneficial, especially as Hollywood needs a place to train and develop talent."[46] Most of the board members worked in Salt Lake City, with Redford's involvement minimized as the Sundance Institute began and grew, so the festival organizers needed another connection to Hollywood. A May 25, 1980, article in *The Salt Lake Tribune* includes an interview with Sydney Pollack, who had been named "honorary chairman of the next USFilm and Video Festival."[47] Pollack stated that the festival may include Hollywood films that cost under $3 million, with the goal of getting studios more involved to eventually give independent filmmakers access to a marketplace. He described his role, saying "I'll be functioning as a liaison between the board of directors and the Hollywood people we hope to bring to the festival."[48] A letter from Susan Barrell to Pollack from the same month suggests the organization's growing reliance on the filmmaker, who had participated in a commentary session when his film *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) screened at the first festival in 1978. Barrell reminds Pollack of names he recommended

[46] Meeting minutes, US Film and Video board of trustees, May 16, 1980, file 2553, Pollack papers, 2.

[47] Terry Orme, "Utah's film festival will have new director, new look in '81," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, May 25, 1980, E5, file 2553, Pollack papers.

[48] Orme, "Utah's film festival will have new director,"

for the competition's national jury, including Margaret Booth and "Irv" Kershner and asks, "Also, when the time comes how would you like these people approached? By you? By us?"[49] In June 1980, the board agreed that "all Hollywood contacts be coordinated through Sydney Pollack," further solidifying his involvement.[50] With an official liaison to the industry, the festival began incorporating new Hollywood features in this period with careful framing, in addition to the independent film competition.

When Hollywood films appeared in the program, the United States Film and Video Festival stressed that the filmmakers were early in their careers and approaching Hollywood differently than traditional associations with the system. The introduction to the "Hollywood: A State of Mind" section of the festival in 1982 notes that the filmmakers "have attempted to blend elements of commercialism with the tradition of storytelling and their own unique personal vision."[51] The new Hollywood directors sidebar featured seven films, including some titles by filmmakers who would have long careers in the industry such as Michael's *Thief* (1981) and George A. Romero's *Knightriders* (1981).[52] Many of the film descriptions emphasize the focus on characterization and style in these selections, with statements like, "The complexities of the characters and their motivation provides the film with its core" about *Cutter's Way* (Ivan Passer, 1981) and "This film works in large part due to the 'extra-ordinary' point of view as seen through the photography and heard through the soundtrack" about *Wolfen* (Rupert Hitzig, 1981).

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[49] Susan Barrell to Sydney Pollack, May 27, 1980, file 2553, Pollack papers.

[50] Meeting minutes, June 12, 1980, Pollack papers.

[51] Lawrence Smith, "Hollywood: A State of Mind," 1982 United States Film and Video Festival program, 16.

[52] Deborah Caulfield, "Movies," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-01-19-ca-36957-story.html.

The festival's stated interest in the balance between commercialism and personal vision facilitated the appearance of more Hollywood films and filmmakers at the festival throughout the 1980s, without openly neglecting the dedication to independent and innovative films. The festival's new space for Hollywood separated the notion of innovation from the context of production, by contextualizing the presence of Hollywood films through their aesthetic strategies and emotional dynamics. Regardless of the festival's careful context for these selections, press already started taking notice of Hollywood's increased presence at the festival. *Variety* reports on plans for the 1981 festival note that films scheduled for commercial release in the months after the festival would appear in the program and major studios were offering sneak preview screenings in the program.[53]

As the festival began incorporating more Hollywood films and filmmakers, the filmmakers' seminar continued as a key method to support emerging filmmakers, especially those outside of New York and Los Angeles. For the first festival in Park City in 1981, the board was directly involved in planning the seminars. Meeting minutes reference concerns about too much emphasis on directing-related topics, for example.[54] A program outline for the 1981 festival suggested that pre-registration would allow attendees to select sessions based on "individual needs and level of expertise," with "General morning sessions focused on creative and philosophical aspects of filmmaking" and "Afternoon small groups (20-25 persons) workshops focusing on specific creative and business problems of filmmaking," again showing the concern for how these events could best help filmmakers.[55] The workshop atmosphere, rather

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[53] "Set Third Annual Utah Ski Resort Film Fest," *Variety*," "United States Fest' Now at Park, Utah," *Variety*.

[54] Meeting minutes, August 26, 1980, Pollack papers, 2.

[55] "U.S. Film Festival in Park City, Utah, 1980/1981 Program Outline," Pollack papers, 2.

than a conventional panel with experts speaking to an inactive audience, parallels the plans for the Sundance Institute, although some of the concepts for longer workshops would be difficult to enact during a typically busy festival schedule. In a letter to Pollack, Susan Barrell noted his idea for three-to-four-hour seminars "with more interaction and possibly some clips, etc. as examples," with topics ranging from "Script Planning" to "Acting Process."[56] While the seminars in 1981 and subsequent years ultimately took a shorter form with a traditional approach, the ideas posed by organizers stress their interest in this aspect of the festival, as well as the possibilities the seminars could offer to filmmakers.

Often taking place at a venue separate from the screenings, the Prospector Theatre, seminars provided a way to connect the independent filmmakers with their Hollywood counterparts. With the goal of bringing together regional filmmakers and successful professionals from Hollywood, the seminar featured structured sessions with time for questions, as well as "informal events" that would allow filmmakers to "discuss specific problems on a one-on-one basis."[57] Industry professionals at the seminars represented a variety of backgrounds. The 1981 seminar featuring guests like independent filmmakers Roger Corman and George A. Romero and representatives from organizations including the American Film Institute, PBS, HBO, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. This selection of guests demonstrates the festival's dedication to connecting new filmmakers with experienced filmmakers, as well as organizations that might offer material resources, either through production funding or distribution opportunities.

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[56] Susan Barrell to Sydney Pollack, May 27, 1980, Pollack papers.

[57] 1981 United States Film and Video Festival program, 38.

The seminars settled more firmly into business-oriented matters as the early 1980s progressed. The 1982 seminar featured a variety of workshops, with topics like lighting and cinematography and making a film for less than $3 million.[58] In 1983, the organizers took a more conceptual approach to planning this section of the festival, with five days titled "Hard Cash," "Hard Knocks," "Hard Choices," "Hard Work," and "Hard Heads."[59] Aesthetic and technical dimensions of filmmaking still appeared in the descriptions, with "Hard Knocks" focused on filmmakers' experiences and "Hard Work" centered on acting, but these 1983 seminar topics included a marked emphasis on financial aspects of filmmaking. "Hard Cash" covered subjects such as distribution agreements and marketing, and the descriptions for other seminar days, "Hard Choices" and "Hard Knocks," also note attention to the economic side of independent film production. Like the new Hollywood directors section in 1982, the 1983 seminar topics and panelists offer early indications of how Hollywood's presence and influence at the festival would grow. Even as the festival and the Sundance Institute organizers attempted to support filmmakers by facilitating connections and education, this change also paved the way for the negative assumptions about the festival and the idea of it selling out for mainstream interests.

In addition to the increased presence of representatives from Hollywood at the seminars, the festival also acknowledged a changing aspect of the event in its framing of the seminars in the early 1980s. By 1984, the festival program billed the workshops as an audience of students, filmmakers, and the general public.[60] The festival's earlier framing as a sort of film-based discussion on ideas of regional identity and national history grew from the writings of film

[58] 1982 United States Film and Video Festival program, Sundance archives, 62.

[59] 1983 United States Film and Video Festival program, Sundance archives, 32-33.

[60] 1984 United States Film and Video Festival program, 22.

scholars, like the reprinted Robert Sklar essay, and the screenings of both retrospective and new films. A general audience did not figure in the initial descriptions of the festival and its various sections, but after six years, references like this brief aside in the seminar description acknowledge the broader interest in the festival. Even as the 1984 seminars cover familiar topics for filmmakers like screenwriting and acting, this section of the program also encourages the festival audience to seek out screenings with attending filmmakers to hear about the creative process, noting "It is a rare opportunity to discuss with the person responsible for the film, your perspective on the work, or to seek an answer to a question or a concern. It is an opportunity to find out first hand, what the filmmaker experienced during the production, and to explore what you experience during the performance."[61] This recognition and promotion of the interactive potential at film festivals, while briefly mentioned here, stands as an early example of festivals recognizing the appeal of filmmaker presence for audiences, even when the filmmakers are new or unknown.

With this interest in connecting filmmakers and audiences as a feature of the festival, the programming strategies in the early 1980s made room for more established filmmakers alongside new artists. In a lasting change, the strict categories that characterized the early years, especially the first year's focus on American geographic regions and culture, gave way to a collapsing of categories, with various types of new films without a guiding conceptual framework. Instead, the programming categories began to suggest different degrees of industrial prominence or connection. The 1983 festival catalog, for example, highlights premieres in both the programming and the framing of the festival, and this framing allowed for worthy creative products outside of the strict independent and retrospective focus of the festival's initial years.

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[61] 1984 United States Film and Video Festival program.

The introduction to the festival guide, by the festival's executive director Susan Barrell, notes that the word "discovery" repeatedly emerged in planning discussions about the festival's promotional materials.[62] Barrell goes on to ponder the various types of discovery connected to the festival, from the discovery of Utah's "beauty and fertile climate for work" to the hope that "artists and other industry professionals attending the festival would discover something about their work that would lead to better product, fresh ideas, or the heartening realization that there are others who share their frustrations and creative ability to endure." Her final word on the festival's relationship to discovery, however, lies in "the belief that what is actually being discovered here is the future," with a focus on independent production occurring inside and outside of the traditional Hollywood system.

This recognition of a future merging Hollywood institutions and the creativity associated with independent production is evident in the programming choices made by festival organizers. New films by major directors and starring Hollywood actors started to appear in the lineup in this period. In 1983, the premiere section featured *Frances* (Graeme Clifford, 1982), starring Jessica Lange in a role that would lead to an Oscar nomination, and Alan J. Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* (1982), starring Meryl Streep, already a four-time Oscar nominee. *Splash*, directed by the established and commercially successful filmmaker Ron Howard, premiered at the 1984 festival before its wide distribution as Touchstone Films' first release.[63] At the same time, films without known directors or stars also screened in the competition sections. Some of these films also became success stories, like Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing*, a 1983 selection, and Penelope

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[62] 1983 United States Film and Video Festival program, 2.

[63] Aljean Harmetz, "Touchstone Label to Replace Disney Name on Some Films," *New York Times*, February 16, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/16/movies/touchstone-label-to-replace-disney-name-on-some-films.html.

Spheeris' *Suburbia*, which showed at the 1984 festival. While recognizable names appeared in the competition film lineup in the early 1980s, most competition films did not have directors who would become notable independent filmmakers with long careers. Many worked with low budgets and limited resources. In this way, the competition remained a section of the festival that maintained the first year's investments in supporting new filmmakers and emerging talents.

Between 1981 and 1984, the Sundance Institute was listed as a sponsor in the program guides for the United States Film and Video Festival, and staff or representatives from the Institute would occasionally be listed as panelists as events like seminars or workshops. While this position at the festival remained relatively minor, the Sundance Institute expanded its programs, and it gained attention from established filmmakers and national press. A May 1982 newsletter from the organization notes the goal of supporting artists year-round and outlines current activities. After working on scripts with ten filmmakers in March, the Program Committee, including Robert Redford and other board members, met with the filmmakers in April. After discussing next steps and plans, they selected three filmmakers to continue with a Pre-Production Planning and Development Program in June.[64] The newsletter also highlights the Sundance Institute's support for new playwrights in this period, co-hosting a conference with the Utah Arts Council, and a section on "Sundance People" offers brief updates on the professional projects of individuals with relationships to the Institute.[65] For instance, this section outlines Christopher Guest's acting roles since the June 1981 Institute session and notes that he "will develop the screenplay *Spinal Tap* for Embassy Pictures this spring."[66] A 1984 newsletter labels

[64] Sundance Institute May 1982 newsletter, Sundance archives, 1.

[65] Sundance Institute May 1982 newsletter, 2.

[66] Sundance Institute May 1982 newsletter, 3.

the names with "Filmmaker," "Resource," or "Advisor" and their year of participation in the Institute, keeping readers informed about activities of both new and established participants in their programs.[67] These updates underscore connections with known industry figures and companies, suggesting the goal of investing in careers with the Institute programs, not just helping develop single feature films.

In addition to documents produced by the Institute that attempted to ensure support from board members and other industry connections and facilitate a continued relationship with filmmakers, like the newsletter, Robert Redford's close involvement with the Sundance Institute attracted press attention.[68] A June 1983 interview with Redford in *The Salt Lake Tribune* highlights changes in the early years of the Institute, with expansion from a monthlong program to a seven-month experience, with filmmakers paired with screenwriters in December before everyone gathered at the resort in June.[69] Redford discussed the attention attracted by his involvement with the institute, and he recalled some "raised eyebrows" about the project, saying, "What I did find is that people were rather reluctant to take us at face value, that we were setting up a mechanism where you could marry mainstream and independent film; a place where you could take the potential of independent film and the need for product in the major film industry and bring them together. And in doing so, increase the quality of the product."[70] The "raised eyebrows" might have resulted from the unusual approach to a filmmaking institution, especially

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[67] Sundance Institute February 1984 newsletter, Sundance archives, 4.

[68] John Lombardi, "Redford's Film Lab in the Rockies," *New York Times Magazine*, October 23, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/23/magazine/redfords-film-lab-in-the-rockies.html.

[69] Terry Orme, "A New Atmosphere for Making Films," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1983, file 2549, Pollack papers, E1.

[70] Orme, "A New Atmosphere for Making Films," E12.

one involving Hollywood veterans. An October 1983 *New York Times Magazine* article details the programs and processes of the organization, with Redford and other interviewees like executive director Sterling Van Wagenen and board member Sydney Pollack describing the early efforts at establishing the Institute and their goals. In explaining the strategy of the Institute, Redford remarks, "Above all, I didn't want it to be a film school or any kind of festival… 'I never learned anything in school, and I'm not big on festivals because people aren't really exchanging ideas, they're just lecturing each other. I wanted some action, for this to be a work-oriented place." Even if Redford initially desired separation between the Sundance Institute and Utah's other growing film organization, the United States Film and Video Festival, the relationship would transform closer just two years later, with the festival's title changing to reflect the Institute's new role as its parent organization.

The Sundance Institute Presents the United States Film Festival: 1985–1990

In 1985, the title of the festival changed once again to reflect the Sundance Institute's new relationship as the event's parent organization. The 1985 festival program, billed as "The Sundance Institute Presents the United States Film Festival," a welcome message notes, "Now under the sponsorship of the Sundance Institute, the Festival enters its seventh year with a commitment to American independent cinema that is stronger than ever."[71] A February 1985 "Report on the Development of the Sundance Institute" describes the goal of the Institute assuming sponsorship of the festival, noting, "For seven years the Park City Festival has been a leading showcase for American independent films. Under a grant from the State of Utah, the Institute is now sponsoring the festival to strengthen its focus and support to American

[71] 1985 United States Film Festival program, Sundance archives, 3.

independent filmmakers."[72] In the period from 1985 to 1990, the festival maintained its programs and support for independent filmmakers, while the involvement of Redford and the Institute both offered more resources and allowed growth, inadvertently introducing questions about the scale of the festival.

Film journalists and Utah press took note of the new relationship between the festival and the Institute, highlighting the festival's stronger connection with Redford. *The Salt Lake Tribune*'s Terry Orme characterized the seventh festival in 1985 as bringing "new prestige, new clout to its standing among American film showcases" as "an arm of the Sundance Institute."[73] Orme also highlighted a $10,000 investment in updated screening facilities, as well as a new festival director coming from the American Film Institute, Tony Safford. The *Los Angeles Times*' Deborah Caulfield also reported on the Institute's sponsorship of the festival, writing, "What a difference a name makes… especially if it's Robert Redford's. On Friday and Sunday, the elusive superstar gave not only his name but also his persona to the seventh annual United States Film Festival."[74] Caulfield outlines moments that Redford participated in the festival, including his attendance at the opening night screening, John Schlesinger's *The Falcon and the Snowman*, and afterparty and his last-minute involvement in a directing seminar after director Ivan Passer had to cancel. For another article published just weeks later, Caulfield interviewed

[72] "Report on the Development of the Sundance Institute," February 1985, file 2550, Pollack papers.

[73] Terry Orme, "The US Film Festival: 10 days of support for art on celluloid," *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 13, 1985, E1, file 2550, Sydney Pollack papers, Margaret Herrick Library.

[74] Deborah Caulfield, "Robert Redford Lends Status to Film Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-01-21-ca-14316-story.html.

Redford about his relationship with the festival and the Institute's new status as parent organization.[75]

In the interview with Caulfield, Redford expressed his concern over the expectations and potential overt Hollywood interested being generated by successful Sundance Institute films, with Caulfield noting at least four films that had been acquired or already released by major distributors, including Orion Classics (*Old Enough*) and Paramount *(River Rat*). Redford also explained his qualms over festivals and their lack of dedication to independent films, saying "I was never big on festivals… And when I was originally approached the first year to do this one, I said I'd be interested only if it emphasized independent film."[76] Redford stopped participating actively in the festival after the first year, retaining only the title of honorary chairman. He told Caulfield that he would "be interested in taking it on only if it began to emphasize independent film and created a kind of niche for being a showcase for independent film," even as he recognized the challenges of supporting lesser-known filmmakers with films that may not have immediate wide appeal. Redford explained, "I knew it was going to be risky to completely emphasize independent work rather than using celebrities to draw in the public to see independent films. You just can't step forward in a community that's not that sophisticated about film—much less art in general. You're going to run the risk of no one coming." In the late 1980s, with Redford's Sundance Institute now managing the United States Film Festival, the programming continued to highlight independent filmmakers through the competition section, while also incorporating films from recognized filmmakers and major studios, allowing the festival to support independent artists while mitigating the "risk of no one coming."

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[75] Deborah Caulfield, "Will Success Spoil Sundance?," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 1985, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-02-04-ca-4275-story.html.

[76] Caulfield, "Will Success Spoil Sundance?"

Apart from the attention to Redford and his new, closer relationship with the festival, the national press also reported on the perspectives and goals of other individuals involved in the Sundance Institute and the United States Film Festival, providing a record of publicly stated goals for the event. In *Variety*'s story on the Sundance Institute's new role in managing the festival, Sundance Institute executive director Sterling Van Wagenen recalled three assumptions about the festival that were included in the proposal to take over the festival: "First, it should remain in Park City. Second, the thrust should be independent film. Third, funding for the festival needs to have a broader base, a national constituency."[77] The "independent film" thrust was a fairly strict assumption, as the Institute dropped the video section from the festival, with Van Wagenen mentioning that the organization would "begin discussions about a separate video festival."[78] Van Wagenen also highlighted a goal of improving screening facilities either by adding new locations or improving the technical features at existing venues, and the festival ultimately kept the 1984 venues, the Holiday Cinemas and the Egyptian Theatre on Park City's Main Street, presumably following the strategy of fixing existing problems rather than starting over wholesale with new screening facilities. Even in the first year of Sundance Institute sponsorship, leadership considered the sponsorship a success. A February 8, 1985, memo from Institute Vice President Gary Beer to the board of trustees reports on the United States Film Festival, noting, "Box office gross was more than double of any previous year ($83,000 and 15,750 attending). The Festival broke even at about $150,000."[79] Apart from Redford's

[77] "Sundance Assumes Reins Of U.S. Fest, Vid Section Dropped," *Variety*, August 15, 1984, ProQuest, 5.

[78] "Sundance Assumes Reins," *Variety*.

[79] Gary Beer to Sundance Institute board of trustees, memorandum, February 8, 1985, file 2550, Pollack papers.

involvement, programming choices in 1985 and subsequent years helped generate press about the festival and attract increasingly larger audiences.

Apart from the exclusion of video projects, the festival continued the programming trends established earlier in the decade, with films by known filmmakers or featuring stars prominently appearing in a program alongside low-budget American independent films. Many of the independent filmmakers from this period would go on to long careers and broader recognition, either in the realm of independent film or the industry more broadly, and retrospective films continued their decline in the festival program. Even as the festival offered independent films to its audience, it strengthened its relationship to the industry. The festival began to screen major films more regularly, expanding the Sneak Previews category that started with the Park City move in 1981, and the festival also received a dramatic increase in corporate and industry sponsorship from the greater attention to the festival and the stronger connections to financially successful filmmakers facilitated by the Sundance Institute. With a robust program of independent films and expanded categories like the Sneak Previews, the festival grew larger during this period. *The Salt Lake Tribune*'s Terry Orme reported on the 1985 program's size making it impossible for the audience to see everything, with festival director Tony Safford's approval, writing, "It will be difficult for participants to see even a fraction of the 90 or so films that will be screened. That's the way Safford likes it – the festival will be a giant potpourri from which a film-goer may sample."[80] This notion of a festival grown too large for a full experience of its programming scope would affect coverage of the event in the late 1980s, as press began focusing on particular types of films, as well as the festival's size.

[80] Terry Orme, "10 days of support."

As Robert Redford's association with the Institute attracted press coverage to the unusual project for a Hollywood star during the early 1980s, his new relationship with the festival combined with the programming of major films to generate frequent reports about the United States Film Festival in the trades and other press about film. The new film by John Schlesinger, director of films including Best Picture-winner *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and the hit thriller *Marathon Man* (1976), premiered at the 1985 festival, with *The Falcon and the Snowman* showing at the opening night gala in Salt Lake City, a tradition that continued until 2004. Other highlights for press included Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* and *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffe), starring Sam Waterston in a role that would lead to an Academy Award for Best Actor.[81] The Premieres section often featured known filmmakers in this period, with Sidney Lumet's *Power*, a 20th Century Fox film, and Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* debuting at the festival in 1986. Robert Altman's *Beyond Therapy* premiered at the 1987 festival, and films with stars also frequently showed at the United States Film Festival, like Gene Hackman and Dennis Hopper in *Hoosiers* (David Anspaugh, 1986), another 1987 selection. Norman Jewison's *Moonstruck* (1987) played in the Premieres section in 1988, with the guide highlighting Cher's performance as "wonderfully convincing, harmonizing comic timing with warmth and volubility."[82] While video had been dropped from the festival's programming purview with the Sundance Institute sponsorship, television remained a frequent presence at the event, with films like HBO's two-part *Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story* (1989), starring Ben Kingsley, premiering at the festival. Audiences could see *Murderers Among Us* on subsequent days in Park City in 1989, just like the eventual home viewing audience that

[81] "'Simple' Top Drama At U.S. Film Fest," *Variety*, January 30, 1985, ProQuest, 6.

[82] 1988 United States Film Festival program, Sundance archives, 12.

would see the two-night broadcast.[83] In these examples and many others, programmers would highlight the success of the actors and directors represented by these feature films in their write-ups, drawing in audiences with familiar, often award-winning, names. While more of these films appeared in the program in the late 1980s than earlier periods of the festival's history, other categories that rarely featured known filmmakers or stars also continued or expanded in this time.

The independent film competition, now divided between dramatic and documentary sections, often introduced major independent films or talented new filmmakers who would have long careers, even if the specific projects programmed by the United States Film Festival did not always take off outside of Park City. The 1985 competition included films by now notable filmmakers, including Jim Jarmusch with *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and the Coen Brothers with *Blood Simple* (1984), which was widely covered in the press after winning the dramatic competition.[84] Wayne Wang, whose first film *Chan Is Missing* received critical acclaim, showed his new feature *Dim Sum* (1985) at the festival in 1986, and Jill Godmilow's feature *Waiting for the Moon* (1986) premiered at the 1987 festival two years after the critical success of her hybrid documentary *Far from Poland*. Women directors appeared more frequently in the independent competition than the premieres section, as Hollywood studios largely continued to exclude women. For example, Lizzie Borden's *Working Girls* (1986), a day-in-the-life narrative of women working at a New York City brothel, screened at the festival in 1987, offering a film driven by women's perspectives that frankly addressed sexuality in a way that studios would avoid. Through the documentary side of the independent competition, the festival became an

[83] 1989 United States Film Festival program, Sundance archives, 13.

[84] "'Simple' Top Drama At U.S. Film Fest," *Variety*.

increasingly prominent venue for non-fiction, with new and unknown documentary filmmakers showing films alongside established directors like Fred Wiseman, whose film *Missile* (1988), screened at the 1988 festival. In the competitions and other sections, the programs from this period reveal that some filmmakers showed films at the festival numerous times, starting a trend that caused Sundance programmers to frequently reference alumni in program notes and festival discussions. As early as 1984, the festival guide notes that six of the twelve independent film competition directors are returning to the festival.[85] This tendency for filmmakers to return to the festival facilitated a nascent community of independent filmmakers growing around the event, as well as the connected Sundance Institute, with independent filmmakers regularly appearing as advisors at the Institute labs.

Jill Godmilow's *Waiting for the Moon* offers an instructive example of how new independent films featured at the United States Film Festival could circulate in this period. Even before the rise of regional festivals, American independent films would sometimes screen at multiple festivals in the United States and internationally. Godmilow was already relatively well-known for *Far From Poland* (1984) and *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman* (co-directed with Judy Collins, 1974), which had been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. Described in the 1987 United States Film Festival program as "a fresh and provocative portrait" of the romantic relationship between writers Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, the film won the Best Dramatic Feature award at the festival.[86] According to Godmilow's website, it also screened at the Cleveland Film Festival and the USA Film Festival in Dallas, and, based on correspondence from her archival records, *Waiting for the Moon* also showed at the Aspen Film

[85] 1984 United States Film and Video Festival program, 14.

