

Who's Choice? Who's Voice? Can Festival Programmers and Film Critics Stand Away from the Market Diktats but not from Societal Issues?

Jean-Michel Frodon*

Sciences Po Paris (France)

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Abstract

This paper aims to emphasize first the decisive role played by festivals in the creation and circulation of films according to other guidelines than those dictated by the market. With different tools, programmers and critics are the main agents of this inevitably asymmetric but nevertheless vital endless battle. In this context, this paper unfolds the necessary and sometimes counterintuitive strategies to remove the dominance of an archaic power built through decades (actually, since the origins of cinema) of masculine and euro-centrist definition of the art of cinema. This necessary purpose must be pursued without destroying the level of demand in terms of originality and ability to keep re-interrogating political, social et esthetical frames and therefore to resist the submission to pre-established market oriented or militant/propaganda patterns that constantly intends to overwhelm filmmaking and film viewing.

Keywords: Film Festivals; Film Criticism; Film Programming; Film Festival Circuit; Global Art Cinema.

* ✉ jmfrodon@gmail.com

As we intend to map, understand and possibly criticize the film festival system today, I believe one should first remind the major effects and evolutions this pattern has today. It means that whatever comments we are likely to make about how film festivals work, they should be understood on the general background of what defines the presence and actions of Film Festivals in the present time.

The first aspect of this background is the incredible increasing of the number of film festivals, all over the world, a general evolution which goes with a comparable increasing of the natures of these film festivals, the way they work, the goals they give themselves, the economical, political, sociological, technological and aesthetical conditions they operate. One should remember *this* is the major phenomenon. And, with all the debates it may raise, this is basically good news. And then we ought to keep in mind in what context this expansion is happening: the context of major concentrations in the film industry, and the raise of new dominant ways of circulation for movies, online now mostly through SVOD – I am talking here only about legal movie accesses, which, I agree, is a limited view, but including the illegal or informal circulation of films would not change, unfortunately, the global picture, which is the growing control of choices, of tastes, by marketing techniques where algorithms and Artificial Intelligence already play a major role, and are meant to increase their dominance.

Together with other forces, limited forces but nevertheless existing and active, like independent theatres, alternative online platforms, and, on a different angle, educators of all kinds, teachers and professors to begin with, there are two connected resources to permanently build and rebuild other visions of what cinema could and should be, what it can offer and provoke, other than the one so actively and efficiently promoted by the market. These two apparatuses are film festivals and film criticism. Here I need to make an *aparté* about what I call film criticism: anyone, being professional or not, being paid or not, who dedicates time, work, knowledge, deep affective relation with films to write about them should be called a critic. This excludes both the immense amount of vernacular comments about movies that exist online through chats and social networks, as well as media people who only use films to promote glamour, or to discuss – potentially interesting – topics regarding society, history, etc. but without any attention to the cinematic device that relates with these topics.

Actually, there are many people who do respond to this definition of film criticism, most of them are young, and their number is, also, increasing. Mostly online, obviously. What film critics do is, in the principle, similar to what film festivals do, though not with the same tools. And that is to give visibility, prestige, recognition, to certain pieces of works we call films, among so many others. And then to give them and their filmmakers an opportunity, which will be or not turned into facts: public success – theatrically or otherwise, access to fame, echoes of the ideas as well as of the artistic proposals and the narratives by various