[86] 1987 United States Film Festival program, Sundance archives, 22.

Festival in early 1987 after its Park City screening.[87] Internationally, the film screened at festivals including the Munich Film Festival in Germany and the Cartagena Film Festival in Columbia, and it was commercially released in the United States through the independent distribution company Skouras Pictures. The festival circulation of a film by an established American independent filmmaker in the late 1980s suggests that, even though the current system with hundreds of events across the country had not yet emerged, independent films could still circulate at several festivals throughout the country and internationally before commercial release.

While premieres and competition films like *Waiting for the Moon* remained primarily American selections at the United States Film Festival in the late 1980s, this period finally saw the presentation of some international films. The Utah/US Film Festival had solely included American films in its initial years, and the United States Film Festival era in the early 1980s had not expanded the national scope of the programming in a meaningful way. But, in part because of the involvement of the Sundance Institute, the festival started showing films from other countries, typically in discrete sections. The "International Showcase" section of the 1985 program featured American films alongside new cinema from countries including Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, West Germany, Italy, and Japan.[88] A subsection of the festival highlighted "New Australian Cinema" with six feature films. The festival also highlighted Australian films at the 1986 festival, with *Variety* noting a program of twenty-four films created in collaboration with the Australian Film Commission, with a mix of features and shorts in

[87] "Waiting for the Moon," The Films of Jill Godmilow, accessed June 20, 2023, https://www3.nd.edu/~jgodmilo/moon.html; Ellen Kohner to Jill Godmilow, April 24, 1987, Jill Godmilow papers, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[88] 1985 United States Film Festival program, Sundance archives.

narrative and documentary categories.[89] The examples from 1985 and 1986 suggest the limited scope of the festival's international programming. Most of the international films at the festival in this period came from predominantly English speaking or European countries, although a section at the 1988 festival focused on Argentine films.[90] International projects in 1987 included Canadian films and television productions from the United Kingdom's Channel 4. In some cases, international films at the United States Film Festival were associated with Sundance Institute projects, like the Latin American Filmmakers Exchange Program. The Institute's 1989 Program Reports describes Colombian cinema at the upcoming festival as part of the program in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art.[91] The festival's inclusion of international films started slowly in the late 1980s, but this shift in programming at the United States Film Festival would ultimately have a broader impact. As the festival became an important venue to introduce films to other programmers with their own audiences in the coming decades, festival selections, including international films, would often screen at other festivals, making the United States Film Festival and later Sundance one visible means of introducing international films to American audiences.

As the festival's independent competition continued to be the largest section of the program and receive the most press coverage, special sidebars typically functioned as the main space for retrospective films in the late 1980s, like the sections with international programming. The United States Film Festival featured retrospective about specific figures from film history,

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[89] "Indie Aussie Films, U.S. Preems Listed for Utah Festival," *Variety*, November 27, 1985, ProQuest, 5, 36.

[90] 1988 United States Film Festival program.

[91] "Sundance Institute Program Reports, 1989," box 57 folder 6, Ira Deutchman Papers, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library), 14.

most often directors, like the programs on Orson Welles in 1986, Samuel Fuller in 1988, and Charlie Chaplin and John Cassavetes in 1989.[92] Restorations or other new versions of films would also appear in the lineup occasionally, like a restored print of Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1925) that premiered at the 1988 festival.[93] The 1989 festival included a retrospective film in an unusually prominent spot, with F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) accompanied by a new score as the opening night selection.[94] Contemporary press would comment on notable events or guests at the festival that involved retrospective programming, but these films generally received less attention in the guide and less coverage in the press than even the limited international sections.

While the last half of the 1980s solidified the importance of the competition compared to other sections of the festival, this period also saw the growth of the seminars, the other aspect of the event that supported new artists specifically. The seminars continued to emphasize various aspects of film production, sometimes highlighting particular film categories or genres. For example, the 1986 festival included directing and screenwriting seminars, like most of the festival, but it also featured a panel titled, "Handle with Care: The Art of Marketing Documentary Films."[95] Another 1986 seminar stressed the importance of release strategy for independent films. According to the guide description of "Case Study: Bobby Roth's *Heartbreakers*," the director and others involved with the film discussed the release as "a primary example of how a major distributor can *mis*-handle an independent film."[96] Seminars in

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[92] 1986 United States Film Festival program, Sundance archives, 33; 1988 United States Film Festival program, 26; 1989 United States Film Festival program, 34, 46.

[93] 1988 United States Film Festival program, 13.

[94] 1989 United States Film Festival program, 12.

[95] 1986 United States Film Festival program, 23.

[96] 1986 United States Film Festival program, 24.

the late 1980s continued to connect filmmakers with institutions that could assist their productions, like a film commission seminar in 1987,[97] but seminars like the *Heartbreakers* case study and the documentary marketing panel suggest attention to distribution as a concern for independent filmmakers, a topic that did not appear as frequently in the initial years of the festival workshops.

Like the festival's programming, its partners and supporters also shifted during this period. At this time, sponsors based in other parts of the United States, or even internationally, also began supporting the festival. The film-related sponsors of the Utah/US Film Festival's early years were predominantly local, focusing on film production in Utah. By this period, film institutions beyond the festival's region started sponsoring the event. Large corporations supported the festival, like the Eastman Kodak in 1988, and small organizations from other parts of the country also sponsored the festival, presumably to promote production in their regions.[98] The sponsor listings from this time also suggest the broadening awareness and influence of the festival. For example, the Tokyo International Film Festival sponsored the United States Film Festival as one of the daily festival sponsors listed in the schedule grid in the 1989 program, likely an effect of the Tokyo/US Film Festival project by the Sundance Institute.[99] Other sponsors extended beyond the realm of film entirely. AT&T sponsored the festival from 1987 to 1989, and American Express and Hertz Rent a Car sponsored in 1989. This presence of both corporate sponsors and major studios at the festival in the late 1980s led to observations and concerns about the festival's increased size.

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[97] 1987 United States Film Festival program, 30.

[98] 1988 United States Film Festival program, 2.

[99] 1989 United States Film Festival program, 2, 60.

Press coverage of the festival in the late 1980s regularly commented on Hollywood's increased role at the United States Film Festival, as well as the overall growth of the event. A *Variety* ahead of the 1986 event notes that "Hollywood presence and support is reflected in the membership of the 1986 festival advisory committee."[100] While Hollywood's involvement grew throughout the 1980s, through the presence of more major films and increased studio sponsorship, the 1987 festival saw a marked rise in discussions of Hollywood's visibility. In Sheila Benson's report for the *Los Angeles Times*, she writes, "Crowding the screenings and the snowy streets of this upscale ski resort were not only the small development and production companies who've reveled in the place over the years but dozens of developers from Hollywood studios, looking with avidity at American independent films en masse."[101] *Variety*'s review of the 1987 festival stresses the statistics relayed by a Sundance Institute executive, Gary Beer, who highlighted that over 800 filmmakers and industry representatives attended and the festival had over 30,000 admissions.[102]

Concerns about the festival growing too large to function effectively for audiences and filmmakers appeared alongside these observations about increased attendance and Hollywood involvement, especially in 1987 and 1988. *Variety*'s critic expressed these qualms in the 1987 review, writing "If the festival were to expand too much, it probably would become too diffuse and lose some of its most particular quality. Most independent filmmakers wouldn't mind going

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[100] "24 Indie Features, Documentaries Slated for U.S. Film Fest in Utah," *Variety*, December 25, 1985, ProQuest, 12.

[101] Sheila Benson, "Park City's Film Fest: Diamond in the Rough," *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1987, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-02-01-ca-23-story.html.

[102] Todd McCarthy, "Godmilow's 'Moon' Takes Top Prize At Boffo U.S. Film Fest," *Variety*, January 28, 1987, ProQuest, 18.

Hollywood eventually, but it would be a shame if the festival designed for them were to go Hollywood as well."[103] Sheila Benson reported on clear frustration at the festival, as well as some of her own concerns, in her *Los Angeles Times* article. Describing the awards ceremony at the 1987 festival, she writes, "At the awards ceremony of the U.S. Film Festival here last weekend, as a Sundance Institute executive was indulging in some understandable public pride over the festival's growth and strength, someone yelled from the back, 'Keep it small!'" [104] Benson's response to the festival stressed the danger of "overdiscovery," with Telluride standing as a cautionary tale for the United States Film Festival's possible future. She noted that "Park City-goers" who had attended Telluride in the past shared "horror stories about Telluride's ticket lines, which require you to leave one film 20 minutes before its close in order to stand in line for the next one, and stories that pointed to a tightening air of elitism." While she acknowledged the concerns about "elaborate seat savers" and over-crowding in Park City, she offered hope that the festival could still "rework these relatively small problems before they spread." This combination of hope and concern over the state and direction of the festival appeared in press reports throughout the late 1980s, with problems intensifying, at least in the eyes of journalists, as the decade progressed.

Festival organizers and Sundance Institute executives recognized these problems, with discussions of the potential pitfalls facing the festival's growth in interviews, especially with Robert Redford. Even after the record attendance in 1987, the festival's ticket sales increased 30 to 40% in 1988. Redford described the immense increase in attendees from other states and countries, saying, "Since Sundance took over the 10-day fest three years ago, nearly 1,500

[103] McCarthy, "Godmilow's 'Moon.'"

[104] Benson, "Park City's Film Fest."

people from outside Utah bought ticket packages, compared to 80 two years ago… We're at the point now where this it. This is the first year we've put a ceiling on the number of outside visitors."[105] Redford directly addressed his hope to manage the festival's size in another 1988 interview, explaining, "I feel very strongly about scale; I don't think we should keep expanding both our audience size and our program size to suit the need. I think there's a cutoff point for the sake of quality and management. I'm more attracted to keeping the festival small. I like the idea of it being outside a major metropolitan area. I think it's a more fun atmosphere."[106] References to a specific atmosphere, like Redford's, and the idea that it changed over time became more common in the late 1980s, offering a broad category for critics to return to after each festival.

Complaints and concerns grew more frequent as the festival's popularity expanded under the sponsorship of the Sundance Institute. Deborah Caulfield's 1988 report treats the greater interest in the festival as a potentially fatal problem for the event, as suggested by the title, "U.S. Film Festival Learns to Cope With Success." She writes, "the 10th annual United States Film Festival concluded Sunday amid signs that it too is undergoing a not-necessarily-for-the-better transformation," pointing to its "burgeoning size and popularity" and an awards party that she characterized as "a cacophony of schmoozing that barely ebbed enough to acknowledge the winner."[107] Caulfield's report primarily focuses on the problems of this awards party and the overall crowds at the festival, with little attention to the films themselves, but other *Los Angeles Times* journalists addressed the quality of the programming. Sheila Benson suggested that the

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[105] Caulfield, "Movies."

[106] Deborah Caulfield, "Redford Keeps Rein on U.S. Film Festival," January 23, 1988, *Los Angeles Times*, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-01-23-ca-9659-story.html.

[107] Deborah Caulfield, "U.S. Film Festival Learning to Cope With Success," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-01-25-ca-25652-story.html.

international films were more impressive than the programming most associated with the festival, writing, "The shock was that in this showplace of American independent film, at an event now sponsored by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute, most of the festival's best came from somewhere other than the United States."[108] She continues, "There were, to be sure, scattered American pictures of promise, but they were certainly scattered." *Variety* also commented on the quality of the American films, proposing that the dip in quality lies in the current state of the independent film movement, rather than the choices of the festivals' programmers.[109]

Beyond the issues of overcrowding, a changing atmosphere, and a perceived decrease in the quality of independent films, writers also criticized the greater involvement of corporate sponsors. *Variety*'s report on the 1988 festival, titled "Growing Pains Mar U.S. Festival; More Pix Not Necessarily Better," also criticized the "chaotic awards ceremony," with a specific note about the overt involvement of sponsors.[110] The report states, "Visibility of corporate sponsors was much greater this year, which is tolerable up to a point, but became disturbing to everyone when it was an executive from American Express and not a filmmaker, as in years past, who announced and distributed the top awards." Problems at the 1988 festival offered journalists a chance to unfavorably compare the event to its past iterations, but the next year's event provided a new and persistent point of comparison for reports on the United States Film Festival, with journalists' further solidifying the commercial focus that they had heavily criticized.

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[108] Sheila Benson, "Foreign Entries Shine at U.S. Fest," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-01-25-ca-25650-story.html.

[109] "Growing Pains Mar U.S. Festival; More Pix Not Necessarily Better," *Variety*, January 27, 1988, ProQuest, 109.

[110] "Growing Pains," *Variety*, 5.

Among the Dramatic Competition titles, the 1989 festival guide introduces *sex, lies, and videotape*, a drama about four characters sharing extramarital affairs and other secrets, an "audacious debut from first-time feature director Steven Soderbergh."[111] The description continues, "Elegantly paced and sparsely framed, this is a psychological drama with a unique point of view." With rave reviews following its premiere at the Prospector Square Theatre, the film won the festival's Dramatic Audience Award. *The New York Times*' festival report, which focused on the shrinking market for independent films and the financial difficulties facing independent filmmakers, proclaimed that the "biggest winner at the festival appeared to be the 26-year-old Mr. Soderbergh," with acclaim for the film and RCA/Columbia having paid $1.2 million for worldwide video rights before the festival.[112] While multiple studio made offers for theatrical distribution rights at the festival, Miramax bought the rights at the American Film Market a few weeks later.[113] The film had continued commercial and festival success. When an initial invitation to the non-competition Directors' Fortnight section at Cannes was upgraded to a main competition slot, *sex, lies, and videotape* won the top award, the Palme d'Or, and it grossed more than $24 million at the box office.[114] It remains a crucial example in independent film history for scholars, with Alisa Perren discussing the film as a turning point for Miramax and

[111] 1989 United States Film Festival program, 30.

[112] Aljean Harmetz, "Independent Films Get Better But Go Begging," *The New York Times*, February 1, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/01/movies/independent-films-get-better-but-go-begging.html.

[113] Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 32.

[114] Vincent Canby, "For the Cannes Winner, Untarnished Celebrity," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1989, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/27/movies/critic-s-notebook-for-the-cannes-winner-untarnished-celebrity.html.

independent film more generally in her study of Miramax's relationship with and influence on Hollywood.[115]

Critics also quickly incorporated it into coverage of the United States Film Festival as a point of comparison for the programming's commercial promise, with industry representatives reinforcing the importance of the film's story. Sheila Benson's *Los Angeles Times* 1990 report noted *sex, lies, and videotape* and *The Big Easy* (Jim McBride, 1986) as examples of films that started trajectories into commercial success at the festival.[116] A *New York Times* article on the 1991 festival quotes Universal's director of acquisitions, Sam Kitt, who said, "'Sex, Lies and Videotape' is the movie that ignited the Hollywood community's interest… The chance to find something that totally unexpected plus the perk of a skiing vacation is irresistible."[117] As *sex, lies, and videotape* set a new bar for an American independent film's success, it also created a persistent association for the festival that introduced it, with an appealing narrative that filmmakers and executives hoped to replicate.

Sundance Institute staff and leadership both used the film as an example of independent achievement and attempted to temper such comparisons. On a page about the festival in the Sundance Institute's 1989 Program Reports, a list of notable films from the program is followed by a sentence highlighting Soderbergh's film specifically: "'sex, lies and videotape' went on to win the Palme d'Or in Cannes and in gratitude for the exposure at the Festival the producers

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[115] Perren, *Indie, Inc*.

[116] Sheila Benson, "Black Film Makers Carry Sundance Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1990, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-01-29-ca-881-story.html.

[117] Aljean Harmetz, "Sundance Film Festival Veers From Mainstream," *New York Times*, January 17, 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/17/movies/sundance-film-festival-veers-from-mainstream.html.

dedicated the Los Angeles premiere to the Institute."[118] While the Cannes prize represented a moment of achievement within the Sundance Institute's programs, the film created outsized expectations. In a *Variety* report on the first few days of the 1990 event, festival director Tony Safford said, "My feeling is this is as strong as any year we've done, but odds are unlikely we can match last year's success… If people come up here expecting the next Palm [*sic*] d'Or winner, they'll probably be disappointed."[119] Regardless of warnings like Safford's, *sex, lies, and videotape* became a shorthand reference to a narrative of prestige and box office potential, which reified the importance of commercial success and obscured other potential ways of understanding a noteworthy festival film.

A festival highlight from the following year offers an informative contrast with *sex, lies, and videotape*. The 1990 Sundance United States Film Festival, the last name change before the event was finally titled the Sundance Film Festival in 1991, featured a typically large independent film competition, smaller international and retrospective sidebars, and several out-of-competition premieres. Wendell B. Harris, Jr.'s debut feature film, *Chameleon Street* (1989), tells the true story of William Douglas Street, a Black con artist from Detroit who impersonated professionals including surgeons and journalists until he was caught. Harris wrote, directed, and starred in the film, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the festival. Critics noted that the festival success could help *Chameleon Street* find an American distributor, as the stature provided by the award might attract attention from the many studios who had rejected it earlier.[120] None of the

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[118] "Sundance Institute Program Reports, 1989," Ira Deutchman Papers, University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Library), 16.

[119] Amy Dawes, "'Stanley & Iris' opens U.S. Festival sans Iris (Fonda); registration up from '89," *Variety*, January 24, 1990, ProQuest, 9; Caryn James, "Sundance Festival turns arty film into a star," *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1990, ProQuest, 12.

[120] Benson, "Black Film Makers."

potential distribution deals referenced in the press coalesced soon after Sundance, unlike the Miramax rights that were finalized for *sex, lies, and videotape* just weeks after the festival. *Chameleon Street* finally had a limited release through Northern Arts Entertainment, with critic Kenneth Turan explaining, "To distributors, even those who specialize in the offbeat and the independent, the film was much too risky to take on, leading to the 18-month gap between that award and 'Chameleon Street's' current one-week run at the Nuart."[121] A restored version of the film was released in 2021, but its potential for a wide audience coming out of the festival was never realized.

While Harris's film did not win the Palme d'Or or even screen at Cannes, it also received strong reviews when it showed at the Venice Film Festival a few months before the Sundance United States Film Festival. The surprising win in Park City for a film with a Black writer-director-star also offered a new and promising narrative for the festival, which historically awarded films by white filmmakers and often about white characters. But commercial failure seemingly prevented *Chameleon Street* from entering the lexicon of festival successes, despite its status as a film with an accomplished trajectory on the festival circuit. Journalists repeatedly highlighted titles like *sex, lies, and videotape* and subsequent Sundance films with distribution deals or box office success as the key references for the event, which only reinforced and elevated the commercial elements of the festival that had generated such frustration for critics in earlier years, particularly in the late 1980s.

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[121] Kenneth Turan, "Harris' 'Chameleon Street' an Interesting Try," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1991, ProQuest, 10.

Conclusion

As the programming trends and priorities developed in the 1980s continued, the national profile of the Sundance Film Festival grew throughout the 1990s.[122] Films like Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994) offered further examples of festival premieres that led to distribution deals and financially successful theatrical releases, and critics and journalists repeatedly returned to them in references to the festival, just like *sex, lies, and videotape* in the years following its 1989 premiere in Park City. While the festival's programs changed throughout the period from 1978 to 1990, before it finally had the title Sundance Film Festival, the event always had a range of films in its programming, with many of them disappearing from journalists' references with the end of each festival, even if they had some attention at the event. The influence of the Sundance Institute, which the festival required for its continued financial existence, and the high-profile premieres from studios that helped draw audiences facilitated a discourse focused on Hollywood connections and commercial potential, dominating the discourse around the United States Film Festival (and later Sundance), and this prioritization of films that experienced commercial success in discussions of the festival reinforced the commercialization of the event that many journalists criticized.

A festival with expansive programming, like Sundance, creates a situation where audiences and critics can focus on one section or type of film in their reception of the programming, leaving little space for deeper understanding of a festival's full scope and a limited characterization of the festival in historic assessments. Sundance had a major effect on awareness of film festivals in the United States, which helped motivate and facilitate the

[122] Writers including Alisa Perren (*Indie, Inc.*) and Peter Biskind (*Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004) have detailed the changes at the festival during this notable decade.

establishment of regional festivals around the country. These festivals were, at times, inspired by Sundance, but they consistently relied on it for the films that would be shown in regional programming. Festival functions like film circulation, which is a core part of the American festival system and a function that Sundance strongly contributes to, are obscured by the emphasis on commercial elements, an emphasis with its roots in the 1980s' responses to the festival's growth and attempts at long-term stability.

Chapter 4:

The Roots of Regional Film Festivals: Local Film Lovers, Industry Hopes, and Birmingham's Sidewalk Film Festival

Hundreds of festivals in the United States do not comfortably fit into the categories of festivals with direct industry connections that receive international coverage, like the New York Film Festival or Sundance, or identity-based festivals that present films by and about underrepresented groups, like Asian American film festivals. Many of the festivals outside of these two categories present a broad range of films in their programming, like major film festivals, but they receive almost exclusively local attention. Regional film festivals, as filmmakers and critics scholars often call them, have limited industrial influence, but they perform notable functions by offering filmmakers a way to circulate their films and providing local audiences with, in many cases, their primary theatrical access to independent films. A 2015 *Indiewire* article about notable regional film festivals acknowledges their lack of formal business dealings, while suggesting another key effect they can have on filmmakers' careers. The article notes, "Attending these festivals might not help you as much on the sales front, but it could certainly plug you into a community and network of filmmakers, programmers and industry folks who will want to support your future projects."[1] This potential for professional support, especially from other filmmakers and programmers, is a quality that sets regional festivals apart from large festivals, which may not allow for the development of relationships as readily as a smaller environment. Indeed, regional festivals have become important sites for networking between independent filmmakers, as well as the exhibition of independent films that might not screen theatrically without this system of festivals, but the period in which they began to rapidly

[1] "Attention, Filmmakers: 5 Regional Film Festivals With Deadlines Coming Up," *Indiewire*, April 3, 2015, https://www.indiewire.com/2015/04/attention-filmmakers-5-regional-film-festivals-with-deadlines-coming-up-63476/.

emerge suggests that they were inspired by hopes of even greater industrial significance, along the lines of the Sundance Film Festival. Estimates of the number of film festivals in the United States vary from hundreds to thousands, depending on parameters such as in-person screenings or feature film programming (instead of only shorts). But more than four hundred American festivals that started in the 1990s and 2000s continue to hold their events, and the vast majority would be considered regional film festivals because of the scope of their influence and audience.

Throughout the 1990s, Sundance gained greater awareness because of a few films that went on to commercial success, creating both industrial opportunities for those filmmakers beyond the festival circuit and a more recognizable brand for the festival itself. Two of the most frequently cited examples, Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), demonstrate the possibility of Sundance selection leading not only to a distribution deal for one film, but a potentially long career as a filmmaker, with both men still directing new films almost thirty years after their first features. Although the critical and commercial success of their later projects varied, Tarantino and Smith both directed multiple other films in the decade following their Sundance hits, and the attention to their stories as low-budget cinephile-filmmakers turned celebrity directors also led to more belief in and discussion of the Sundance Film Festival's importance to the industry. Film executives at the 1997 festival reinforced the idea that Sundance was a place to find new filmmakers, who would then become famous and rich. In a *New York Times* piece about the festival, 20th Century Fox's Bob Aaronson said, "We're turning these guys into instant millionaires; they're like basketball players," and Fox Searchlight's Lindsay Law commented, "The filmmaker is the new rock star."[2] Such statements

[2] Caryn James, "Hollywood Breathes in the Spirit of Sundance, *The New York Times*, February 2, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/02/movies/hollywood-breathes-in-the-spirit-of-sundance.html.

caused *Times* writer Caryn James to claim Sundance would not be moving to Hollywood as some suggested, because the festival had lured Hollywood to Park City.

This period of sustained attention to Sundance and its possibilities for filmmakers correlates with a substantial increase in new film festivals in the United States. Many of those festivals continue to exist and thrive, even after the pandemic. Nearly five hundred of the American film festivals that show feature films were established before 2010.[3] In the three decades lasting from the 1950s through the 1970s, twenty-four festivals started in the United States, with thirty-seven in the 1980s. That number almost tripled in the 1990s, when 110 festivals began across the country. The 2000s again almost tripled the previous decade's number of new festivals, with 310. The table below lists the number of new festivals for each year between 1990 and 2009.[4]

Year	Number of new festivals	Year	Number of new festivals
1990	3	2000	32
1991	3	2001	28
1992	10	2002	18
1993	8	2003	24
1994	7	2004	28
1995	10	2005	25
1996	15	2006	36
1997	13	2007	30
1998	19	2008	45
1999	22	2009	44
Decade total:	110	Decade total:	310

The trend toward more new festivals continued through the majority of the 1990s, as new organizations and individuals started festivals across the United States. Even when this trend

[3] Data compiled from Film Freeway festival listings, combined with festivals that do not collect submissions through Film Freeway but receive substantial press coverage.

[4] This table utilizes the same data referenced above: Film Freeway listings combined with festivals widely covered in press.

peaked with thirty-two festivals in the year 2000, 2001 to 2005 continued to see substantial numbers of new festivals, leading to a new record number in 2006 and again in 2008. Not all of these events are regional film festivals that feature general programming, as many festivals focusing on specific topics began during this period. For instance, new Jewish festivals and horror festivals were particularly popular during this period. But the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a pronounced emerging trend in small American cities becoming home to their own film festivals, which brought different kinds of films to audiences that might otherwise only have had access to multiplexes showing Hollywood's wide releases.

While the correlation between new festivals and Sundance's increased prominence does not prove that the regional film festivals established between the 1990s and 2000s were inspired by Sundance, the idea of Sundance and other festivals as sites of industry activity certainly appeared in the programming and marketing of new events. Many festival organizers tie their event to Sundance through associated individuals and organizations, with varied success, while others simply draw on the idea of a festival as an event that can bring independent filmmakers to the attention of powerful Hollywood players, playing into the concept of industrial opportunity at festivals, an idea that was popularized by Sundance. The first organizers of the Wisconsin Film Festival in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1999 planned to host a tribute to the actor Robert Redford, known for supporting independent film as the first chairman of the Sundance Film Festival and founder of the Sundance Institute. The festival promoted the tribute, including a planned ceremony to give Redford the inaugural Cheesehead Award, but local press revealed that organizers never received an answer from Redford and also failed to secure a Hollywood premiere for opening night.[5]

[5] Tom Alesia, "Incredible shrinking film festival nearly vanishes," *Wisconsin State Journal*, March 16, 1999, Newspaper Archive, 1.

Even when festivals did not promise appearances by Redford or other specific stars, they still frequently positioned their events as opportunities for filmmakers and local audiences to connect with the industry. For example, the first website for the Woodstock Film Festival, established in 2000 in Woodstock, New York, states that the festival "fosters an intimate, reciprocal relationship among independent filmmakers, industry representatives, and audience members."[6] Others go out of their way to define their festivals against Sundance and other famous festivals. Co-founder of North Dakota's Fargo Film Festival, Margie Bailly, claimed that their festival was filling an important role after changes in larger events. In a 2005 interview, she states, "We felt like some people were being left out... That's where we felt we could step in. Face it, Sundance has gone commercial. Cannes is paying people to be there. It's not about the little guy anymore."[7] Whether new festivals considered industry events like Sundance to be inspirational or cautionary, the industrial significance of festivals in the 1990s certainly added to awareness of festivals as a possibility across the United States, even outside of resort towns like Park City or major cities like New York and Chicago that already hosted festivals of their own.

As cinephiles across the country decided to establish festivals in their local communities, each set of organizers had to reconcile the limitations of their local film institutions, if any existed, and the needs and interests of local audiences with their initial hopes for industrial significance. When organizers did not respond to these circumstances, their festivals often failed quickly, like the Wisconsin Film Office's glamorous concept for the Wisconsin Film Festival, which had to be changed in the final weeks of planning by a group of University of Wisconsin

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[6] "Woodstock Film Festival" Woodstock Film Festival, August 16, 2000, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20000816032402/http://www.woodstockfilmfestival.com/

[7] "Fargo Film Festival's Fabulous Fifth Feature," *West Fargo Pioneer*, March 23, 2005, https://www.westfargopioneer.com/news/428939-fargo-film-festivals-fabulous-fifth-feature.

students and volunteers that replaced the original staff. New film festivals were staged in communities large and small, whether with genre- or location-specific programming or general programming, and they all faced unique challenges in replicating events based on buzz and celebrity with their efforts that were, in most situations, grassroots. The goals and struggles of regional film festival organizers allowed a new type of festival model to form in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with hundreds of festivals remaining in practice. The Sidewalk Film Festival in Birmingham, Alabama, typifies this challenge of reconciling the film festival plan with the specific needs and problems of the local community, as a small group of film lovers determined to create a film festival in a midsize Southern city with few apparent connections to film history or the film industry. The festival also exemplifies a regional film festival with longevity, as Sidewalk will present its twenty-fifth year in summer 2023. Regional film festivals ultimately emerged as a system of circulation for independent films that would be unlikely to screen theatrically, either outside of major cities or at all. But as the case of the Sidewalk Film Festival suggests, their initial creation often stemmed primarily from local interests and needs.

“It’s Just Film” (and a Street Carnival): Planning the First Sidewalk

Formal planning for the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival began in early 1998, with the festival’s non-profit corporation, the Alabama Moving Image Association, registered in November. The first annual festival took place from May 7 to 9, 1999. In organizing the festival, founders Erik Jambor, Wayne Franklin, and Kelli McCall worked with two Birmingham natives with industry experience, Alan Hunter and Michele Forman. Hunter is best known as one of MTV’s original VJs, and Forman worked in film development and producing, perhaps most notably as an associate producer on Spike Lee’s *4 Little Girls*. Jambor, Franklin, and McCall were all filmmakers who wanted to start a local festival after showing their own projects at other

festivals in the region. The three founders, Hunter, and Forman formed the first Sidewalk board. Co-founder Erik Jambor, who was also the festival director in its early years, has described a Slamdance film screening as inspiring him to create a festival, but he and the other founders hoped to create something distinct to attract local audiences and sponsors. Initially titled the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, Sidewalk was introduced to its community as a local film experience, rather than an imitator of nationally recognized film festivals that the audience may have heard of. For example, a brochure announcing the festival in early 1999 notes, "This isn't New York. This isn't supposed to be Sundance. It's just film."[8] The planning and marketing of Sidewalk repeatedly demonstrate this effort to differentiate the festival through three characteristics: a walkable footprint, a street carnival theme, and an emphasis on support for Birmingham's local filmmakers and downtown revitalization efforts.

These factors are evident throughout the festival's planning stages, beginning with the most complete record of the ideas and goals driving the first festival, an organizational plan dated February 1, 1998. Presumably used to explain the festival to early supporters, including potential financial sponsors, this document is valuable not only for gaining essential information about the early days of the Sidewalk organization, but also considering how the festival was positioned for stakeholders. According to this plan, the festival would include films at three venues in downtown Birmingham's Historic Theater District, as well as multiple temporary screening venues set up in tents. Two theaters from the early twentieth century, the Alabama Theatre and the Lyric Theatre, would be the primary festival venues, with the world's first IMAX Film Festival taking place at the McWane Science Center as part of Sidewalk.[9] The

[8] The First Annual Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival brochure, Sidewalk Film Festival internal archives, Birmingham, Alabama (hereafter cited as Sidewalk archives).

[9] Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival Organizational Plan, February 1, 1998, Sidewalk archives, 2.

temporary tent venues would feature student, short, and children's films, as well as readings of the finalists from a screenplay competition. With the three permanent venues all on the same city block, this small festival footprint would be easy for audiences to navigate, while also helping Sidewalk's organizers solve a basic problem that would logically confront any community's first film festival. The central activity of these festivals, watching movies, typically occurs indoors, so how can you give attendees a festival atmosphere when they enter the area? Festival organizers across the country have solved this problem in different ways, but Sidewalk hoped to, in part, mitigate this concern by taking the festival out onto city streets, using the tents.

The plans for creating a visible festival environment for Sidewalk extended beyond the tents, as the organizational plan and early marketing also stress a street carnival theme. The announcement brochure states that "to keep everyone entertained between screenings, the city streets will be filled with visual artists, magicians and circus-style acts."[10] This approach was part of the festival concept from the beginning, with the organizational plan detailing some of the performers, including "Felliniesque nuns on skates," mimes, balloon men, jugglers, street musicians, fire eaters, and fake paparazzi who would "swarm a visitor and flash their flashbulbs before scurrying away to their next target."[11] An early festival logo from a 1998 press release underlines the inclusion of other, non-filmic arts and performances styles, with the silhouettes of a filmmaker, a dancer, and a drummer above a wavy strip of film. While this logo would soon be replaced by the silhouette of a running man with a camera, playfully drawing on the idea of audience members rushing between screenings, the three-figure logo stresses the importance of the street carnival idea for organizers. In addition to keeping the audience entertained, organizers

[10] The First Annual Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival brochure, Sidewalk archives.

[11] Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival Organizational Plan, 14.

also expected that the carnival atmosphere would distinguish Sidewalk from other film festivals and help gain attention from national media.[12]

The three-fold purpose of the festival from the organizational plan suggests the third way that the festival would be differentiated for its local audience:

1. To establish a focus that will nurture a viable film community in Birmingham.

2. To generate an interest and enthusiasm for film which demonstrates an "independent vision."

3. To give special recognition to southern filmmakers, with an emphasis on Alabama filmmakers.[13]

Sidewalk's purpose involved building up a local industry through the festival and the presumed attention it might bring from established industry professionals. The stated purpose of the festival was adjusted throughout the planning process, although the points continued to center around support for Southern filmmakers. Organizers later added one more point to the festival's purpose, connected to its particular location. Grant applications for the first festival include that one goal is "to provide a focal event for the rebirth of Birmingham's Theater District by drawing local crowds and national media attention."[14] This emphasis on Birmingham connections, both film-specific and general to the community, became a central feature of the festival's identity in its marketing and promotion.

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[12] Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival Organizational Plan, 5.

[13] Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival Organizational Plan.

[14] Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham Grant Application, Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, 1999, Sidewalk archives.

While the Theater District would indeed be a focus of the festival through featuring historic venues like the Alabama Theatre, the specific ways that Sidewalk would offer support to local filmmakers were not as clear. Even in these early stages, the planned programming strategy focused on independent filmmaking in general, rather than Alabama-specific projects, apart from a proposed Alabama Young Filmmakers Award that was not ultimately included in the festival. In the organizational plan, the competition section states a goal of competing with other major festivals around the United States, noting that Sidewalk aims to "become the next festival at which aspiring filmmakers hope to be 'discovered,' thus increasing industrial credibility and media exposure."[15] As the competition would seemingly not feature Alabama filmmakers in particular, the local film connections instead appear in the ideas for special screenings. A proposed schedule includes non-competitive screenings of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962), with the note that it was filmed in Monroeville, Alabama, and *The Grass Harp* (Charles Matthau, 1995) shot in Montgomery by Alabama cinematographer John Alonzo. The special presentation on the festival's closing night would be *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Miloš Forman, 1975), starring Alabama native Louise Fletcher in an Oscar-winning role.[16] This schedule also highlights Alabama's industry connections through seminars with Fanny Flagg, who wrote the novel *Fried Green Tomatoes* and co-write the adapted screenplay for Jon Avnet's 1991 film, and Winston Groom, author of the novel *Forrest Gump*. At this point, organizers planned to emphasize Alabama filmmakers and writers through historical highlights, rather than featuring contemporary filmmakers in the state, as the competition section of the organizational plan positions Sidewalk as a competitor with festivals across the country.

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[15] Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham Grant Application, 6.

[16] Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham Grant Application, 10.

With an established strategy for distinguishing Sidewalk from other festivals and making it appeal to local audiences, Jambor and the other organizers attempted to raise funds through 1998 and early 1999, leading to the festival weekend in May 1999. Budgets from this period vary drastically. For example, the ticket sales goal of $150,000 in February 1998 shifted to $44,000 by March 1999, and expected submissions income decreased from $25,000 to $2,500. Jambor's correspondence from this period reinforces the apparent uncertainty about ticket sales, as he writes to an experienced fundraiser and festival supporter about a new budget that would allow the festival to break even without relying on ticket sales in March 1999. Expectations for corporate financial sponsorship also dropped much lower as the festival neared, with the three $25,000 presenting sponsor packages taken by Blockbuster Video, Coors, and local grocer Bruno's, even though they paid lower dollar amounts to the festival.

Sidewalk's challenges with the local perception of the festival related closely to these financial concerns. From the beginning, organizers faced some resistance about the festival potentially being too edgy for parts of the community. A May 1998 letter from an employee at a Birmingham post-production company warned Jambor about problems that could arise. In the initial 1998 version, the running man logo appeared to be nude, with genitals visible between his legs. The author argues that "if the festival is to have broad appeal, especially starting with support from Birmingham, a less radical logo should be incorporated… its 'in your face' design can kill any attempt at corporate, organizational, or school association participation at any level from elementary to the university."[17] The writer also expresses concern about the festival's programming, writing, "Is this going to be an 'anything goes' festival, or will you set parameters of acceptance?" Another Birmingham citizen shared a chain letter castigating the festival's

[17] Robert W. Johnson to Erik Jambor, May 20, 1998, Sidewalk archives.

blatant "disdain for religion" based on the plans for roller-skating nuns, and they urged concerned citizens to call the mayor's office to protest the festival.[18] Such responses seem to have been limited, with substantial, positive local press coverage before and after the first festival in May 1999, but even the sympathetic press at times seemed aware of the need to manage the audience's expectations. Writing for *Black & White*, one of Birmingham's alternative newspapers and a Sidewalk media sponsor, David Pelfrey suggests that audiences keep in mind that festivals exist to present potential, not necessarily expertise. He writes, "There's a curious paradox inherent in film festivals. Naturally one attends with the expectation, or hope, that there might be a few good films screened. The good ones, however, can spoil you, and it is easy to forget that most of what you will see are student projects, low-budget resume builders, and outright experiments."[19] Whether they feared obscenity or sloppy filmmaking, parts of the Birmingham community seemed wary of what they might actually see at Sidewalk.

Festival organizers attempted to prepare the community for a new kind of festival through their own marketing and events and their interactions with the press. In December 1998, Sidewalk's founders and board members hosted an event at an office space in downtown Birmingham to explain what they hoped to achieve with the upcoming festival. They discussed essential information about the festival, including the venues and activities outlined in the organizational plan, and they situated Sidewalk within a larger effort to revitalize the downtown area. A *Birmingham Weekly* report on this event describes attendees as a mixed subculture of "art gallery types" and lawyers just leaving work, as well as a city councilman.[20] In a comparison that

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[18] Sandy Harwell chain letter, Sidewalk archives.

[19] David Pelfrey, "Festival Highlights," *Black & White*, April 29, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 16.

[20] Thomas Spencer, "Where the Sidewalk Begins," *Birmingham Weekly*, December 24-January 7, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 7.

would be repeated frequently in the coming months, a Sidewalk board member described the festival as being "like a miniature City Stages of film," referencing Birmingham's outdoor, downtown music festival that had occurred annually since 1989. By 1998 when organizers were planning Sidewalk, City Stages had a record attendance of 125,000 visitors and 275 acts across sixteen stages.[21] Because of its popularity, City Stages became convenient shorthand in explaining Sidewalk to the community. For example, Jambor describes Sidewalk to a *Birmingham News* reporter as a cross between Sundance and City Stages, saying "You're bringing new films to a new audience, and presenting them in a fun, festive downtown street setting."[22] To prepare the potential audience for what they might expect from Sidewalk, organizers capitalized on Birmingham's familiarity with City Stages, while referencing Sundance for its broad association with independent film.

Budgets continued to change as the festival approached, and local news described minimal audience engagement leading up to the festival. *The Birmingham News* reported that only 183 tickets had been sold on Thursday, May 6, the day before the festival opened. [23] Despite challenges, the festival did take place from May 7 to 9, 1999. While some ideas remained unrealized, the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival featured many of the hopes outlined in the organizational plan, showing over forty films and featuring a few special guests in panels and presentations.[24] The newly restored Alabama Theatre was the central venue for the festival, but

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[21] Mark Hughes Cobb, "Boon or bust for outdoor festivals," *Tuscaloosa News*, June 12, 2005, http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/news/20050612/boon-or-bust-for-outdoor-festivals.

[22] Bob Carlton, "Just think Sundance on streets of Birmingham," *The Birmingham News*, April 30, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 20G.

[23] Bob Carlton, "City to launch three-day downtown film fest," *The Birmingham News*, May 7, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 2C.

[24] 1999 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, Sidewalk archives.

restoration plans for the Lyric had been delayed, so it could not be a venue for the festival. According to the schedule provided in *Black & White*, the McWane Science Center hosted some panel discussions, but there is no mention of the IMAX festival.[25] Because the festival only used one of the three central venues outlined in the initial plans, many screenings instead occurred at two temporary storefront cinemas set up in the block around the Alabama Theatre. Sidewalk also showed films at the Birmingham Arts Alliance screening room, described by *The Birmingham News*' Bob Carlton as a "funky little hippie den" filled with "folk art and twinkling lights."[26] The festival also used one outdoor screen on Saturday evening, to show *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988), introduced by one of the film's actors and Birmingham native Glenn Shadix, and an installment of *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*. Based on the published program and schedule, the screening tents concept was not realized for the 1999 festival.

The music schedule for Sidewalk, published in *Black & White* alongside the screening schedule and film descriptions, highlights some of the street carnival performances listed in the original event plans, although most of the acts on the two outdoor stages are local bands. Friday's opening night schedule lists circus performers, mimes, magicians, and fire-breathers, and the Not Ready for Modern Times Players would perform medieval dance, songs, and readings on Saturday morning. Based on published materials leading up to the event and press responses after the festival, it seems that Sidewalk partially achieved a carnival atmosphere. But the programming tends to suggest more of a conventional downtown festival with a couple outdoor stages hosting different performers throughout the days, rather than the original concept of street performers all over the festival footprint.

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[25] "Sidewalk Festival: Film Synopses," *Black & White*, April 29, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 18-19.

[26] Bob Carlton, "Lots of Small Stories make Sidewalk Film Festival a hit," *The Birmingham News*, May 14, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 5G.

Film programming and events similarly fulfilled some of the original plans for the festival, most notably the attendance of Alabama-native Louise Fletcher to receive a lifetime achievement award on Sunday evening at the Alabama Theatre. This event was discussed perhaps more than any other in the local press. Sidewalk also presented the pilot episode of the Lifetime series *Any Day Now*, a story of the friendship between a black woman and a white woman as children and later as adults. The show was not filmed in Birmingham, but the city was the primary setting for the story, making it one of the more prominent contemporary examples of media related to Alabama. Fifteen cast and crew members traveled to Birmingham for the festival and participated in a discussion after the screening.[27] Other industry guests who screened their projects included Tom Cherones, an Alabama native and University of Alabama graduate known for directing most episodes of *Seinfeld*'s first five seasons, and Amber Benson, a Birmingham native who appeared in Stephen Soderbergh's *King of the Hill* and other independent and Hollywood films of the 1990s. While 1962's *To Kill a Mockingbird* did not screen at the festival as the organizers originally suggested, a documentary about the film's production called *Fearful Symmetry* (Charles Kiselyak, 1999) did premiere at Sidewalk, with a special Alabama Theatre screening followed by a panel discussion including the actors who played Scout and Jem in the film, Mary Badham and Philip Alford. These programming selections and events suggest a pronounced effort by Sidewalk's organizers to display any possible connections between Birmingham, or Alabama in general, and the film and television industries. Such events received the most coverage in local press, although the festival showed forty-one films during the weekend that suggest more about the festival's eventual identity as it matured in the following years.

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[27] Alec Harvey, "TV series cast, crew soak up city flavor, *The Birmingham News*, May 9, 1999, Sidewalk archives, 17A.

The independent films that screened at the festival included ten narrative features in competition, eleven short films in competition, five documentary features, twelve student shorts, and three special screenings of features that had premiered at other festivals between 1996 and 1998. Two of the ten competition narratives were southern features, Kenneth Jones's *Love and Fate* from Tallahassee, Florida, and the world premiere of Rudy Gaines's *The Cracker Man*, from Auburn, Alabama. Two of the five documentary features were also Alabama films. Most of the features had premiered at larger festivals and subsequently screened at other festivals before appearing at Sidewalk. For example, *Dill Scallion* (Jordan Brady, 1999) is a mockumentary about a country singer with a score by Sheryl Crow and appearances by actors including Kathy Griffin and Henry Winkler. The film world premiered at the Slamdance Film Festival in January 1999 before it showed at other festivals, including its Southeast premiere at Sidewalk in May and a screening at the Nashville Independent Film Festival in June.[28] Another Sidewalk selection, *Bury the Evidence* (J. Greg De Felice, 1998) had premiered at Baltimore's MicroCineFest in November 1998 and screened at other festivals including the South Beach Film Festival in Miami before showing at Sidewalk.[29] Although organizers planned Sidewalk to emphasize the connections between Alabama and the film industry, this quality of the festival, as one site in a system of independent film circulation, would gain importance as the festival grew and became a more established part of the regional film festival circuit.

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[28] Charles Lyons, "Is Success Seducing the Rebel Film Festival?" *New York Times*, February 7, 1999, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/07/movies/film-is-success-seducing-the-rebel-festival.html; Chet Flippo, "Music to Enjoy Higher Profile at Nashville Indie Film Fest," *Billboard*, June 12, 1999, ProQuest, 27.

[29] Charles Cohen, "Microcinefest: Baltimore's Underground Film Festival," *FilmThreat*, November 16, 1998, https://filmthreat.com/uncategorized/microcinefest-baltimores-underground-film-festival/; Laura Kelly, "Sobe Fete," *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, April 16, 1999, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1999-04-16-9904160366-story.html.

Grant records provide the most detailed evidence of Sidewalk's degree of success in its first year. On February 25, 2000, festival director Erik Jambor filed a final report for $15,000 of Alabama State Council on the Arts grants that the festival received in 1999. This document lists admissions income and estimated attendance, as well as the festival's other forms of income. The report notes an estimate of 5,000 attendees at the festival with just over $16,000 in admissions revenue.[30] With ticket prices of $12 for a weekend pass, $8 for a Saturday and Sunday pass, and $5 for a single day pass, the 5,000 headcount must have included a substantial number of people who only participated in free programming, like some of the panels or the outdoor music stages. This report declares a total income of nearly $133,000, including $50,000 in corporate support, $6,600 in foundation support, $6,225 in private support, and $2,395 in submission fees. One of the income items on this report would remain a problem for Sidewalk, as the festival organization borrowed $40,400 in loans to put on the event. In the coming years, Sidewalk's organizers balanced the apparent need to increase marketing and programming to attract a wider audience, in order to make more money, with debt repayments that would hamper the institution's growth. In this process, Sidewalk's relationships with local grant-making organizations and other sponsors were crucial to the festival's continued existence.

Keeping the Machine Rolling: Refining the Sidewalk Formula

In the *Birmingham Post-Herald*'s writeup of the second Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival in 2000, Erik Jambor mentions a new approach that organizers will adopt for the festival moving forward, stating, "The first year didn't really count. We just made it work through brute force because we didn't know how to put on a film festival, and we stopped right after the

[30] Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival final report, 1999 Alabama State Council on the Arts grant, Sidewalk archives.

festival was over. Now we know that we need to set up a machine and keep it rolling."[31] Erik Jambor continued working as the festival director through its eighth year in 2006, but he and the rest of the staff had established the majority of the programs that the festival maintains in 2023 before the sixth festival in 2004. Throughout this period between 2000 and 2004, awareness of Sidewalk grew both in Birmingham and the American independent filmmaking community more largely, but the festival continued to face financial and closely related staffing issues. Even as the organization faced internal problems, Sidewalk added programs to support local filmmakers throughout the year, and it continued to promote the revitalization of downtown Birmingham through its Historic Theatre District location. In another change from this period that has lasted for the festival, programming strategies shifted from a spotlight on Alabama's historical contributions to the film industry to a greater focus on new independent films, although the festival still emphasized industry guests and related special events in its early years.

Additions and adjustments to the festival footprint began in the second year. The festival moved from May to October, avoiding the festival-heavy summer months, and Sidewalk only maintained the Alabama Theatre as a repeat venue from the first year. In 2000, Sidewalk added the Carver Theatre, a five hundred seat historic theater; the Cinema Cabaret, a cabaret theater space with 260 seats; and the Film Lounge, a one hundred seat temporary screening room that showed non-competition shorts and documentaries. All of these venues were within two blocks of the Alabama Theatre, maintaining the festival's small, walkable footprint. Sidewalk also screened two IMAX shorts in collaboration with the McWane Center, next door to the Alabama Theatre, and the festival also continued to host panels on various topics related to filmmaking and festival selections at the McWane Center. Some of the venues would continue to change

[31] Jeb Phillips, "Film Festival Gets a Thumbs Up," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, October 9, 2000, Sidewalk archives.

each year, especially for temporary venues like the Film Lounge, but proximity to the Alabama Theatre remained a priority.

While the Theatre District location aligned with Sidewalk's goal of supporting the revitalization of downtown Birmingham, notes from a festival follow-up meeting with head volunteers in October 2000 suggest some of the challenges introduced by bringing a new festival to Birmingham, especially in this location.[32] Even with the small festival footprint, many attendees seemed to have trouble locating venues, as some of the spaces were temporary, so volunteers suggested better signage and more information displayed prominently in the street. Attendees and volunteers also described problems finding places to buy food or coffee. Downtown Birmingham was primarily a business area at the time, with the lack of residents leaving little reason for restaurants to stay open on weekends. The festival continued to face this problem for years, and the few food options in the area received substantial business from Sidewalk. In 2003, the owner of Lyric Hot Dogs and Grill, across the street from the Alabama Theatre, told a *Birmingham News* reporter that his restaurant quadrupled their normal daily business by 3 p.m. on the Saturday of the festival.[33] Sidewalk's growing audience gave the festival a way to support downtown Birmingham businesses, with new restaurant partnerships often advertised in the festival program. Since audiences would eat and drink between films, the festival could promote Birmingham's revitalization in a seemingly simple way, but the festival's goal of highlighting Alabama's contribution to the film industry was more complicated to

[32] Sidewalk 2000 Follow-Up Committee Head Meeting agenda and notes, October 16, 2000, Sidewalk archives.

[33] Wayne Martin, "Film fans converge downtown for Sidewalk," *The Birmingham News*, September 21, 2003, Sidewalk archives, 18A.

achieve. This led to a change in programming for special events, with fewer Alabama-specific guests.

After Sidewalk's first year highlighted films and celebrities related to Alabama, like Louise Fletcher and the stars of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, industry guests at future festivals often lacked these connections. From 2000 to 2004, Sidewalk's guests and featured films suggest the festival's continued efforts at determining its identity, for both the Birmingham community and the independent film community more largely, and its relationship to the industry. In the festival guides, sections titled special programs or special screenings typically showcased the most notable guests each year. The 2000 festival included an appearance by Bordo Dovnikovic, a Croatian animator known for his involvement in the Zagreb school of animation. Sidewalk screened the United States premiere of a restored print of his short film *The Big Meeting* from 1951, and the festival also showed seven of his other short films in a block, as well as a separate retrospective of seven other Zagreb animated films. The festival guide and press make no mention of connections between Dovnikovic and Birmingham, even though his attendance and screenings were some of the major points in coverage of the festival. Sidewalk included few retrospective films in its programming and few international guests after its tribute to Dovnikovic, but later industry guests at the festival shared his lack of personal relationship with Alabama. For example, Tim Blake Nelson was a featured guest at the 2003 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival. The festival screened *A Foreign Affair* (Helmut Schleppi, 2003), a Sundance and Cannes selection that starred Nelson, as the opening night film and also showed *The Grey Zone* (2001), written and directed by Nelson. The Sidewalk guide's full-page tribute to Nelson also mentions no links to Alabama, but he still provided the festival with a notable guest who had

starred in major films.[34] As the festival grew and guests became more common, Sidewalk's program guides and local press discussed guests less frequently, but they were usually included to represent a single film in the lineup, instead of the festival programming multiple screenings around guests as they did for Dovnikovic and Nelson.

Even when the filmmakers did not have personal connections to the state, Sidewalk's organizers continued to take advantage of any links between Hollywood or independent films and Birmingham, like the 2000 screening of *The Myth of Fingerprints*, a 1997 Sony Pictures Classic release. Directed by Bart Freundlich and co-produced by Tim Perell, the film stars Julianne Moore, Noah Wyle, and Roy Scheider. At the time of the 2000 Sidewalk festival, Freundlich and Perell were filming a new project with Moore and Billy Crudup in Birmingham, which allowed the festival organizers to invite them to screen *The Myth of Fingerprints* and participate in a Q&A. The festival guide seems to hint that Moore or other actors could be present for the screening, noting that the filmmakers and "special guests" would be present for a discussion after the screening.[35] Press coverage of the festival lacks any reference to Moore or other celebrities attending the event, but the festival's promotion of this screening capitalized on the association with Moore and her working in Birmingham at the time.

During this period, guests' connections to Alabama could be temporary, as they were for Freundlich and Perell, or tenuous, especially for major films. Perhaps the most prominent example of a new Hollywood film screening at the festival with little actual relationship to Alabama, *Sweet Home Alabama* (Andy Tennant, 2002) screened as the opening night film on September 20, 2002, one week before its wide release distributed by Buena Vista Pictures in the

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[34] 2003 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, Sidewalk archives, 19.

[35] 2003 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, 14.

United States. The romantic comedy starring Reese Witherspoon focuses on a New York fashion designer who hesitantly reconnects with her Alabama roots. This conventional Hollywood film was almost entirely shot in Georgia because of that state's generous tax credits, despite the Alabama setting of the story.[36] Although *Sweet Home Alabama* did not support the state's filmmaking community as a local production would have, Sidewalk still featured the film as its opening night selection, with live music in the Alabama Theatre lobby before the screening. At 1,800 people, this screening had Sidewalk's greatest recorded attendance to date.[37] Festival organizers also seemed to employ this opportunity to appeal to prospective donors, with a private reception before the film at a home in Mountain Brook, an upscale Birmingham suburb.[38] Although *Sweet Home Alabama* did not fulfill the festival's goal of supporting the Alabama filmmaking community, it extended the festival's reach with a crowd-pleasing film for its opening night selection, while also marking a key moment for the festival's institutional growth, as the staff successfully booked an early screening of a major Hollywood release in a large venue.

Films programmed for their historic value or their wide appeal often received prominent placement in Sidewalk guides and press coverage, but most of the festival's selections comprised new independent features and shorts, both narrative and documentary. Despite the relative lack of promotion for this type of programming, the dedication to smaller films without notable stars or established historic value is the most lasting quality established by Sidewalk's programming

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[36] Bob Carlton, "'Alabama' finds a home in Georgia," *The Birmingham News*, September 22, 2002, Sidewalk archives.

[37] Bob Carlton, "Sidewalk could be Birmingham's coolest festival," *The Birmingham News*, September 27, 2002, Sidewalk archives.

[38] Sweet Home Alabama reception invitation, 2002 Marketing, Sidewalk archives.

during this period. Across all of the festival's categories and programs, Sidewalk included over eighty films in 2000, 2001, and 2002, with over 150 films in 2003. The numbers of feature films remained fairly consistent, with around ten narrative features and ten documentary features each year, with shorts programming accounting for the festival's substantial growth in the number of films. Sidewalk continued to show films that screened at other festivals around the United States, as part of the developing system of regional festivals that showed films after their premieres at larger festivals. For example, the 2000 festival included *The Girls' Room* (Irene Turner, 2000), a female-driven drama about two college roommates with different perspectives on Southern traditions. Turner's film premiered at the Santa Barbara Film Festival in March 2000, later screening at other festivals where it also won awards including Big Bear Lake International Film Festival in Big Bear Lake, California and the Magnolia Independent Film Festival in West Point, Mississippi.[39] Even at this early point in the history of regional festivals, some of the directors with films circulating through the system would later become major filmmakers. Mike Flanagan, known for directing horror films such as *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019), the big-budget adaptation of Stephen King's sequel to *The Shining*, attended Sidewalk in 2001 with his film *Still Life* (2000), a drama about the scandals among a group of four undergraduate photography students. Andrew Bujalski and actress Kate Dollenmayer visited Birmingham for the 2002 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival with his film *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), one of the earliest films typically associated with the mumblecore movement.[40] Bujalski has continued to make acclaimed independent films, like 2018's *Support the Girls*, which screened at regional

[39] *The Girls' Room* (2000) Awards, IMDB, accessed June 20, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0167183/awards.

[40] Dennis Lim, "A Generation Finds Its Mumble, *The New York Times,* August 19, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/movies/19lim.html.

festivals including Sidewalk after a SXSW premiere, but he has also worked for Hollywood studios, co-writing the screenplay for the remake of Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* (Charlie Bean, 2019). Many filmmakers that screened films over Sidewalk's first five years would never go on to direct another film, but the regional film festival system was already offering a mechanism for independent filmmakers to show their work to new audiences and make connections with other filmmakers and industry professionals, whether they would continue making films or not.

Among the filmmakers selected for Sidewalk, each year a few of them were Alabama natives or had produced their films in the state. While the festival shifted away from recognizing Alabama's contributions to film history, as it did in 1999 with the Louise Fletcher tribute, Sidewalk began showcasing the contemporary status of its local industry by programming new films made in the state. The numbers remained small for the first few festivals, but they were a notable portion of the entire program by 2003. For example, in 2001, the nine narrative features included one Alabama film, and the ten documentaries also included one. Of the sixty-two shorts at the festival, ten were Alabama shorts. In 2003, Sidewalk's fifth festival screened five Alabama features, out of twenty-five features, and thirty-nine Alabama shorts, out of 118. The festival also showed a program of short films by local high schoolers and a set of documentary shorts produced by students in the University of Alabama at Birmingham's digital media program. While formal industry involvement in Alabama filmmaking was still minimal, the festival highlighted Alabama films through its programming, especially short films and student productions. The festival likely benefited from this approach, with local film blocks attracting ticket-buying friends and family members, but this strategy of supportive programming also aligned with the festival's larger goals of nurturing a film community in Birmingham.

In this period, official descriptions of the festival and its parent organization, the Alabama Moving Image Association, incorporate two major goals. The "About" page from Sidewalk's 2003 website states that the organization was "created to inspire, encourage and support films and filmmaking in Alabama," and the festival was "created to bring new films to a new audience."[41] The annual festival could achieve both goals by screening independent films, which could inspire Alabama filmmakers, but between 2000 and 2004 Sidewalk's organizers made a pronounced effort to expand support for Alabama filmmakers, especially through networking opportunities and student programs. Although Sidewalk has continued to add education and outreach programs throughout its history, the majority of these programs had been launched by the sixth festival in 2004, even if the titles of the programs or their details changed over time. Regional film festivals across the United States have expanded their programs in similar ways, albeit at various paces, as local filmmaker education programs became a way both to distinguish a festival from its competitors and to attract new sponsors. While the idea of bringing "new films to a new audience" could apply to almost any festival, education and outreach programs allow festivals to further develop their identity as institutions and increase local support. By 2004, Sidewalk's major education and outreach programs were panels, an online forum for filmmakers, a monthly networking event, and a high school filmmaking competition.

Sidewalk's panels typically included at least one event aimed at Alabama filmmakers specifically. The 2000 festival guide lists panels titled "Funding and Support for Alabama Filmmakers" and "Filmmaking in Alabama," while Sidewalk produced a separate filmmaking

[41] "About," Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, July 24, 2003, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20030724083820/http://sidewalkfest.com/about.htm.

symposium on the first day of the festival in 2001.[42] Under the Sidewalk was a day-long event at Workplay Theatre, a new building with concert venues, sound stages, and music studios owned by Sidewalk executive director Alan Hunter and his brothers. Chris Gore, editor of the website *Film Threat*, moderated three panels. "Indie Film Smackdown" focused on the struggle of making independent films, featuring three filmmakers "who've made it," while "Stranger than Fiction" considered the challenges of making documentary films.[43] The final panel, "Alabama at 24 FPS," included three Alabama filmmakers and the director of the Alabama Film Office. The festival produced Under the Sidewalk again in 2002, with a similar panel setup. In future years, panels would be integrated into the festival footprint, taking place at the same time as film screenings, but this emphasis on topics related to Alabama filmmakers would continue.

The festival's programs for filmmakers often focus on networking, either in-person and digitally. In April 2001, festival organizers launched the Sidewalk Film Forum. A press release about the website points out that the forum will be a place for conversation, while also providing space for crew and casting calls and job opportunities.[44] By the end of 2001, the forum had more than seven hundred messages and 149 registered users.[45] Announcements covered general film topics, like local independent film screenings, as well as key information for filmmakers, including submission deadlines for other festivals in the Southeast. The Filmmaking Forum

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[42] 2000 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, Sidewalk archives, 9.

[43] 2001 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, Sidewalk archives 3.

[44] "Sidewalk Organizers Launch Alabama Film Industry Website" press release, April 27, 2001, Sidewalk archives.

[45] "Sidewalk Film Forum," Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, December 21, 2001, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20011221111845/http://www.sidewalkfest.com/forum/.

section of the website contained active threads about fundraising, post-production, and exhibition and distribution. The Sidewalk Film Forum remained a resource for filmmaker conversations through 2006, with more than five thousand posts and 1600 users in the first five years. In November 2003, Sidewalk also instituted a monthly event for in-person networking called Salon. With both an unstructured networking time and a presentation from a guest speaker, each Salon focused on a specific topic, such as funding opportunities for filmmakers or a sneak preview of the Atlanta Film Festival's upcoming slate.[46] By the end of 2004, Sidewalk reported an average attendance of seventy people at Salon. With the online forum and Salon events, Sidewalk extended the networking possibilities of the festival throughout the year, building a loose infrastructure that allowed local filmmakers to interact with each other about needs, problems, and opportunities.

In addition to programs that served as information sources, the festival also established multiple filmmaking competitions that gave local filmmakers, including students, a chance to win prizes and show their films to an audience. Sidewalk initiated a high school filmmaking competition in 2003, with the one requirement that the films had to relate to the competition theme, the weed kudzu. Sixteen teams of students submitted films, with all of the entries screening during a block at the Summerfest Cabaret during the fifth festival.[47] Sidewalk held its first weekend filmmaking competition, called Scramble, in February 2004, awarding $1000 in prizes.[48] Winning films would also screen during the film festival. With two additional

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[46] "2004 – A Look at Highlights/Activities of the Year," 2004 Sponsor Info folder, Sidewalk archives, 2.

[47] 2003 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, Sidewalk archives, 15.

[48] "Sidewalk Scramble," Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, February 11, 20014, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20040211104034/http://www.sidewalkfest.com/scramble.htm.

Scrambles in 2004, Sidewalk reported audiences of over five hundred people for each of the Scramble screenings, with a total of sixty-seven teams participating.[49] Although these events encouraged filmmaking in a structured way, with specific rules based in competition themes, they provided opportunities for local filmmakers to gain experience working with a team of other filmmakers, with the potential for cash prizes and a festival screening. In addition to the filmmaking competitions outside of the festival, Sidewalk's support for local filmmakers included the institution of an award for Alabama filmmakers at the 2002 festival, expanded to three "Homegrown categories" for the 2003 festival. These awards initially did not include cash prizes, but they did spotlight local films at the same awards ceremony and in the same press releases as the general competition prizes for Sidewalk.

Such initiatives to support local filmmakers were often attractive to sponsors, with specific festival sponsors often attached to each of these programs. For example, the high school filmmaking competition had three sponsors in its first year: *The Birmingham News*/*The Birmingham Post-Herald*, the local Fox affiliate WBRC, and Avid editing software.[50] The monthly Salons took place at longtime festival sponsor Rojo, a local bar and restaurant that opened on Mondays specifically to host Sidewalk's events. And Blockbuster Video often sponsored filmmaker programs, presenting both the Alabama film award and the Under the Sidewalk symposium in 2002.[51] These programs allowed Sidewalk to offer their potential sponsors a greater variety of sponsorship packages, with the attractive value of supporting part of the local arts community through these festival projects.

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[49] "2004 – A Look at Highlights/Activities of the Year," 2.

[50] 2003 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, 15.

[51] 2002 Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival program, 21, 23.

During this period, Sidewalk developed a lasting format and programming strategy for the festival, added year-round educational and outreach programs, and maintained sponsor relationships, but the festival continued to face financial challenges. The festival's tax records do not show a positive balance for a single year until 2003, with deficits of $64,118 and $49,732 in 2001 and 2002, respectively. In 2003, the festival reported a balance of $8,445, and it continued to at least break even in the coming years. Sidewalk hired its first Development Director in October 2003, which helped the festival increase corporate sponsorships from $61,000 to $101,500 in 2004. While the festival did gain a more secure financial position from this corporate support, the festival continued to carry around $40,000 in debt from its first year throughout this period. Sponsorships and increased ticket sales, with around 10,000 attendees each year beginning in 2002, allowed Sidewalk to maintain its added programs and the growth of the festival, but it still remained in debt from the financial problems of the first year.

The festival organizers continued their efforts at making the organization sustainable as finances remained a challenge. The board and festival staff employed various external marketing and consulting firms to determine the future direction of Sidewalk. For example, a November 2004 brand study by the Birmingham advertising agency Cayenne Creative outlines various potential marketing strategies for Sidewalk, with major challenges including competition for local sponsorship funds and funding issues listed as the number one barrier to achieving the festival's goals.[52] A September 2006 report from the Clarus Group, a Birmingham business

[52] "Brand Study: Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival," Cayenne Creative, November 2004, Sidewalk archives, 7.

consulting firm, suggests that the organization needs additional infrastructure as a board and a staff and further development of funding and marketing.[53]

The fifteen stakeholders interviewed for this report repeatedly expressed concern over the staff's workload, and the organization did experience substantial turnover over the next three years. Between the 2006 and 2007 festivals, cofounder and festival director Erik Jambor, who also managed programming duties, left the festival. After Jambor's departure, operations director Catherine Pfitzer became the festival director in 2007, and screening committee members Rachel Morgan and Kyle McKinnon joined the staff as lead programmers, both in part-time positions. After Pfitzer left the organization in 2009, Chloe Cook became the executive director. Sidewalk's growth over the next ten years involved many board and staff members, but Cook, Morgan, and McKinnon were among the key figures that helped reshape Sidewalk into a larger organization with more venues and more films, increased programming beyond the festival, and a permanent cinema space.

The Sidewalk Cinema and Film Center: From Weekend Festival to Year-Round Theater

From its earliest days, the Sidewalk Film Festival often generated discussion about the possibility of a permanent arthouse cinema space in downtown Birmingham, whether that cinema would be coordinated by the Sidewalk staff or a different group of people.[54] In a 2000 *Birmingham Post-Herald* article, Jeb Phillips notes the post-festival sadness of people who would like to watch independent films all year, writing, "As for the people in mourning, Jambor said that the more people who enjoyed this year's festival, the more likely an independent movie

[53] "Alabama Moving Image Association, Inc.: The Clarus Group Report," The Clarus Group, September 18, 2006, Sidewalk archives, 1.

[54] The Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival was officially renamed the Sidewalk Film Festival in 2010.

screen could find support in Birmingham."[55] He ends the article with a quote from Jambor: "Hold tight. Support the events. A screen will crop up." Almost twenty years later, Sidewalk did eventually manage the funding, construction, and opening of an arthouse cinema in Birmingham. A successful $4.9 million capital campaign led to the September 2019 grand opening of the Sidewalk Cinema in the basement of the Pizitz Building, one block away from the festival's central venue, the Alabama Theatre. The Sidewalk Cinema hosts smaller festivals and series throughout the year, like Black Lens Film Week, a Midnight Madness series, a Jewish Film Festival, and Alabama Film Week, as well as themed nights like a discounted College Night, and regular programming mostly focuses on new independent film releases. This new chapter for the organization resulted from the strong reputation of the festival as a local institution worthy of major donations.

Under Chloe Cook's management as executive director and Rachel Morgan's guidance as lead programmer and later creative director, the festival has experienced steady growth, with additional days of programming, an expanded footprint in downtown Birmingham, and a continued refinement of the festival's identity through its film selections and events. Since 2011, the Sidewalk Film Festival has been positioned in the late summer, the weekend before Labor Day, instead of taking place in September or October. These dates have allowed the festival to avoid the competition of college football, a continued problem for the Southern audience that staff cited as far back as the 2006 Clarus Group Report. With the new dates and the expansion of the festival, Sidewalk's attendance now averages around 15,000.[56] The official festival dates also

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[55] Phillips, "Film Festival Gets a Thumbs Up."

[56] Mary Colurso, "It's crunch time for Sidewalk Film Festival and new cinema at Pizitz," *AL.com: Birmingham*, July 11, 2019, https://www.al.com/life/2019/07/its-crunch-time-for-sidewalk-film-festival-and-new-cinema-at-pizitz.html.

now extend longer than the three-day weekend that Sidewalk had promoted since it began in 1999. Since 2016, Sidewalk has presented an opening night film for SHOUT, the LGBTQ+ sidebar of the festival with a separate jury and awards, on Wednesday night of the festival week. In 2022, the festival lasted from Monday, August 22, to Sunday, August 28, with one or two screenings at Sidewalk Cinema for the first four days, building to the festival's opening night film at the Alabama Theatre on Friday, and full days of programming on Saturday and Sunday. The twenty-fourth Sidewalk Film Festival presented films in twelve venues, including two screens at the Sidewalk Cinema before its official opening. The Alabama Theatre remains the central festival venue, and others have also been used for many years, like the Carver Theatre and the Birmingham Museum of Art. Since 2016, the restored Lyric Theatre has been a venue, and Sidewalk also shows films at First Church Birmingham and in four venues at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, all within five blocks of the Alabama Theatre. In addition to SHOUT, the special section highlighting queer films, Sidewalk also has sidebars called Black Lens, which features films by black directors and starring black actors, and Life and Liberty, which spotlights films about historic civil rights topics and contemporary human rights issues. The festival has also maintained its emphasis on Alabama filmmakers, with five shorts blocks and eleven features at the 2022 festival.[57]

Beyond its festival programming, Sidewalk continues to support Alabama filmmakers through its awards and year-round programs. The weekend-long Scramble filmmaking competitions still occur, as well as the monthly Salon networking events. While the high school filmmaking competition no longer exists, Sidewalk instead maintains a Youth Board program, which began in 2012. The Youth Board is a group of Birmingham-area high schoolers who learn

[57] 24th Annual Sidewalk Film Festival schedule, Sidewalk Film Festival, https://sidewalk24.sched.com/, accessed May 20, 2023.

the basics of filmmaking at regular weekend meetings over an academic year, ultimately producing a short film that screens at the Sidewalk Film Festival. The festival has significantly expanded the number of awards it distributes each year, with many of the stemming from specific donation funds, but it still only awards two Alabama film awards: a juried Best Alabama Film and an audience-choice Best Alabama Film, which receive $500 and $250, respectively.

Since the addition of new programs leading up to the 2004 festival, Sidewalk has largely maintained its methods of supporting Alabama filmmakers at a steady level, even as other parts of the festival have significantly grown. While Sidewalk offers information and opportunities to Alabama filmmakers, most of the films in Sidewalk's lineup each year are not Alabama films. This suggests that the festival's key industrial function is participating in a system of festival circulation for independent and documentary films, which does make a substantial, unique contribution to the Birmingham community. The increased size of the festival offers local audiences access to a larger slate of new films, and the two-screen Sidewalk Cinema has expanded the availability of independent films throughout the year. However, most of these films have formal distribution deals that allow them to screen at arthouse theaters like the Sidewalk Cinema, instead of the independent films that circulate through the festival system because they lack formal distribution.

The Proliferation of Regional Film Festivals and Festival Trajectories

Most Sidewalk Film Festival panels are free and open to the public, but the 2019 festival also hosted an event requiring separate registration or membership in another organization: a Film Festival Alliance Regional Roundtable. A non-profit organization networking organization for festival professionals, Film Festival Alliance has also held Regional Roundtables at the Seattle International Film Festival, the Woods Hole Film Festival in Massachusetts, Cucalorus

Festival in North Carolina, and the Cleveland International Film Festival.[58] Sidewalk's Regional Roundtable, positioned as a professional development tool for festival workers, featured six sessions. Topics included "Supporting Filmmakers," "Cultivating Filmmaker Culture," and "Defining the Region," which organizers had planned to address questions facing festivals in the American South and its political climate.[59] The existence of Film Festival Alliance and events like the roundtables demonstrate that Sidewalk and other regional film festivals are now part of a professional landscape, with festival directors, programmers, and other employees encountering similar challenges all over the United States.

The proliferation of regional film festivals in the United States made such an organization possible, and they also presented the problem of an overabundance of festivals for independent filmmakers seeking the most useful venues for their work. A cluster of festival publications dealing with this problem emerged in the 2000s, like Chris Gore's *Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide*. Gore's work stresses the value of networking at parties and making contacts with industry professionals whenever possible, but he also outlines broader festival plans that may help filmmakers approach the system effectively. In the fourth edition from 2009, he explains the value of smaller festivals, even for filmmakers who ultimately want distribution deals out of their festival circulation process. In describing an overall festival plan that includes backups, in addition to Sundance and other "A" festivals, he writes:

> There are just not enough screening slots at Sundance, as they only program about 200 films in total. Research and narrow down a list of festivals for your plan B… These might include strong regional festivals AFI Fest (both L.A. and Dallas), Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, CineVegas, Denver, Florida, LAFF, Phoenix, San Diego, San Francisco,

[58] "Regional Roundtables," Film Festival Alliance, accessed September 3, 2019, https://filmfestivalalliance.org/events/roundtables/.

[59] "FFA Regional: Sidewalk Film Festival," Eventive, accessed September 3, 2019, https://ffasidewalk2019.eventive.org/schedule.

> Seattle, Sidewalk, Wisconsin, Woodstock, or those genre-based festivals more suited to your particular film.[60]

He further explains that these festivals offer "opportunities for awards, networking, and fun" and "building buzz and an audience," even if the likelihood of the experience leading to a distribution deal is minimal. Gore's list of sixteen specific "strong regional festivals" includes some that no longer exist, like LAFF and CineVegas, while also excluding others that have gained prominence since. Regardless of the content of his recommendations, his guide suggests the vast landscape of regional festivals established by 2009, leading filmmakers to be intentional with their submissions and producing various trajectories through the system.

Films that circulate at numerous festivals often premiere at Sundance, or another major festival with widespread press coverage and notable business activity, but the breadth of regional festivals described by Gore and evinced by the Film Festival Alliance facilitates countless other trajectories. *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, directed by Stephen Cone, demonstrates one such path, largely involving regional festivals. The film follows a closeted gay teenager as he navigates an uncomfortable celebration with church friends, school friends, and family members. It premiered at the Maryland Film Festival, an established regional film festival that occasionally receives broader attention for its association with John Waters.[61] After the Maryland premiere on May 7, 2015, *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* screened at the prominent LGBTQ festival Frameline in San Francisco and BAMcinemaFest in Brooklyn in June, the Sidewalk Film

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[60] Chris Gore, *Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide*, 4th edition (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2009), 117.

[61] "MFF Unveils the First 10 Titles of Our 2015 Lineup!," Maryland Film Festival, April 10, 2015, https://blog.md-filmfest.com/2015/04/10/mff-unveils-the-first-10-titles-of-2015-lineup/.

Festival in August, and the New Orleans and Chicago International film festivals in October, among others.[62]

Shortly after the screening at Sidewalk, Wolfe Video, a distributor of LGBTQ+ media, announced a deal to release the film through home media. *IndieWire*'s article about the deal notes that *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* "has had much success at various regional festivals," and lists the screenings in Maryland and New York, as well as awards that the film won at Sidewalk.[63] Director Stephen Cone's earlier films *The Wise Kids* (2011) and *Black Box* (2013) also screened at numerous festivals, especially in the United States, with some key differences. Like *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, *The Wise Kids* includes a central gay character, but it primarily screened at queer film festivals. *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* instead demonstrates the possibility of a film that is relevant for specialized festivals, in this case LGBTQ festivals, also circulating at festivals with general programming strategies. For filmmakers who are familiar with festivals (and for films that connect with programmers), the American festival system makes possible an extended circulation process that can bring a film before various types of audiences at different festivals, as this system features specialized circuits alongside a broad range of regional festivals. *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* also suggests that a premiere at a well-known regional festival can start a trajectory that leads to further success, in both circulation and formal distribution. In other words, while a Sundance or South by Southwest

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[62] *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* Release info, IMDB, accessed June 15, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3703836/releaseinfo/.

[63] Zack Sharf, "Exclusive: Wolfe Releasing Acquires Gay Coming-Of-Age Drama 'Henry Gamble's Birthday Party,'" *IndieWire*, September 8, 2015, https://www.indiewire.com/news/general-news/exclusive-wolfe-releasing-acquires-gay-coming-of-age-drama-henry-gambles-birthday-party-58477/.

premiere might be the goal for an American independent filmmaker, it is not the only way to achieve a broad audience and an extended life cycle for a film.[64]

Regional festivals can even play a role in the circulation of films with major distributors or awards campaigns, especially documentaries. In the 2022 documentary feature *Descendant*, director Margaret Brown examines the search for The Clotilda, the last known ship to arrive in the United States illegally carrying enslaved African people. The story follows the descendants of the kidnapped Africans in Brown's hometown of Mobile, Alabama. Like Stephen Cone, Margaret Brown had previously shown her films at festivals throughout the United States, such as *The Order of Myths* (2008), her documentary feature about Mobile's segregated Mardi Gras organizations. *The Order of Myths* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008, and *Descendant* premiered at the virtual edition of Sundance in January 2022. During the festival, Netflix and Higher Ground announced a deal to distribute *Descendant*.[65] It then screened at numerous festivals between the January premiere and the Netflix release on October 21, 2022. The official website for the film includes a looping banner with the Sundance, South by Southwest, and New York Film Festival logos, but the film also screened at the Independent Film Festival of Boston, the Sidewalk Film Festival, the Camden International Film Festival in Maine, the Mill Valley Film Festival in California, the Middleburg Film Festival in Virginia, and others, including some festivals in other countries.[66]

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[64] *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* continues to circulate in new ways. For example, Criterion Channel launched a streaming collection focused on Stephen Cone's work in August 2020.

[65] Angelique Jackson, "Netflix, Higher Ground Acquires Sundance Award Winner 'Descendant,'" *Variety*, January 28, 2022, https://variety.com/2022/film/festivals/descendant-netflix-higher-ground-1235166645/.

[66] *Descendant* official website, accessed June 5, 2023, https://www.descendantfilm.com/; *Descendant* Release info, IMDB, accessed June 15, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt16376494/releaseinfo/.

While the website employs the laurels of three prominent events to suggest *Descendant*'s quality and success, the screenings at regional festivals throughout the United States demonstrate the breadth of the system and the extended circulation that a film can experience before formal distribution. For a film that premiered in January, a fall screening at the New York Film Festival often positions the film for potential awards attention, but the utility of the smaller festivals in the film's trajectory is less immediately clear. Some festival screenings had likely been arranged before Netflix's distribution deal, but the length of the festival circulation suggests that the distributor approved the ongoing screenings. While the company's reasoning is unknown, the film's circulation throughout most of 2022 suggests that Netflix, which has presented its major productions at festivals including Telluride, sees the value of regional festivals for bringing films to varied communities around the country and building interest for a promising new film.

Conclusion

When Erik Jambor, Wayne Franklin, and Kelli McCall founded Sidewalk in 1998 and worked with board members Alan Hunter and Michele Forman to produce the first festival in 1999, this landscape did not exist outside of major festivals and circuits built around specific topics. As new festivals started all over the country, organizers navigated similar questions of their position in the industry and their role in the community, balancing the goals they hoped to achieve with the needs and constraints of local contexts. Like Sidewalk, many festivals shifted from highlighting the contributions their cities and states had made to the film industry, in hopes of attracting an industry audience, to functioning as a key cultural event for their cities by showing new independent films. Through establishing year-round cinemas or extensive outreach programs, festivals around the United States have transitioned their organizations into year-round institutions that support local filmmakers and present independent films to local audiences.

These organizations now play a crucial role in the American film festival system. They offer a key form of circulation for hundreds of films without commercial distribution, and they can even play a role in the circulation of films before their commercial release, like the examples of *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* and *Descendant*. The precise trajectories of circulation vary widely, but they all demonstrate the utility of different types of festivals for filmmakers as they expand their audience with each screening. Just as festivals vary significantly in organizational structure and programming strategies, the financial situation for arts organizations in the United States leads festivals to various budgetary strategies, with many relying on submission fees from filmmakers and volunteer and contract labor. This arrangement has now lasted for decades, despite the frustrations of many filmmakers and festival workers, and, if such strategies persist, they could suggest a precarious future for the regional festivals that proliferated in the United States in recent decades. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a more concrete and immediate challenge to events that rely on in-person gatherings, forcing festivals to experiment with new methods and models.

Chapter 5:

Drive-Ins, Spaceships, and Teleportation: Festival Hybridity and Virtual Experiments During the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 6, 2020, the city of Austin, Texas, cancelled the planned dates for South by Southwest one week before the event's scheduled opening as COVID-19 began to spread rapidly around the world. Reports noted that the film festival portion of South by Southwest, typically abbreviated as SXSW in marketing and press coverage, had already lost multiple participants in the previous days, with major companies including Amazon and Apple dropping out of panels and pulling screenings from the program.[1] Just three days later, SXSW laid off fifty people, about one-third of its staff, amid ongoing questions about the possibility of rescheduling the festival.[2] In the days after the SXSW news, announcements about other festivals cancelling or postponing their March and April 2020 events appeared in the trades, and the general press reported on constant cancellations of large events and business closures as the United States entered a widespread lockdown. While some gatherings like business meetings and classes could quickly, if imperfectly, adjust to virtual alternatives, specific challenges became clear for festivals because of their fundamental nature, as they had always relied on people sharing space to experience media exhibition in real time – a key factor that differentiated them from other forms of media consumption, particularly home viewing. Without the ability to gather in person to watch a film, participate in a Q&A, attend a party, or any of the other shared experiences that have historically defined festivals, how could festivals continue to attract audiences, filmmakers,

[1] Chris Lindahl, "SXSW Canceled Amid Global Coronavirus Outbreak," *IndieWire*, March 6, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/south-by-southwest-canceled-coronavirus-1202215679/.

[2] Kevin Curtin, "SXSW Lays Off Some 50 Employees After Cancellation of 2020 Festival," *Austin Chronicle*, March 9, 2020, https://www.austinchronicle.com/daily/news/2020-03-09/sxsw-lays-off-some-50-employees-after-cancellation-of-2020-festival/.

distributors, industry representatives, sponsors, and the rest of their stakeholders? And would the innovations used to face this situation outlast the pandemic?

This chapter examines ways that American film festivals experimented with online, in-person, and hybrid formats; programming; and audience engagement, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual festivals had faced crises based on staffing, finance, local regulations, and myriad other problems that emerged from their specific situations, and many festivals, from the Telluride Film Festival to the True/False Film Festival, had long created pop-up venues by building out screening venues in spaces like gyms or general-use auditoriums. Even with this background in dealing with unusual circumstances, the entire American film festival system had never confronted a challenge as large as being unable to gather in person. Despite the period in spring 2020 of all festivals being unable to function in the United States, factors such as financial situations and aesthetic and political commitments, as well as the widely disparate public health orders across states and regions in the country, would determine how festivals responded to the pandemic. For this study of festival experiments during the pandemic, I draw on numerous experiences participating in virtual film festivals, primarily in 2020 and 2021, with extended case studies of the Sundance Film Festival and True/False, a regional documentary festival. Their hybrid approaches, while distinct to their audiences and goals, exemplify many of the options that festivals explored throughout this period.

My analysis of festival materials, especially programs and press releases, follows the approach of previous case studies, with the addition of new methods stemming from the online nature of much of this research and my ability to study many of these festivals as they occurred, unlike the archival research in other case studies that allowed me to consider past festivals. For virtual festivals, particularly those that attempted digital forms of audience engagement and

immersion like Sundance's New Frontier section, I draw on digital ethnographic methods, with extensive observation of and participation in the sites (websites and virtual reality experiences) introduced by festival organizers. While the field of digital ethnography contains a vast range of strategies and debates, a few major terms and ideas help guide my research and analysis of virtual festivals. For reasons I will discuss further during my case of study of Sundance, I prioritize observation of the systems and frameworks created by festivals, instead of discourse between participants. As outlined by Ryan Milner, this form of digital ethnography considers "place" more than "text," a choice that helps maintain my attention to festivals' how they frame their programming for audiences, albeit here in virtual forms.[3] As I began this research, I also questioned the efficacy of spending time on these platforms, especially if they might only last as long as the lockdowns instead of becoming ongoing practices for the festivals. Christine Hine's overview of virtual ethnography confronts such questions, based in decades of online ethnographic research, helped assuage my doubts. Building from an example of her early virtual research, she writes, "In the intervening years I have engaged in many different kinds of online interaction and have stuck with this basic ethnographic intuition that our task is to understand ways of life as they are lived… If people do it, then that is enough to make it a legitimate focus for ethnography."[4] With my interest in festivals' self-presentation, particularly at moments of change or crisis, the pandemic seems a crucial moment to consider how festivals maintained and

[3] R.M. Milner, "The Study of Cultures Online: Some Methodological and Ethical Tensions," *Graduate School of Social Science* 8, no. 3 (December 2011), http://gjss.org/sites/default/files/issues/chapters/papers/Journal-08-03--01-Milner.pdf.

[4] Christine Hine, "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, edited by Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway, and Genevieve Bell (New York: Routledge, 2017), 21–28.

revised their functions for audiences, filmmakers, and the industry, even if the strategies are ultimately temporary.

Even in events that seemingly limited themselves to just putting films online, without additional efforts at audience engagement or experience, supplementary materials like programs and marketing suggest organizers' priorities and sense of festival identity through self-presentation, creating a virtual alternative to the festival. Many festivals attempted to detach specific elements from their in-person events, beyond just screening films, and reconfigure them online. For example, SXSW organizers quickly decided to still have the juried competition for its canceled 2020 festival, allowing the in-competition films to keep one of the benefits of screening in the festival. Extricating festival elements, like juried competitions, from the in-person experience proved complex in most cases, with a fundamental, intangible aspect of festivals made impossible by the pandemic. As Antoine Damiens and Marijke de Valck have described, "Imperfect measures such as the move to a digital format, cannot recapture the communal experience at the very core of festivals."[5] De Valck has also noted the difficulty of replicating particular parts of festivals, like Q&As and parties, stating, "Once the initial excitement of online experimentation had waned off and screen time fatigue set in, virtual festivals are, simply put, less festive and therefore less effective in achieving some of their purposes."[6] Despite the

[5] Antoine Damiens and Marijke de Valck, "What Happens When Festivals Can't Happen?" *Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After*, eds. Marijke de Valck and Antoine Damiens (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14171-3, 3.

[6] Marijke de Valck, "Vulnerabilities and Resiliency in the Festival Ecosystem: Notes on Approaching Film Festivals in Pandemic Times," in *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory*, eds. Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (Lüneberg, Germany: Meson Press, 2020), 127.

impossibility of recreating the in-person experience, festivals tried, as they had no other choice, with both successes and failures.

While plans and strategies varied, discourse in press releases, interviews, and festival materials reveal core assumptions and ideas about individual festivals and festivals more largely as they attempted to find paths through the pandemic and its various effects, including financial precarity. In his discussion of pressures on festivals during and after COVID-19, Brendan Kredell notes that organizations must respond to multiple crises, beyond the in-person restrictions that initially caused their problems in the early weeks of the pandemic. He writes, "Festivals must renegotiate the role they play within the broader film industry… while at the same time navigating a critical moment in the funding of arts and culture organizations"[7] Festivals' efforts to attract and maintain audiences through the pandemic diverged not only based on financial means, but also their proximity to the industry, the makeup of their audiences, and the goals of the organizations.

This chapter will briefly examine the history of festivals' experiments with online programming before outlining the main approaches to pandemic-era festivals seen in the United States, with Sundance and True/False as extended case studies. The importance of a given festival's location, size, and mission will be apparent throughout this analysis, as those factors and others determined the necessities and available options for the events, with the individual festivals and types of festivals that have been analyzed in previous chapters as instructive examples. As festivals reimagined their formats, developing new and altered methods of showing films to audiences, their experiments pointed to the ways in which festivals conceive of their

[7] Brendan Kredell, "Scarcity, Ubiquity, and the Film Festival After COVID," *Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After*, 41-58.

individual events' identity and the defining characteristics of festivals more largely, based on the factors deemed necessary to continue their events, even in almost unrecognizable forms.

Online Festivals and Virtual Programming Before the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic forced every film festival to at least consider the possibility of an online alternative to the conventional in-person gathering, but many festivals had briefly attempted to offer a portion of their programming to at-home audiences even before 2020. These programs did not demonstrate longevity, but they prefigured a key aspect of pandemic-era festivals: the promotion and configuration of these virtual festival sections regularly highlighted festivals' identity and the defining characteristics of "festivals" as a type of event. In terms of the American film festival system overall, such online practices were not influential or historically significant, like the types of festivals examined in previous chapters. Instead, they were mostly promotional projects, sometimes involving specific sponsors.

Before the pandemic, festival scholars typically assessed such programs as supplementary, often describing them only briefly. Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong acknowledges their development and explains their lack of threat to mainstream, traditional festivals as a fundamentally different experience, writing, "When festivals are completed removed from their specific spatial and temporal elements, they challenge nearly all aspects of film festival existence and relations among filmmakers, programmers, and audiences."[8] Norbert Bakker's 2015 analysis of online festivals, traces the development of a "far from uniform and well-established" phenomenon, mostly considering events that emerged separately from the conventional festival system with predominantly French examples; he finds that online festivals stand as "a

[8] Wong, *Film Festivals*, 62.

supplementary practice," rather than a core part of the main network.[9] This finding perhaps remains true, even after COVID-19 restrictions made online festival experiments far more widespread than ever before, but the proliferation of virtual and hybrid festivals during the pandemic marks a major moment in the history of film festivals, granting earlier efforts more significance than previously assumed. The strategies and trajectories of past online festival programs reveal a trend toward quiet dissolution of such festival supplements after idealistic claims about wider access, and this trend is already taking shape again as festivals attempt to return to pre-pandemic norms. The earlier attempts at virtual components at Sundance and Tribeca demonstrate this tendency toward launching programs to major press coverage before a slow dissipation or incorporation into other festival sections.

In 2001, the Sundance Institute introduced the Sundance Online Film Festival, screening the films for one month longer than the two-week festival in Park City.[10] Sundance Online showed eighteen "Net films," curated from animated, live-action, and interactive submissions. The timeline on the Institute's website notes that it received "over 3.3 million hits."[11] After four years of continuing this strategy, organizers shifted to a different programming approach for Sundance Online, dropping the web-based parameter to instead show the short films that screened at the in-person festival in Park City.[12] A *Wired* article about this change includes

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[9] Norbert Bakker, "Utopian Film Festivals: Space, Content and Business Matters in Early Online Film Festivals," *Synoptique* 3 no. 2 (Winter 2015), 9, 26.

[10] Allison Tom, "Online Sundance festival showcases Net films," *CNN*, January 19, 2001, http://www.cnn.com/2001/TECH/computing/01/19/sundance.online/.

[11] "Festival History," Sundance Institute, accessed January 19, 2023, https://www.sundance.org/festival-history/.

[12] Jason Silverman, "Sundance Online Adjusts Focus," *Wired*, January 20, 2005, https://www.wired.com/2005/01/sundance-online-adjusts-focus/.

comments from two of the shorts filmmakers who allowed Sundance to show their films online, despite concerns about streaming quality. Tom Putnam, director of the narrative short *Broadcast 23*, said, "Online definitely isn't the optimum screening venue… I'd rather someone see it in a theater on a 120-foot-screen with the surround sound cranked and the subwoofer booming instead of on a little window on their monitor at work while their boss is yelling at them from across the hall. But the reality is that 99.9 percent of the people who see the film online wouldn't see it at all otherwise."[13] This notion of vastly expanding the festival audience by making a limited number of films online appears throughout coverage of Sundance Online and other online festival programs in this period, from both filmmakers and festival organizers.

Sundance Online adapted significantly once more before it was slowly removed from the festival's plans. Beyond simply making short films available to a wider audience, the Sundance Institute experimented with another perk for filmmakers starting in 2007, making the films available to download on iTunes or Xbox Live for $1.99. This was an effective addition to the program, at least initially. A *Variety* report on the festival's expanded plans for download availability in 2008 notes, "According to Sundance online producer Joe Beyer, some veterans of the 2007 short films program have seen revenue in the 'tens of thousands of dollars,' even after iTunes and the Sundance Institute took their fees."[14] Even though Sundance staff publicly touted the success of this opportunity for filmmakers, they quickly changed course, finding the popularity of other streaming platforms to be a major challenge. After showing almost fifty short films online in 2007, the festival only made ten available in 2008. Programmer Trevor Groth told

[13] Silverman, "Sundance Online."

[14] Michael Jones, "Sundance expands online plan," *Variety*, December 5, 2007, https://variety.com/2007/digital/markets-festivals/sundance-expands-online-plan-1117977130/.

Wired that he and other staff wondered why people would pay to download the films, when they could just stream them elsewhere.[15] While the negotiations between the Sundance Institute and the corporations that made the short films available to purchase on their platforms are unclear from such press coverage, the problems inherent in widespread availability alone seem to have impacted the festival's interest in streaming films. Other festivals in this period attempted to maintain programs, even as streaming video platforms increased online, and they sometimes constructed their virtual offerings with the festival experience in mind.

The Tribeca Film Festival's initial online program, titled Tribeca Film Festival Virtual, began in 2010, just two years after Sundance dramatically reduced its online extension, and Tribeca immediately attempted to give audiences more than just streaming films.[16] The Virtual program included backstage footage from the festival, live-streamed red carpet events, and Q&A panel sessions, but its central and most heavily advertised components were a curated selection of eight feature films and a program of shorts. All of these films screened at the traditional, physical 2010 Tribeca Film Festival, but a block of past Tribeca shorts also streamed on Tribeca Virtual. These retrospective shorts, along with the red-carpet events and backstage footage, were available to all website visitors; the other portions of the program, the panel sessions and the new films, could only be accessed with the purchase of a Tribeca Film Festival Virtual Premium Pass. Viewers gained one more benefit from purchasing the pass—the ability to vote for the winner of the Tribeca Virtual program. For $45, people could have full access for eight days and participate in the awards process of the festival.

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[15] Jason Silverman, "Sundance Shrinks From Web as Online Video Explodes," *Wired*, January 16, 2008, https://www.wired.com/2008/01/sundance-walkup/.

[16] "Tribeca Film Festival Virtual," Tribeca Film Festival, March 23, 2010, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20100323034303/http://www.tribecafilm.com/virtual/?.

The festival advertised a limited number of online passes to help entice audiences, making the virtual programs an event that could be sold-out like any screening at the actual festival. The website also emphasizes the novelty of the films, stating that Virtual Premium Pass holders could enjoy the premiere of a new feature, *Nice Guy Johnny* (Ed Burns, 2010), "from the comfort of your own living room" as it simultaneously screens in New York City at the festival. With this digital extension, Tribeca incorporates some of the typical characteristics associated with the festival context, making the environment both exclusive and ephemeral. The non-film elements of the 2010 Tribeca Virtual program demonstrate the importance of the festival as a consumption experience. Viewers could watch panel sessions and vote for award winners with the pass, separating these activities from the free features like red-carpet coverage. This valuation of panels and awards suggests their importance within the nature of festivals generally, at least to organizers.

In subsequent years, the tendency to limit the availability of the online festival continued. In 2011, viewers no longer had to pay for access to that year's festival films that were streaming on the website; instead, they had to reserve a twenty-four-hour viewing window for each film.[17] From 2012 to 2014, the Tribeca Virtual program was rebranded as the Tribeca Online Film Festival, but it still showed both features and shorts that also screened at the regular festival, allowed audiences to vote for prize winners, and included other elements of the festival like Q&As.[18] The Tribeca Film Festival made only short films available online for viewers in 2015

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[17] Jason Sondhi, "Retro Short Films: Tribeca 2011 Film Festival," Short of the Week, April 22, 2011, https://www.shortoftheweek.com/news/retro-short-films-tribeca-2011-film-festival/.

[18] Devin Lee Fuller, "Tribeca Film Festival Unveils 2012 Online Lineup," *IndieWire*, April 9, 2012, http://www.indiewire.com/2012/04/tribeca-film-festival-unveils-2012-online-lineup-48254/; "2013 Tribeca Film Festival Announces Digital Opportunities for Audiences Nationwide to Experience the Festival," Tribeca Film, *Benzinga*, April 2, 2013, https://www.benzinga.com/pressreleases/13/04/w3462256/2013-tribeca-film-festival-announces-digital-

and 2016, instead of including features from the lineup like they did in the previous five years.[19] The 2016 online extension of the Tribeca Film Festival continued this narrowing process, with Tribeca N.O.W. (New Online Work), which showcases episodic material, highlighting "engaging and inventive storytellers."[20] It only showed short films that were specifically created for digital distribution, many of which were already available online, and it again did not feature other forms of viewer engagement like panels or voting. N.O.W. maintained this format through 2019, then became integrated into other programs with an emphasis on connecting online creators to industry professionals and resources.

Although Tribeca initially attempted to replicate the festival experience through limited availability and supplementary materials like Q&As, it slowly shifted to only showing made-for-online projects, mirroring the Sundance Online trajectory of experimenting with a virtual section only to diminish it over time. The claims of expanding audiences and access when such programs were introduced did not translate to long-term dedication from festival organizers. The virtual programs from Sundance and Tribeca did not have a major effect on the festivals, as the in-person components continued largely as usual and outlasted these experiments. But they have renewed importance as approaches to digital festival experiences that prefigure the pandemic era, when festivals across the world shifted to virtual formats, either for specific sections or the full festival. The questions of balancing audience access and filmmaker approval that Sundance

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opportunities-for-audience; "Get the TFF 2014 Online Experience," Tribeca Film Festival, April 10, 2014, https://tribecafilm.com/news/tribeca-online-festival-tribeca-now-6secfilms.

[19] "About the Online Program," Tribeca Film Festival, September 9, 2015, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20150909013650/https://tribecafilm.com/online/films.

[20] "2016 Tribeca Film Festival Announces Its Inaugural Digital Creators Program," Tribeca Film Festival, March 17, 2016, https://tribecafilm.com/news/2016-tribeca-film-festival-announces-its-inaugural-digital-creators-program-marketplace-showcase-now.

confronted in the 2000s would only return much more forcefully in 2020, as would Tribeca's problem of how to create a festival environment online.

Pandemic Film Festivals in the United States

After most state and local governments in the United States initially announced two-week lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it quickly became clear that a return to normalcy would take months, at least, and many traditionally in-person events including festivals began creating alternate plans. With varied public health orders around the country, festivals coordinated responses to balance their individual situations with their aesthetic and political commitments, as well as their industrial connections and activities. Festivals attempted to translate their events to pandemic formats in countless ways, but their efforts can be broadly grouped in four strategies: replicating limited portions of the festival online, hosting an entire substitute festival online, producing a drive-in or otherwise outdoor event, or creating a hybrid festival including in-person and virtual programming. Examples from each strategy, largely drawn from 2020 and 2021, will illuminate ways in which festivals attempted to replicate the core features of a festival experience, even as they were forced to produce their events in dramatically altered ways. This analysis builds from the four categories, rather than presenting a chronology, as the factors of infection rates and public health orders (and later vaccination rates) that caused festivals to select in-person or virtual formats changed rapidly throughout the years in questions, leading to a patchwork of options with no clear phases for festival formats across the country.

Partial Festivals Online

The first strategy of virtually replicating limited portions of the festival's standard practices was mostly adopted in spring 2020 when festivals did not have time or resources to

fully produce an online event, with some of these choices representing relatively easy substitutes for typical festival outcomes, like awards announcements, and others showing more complicated attempts at maintaining key functions, especially screening films for audiences. As mentioned above, SXSW announced juried awards for its 2020 slate, despite the cancellation of the in-person event. On March 24, 2020, SXSW posted the list of winners, with brief comments from Director of Film Janet Pierson, who said, "We know that it's no substitute for the actual festival's vitality, enthusiasm, and potential for surprising outcomes – and that it is only available to a small fraction of our program – but we hope it will help garner some well-deserved recognition for these wonderful works."[21] The juries awards eighteen categories, with forty-three total films receiving a "winner" or "special recognition" designation. The intended "recognition" for these titles came through trade press coverage of the awards, although another virtual substitute by SXSW gained much more attention.

Organizers found a way to present some of the 2020 SXSW selections to audiences by partnering with Amazon Prime Video. Announced on April 2, Amazon would host a "film festival collection" for ten days, and filmmakers who had been accepted to SXSW were notified that they could opt in to the program and would receive a screening fee.[22] Users would need an Amazon account to view the films, but they would not be required to have an Amazon Prime membership. Questions immediately emerged about potential concerns from this arrangement, namely the likelihood that distributors – both those with existing agreements for SXSW films

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[21] Jordan Roberts, "The 2020 SXSW Film Festival Announces Jury and Special Awards," SXSW, March 24, 2020, https://www.sxsw.com/film/2020/the-2020-sxsw-film-festival-announces-jury-and-special-awards/.

[22] Tatiana Siegel, "Amazon Teams With SXSW to Launch a Virtual Fest," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 2, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/amazon-teams-sxsw-launch-a-virtual-fest-1288163/.

and those that might later acquire them – would not agree to the temporary, free streaming release. Just one week after the announcement, *The Hollywood Reporter* published an article about filmmakers' qualms over the SXSW Amazon "collection." According to the article, the invited films were all narrative or documentary features, with some episodic selections, and filmmakers anonymously expressed concern over harming their distribution chances. One director said, "We spent three years, our budget wasn't big, but it was three years of our lives. We aren't going to kill the distribution chances for this film for an unknown sum," referring to the unspecified screening fee offered under the program.[23] Despite the initial reports, the "Prime Video presents the SXSW 2020 Film Festival Collection" program included predominantly short films, suggesting that the festival and the streaming service faced difficulty in convincing feature filmmakers to participate. With thirty-nine titles, twenty-nine were short films, along with four narrative features, three documentary features, and three episodic titles.

The Tribeca Film Festival also attempted to extract and virtually substitute specific elements of its event rather than host a full online festival. The festival announced juried winners in early April, and it made its Industry Extranet available to filmmakers, "providing accredited industry with resources on the 2020 program including rights availabilities, delegate directory, and sales contacts."[24] In this way, the festival tried to maintain its business functions, like connecting filmmakers with possible sales opportunities. Despite its earlier experiments with streaming sections of the program to a broad audience, Tribeca showed a selection of films from

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[23] Mia Galuppo, "'No Easy Solution': Filmmakers Weigh Risks of SXSW's Amazon Offer," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 9, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/no-easy-solution-filmmakers-weigh-risks-sxsws-amazon-offer-1289163.

[24] Kate Erbland, "Tribeca 2020 to Offer Select Online Programming, but Still Hopes for a Live Festival," *IndieWire*, April 3, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/tribeca-2020-online-programming-live-festival-1202222370/.

its program to a limited online audience, with filmmakers able to opt into a program that would make films available for journalists and accredited industry representatives. Like the comments from *The Hollywood Reporter*'s coverage of filmmaker concerns over showing films online, Tribeca's approach suggests the initial discomfort with simply translating a festival to streaming, as they severely limited access.

SXSW's partnership with Amazon and Tribeca's attempted online market were temporary fixes for the massive problems of festivals cancelled with little notice, but they foreground a question that would face festival organizers, festivals, distributors, and sales agents throughout the pandemic: Does a temporary festival streaming release hinder or help the goal of finding an audience and, in doing so, some hope of recouping financial investments? This question was especially pressing for festivals that typically see substantial business activity, like SXSW, Sundance, and Tribeca. But it seemed to trouble filmmakers less as the pandemic continued. Studios began releasing films that were originally intended for theatrical release online instead, and larger festivals convinced filmmakers to screen virtually, with strategies employed to limit access in many cases.

Full Festivals Online

As 2020 continued, countless festivals in the United States chose to host a full, substitute festival virtually, with feature films and shorts available to a wide audience. Geoblocking assuaged some of the fears of streaming's potential for piracy or generally taking away from the future audience, with many festivals making certain films, particularly those with ambitions for theatrical release, available only to certain states or regions of the country. Beyond the geoblocking that helped festivals secure their selections, online versions of festivals in 2020 and 2021 demonstrate substantial efforts to produce *events*, rather than just streaming a program of

films – an experience that audiences could have on Netflix, Disney Plus, or any streaming service, in some cases even with new films. Festivals continued the practice initialized with earlier virtual festival experiments of limiting the availability of films to recreate some degree of the ephemeral nature of festivals, and they introduced more strategies to differentiate their offerings from streaming services, often suggesting key elements of a particular festival's identity or mission and the broader characteristics that separate festivals from other exhibition experiences.

One practice instituted by festivals to help differentiate the experience for audiences involved materials preceding film selections, especially festival trailers and pre-recorded introductions from organizers and programmers, usually recorded from home. For example, AFI Docs Film Festival, which took place from June 17 to 21, 2020, featured introductions from programmers before films, packaged together on the platform Eventive, as well as some introductions from filmmakers or the subjects represented in the documentaries. Although they were recorded from living rooms, offices, and sunrooms, AFI Docs introductions featured a bit of festival branding, with large printed "AFI Docs Film Festival" signs with the festival dates positioned behind speakers. These short videos welcoming audiences to the virtual festival and providing brief context for the screening mirrored a traditional in-person festival characteristic of staff and programmers introducing films, reminding audiences that the films are, in fact, programmed, instead of simply appearing through the machinations of study distribution or licensing, like commercial film exhibition.

Virtual panel discussions and Q&As also provided a way for festivals to replicate a major characteristic of the in-person experience. Many festivals chose to pre-record conversations, while others attempted to host them live, allowing for some of the spontaneity and audience

interaction involved in traditional festivals – an approach that will be detailed further in the case study of Sundance's virtual practices. These sessions allowed audiences to hear from filmmakers, but they also provided festivals an opportunity to foreground their histories and aesthetic and political goals through the selection of topics, like in-person panel discussions. The 2020 Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, which was hosted fully online from September 24 to October 31, 2020, included a series of panels presented under its C3: Converse brand, a carryover from the in-person event. The panels featured a mix of festival staff, filmmakers, activists, and other experts, with topics maintaining the festival's legacy of Asian American activism and representation. Hosted as free discussions over Zoom, the C3: Converse section of the festival included conversations about the ongoing program Armed with a Camera, the filmmaker fellowship with a block of films at the festival every year, as well as sessions focused on individual films and topics. Industry-related panels such as "The Pinays Who Are Pipelining New Talent at NBCUniversal" and "Understanding Inclusion On-Screen" continued the festival's dedication to addressing Asian Americans' presence in the film industry.

Reminders of the festival's activist nature appeared throughout these conversations, with repeated references to the rise in violence toward Asian Americans during the pandemic and the need for community activism. During the session titled "ART4FSN: What Can Us Artists Do?" presented jointly by Visual Communications and the community group Sustainable Little Tokyo, a panel of artists, festival organizers, and activists discussed the importance of voting in the upcoming presidential election, as well as the ways in which Little Tokyo and other communities could protect their history and culture in the face of gentrification. Such panel discussions allowed LAAPFF to reinforce the festival's commitments during the pandemic with the types of conversations that would normally take place in-person. As live conversations, they also

provided a sense of the ephemerality that marks the traditional festival experience and allowed for some spontaneity and audience engagement, although festivals varied in their willingness to open the conversation beyond the panelists.

In addition to virtual Q&As, some festivals attempted to facilitate virtual networking, hoping to restore one of their key appeals for filmmakers, audiences, and other participants. The 2021 SXSW Film Festival took place entirely online, from March 16 to 20, alongside the other sections of SXSW – the conference, comedy festival, and music festival. Branded as "SXSW Online," the lineup included a handful of high-profile documentaries about celebrities, like *Demi Lovato: Dancing with the Devil* (Michael D. Ratner) and *Alone Together* (Bradley Bell and Pablo Jones-Soler), about the production of Charli XCX's pandemic album *How I'm Feeling Now*, and many American independent films. In addition to introductions, Q&As, and panels like those described from AFI Docs and LAAPFF, SXSW added another element from traditional festivals by scheduling numerous opportunities to engage with other attendees. On Thursday, March 18, SXSW's Director of Film Janet Pierson hosted a "film meetup" on Zoom that was open to anyone who had purchased a festival pass, with more than seventy people present. Pierson randomized participants into breakout rooms, where, in my experience, people mostly shared film recommendations. The SXSW virtual platform also had a Film AMA with programmers. The conversation with programmers mostly reflected the goal of many audience members to network during the festival, with attendees asking for advice on how to become a programmer and SXSW staff briefly summarizing how they arrived at their current positions. SXSW also integrated the "social audio app" Clubhouse into the 2021 festival, with a Film Club Daily Hangout. At the March 18 session with about fifty attendees, festival staff moderated a conversation with filmmakers discussing their work. With staff and filmmakers "on stage," other

people in the “Hangout” could not join the conversation at most points, making it more like a conventional panel than the title may suggest. Because of the pronounced involvement of industry sponsors at the festival, SXSW is known as a networking opportunity for attendees, not just in the film festival section, and organizers tried to bring that quality to the virtual edition in 2021, even if it required more obviously structured and moderated experiences than in-person festivals.

Festivals that produced fully online events, an especially frequent option in 2020, used different approaches to limit availability of films. In the case of SXSW, promotional screenings of projects like the Demi Lovato documentary, which was released on YouTube the week after the festival, could only be accessed by audiences for four hours after the SXSW premiere time. While this was likely often based on negotiations with filmmakers or distributors to balance business plans and goals with the festival’s needs to attract an audience, such practices also continue the basic strategies tried earlier by festivals like Sundance or Tribeca in recreating the festival experience through some element of limitation. Other festivals were able to produce something closer to the traditional in-person experience by shifting screenings to new environments and instituting strict health and safety policies.

In-Person Festival Strategies

Although lockdown orders from local and state governments prevented in-person festivals through spring 2020, festival organizers soon found ways to gather in person that could avoid crowded indoor screenings, especially through outdoor events. Many festivals required vaccination against COVID-19 to facilitate safely gathering in person in summer 2021, but a few festivals, especially in regions with fewer restrictions, managed in-person, outdoor festivals in summer 2020 with extensive safety precautions. Screening setups varied, with some festivals

using pop-up theaters projected on buildings or inflatable screens and others employing the drive-in theater as a model. Drive-in screenings allowed audience members to share a small space with their family or friends in vehicles, while also enjoying the larger communal experience of a public screening.

Birmingham, Alabama's Sidewalk Film Festival produced a fully drive-in festival in August 2021, giving their audiences the chance to return to a physical event after most festivals and events had been forced to online formats for more than five months. Some festivals that included a drive-in component during the pandemic created temporary drive-in theaters, but Sidewalk partnered with a local outdoor shopping mall that already had a year-round drive-in theater with four screens. Part of The Outlet Shops at Grand River in Leeds, Alabama, the Grand River Drive-In is a roughly twenty-minute drive east from downtown Birmingham, where the festival traditionally takes place. From August 24 to 30, Sidewalk showed films on all four screens, with films scheduled beginning at 8:00 PM. The festival charged audiences entry based on the number of people per car, starting at $15 for one person. Sidewalk advertised its program of more than 150 features and shorts, highlighting notable new films from the festival circuit like Pablo Larraín's dance drama *Ema* (2019) and the Bill Ross IV and Turner Ross's dive bar documentary *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets* (2020).[25] Photographs posted on the festival's Facebook page show masked staff and volunteers with illuminated batons, directing vehicles to their parking spots for the films, as well as an outdoor merchandise table and people playing yard games. The pre-existing drive-in venue with multiple screens facilitated Sidewalk's production of a reduced festival that still had a substantial number of films, yet the pandemic situation in

[25] "22nd Annual Sidewalk Film Festival Moves to Drive-In at Grand River," Sidewalk Film Festival, accessed January 10, 2023, https://www.sidewalkfest.com/22nd-annual-sidewalk-film-festival-moves-to-drive-in-at-grand-river/.

2020 prevented networking opportunities, a traditional emphasis for the festival and many other regional festivals like it. A large outdoor festival allowed a core part of a festival experience, watching films together, to be recreated, but hybrid events allowed many festivals to offer both in-person and virtual viewing, with the additional opportunity of virtual audience engagement and networking.

Hybrid festivals with in-person and virtual programming

Hybrid film festivals during the pandemic shared the fundamental characteristic of mixing in-person and virtual formats, although they represent a vast range of practices and priorities in both their virtual offerings and in-person screenings. The New York Film Festival, for instance, was one of the first major festivals to incorporate some in-person programming. From September 17 to October 11, 2020, NYFF showed thirty-three drive-in screenings at the Bronx Zoo, the Brooklyn Army Terminal, and the New York Hall of Science in Queen, and they screened films online.[26] Each film had an 8:00 PM premiere scheduled at some point during the festival, and they were available for either four, twenty-four, or forty-eight hours after a viewer pressed play. NYFF also included Q&As and panels on Zoom, many featuring major filmmakers and actors like Spike Lee, Whoopi Goldberg, and Michelle Pfeiffer. The lineup similarly contained new films by prominent directors, many returning to the festival. The Main Slate included Steve McQueen's *Mangrove* and *Lovers Rock*, Tsai Ming-liang's *Days*, Frederick Wiseman's *City Hall*, Chloé Zhao's *Nomadland*, and Hong Sang Soo's *The Woman Who Ran*. NYFF reported positive results from the festival, noting 40,000 virtual rentals across all fifty

[26] 58th New York Film Festival guide, Film at Lincoln Center, accessed January 5, 2023, https://www.filmlinc.org/nyff2020/guide/.

states and 8,300 New Yorkers attending in person, with numbers calculated based on an average of 2.5 people per car and 1.5 home viewers per rental.[27]

Hybrid festivals during the pandemic varied in the proportion of in-person to virtual screenings, sometimes even in the same city. *IndieWIRE* noted that the 2021 Tribeca Festival offered "one of the more robust slates of in-person programming of any festival since the pandemic began," but they also offered a smaller online Tribeca at Home hub with some features, shorts, and virtual reality programming.[28] In general, festivals could show more films in-person as COVID-19 vaccines became widely available in the United States in spring 2021, but later surges in infection rates meant that the trajectory back to fully in-person festivals experienced many setbacks. In this unpredictable situation, some festivals leaned more toward virtual plans, even later in 2021. The cover of the Asian American International Film Festival's program guide highlighted the format, with the words "Hybrid: Online + Live Events" between the festival logo and the dates, August 11 to 22, 2021.[29] Nine narrative features, six documentary features, and nine short programs were available online, and the in-person even schedule comprised just seven events, including an opening night screening and reception, a double feature of Filipino films, a comedy night, and a music video showcase. This hybrid format allowed AAIFF to welcome its audience back with in-person events that would be difficult to

[27] "58th New York Film Festival Among the Most Attended Editions in Film at Lincoln Center History," Film at Lincoln Center, November 2, 2020, https://www.filmlinc.org/nyff2020/daily/58th-new-york-film-festival-among-the-most-attended-editions-in-film-at-lincoln-center-history/.

[28] Chris Lindahl, "How to Buy In-Person Tickets and Reserve Virtual Seats for the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival," *IndieWire*, June 4, 2021, https://www.indiewire.com/2021/06/watch-tribeca-festival-films-online-1234641749/.

[29] AAIFF44 Program Book, Asian CineVision, August 11, 2021, https://issuu.com/aaiff.org/docs/aaiff44_program_book.

replicate online, like the comedy night and opening night reception, while also maintaining a strong virtual presence if in-person gatherings had to be canceled.

The 2021 and 2022 Sundance Film Festival and the 2021 True/False Film Festival are especially instructive as hybrid events which reflected their organizers' strategies to enrich their online offerings in ways that replicated aspects of the festival experience. The Sundance Film Festival invested substantially in a platform for an online festival in 2021, alongside a range of digital features and activities that would translate elements of traditional festivals for audiences, and True/False, a regional documentary festival founded in 2004, developed a limited hybrid festival with efforts to engage to physically manifest an experience, even with online screenings. As each festival devised a specific way to reach and engage audiences during the pandemic, the details of Sundance and True/False's planning and implementation are not representative of the festival system as a whole. Together, however, they exemplify a range of options that festivals might take that combine the basic options outlined above, in this case combined with the goals and identity of each festival. As two festivals that deployed substantial time and financial resources to plan hybrid events, the pandemic editions of the Sundance and True/False festivals demonstrated challenges of distance, cost, and other factors in attempts to recreate festival environments.

The 2021 True/False Film Festival

The last notable in-person film festival in the United States before pandemic-related cancellations and postponements began was the True/False Film Festival in Columbia, Missouri, lasting from March 5 to 8, 2020. In a podcast interview about plans for the 2021 festival, True/False founder and "co-conspirator" David Wilson described organizers' frequent communication with local public health authorities ahead of the 2020 festival, as global COVID-

19 numbers began rising ahead of a surge in the United States.[30] Although the festival only avoided having to cancel the festival in 2020 by a couple weeks, the May dates in 2021 allowed them over a year to carefully plan for a hybrid event, which featured outdoor screenings, mostly at a park in Columbia, and virtual screenings available through a small component called "Teleported."

The outdoor festival used the four amphitheaters in Stephens Lake Park for daytime events, including concerts, and screenings at nights, as well as a drive-in at the Holiday Inn Executive Center-Columbia, with sixteen feature films and twenty-three shorts total. True/False organizers frequently communicated safety precautions to the audience. An email from March 18, 2021, announced that the venue operations plan had been approved by the county health department. Audiences would be required to wear masks unless eating or drinking, and they would receive "pod" assignments upon arrival. The pod system was carefully designed by organizers to include as many people as possible in the park while social distancing, with rectangular seating areas separated by six feet on all sides. Each pod could have up to four people, and True/False also staggered event start times to avoid congested walkways in the park. Despite the level of planning involved in producing a large in-person festival under social distancing guidelines and a rapidly changing situation, True/False also created an option described as "high-engagement virtual" and, more regularly, as "Not just another virtual festival" in announcements.[31]

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[30] Fernando Narro, "Fashioning a Film Festival Amid the Pandemic Part One," *KBIA*, March 17, 2021, https://www.kbia.org/arts-and-culture/2021-03-17/fashioning-a-film-festival-amid-the-pandemic-part-one.

[31] True/False Film Fest, "T/F Venue Operations Plans APPROVED by County Health Department," email, March 18, 2021.

The "Teleported" festival was an elaborate addition to True/False's 2021 plans, but it, in part, helped them maintain connections with the community of programmers, critics, and general fans of the festival that they had cultivated since its founding in 2004. True/False planned Teleported as a curated selection of screenings from the larger slate and an intentionally limited experience. Initial announcements only listed a $695 price for the Teleported festival, which predictably received angry responses on social media. An Instagram post from December 23, 2020, lists the cost and describes three festival components: "Watch a selection of brand new T/F 2021 films from your home! May include world premieres, secret screenings, and surprise selections," "A series of custom-designed packages overflowing with goodies," and "unique online content TBA."[32] Despite the promise of a custom experience with a full slate of new True/False films, comments on this post and others express various frustrations about the price, like "good to know T/F is officially exclusive to the wealthy this year!" The single (and substantial) price announced for Teleported was a marked difference from the range of options previously accessible at True/False. The festival had, in 2020, offered seven ticket packages or passes ranging from a $45 three-ticket Gateway Packet to the $975 Super Circle pass, with a $225 Lux pass providing "a complete True/False experience, adding events and parties to a four-day lineup of films."[33] Unlike many virtual festivals that allowed audiences to buy tickets for single films, True/False's virtual slate was an all-or-nothing purchase, a severely limited option that at least some past festivalgoers found unsatisfying. The festival later implemented a sliding scale from $200 to the original price of $695, available through an application process.

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[32] @truefalsefilmfest, Instagram post, December 23, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CJJKMMEMWGP/.

[33] "Passes," True/False Fest, Wayback Machine, March 6, 2020 capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20200306070535/https://truefalse.org/attend/passes/.

Organizers explained this decision on the webpage: "A major reason for this pricing model is to include young filmmakers who may not have the resources to take part in the Teleported Fest – and we are, in part, subsidizing this by asking folks who feel they can to pay a little more for this experience. It's important to note that all Teleporters will receive the same benefits no matter the amount paid."[34] The festival's justification for the relatively expensive price of participation became clearer as organizers started detailing their plans for Teleported.

At the top of the Teleported page on the True/False website, bold type described what audiences, called "Teleporters" in email correspondence leading up and during the event, could expect: "Be the first in the world to view new films as you sip and snack on a selection of locally sourced treats, lounge in festival merch, and engage with films in new and unexpected ways." The list of items included with the pass notes a "series of custom-designed packages overflowing with goodies." True/False announced a detail schedule for the Teleported festival at roughly the same time that participants received a package, specifically a cardboard treasure chest, at their homes. Each treasure chest was twenty-three inches long, sixteen inches wide, and nine inches tall, with "Teleported" printed on top and "True/False" on both sides, with the festival name extending from the graphic of a tree root. The words "Open May 5" were printed below the cardboard flap used to access the box (Figure 1). Participants had some hints to the contents, from the website's promise of the chance to "sip and snack" and "lounge in festival merch" and survey following the application acceptance of coffee preferences, food allergies or restrictions, wine favorites, and pant size. While True/False organizers sent multiple requests for the audience to wait for May 5 to open their treasure chest, the festival schedule gave audiences a sense of the efforts involved in making Teleported a more involved experience than most virtual festivals.

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[34] "Teleported True/False," True/False Film Fest, accessed May 1, 2021, https://truefalse.org/teleported-fest/.

Figure 1. The cardboard Teleported chest sent to participants, with the instructions to open on May 5th. Photo by author.

The schedule listed both film screening times and other events that would allow the Teleported audience to interact with each other, festival staff, and filmmakers. The six new feature films were available for twenty-four hours starting at 9:00 AM through the festival streaming platform Shift72, and the audience could access them again for one day later during the festival dates. Short films and retrospectives streamed throughout the event. Virtual Q&As took place on Zoom after suggested screening times for the six new features, sometimes featuring both the moderator and filmmaker together in person in Columbia. For instance, documentary filmmaker Robert Greene moderated a conversation with Emilia Mello, the director of a documentary about a remote Brazilian community, *No Kings*. Other events included a "Welcome/Unboxing Zoom," designated hangout times each day, and a livestream of Gimme Truth – a live game show featured during True/False each year in which contestants attempted to trick the audience with a short film claiming to be a documentary, and the audience votes on whether the film is based on fictional or true events. This schedule allowed the Teleported

audience to communicate with each other at various points during the festival, often during virtual-exclusive sessions, while also observing one of the festival's signature events that took place in-person in Columbia.

For the welcome event on Zoom, True/False staff highlighted the experimental nature of the Teleported experience by speaking from a lab set, complete with lab coats. They introduced the event overall and the items that participants could find in their boxes, while dealing with typical Zoom technical problems, like attendees repeatedly forgetting to turn off their microphones. The items in the Teleported box were a mix of gifts from festival sponsors, True/False merchandise, and—most importantly for this intricate version of a virtual event—smaller boxes related to the suggested screenings for each day of the festival. Sponsor items included sweatpants with the logo of ESPN Films' *30 for 30* documentary program and a Documentary+ baseball cap (Figure 2). The True/False merchandise, like socks, a metal cup, and a Teleported candle, accompanied gifts involving contributions from Missouri communities, such as a True/False red wine from the Les Bourgeois Vineyard and a ceramic figure from an elementary school's art classes made especially for Teleported festival participants. During the unboxing event, staff walked through each item and explained its significance or intended use during the festival. In a reference to traditional festival practices, each Teleported box had a pass on a lanyard, which featured the name and logo of a major True/False sponsor, University of Missouri Health Care. The sponsor and festival merchandise recreated, to some degree, the experience of a swag bag at an in-person festival for the remote Teleporters, but the daily boxes demonstrated the elaborate plans developed for True/False's virtual program.

Figure 2. The opened cardboard Teleported chest, with sponsor items and daily boxes visible. Photo by author.

The daily boxes, labeled Wednesday through Sunday, contained materials related to specific films. Small cards inside the boxes explained the items, and organizers also sent emails each day with additional information. The first three boxes were four-inch cubes, and the Saturday and Sunday boxes were seven-inch cubes, as those days had more films on the suggested schedule. *Delphine's Prayers* (Rosine Mbakam, 2021), the feature film available on Wednesday, is a portrait of a young woman from Cameroon who now lives in Belgium with her older husband. Comprised of the director's multiple interviews with Delphine, the film reveals the subject's vivid perspective and approach to storytelling as she describes her experiences as a sex worker and the larger patriarchal and colonial forces that dominate African women's lives.

The True/False box for Wednesday included a lighter and a bag of chin chin, with a card explaining, “A lighter ignites memories; Delphine uses one for her cigarettes. To mix up your typical movie snacks, try out this popular West African snack, chin chin, made locally in a Columbia by a Cameroonian woman named Mimi. She makes sweet and savory varieties. Which one did you get?” Many of the films dealt with serious political topics and subjects in dire situations, like *Delphine’s Prayers*, introducing a difficult dynamic for the True/False organizers to address. The Teleported experience required new ways to engage the audience, but the content of most films did not lend itself to direct humor or joy. Instead, organizers incorporated different sensory experiences, especially through snacks, with references to local involvement or connections to the films’ settings. In this way, the Teleported festival drew on a sense of immersion rather than a pure entertainment experience. This introduces an additional set of questions, familiar to documentary theory, about filmmaker and audience positionality in relation to film subjects, but it does suggest greater sensitivity to such issues than the frequently obvious disconnects between festival receptions, for instance, and the films that accompany them.

The themed objects for each screening sometimes had more direct links to the filmmaking process. For *No Kings* (Emilia Mello, 2020), a profile of a remote Caiçara fishing community in coastal Brazil, the Thursday box included candy and a small thumb drive wrapped in an origami shrimp (Figure 3). The card describing the items noted, “Tonight’s filmmaker Emilia Mello shares her audio field recordings, taking you from the quay bar where fisherman sing to a rumbling waterfall & the lush tropical forest the Caiçara cultivate. Very popular in Brazil, Zazá is often described in English as ‘gum candy’ and you’ll see why!” The filmmakers’ involvement with the Teleported plans varied, but such details accumulated to demonstrate

True/False's dedication to making their virtual program a full experience, rather than just a collection of streaming films.

Figure 3. The Thursday box for the Teleported True/False festival, showing the candy, environmental spray, origami thumb drive, and descriptive card. Photo by author.

Beyond the tie-in objects and snacks, True/False also included room sprays with scents associated with each film in the daily boxes. For *No Kings*, an email explained, "Today's scent is inspired by director Emila Mello's evocative description of standing on a pier along the Brazilian coastline, the wind drawing in smells from the sea, the village, and rainforest around her. Combine this with her field recordings to be truly transported to the Brazilian coastline." The

efforts at multisensory engagement and language like “transported” suggest the unusual degree of True/False’s planning for audience engagement and participation. This required the event to involve frequent communication with reminders and explanations, which in turn reinforced the idea that Teleporters were fully participating in a festival, even without being physically present in Stephens Lake Park for in-person screenings.

In addition to the daily boxes with snacks, scents, and other themed items, the program also included various ways to recreate ephemeral and interactive elements of traditional festivals. The festival typically features performances by musicians, called “buskers,” before each film screening, and the Teleported festival also had a series of pre-recorded busker performances, like harpist Mary Lattimore, that would play before the film when a viewer pressed play on a screening. True/False also has different trailers that play throughout the festival instead of a single festival trailer that plays before every film, as many festivals do. These trailers, also part of the screening package with the busker performance, were created by documentary filmmakers who had shown films at True/False in the past, like Julia Reichert and Yance Ford. Some methods of injecting a degree of ephemerality into the virtual event relied more on interactivity, than simply recreating elements that the audience would usually watch at True/False.

True/False implement a platform called Spatial Chat to allow the audience to interact with “fellow Teleporters” in different themed virtual environments called Water, Air, Earth, and Fire. Participants could move their profile picture closer to other avatars on the screen in any given environment – Water was a nighttime pond with trees around the shore, for instance – to have a conversation, and the audio attempted to replicate the experience of having a small conversation at a larger party, so you could hear the people close to you on screen more loudly than those further away. The Spatial Chat “hangout” events, scheduled each night, had varied

degrees of engagement from the audience, but they represent a more intentional effort to recreate in-person festival experiences with other audience members than most virtual formats, like text-based chat. A Sunday morning "brunch" on Spatial Chat also invited the audience to meet directors with films in the Teleported festival program, expanding the possibility of engagement from just audience members to filmmakers as well.

Some of the events involved in the Teleported festival were based on pre-existing programs, rather than the festival producing its own new virtual ways for audiences to participate. On Saturday night, True/False hosted its own experience with Eschaton, a virtual nightclub built on Zoom that received widespread coverage in the early months of the pandemic as a creative and artistic spin on the virtual format that people had been forced to use for most aspects of their lives. A feature from *The New York Times* described it as "part theater, part nightlife simulator, part Chatroulette."[35] In Eschaton, performers occupied different rooms, and they played different characters and employed styles of entertainment such as comedy and dance, and they often spoke to the audience as the Teleported groups were relatively small. The finale of the Eschaton event brought all participants back together on one Zoom, and it culminated with a drag performance to the song "Sweet Melody" by the British pop group Little Mix. Instead of just allowing audience members to communicate with each other about the films they had watched or ask directors questions about their work, the Eschaton event added an element of the festival parties that typically appeared throughout the True/False schedule.

While the Teleported festival in 2021 involved more efforts to increase audience engagement beyond just streaming films, it was an expensive and labor-intensive process, with each participant receiving the large box filled with themed souvenirs and daily snacks, as well as

[35] Darryn King, "And in the Next Zoom Room, a Rat Doing a Striptease," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/theater/eschaton-immersive-nightclub.html.

the virtual component itself. Beyond planning and packing the shipments for the audience, the staff had to determine which software and systems could be used for the various interactive events, especially as they prioritized small group engagement more intentionally than other virtual festivals during this period. The Teleported festival could not easily be replicated at a reasonable cost, for either the festival or its audiences, especially given True/False's choice to eventually offer the program at a lower fee after the initial announcement of $695, and it was presented as a one-time addition to the festival's programming. In 2022, True/False returned to its typical format with in-person, indoor screenings in Columbia, Missouri, without the park screenings or the Teleported option, but other festivals maintained their online programs longer than one year, even as they returned to their past venues and formats. True/False demonstrates a regional festival's project to create a one-time format that would attract audiences and engage them more fully than just streaming programs, and Sundance's pandemic versions show how a major festival could employ its resources to produce a major event even without its normal physical gatherings.

The Sundance Film Festival During the Pandemic

The Sundance Film Festival offers an instructive case study for the strategic importance of both flexibility and substantial resource investment in planning festivals during the pandemic. Throughout the planning of the 2021 and 2022 festivals, the Sundance Institute prepared options that would allow the organization to respond appropriately to the fluid situation with the spread of COVID-19 variants, vaccination efforts, and their effects on the festival. Unlike regional festivals and smaller events that could count on predominantly local crowds, the Sundance Film Festival regularly hosts filmmakers and other festival attendees from countries around the world, complicating the possibility of a continued in-person event. Like most major film festivals, a

typical Sundance experience involves thousands of people traveling, creating a situation with increased risk compared to festivals with primarily local audiences, in addition to the challenges posed by the inconsistent travel requirements that would affect potential attendees. With these factors in mind, Sundance staff began planning for different formats of the festival starting in summer 2020, preparing them to respond to changing circumstances.

The Sundance Institute ultimately produced hybrid events in 2021, 2022, and 2023. The 2021 and 2022 festivals were mostly virtual, with in-person "satellite" screenings in select cities across the United States, and the 2023 festival continued to offer a robust virtual section alongside an in-person return to Park City. The virtual and hybrid Sundance editions were among the most high-profile festivals with prominent online sections that were widely available in the United States, but the precise trajectory of the festival's programming across these three years points to a retraction of elements that attempted to recreate the festival experience, particularly those intended to help viewers feel like part of a larger audience. While this seems like a reasonable response to Americans' broader return to normal social life with large-scale gatherings, the Sundance Institute invested significant creative and financial resources to their virtual programs, and Sundance staff, including 2021 and 2022's festival director Tabitha Jackson, expressed enthusiasm for the possibilities presented by virtual programming, often in greater detail than the typical promotional discourse about alternative festival formats during the pandemic. The retraction of key elements of the virtual experience suggests the challenges of maintaining a hybrid festival-production format, but Sundance's experiments during this time exhibit the potential and limitations of virtual events as one of the largest festivals attempted to create an experience beyond simply screening films online. In other words, Sundance's formats and programming between 2021 and 2023 demonstrated the possibility of widely available,

meaningfully interactive virtual festivals, but the specific changes across the three years point to the difficulty of maintaining such approaches alongside a traditional in-person festival.

As festival director, Tabitha Jackson was central to Sundance's announcements and promotion for the 2021 and 2022 events, which were primarily virtual. Like festival directors referenced previously in this study, such as Bill Pence at the Telluride Film Festival, her speeches and introductions during the festival offer a useful example of self-presentation from festival leadership. Jackson was announced as festival director in February 2020, just one month before COVID-19's designation as a pandemic quickly made it clear that festival organizers would need to adapt and plan alternatives, even for events that seemed distant enough to allow some return to normalcy.[36] She and other key festival organizers quickly planned a pandemic version of Sundance, revealing plans in June 2020 for the festival that would take place in January 2021. The initial announcement noted plans to take place in Park City and at least twenty other locations. A *New York Times* interview with Jackson summarized the in-progress plans for other places: "Exploratory talks are underway with independent cinemas in California, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, New York, Michigan, Minnesota, Tennessee and Texas. Mexico City is also on the list."[37] In the interview, Jackson also explained the plans to make the full program available online, stating, "It will be the nucleus of the festival… a one-stop point of access, designed to create a participatory experience which brings all the elements and locations of the festival together." This description and others by Jackson positioned the online portion of

[36] "Sundance Institute Announces Tabitha Jackson as Incoming Festival Director," Sundance Institute, February 1, 2020, Internet Archive Wayback Machine capture, https://web.archive.org/web/20210226172430/https://www.sundance.org/blogs/news/sundance-festival-director-tabitha-jackson.

[37] Brooks Barnes, "Sundance 2021 Will Be Held in at Least 20 Cities," June 29, 2020, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/movies/sundance-virus.html.

the 2021 Sundance Film Festival as central, both a pragmatic decision, as plans for in-person gatherings remained uncertain, and a matter of evolved self-presentation for the event. Jackson identified the importance of the virtual component for accessibility, saying, "We want to reach people who we have not been able to reach before — where access to the work is not predicated on being able to afford to travel to an expensive place… The world has typically come to Sundance. We are now trying to take Sundance to the world." Jackson's description of Park City as "an expensive place," while objectively true, is a surprising admission from the director of an event so closely associated with the location, and this comment introduces an enthusiasm about the wider access provided by an online festival – an enthusiasm that she and other staff would repeatedly express leading up and during the 2021 festival, often in ways that contrasted the event with its traditional in-person format.

The Sundance Institute continued to announce plans throughout 2020, with some details having to change later based on virus numbers and regulations in specific locations. Press reported on a reduced in-person format, with seven days instead of ten and a smaller footprint in Park City. *IndieWire* reported on Sundance CFO Betsy Wallace's meeting with the city council in Park City to agree on plans, such as smaller leases for spaces rented from the city like offices and parking.[38] In October 2020, passes went on sale for the festival, including all-access passes that would include in-person screenings, if possible, and the full virtual slate. In communications with press at this time, Sundance encouraged attendees to "think of the online festival as the center of your Sundance experience this year" – another marker of the continued uncertainty

[38] Chris Lindahl, "Sundance Prepares a Shortened, Seven-Day Festival, and Pushes Back Dates a Week," *IndieWire*, August 6, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/sundance-shortened-new-dates-2021-1234578435/.

around the viability of sharing physical space at this point in the pandemic.[39] Ultimately, Sundance managed to produce a hybrid festival in 2021, but the virtual side of the event received far greater press coverage because of its audience reach and novelty, in addition to the smaller markets generally represented by the Satellite program.

In December 2020, the festival announced detailed plans for the virtual and in-person portions of the 2021 program, including the Satellite Screens program. This section included in-person venues ranging from drive-in theaters to conventional cinemas. Sundance partnered with organizations in various regions of the continental United States and one venue each in Hawaii and Puerto Rico, and regional festivals and film centers like the Sidewalk Film Festival, Denver Film, and the Maryland Film Festival appeared on the list.[40] Even after this list was announced, pandemic regulations in some areas forced plans to change. For example, on January 5, 2021, the Los Angeles-area drive-ins were canceled because of a virus surge in the region.[41] In the end, thirty sites participated in the Satellite Screens program.

While most media, including the trades, only passingly referenced the Satellite side of the festival, it represents a complex undertaking that required frequent adjustments based on changing circumstances. More broadly, the program also functions as a prominent example of the festival system that had matured in the United States since the 1990s, with dozens of film

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[39] Chris Lindahl, "Sundance Opens for Business," *IndieWire*, October 15, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/sundance-2021-press-industry-passes-online-virtual-festival-1234592849/.

[40] "2021 Sundance Film Festival Will Meet Audiences Where They Are," Sundance Institute, December 2, 2020, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/festival/2021-sundance-film-festival-will-meet-audiences-where-they-are.

[41] Alexandra Del Rosario and Dominic Patten, "Sundance Axes SoCal Drive-In Screenings Amid Region's Coronavirus Surge," *Deadline*, January 5, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/01/sundance-film-festival-cancel-socal-drivein-coronavirus-1234665511/.

festivals around the country that partnered with Sundance to bring an unusual experience to their audiences. In typical years, the connections between Sundance and regional festivals appeared in the diffuse manner of shared programming, through films that screened at larger festivals then circulated through the festival system for months, but the pandemic created a situation in which Sundance could work directly with those organizations, drawing attention to the range of independent film festivals in the United States. In 2021, Satellite Screens was a complicated endeavor for Sundance, but the other component of the festival was the primary project.

The virtual section of the festival was branded as "Sundance Institute Presents Sundance Film Festival 2021" in marketing and programs, without the qualifications that accompanied some virtual festival editions like SXSW Online. When the festival selections were announced in mid-December 2020, press compared the smaller size of the program to previous years and noted relatively more first-time filmmakers, but generally acknowledged a seemingly normal program mixing known and emerging filmmakers. The *Los Angeles Times*' Mark Olsen began his coverage with the statement, "Perhaps the most surprising thing about the program announcement for the 2021 Sundance Film Festival released on Tuesday is how much it looks like the program announcement for any other year of the Sundance Film Festival."[42] With over 14,000 submissions, including 3,500 features, the festival programmed seventy-one feature films, while a typical year would have around 120.[43] To present these films to audiences, Sundance used a festival streaming platform called Shift 72, which had also been used by the New York Film Festival in 2020. Films were geo-blocked to the United States, likely due to

[42] Mark Olsen, "Sundance Film Festival promises 'year of discovery' with a largely virtual 2021 fest," *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2020-12-15/sundance-film-festival-virtual-lineup.

[43] "2021 Sundance Film Festival: Full Program Announced," Sundance Institute, December 15, 2020, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/news/2021-sundance-film-festival-full-program-announced/.

negotiations with concerned filmmakers and distributors, while some virtual reality projects were available internationally. The festival included Q&As and panels as audiences would expect from a festival, like many others during the pandemic. For example, the 2021 festival hosted panels with celebrities and major political topics in media, a normal characteristic of the in-person event in Park City, with online panels like "A Conversation with Viola Davis and Juvee Productions" and "The Big Conversation – The Past in the Present: A Personal Journey Through Race, History, and Filmmaking." But they supplemented the basic features of an online festival and the Shift 72 platform with numerous additions to replicate the limitations of a particular time and space from the traditional festival experience.

The basic logistics of the virtual festival stressed this effort to make the experience ephemeral. Each film was first available during a premiere screening with a live Q&A after the film, then it was again available two days later for a twenty-four hour "on demand" period as an encore. The festival sold individual film tickets for either option, the premiere or on demand. Live Q&As slots were included with the premiere slot for audience members who played the film at the start time. Features of the screening system, like this basic availability process, were explained through "Tips of the Day" on the website's homepage and Sundance's social media pages. In another replication of typical festival elements, a trailer listing sponsors like Adobe and White Claw showed before each film, with animated graphics in the bold, color-blocked style of the festival's marketing. Many events started at specific times, and they were promoted in emails (to ticket buyers or subscribers) and social media posts. Sundance's Instagram stories, for instance, showed a "Schedule of Events" for each day. Pre-recorded filmmaker introductions accompanied most screenings, often with filmmakers recognizing the unusual situation. While welcoming the audience for the premiere of *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, director Jane

Schoenbrun acknowledged the difficulty of watching a film at home without looking at phones and requested that the audience put their phones in another room or in a safe to preserve some degree of attention.

Many of these non-film screening events promoted by the festival specifically referenced the virtual format and Sundance's goals for the 2021 event, starting with the first evening. The opening night on Thursday, January 28, showcased four films in premiere slots starting at 6 P.M. Mountain Time. One hour earlier, the festival streamed an "Opening Night Welcome" that comprised many acknowledgements and sections, like most festival opening nights. The virtual event included an introduction from Sundance Institute director Keri Putnam, a featurette with celebrities and filmmakers talking about their past experiences with the festival, an introduction by festival director Tabitha Jackson, and a short video narrated by Robert Redford about the concept of togetherness. After these conventional elements that spotlighted major players from the Sundance Institute, Jackson discussed the festival's "what if" approach to the 2021 event, with various experiments and concepts leading to the specifics of the virtual festival, especially the New Frontier section discussed below. This welcome also featured a series of greetings from the Satellite festivals, and audience members posted in a live chat about where they were viewing from, an ongoing practice throughout the week-long virtual Sundance.

Other events allowed the festival to highlight major sponsors and promote films and filmmakers from the program, all while reflecting on the unusual circumstances of the 2021 festival. At 9 A.M. Mountain Time each day, Tabitha Jackson hosted a morning show, "The Sundance Dailies presented by Acura." Guests, like the Spark Brothers and Edgar Wright (the director of the documentary about the musicians that showed at the festival), joined for short interviews, and staff and friends of the festival functioned as special correspondents. One

morning, recently resigned festival director John Cooper gave a weather report from Park City's Main Street. The Sundance Dailies also included a short recap of each previous days, compiled of clips from Q&As, panels, and social media posts about the festival. On the final day of the festival, the morning show was titled "It's a Wrap," and Jackson highlighted major moments from the week, like Robert Redford speaking with directors in lieu of a traditional filmmaker brunch. Jackson and programmer Kim Yutani also discussed their favorite Q&A sessions and the success of the Satellite Screens program, noting specific local events and celebrations like Columbia, South Carolina's Luminal Theater, which hosted DJs, a watch party for the film *Night of the Kings*, and a celebration of Carolina filmmakers. In reflecting on this program, Jackson questioned how to bring Satellites into the network for the rest of the year, suggesting that Sundance may continue working with the partner organizations. One key moment in the "It's a Wrap" session gestured toward the larger impetus for the festival's virtual architecture, as Jackson talked about the staff's focus on making the audience aware of the rest of the audience's presence and affirming the festival's status as a shared experience. Evidence of this goal appeared throughout the festival, particularly in the interactive elements of film screenings and the New Frontier section.

Film screenings stressed the presence of other audience members through a waiting room and live Q&As. Fifteen minutes before the premiere time for a film, a chat with other viewers was available in the "waiting room," a clear attempt to replicate the conventional experience of talking with other festival goers in lines before films. Before the opening night screening of Nanfu Wang's *In the Same Breath*, viewers chatted about what films they were seeing during the festival, where they were watching from, and how many times they had attended Sundance. Occasionally, the waiting rooms also gave audiences the chance to ask each other for technical

help, and ambient chatting sounds were sometimes playing on a soundtrack along with slides showing sponsors and event reminders. Viewers who had joined a premiere screening before its scheduled start time could participate in a live Q&A after the film, typically with the filmmakers and stars of each film. Through Zoom architecture, festival guests appeared in the Sundance Film Festival website browser window or on a TV for viewers who watched on Apple TV or other similar devices. Audience members could not ask questions out loud, but they could submit them through a chat window, and other viewers could vote on questions with a thumbs up to move them higher up the list, possibly giving the audience some influence in what moderators would select. Overall, this setup gave moderators greater control than they would have during an in-person Q&A when specific questions would be unknown until viewers voiced them. These choices helped recreate elements of a traditional festival experience by reminding the audience at home that others were sharing the experience, or at least watching the same film, even if they were not in the same physical space. The New Frontier section of the festival attempted to add a spatial component to this approach.

Jackson's enthusiastic interest in telescopes and space helped her and New Frontier director Shari Frilot conceive of a virtual spaceship for the New Frontier section of the festival. Originally a segment for experimental and avant-garde works when it was introduced in 2006, New Frontier later transitioned into a selection of augmented and virtual reality projects. In her analysis of New Frontier as feminist curatorial and artistic practice, Roya Rastegar notes that "a great number of the works curated carry provocations bent on social, environmental, and economic justice."[44] The 2021 version of New Frontier still comprised augmented and virtual

[44] Roya Rastegar, "Curating 'Physical Cinema' at Sundance's New Frontier," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 10, no. 3 (Summer 2012), https://sfonline.barnard.edu/curating-physical-cinema-at-sundances-new-frontier.

reality programming, and the projects continued to demonstrate the activist tendencies described by Rastegar. But for the hybrid festival, the projects were presented in a different context: through a virtual spaceship that also housed specifically social spaces, apart from the augmented and virtual reality projects selected by Sundance programmers. Festival participants could access New Frontier through a web browser or a virtual reality headset like the Oculus Quest. A virtual representation of an imagined space, New Frontier was presented as a spaceship orbiting Earth near the International Space Station. In addition to the ability to explore the ship, including views of the station and Earth, different areas on the spaceship allowed participants to view festival selections and engage with audience members. With a virtual avatar that showed an uploaded profile photo, participants could approach each other and speak over audio or video chat, after granting permission to enter a "chat zone." This creation of the spaceship as a shared environment allowed Sundance to confront one of the key challenges of virtual festivals compared to in-person events. As Brendan Kredell notes, "While time zone and language (and, in some cases, geofencing) impose a loose geographic order on the online festival, the shared sense of place that binds the traditional festival is absent."[45] Sundance attempted to address this problem through this new venture, which was somewhat complicated to explain to a general audience, in part because of the multiple areas in the spaceship.

Audiences "teleported" to the spaceship by accessing New Frontier on a browser or virtual reality headset, and they arrived in the Space Garden, a hub that then allowed access to other areas by approaching labeled portals with the avatar. The three other areas were the Gallery, Film Party, and Cinema House. The Gallery was set up as a spacious art gallery, with images from New Frontier's augmented reality and virtual reality projects appearing on the walls

[45] Kredell, "Scarcity, Ubiquity, and the Film Festival After COVID," 44.

next to descriptions. The overall outer space setting was visible through large windows throughout the area (Figure 4). Access to the New Frontier projects varied. Some required virtual reality headsets, while others allowed participation through a computer browser or a smartphone app. Many of the projects were live, scheduled performances, and a few experienced late starts or technical issues that prevented the audience from participating, with chat windows then allowing people to, predictably, express frustration and anger.

Figure 4. The gallery space in the Sundance Film Festival's 2021 New Frontier program, seen from a web browser. Screenshot by author.

The Cinema House was a virtual reality theater with more than a hundred seats, a large screen in the front, and a glass roof that allowed audiences to view fireworks before screenings. Audiences could arrive at the scheduled time for four screenings at Cinema House during the festival: one shorts program, two feature films that showed at Sundance previously (*Station to Station* and *Mother of George*), and a new film from the US Documentary Competition, Natalia

Almada's experimental documentary *Users*. Drawing numerous comparisons to *Koyaanisqatsi* in reviews, *Users* ambitiously explores the relationships between human life cycles and technology through footage of childhood and processes disrupted by or relying on technical systems. Apart from the physical discomfort of viewing a full feature film with a virtual reality headset, watching the film in Cinema House was one of New Frontier's most directly experimental activities and one that would only make sense after months of a pandemic that had shut down theaters around the world. Even if only attending in avatar form and surrounded by other avatars, watching *Users* or other screenings in Cinema House was one of the first times many attendees returned to a "theater" (Figures 5 and 6).

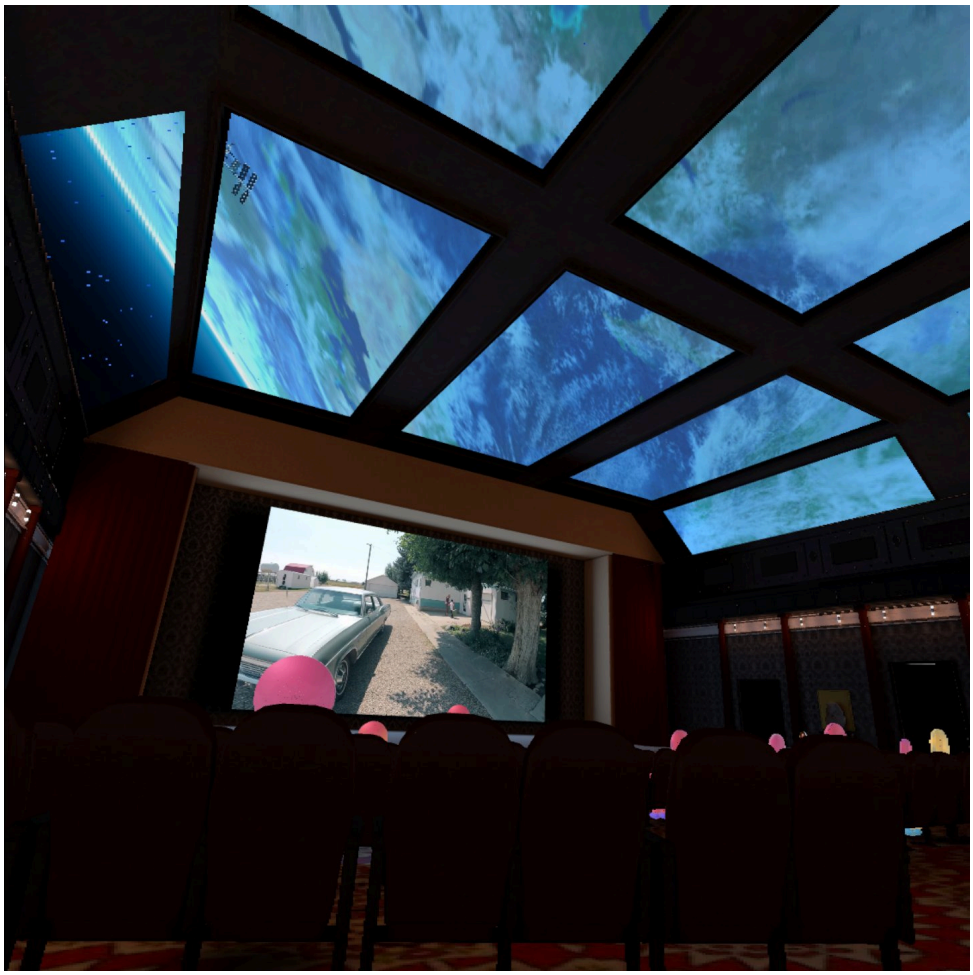

Figure 5: The Cinema House from New Frontier in 2021, visible here while seated and viewing from a virtual reality headset. Screenshot by author.

Figure 6. The reverse shot of figure 5, showing the author's New Frontier avatar seated in the Cinema House. Captured from a web browser. Screenshot by author.

While the Gallery and Cinema House showed projects selected by Sundance programmers, Film Party instead offered a space designed specifically to promote interaction between attendees. Structured as a hub lounge with six smaller rooms, Film Party often had small groups of people chatting in avatar form, and some participants attempted to network by walking around and introducing themselves as they might at a normal festival party. The smaller

rooms were intended to host parties after the screenings of film premieres, so audiences could potentially talk with filmmakers or other people who had watched the same film (Figure 7). A screen marking each room showed a still from the current film assigned to that space. Despite their greater complexity, Film Party and the chat functions available throughout New Frontier followed the same logic of mutual audience awareness that motivated the film waiting rooms and interactive Q&As, reflecting one of the major goals of the virtual festival.

Figure 7. The main area of the Film Party space from New Frontier 2021, seen from a web browser. The signs like “Short Films” marked separate areas for gathering to discuss specific screenings. Screenshot by author.

In events like the opening night welcome and closing day "It's a Wrap," Tabitha Jackson and other staff employed the discourse of possibility and exploration around the 2021 Sundance Film Festival, but whether the festival would succeed remained an open question, especially given the difficulty of comparison in such a different year. The experimental nature of the festival involved extending it beyond the conventional limitations of time and space that created a major business environment, and press repeatedly asked about the effects of such changes on business. On an episode of *IndieWire*'s *Screen Talk* podcast released during the festival, hosts Anne Thompson and Eric Kohn shared their observations about this aspect of the virtual event. Kohn described hearing that buyers were watching fewer films than press, in part because press were receiving links to view films earlier, and Thompson mentioned how she missed schmoozing with distributors to talk about major titles.[46] Such questions appeared frequently in press commentary about the success of the festival, but major deals did occur. *IndieWire* reported that Netflix paid more than $15 million for Rebecca Hall's debut feature *Passing*, and Apple set a record for a Sundance deal with Sian Heder's future Best Picture winner *CODA*.[47] While such success stories did not ensure future investment in virtual festivals for Sundance or other major events, it did prove that, at least under a specific set of conditioned determined by a global pandemic, distributors would consider changing a business model that previously relied on huddled conversations after observing reactions at in-person screenings. The festival also promoted Sundance 2021's success based on its own metrics in email newsletters and social media. In a set of Instagram stories from February 9, 2021, the festival claimed that it enjoyed its

[46] Anne Thompson and Eric Kohn, "Sundance Minus Park City: Why This Year's Virtual Festival Is Still a Big Deal," January 29, 2021, in *Screen Talk*, podcast, *IndieWire*, https://www.indiewire.com/video/sundance-without-park-city-screen-talk-318-1234613108/.

[47] Chris Lindahl, "Sundance 2021 Deals: The Complete List of Festival Purchases," *IndieWire*, June 8, 2021, https://www.indiewire.com/feature/sundance-2021-film-acquisitions-1234605127/.

largest audience ever, with more than 500,000 film views and nearly 40,000 visits to the New Frontier platform. Beyond the virtual festival, 20,000 people attended films through the Satellite Screens. With a total internal measurement of over 600,000 audience views, Sundance stated that the audience was 2.7 times larger than in 2020.

As COVID vaccination efforts unfolded around the world in spring and summer 2021, the Sundance Institute announced plans for another hybrid festival in 2022, with a return to Park City.[48] Like many other events and cultural institutions, Sundance installed a vaccine requirement for in-person attendance at the festival, announced in August 2021, and they also shared plans for a return of the Satellite Screens program.[49] In the months leading up to the event, it seemed that the January 2022 Sundance Film Festival would recreate many of the elements of the 2021 festival, with the major addition of a return to the traditional venues in Park City. The winter surge of the Omicron COVID variant forced organizers to cancel the in-person portion of Sundance in Park City, just fifteen days ahead of the event on January 5, 2022.[50]

This left the 2022 festival as a near duplicate of the 2021 festival's format, with some keys changes that anticipate an even greater reduction of virtual elements in 2023. The 2022 Sundance Film Festival's Satellite Screens program involved only seven venues, compared to thirty the year before, while the New Frontier spaceship with its Gallery, Cinema House, and

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[48] Patrick Hipes, "Sundance Film Festival Sets Dates For Hybrid 2022 Edition," *Deadline*, May 13, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/05/sundance-film-festival-2022-dates-1234755620/.

[49] Mark Olsen, "Sundance Film Festival will require attendees to be fully vaccinated," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-08-03/sundance-film-festival-COVID-vaccinated; Matt Grobar, "Sundance Film Festival Sets Online Platform, Satellite Screens & Ticketing Details For Hybrid 2022 Edition," *Deadline*, September 28, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/09/sundance-film-festival-sets-online-platform-satellite-screens-for-2022-edition-1234845572/.

[50] Chris Lindahl, "Sundance Film Festival Goes Virtual," *IndieWire*, January 5, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/2022/01/sundance-2022-cancels-in-person-1234688754/.

Film Party returned. Live and on-demand projects were still available in the Gallery, with a new slate selected for the year. While live Q&As were still available during premiere slots of films, online screenings no longer featured a waiting room, removing one of the main features that created the sense of mutual audience awareness.

The 2022 festival generated substantial business deals, including Apple TV's $15 million purchase of Cooper Raiff's American independent comedy *Cha Cha Real Smooth*, but the lack of a record-setting deal, like *CODA*, was described by *Hollywood Reporter* as a simple market correction.[51] Sales were not a major story at Sundance 2022, but another event at the festival received coverage for some time, with possible effects on Sundance's leadership structure. The new documentary *Jihad Rehab*, which profiled a rehabilitation center for terrorists, premiered at Sundance, and it garnered some attention before the festival as a controversial programming choice, when a group of Muslim American filmmakers shared concerns about the film's reductive title and the potential safety issues for subjects. Anger over the film's selection continued, both internally and externally, and two staff members resigned at the end of January.[52] The festival ultimately released an apology for programming the film, and the situation received additional attention when *The New York Times* profiled the director and her situation with a now untouchable film in September 2022.[53]

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[51] Chris Lindahl, "Sundance 2022 Deals," *IndieWire*, March 16, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/2022/03/sundance-2022-acquisitions-festival-deals-1234686428/; Mia Gallupo, "Sundance Dealmaking Adjusts to Indie Film Market in Limbo," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 3, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/sundance-market-2022-film-sales-1235086264/.

[52] Eric Kohn, "Sundance Institute Staffers Resign in Response to 'Jihad Rehab' Backlash," *IndieWire*, February 9, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/sundance-institute-staffers-resign-jihad-rehab-1234697522/.

[53] Michael Powell, "Sundance Liked Her Documentary on Terrorism, Until Muslim Critics Didn't," *New York Times*, September 25,2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/us/sundance-jihad-rehab-meg-smaker.html.

Tabitha Jackson stepped down from her role as festival director in June 2022. The festival's announcement did not provide an explanation, although it highlighted the festival's greater reach to new audiences under her leadership. After a quote from Institute CEO Joana Vicente expresses Sundance's gratitude to Jackson, the announcement ends with a quote from Jackson that begins, "Being part of driving forward the mission and purpose of the Sundance Institute has been a deep privilege and a profoundly meaningful part of my life," before affirming her dedication to artists.[54] A January 2023 *Variety* article about festivals' avoidance of controversial films suggests that the *Jihad Rehab* situation contributed to Jackson's resignation, with the statement, "And though no one will officially confirm it, plugged-in indie sources and Sundance board members tell *Variety* that they believe Jackson's exit is related to her handling of 'Jihad Rehab.' Sundance and Jackson declined to comment on her departure."[55] When Sundance announced Eugene Hernandez as Jackson's replacement in September 2022, they also noted that CEO Joana Vicente would lead the 2023 festival.

While the circumstances that caused Jackson to leave Sundance are unclear, her absence from the festival's promotion and self-presentation in 2023 accompanied a reduction of Satellite and virtual elements, which were components of the festival that she prized as ways to expand the audience. In late 2022, the Satellite page of the website included the note, "At this time we are not moving forward with the Satellite Screen program at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival."[56]

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[54] "Tabitha Jackson to Depart Sundance Institute," Sundance Institute, June 7, 2022, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/tabitha-jackson-to-depart-sundance-institute/.

[55] Tatiana Siegel, "Tabitha Jackson to Depart Sundance Institute," *Variety*, January 18, 2023, https://variety.com/2023/film/festivals/film-festivals-controversial-movies-jihad-rehab-1235491953/.

[56] "About Satellite Screens," Sundance Institute, accessed March 5, 2023, https://www.sundance.org/festivals/sundance-film-festival/satellite-screens.

The New Frontier program was initially announced as a returning part of the festival's digital platform on August 30, 2022, but it was canceled less than two months later.[57] An *IndieWire* report stated that New Frontier was always planned as exclusively virtual, and they accepted submissions as usual for months, until New Frontier curator Shari Frilot told submitting artists that they would receive refunds for submission fees.[58] The virtual spaceship created by the festival was not part of the 2023 hybrid event, but New Frontier had a smaller presence in the lineup.

Three feature films were marked as part of the New Frontier section. These films, including *Last Things,* Deborah Stratman's philosophical avant-garde feature about the history and future of rocks, were all experimental to some degree, hearkening back to the earliest days of New Frontier at Sundance. The section description from the 2023 program guide on the website acknowledges the changes to New Frontier, from a series of curated virtual reality and augmented reality storytelling projects to three feature films: "New Frontier champions artists who engage in experimental storytelling at the crossroads of film, art, performance, and media technology, showcasing cutting-edge work that explores and evolves cinema culture in today's rapidly changing landscape. New Frontier is presently in a process of reimagination. This year, we return to our roots to offer a global lineup of resonant experimental films." A Sundance Institute promotional trailer that played before films titled "Sundance Universe" included clips

[57] "Sundance Institute Announces Key Updates for the 2023 Sundance Film Festival," Sundance Institute, August 30, 2022, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/sundance-institute-announces-key-updates-for-the-2023-sundance-film-festival/.

[58] Eric Kohn, "Sundance Film Festival Cancels Plans for New Frontier Program in 2023," *IndieWire*, October 17, 2022, https://www.indiewire.com/2022/10/sundance-cancels-new-frontier-2023-1234773339/.

from virtual reality projects, including a dance project from 2022's New Frontier, despite the absence of such works in the 2023 hybrid event.

In addition to the publicized-then-cancelled New Frontier section, the festival had a larger renewed emphasis on in-person events because of the return to Park City after two years of a mostly virtual festival. A new opening night gala called "A Taste of Sundance" welcomed attendees with individual tickets starting at $1,500, as a fundraiser for the Institute's year-round work.[59] Nearly all films were available online, including the full competition slate, but a few high-profile titles could not be screened virtually. Q&As took place in person and showed with some films online, but they were not on demand and only available after the credits of a virtual screening. Some hybrid elements acknowledged virtual attendees, like an introductory video narrated by Robert Redford. He stated, "With great pleasure we invite you back to Park City and light up the Egyptian marquee. Even if you're part of Sundance from afar, you're part of Sundance's evolution." Unlike the 2021 and 2022 festivals that centered on the virtual experience, the 2023 festival positioned the virtual elements as an extension or sidebar, with little of the interactivity that distinguished the previous festivals as experiences, rather than just temporary streaming services.

Conclusion

Like all public events and services, the pandemic forced American film festivals into a convoluted and uncertain period, with many of them returning to a roughly standard situation, or at least slowly reducing the virtual events added during the pandemic, as American resumed normal activities. Even after festivals incorporated virtual components because of the pandemic,

[59] "Sundance Institute Announces Opening Night: A Taste of Sundance Presented by IMDbPro," Sundance Institute, November 21, 2022, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/strongsundance-institute-announcesnbspstrong/.

many with enthusiasm for the much broader audience, online festivals have seemingly returned to the "supplementary" status identified by Bakker.[60] Pandemic festivals often made films available to audiences that would otherwise be unable to access them in a festival environment, but many of the processes would be difficult to standardize and continue every year without extraordinary circumstances forcing festival organizers to experiment with new formats and ways of engaging audiences. Similarly, these circumstances pressured filmmakers, distributors, and sponsors into participating in the virtual festivals, an idea that previously would have been dismissed by much of the industry.

A range of factors make it unlikely that festivals will maintain or return to the programs they introduced in this period. True/False's Teleported experience was a hyper-curated and much smaller festival that would be prohibitively expensive and cumbersome to scale to a larger audience, but it allowed them to sustain ties with returning critics, filmmakers, and festival organizers while also reaching younger filmmakers and fans of the festival during an unusual year. Sundance created a virtual festival that facilitated its now-traditional business activities, while also reaching new audiences. The platform made viewers aware of the larger audience through waiting rooms, live Q&As, and the New Frontier experience, with the avatars moving through space and visible to each other. Although many audience members used these features in 2021 and 2022, the cancellation of such elements in 2023 suggests decreased interest, either from the staff itself or from the assumed audience, or a strain on the limited resources that even major arts institutions can access. If prominent festivals like Sundance continued their hybrid formats, virtual programs could be a way to address problems of access, in terms of money, location, or physical disability, but they will still reify a hierarchy between in-person audiences and the

[60] Norbert Bakker, "Utopian Film Festivals," 26.

widespread virtual audiences, unless the virtual elements are curated with substantial attention. Despite the efforts of festivals of all locations and sizes, few created online programs that remained in place after the removal of pandemic restrictions and widespread vaccination campaigns made possible a return to relative normalcy, but the American film festival system's brief detour into experimental formats highlighted the possibility of alternate methods of audience engagement that could expand the notion of a film festival experience, even if the current pressures of finances and logistics prevent such experimentation under typical circumstances.

Conclusion

On May 2, 2023, documentary filmmaker Michael Moore announced that the Traverse City Film Festival would end.[1] As the president and founder of the festival, Moore had provided a public face to the regional festival in Michigan. The event received occasional press attention outside of its community and state for notable guests, like Jane Fonda's attendance to receive an award in 2018, and the successful renovation and reopening of historic venue, the State Theatre.[2] Even with the profile boost from a famous filmmaker, the festival had not broken even in many years until the 2022 festival, its first during the pandemic era, and the board determined that they would take that opportunity to end the festival. Moore explained, "We've decided, after much heartfelt discussion, that it's best to close this era of the film fest now while we're ahead, no longer in debt, and go out on top with many years of fond memories that we will all collectively cherish for the rest of our lives."[3] Instead of managing and supporting the festival, the board planned to shift their efforts to opening a year-round venue.

While people involved with the Traverse City Film Festival intend to continue supporting filmgoing in the community in some form, other regional festivals are in more precarious positions, even publicly. Full Frame, a respected regional documentary festival that was started in 1998 and is now one of the largest university-run festivals in the United States, is on hiatus in 2023 "as the organization continues a strategic planning process," according to an announcement

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[1] Miriam Marina, "Curtains closed: Traverse City Film Festival comes to an end," *Detroit Free Press*, May 3, 2023, https://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/movies/michigan/2023/05/02/traverse-city-film-festival-comes-to-an-end-michael-moore-announces/70177090007/.

[2] Marin Cogan, "Jane Fonda Is Ready for This," *The Cut*, September 4, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/09/jane-fonda-profile-hbo-documentary.html; Keith Schneider, "Curtains Rise Again," *New York Times*, December 5, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/05/realestate/commercial/05theater.html

[3] Marina, "Curtains closed."

by its parent organization, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.[4] The Maryland Film Festival, started in Baltimore in 1999, is perhaps most known for featuring a screening hosted by filmmaker John Waters each year. But it regularly premieres films by established independent filmmakers, like *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, and screens other that premiered at Sundance or major international festivals. Its board chair stated that the celebration of the 25th festival would be delayed until 2024, explaining, "The Board of Directors made the decision to postpone the 2023 festival as we chart a sustainable plan to continue bringing films, filmmakers and audiences together in Baltimore."[5] Just six months after the postponement of the 2023 festival, the New/Next Film Festival was announced, with its inaugural edition planned for August 2023 at the Charles Theatre, where the Maryland Film Festival used to show films. Produced by the local public radio station WYPR, the festival will be co-organized by Eric Hatch, who worked for the Maryland Film Festival in eleven years.[6]

Traverse City, Full Frame, and Maryland are all well-respected and relatively prominent regional film festivals, drawing on the model of local sponsorship and organization, combined with film circulation within the festival system, that has helped many festivals endure for more than twenty years. While their problems potentially suggest larger issues for the festival system, the rapid emergence of the New/Next Film Festival in Baltimore, with a major local sponsor and

[4] "A Message from CDS on the 2023 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival," Center for Documentary Studies, November 22, 2022, https://www.fullframefest.org/2022/11/a-message-from-cds-on-the-2023-full-frame-documentary-film-festival/.

[5] Marcus Dieterle, "Maryland Film Festival postponed until 2024 as organization develops new business model," *Baltimore Fishbowl*, November 7, 2022, https://baltimorefishbowl.com/stories/maryland-film-festival-postponed-until-2024-as-organization-develops-new-business-model/.

[6] Imana Spence, "New/Next Film Festival aims to fill the Maryland Film Festival-shaped hole in your heart," *The Baltimore Banner*, May 19, 2023, https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/culture/film-tv/wypr-wtmd-new-next-film-festival-baltimore-HENQAGOSNVGTPEX2RKGLJBCQMA/.

an experienced local film programmer, points to more consistent features within the history of the American film festival system: it is always in flux, with new events beginning and others ending, and stakeholders will continue to invest their time, effort, and money in producing film festivals, even if seemingly established institutions are in a precarious position.

Throughout this dissertation, I have analyzed circumstances, experiments, and objectives that helped construct the contemporary American film festival system. How did film festivals expand throughout the United States to include small, local events? How did a seemingly stable system emerge in an environment with little consistent government support for the arts? I argue that the range of festivals developed to serve the needs of different types of filmmakers and audiences, even as specific events tried to translate the functions of major festivals to new contexts. The American film festival system is composed of a handful of major festivals, like Sundance, Telluride, South by Southwest, and Tribeca, and hundreds of smaller events based on a few models that have demonstrated some endurance, such as the Asian American International Film Festival, Sidewalk, and True/False. Some of these smaller festivals constitute distinct circuits, screening films that circulate mostly within a specific category of specialized programming, while others function in the broader circulation process facilitated by the festival system.

As festivals offer an exhibition experience outside of conventional commercial release, they require organizers to tailor their events to local audiences and make them distinct from normal filmgoing. The labor involved in creating and promoting festivals is central to the case studies in this dissertation. Some of the earliest major festivals in the United States, the New York Film Festival and the Telluride Film Festival, quickly established central components of film festival production and self-presentation. The New York Film Festival reveals the

complexity of the programming process, especially for a festival nested in a larger institution that must deal with stakeholders at different levels and from other organizations. Through the framing of the tribute program by festival organizers, as well as the discourse around the festival's location and atmosphere, the Telluride Film Festival suggests the fundamental trait of ephemerality for festival culture. The experience of a festival cannot be replicated, and organizers can stress that characteristic and even promote it by planning screenings, panels, and other events marked by spontaneity and interaction. Within the context of specialized film programming, the Asian American International Film Festival's tour in the 1980s demonstrates the possibility of formal festival circulation, especially for festivals that share a larger activist goal. But it also points to the importance of tailoring programming and promotional strategies when appealing to multiple communities.

The early years of the Sundance Film Festival, leading to its industrial prominence in the 1980s, convey the complex relationship between a festival's self-presentation and its reception. In this period, commercial opportunity slowly emerged as a journalistic fixation at Sundance, even as the festival attempted to maintain more varied interests in independent filmmaking. In the decades after the widespread discussion of Sundance as an industrial force, regional film festivals started all over the United States, forming a resilient model that draws on local resources and goals. While many regional festival organizers hoped to gain industrial connections and recognition, the relationships between these festivals and the industry developed in a more diffuse way, offering a form of circulation for independent films outside of commercial distribution.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a fundamental barrier to conventional film festivals, and festivals around the world, including the United States, responded with experiments that still

attempted to present films in distinctive environments. Despite widespread attempts to differentiate virtual festivals from streaming, very few festivals effectively translated conditions that would produce memorable audience experiences. Events including the True/False Film Festival and Sundance produced elaborate projects to engage audiences in unique ways, drawing on discourses of dematerialized audiences through ideas like teleportation and virtual space exploration. Even for these festivals, the complex responses to the pandemic were labor-intensive and temporary, although they suggested broader possibilities for the festival system. For most festivals, unavoidably uncertain plans and scarce resources prevented the production of such intricate virtual experiences, creating a gap in consistent engagement with audiences and, for many organizations, serious financial problems.

Even after the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, new festivals are constantly introduced in communities across the country, and others intentionally run for only one year, like many student-run events, making it difficult to identify a precise number of festivals in the United States. As of June 2023, Film Freeway lists more than 2,000 American festivals that have been running for longer than five years. But these listings often include events accused of hosting in-person screenings in inadequate venues and other questionable practices, like enticing filmmakers to pay additional submission fees to be considered in multiple awards categories.[7] The perceived value of a film festival laurel, from any given festival, is intriguing, drawing on decades of events that have attempted to connect filmmakers with audiences, industry

[7] A 2019 *Hollywood Reporter* article on questionable film festivals shares the example of the "Action on Film Megafest" in Las Vegas, which "encouraged filmmakers in 2019 to submit their projects to at least one other festival within its event for the maximum opportunity to win awards." (Katie Kilkenny and Alex Ritman, "'People Can Be Exploited': How Below-the-Radar Film Festivals Prey on Struggling Moviemakers," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 31, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/how-below-radar-film-festivals-can-prey-struggling-filmmakers-1250714/).

representatives, and other filmmakers. The idea of a film festival, with its associations of prestige, glamor, and exclusivity, is firmly entrenched in film culture, and the trend of questionable, unproven festivals taking advantage of this concept for financial gain is worthy of analysis. The ways in which such festivals, whether truly scams or simply unprofessional events, have affected the film festival system are worth studying. At the same time, the current situation calls into question whether models of legitimate festivals that enjoyed longevity for decades can maintain their status.

Are current festival models outdated because of audiences' streaming habits and the industry's continued concerns over the decline of theatrical exhibition? Or have those factors made festivals even more relevant? In other words, does a shared, in-person, ephemeral, film-going experience become even more of a festive occasion when it is further out of the norm? Based on the flexible models and evidence of recent decades, I contend that festivals will endure, if they can balance the pressures of varied stakeholders, from filmmakers and audiences to sponsors and other arts organizations, to curate experiences distinct from the everyday. But these questions are unanswered, and they offer substantial opportunity to consider how festival organizers, audiences, and the industry interact in coming years. This dissertation has examined a small set of case studies to explore the factors involved in the evolution of festivals in the United States since the early 1960s, but countless examples of historical cycles, festival models, and programming strategies remain, even in this national context. I hope that the questions and case studies analyzed in this dissertation will encourage further studies of the deeply varied, ever-changing American film festival system.

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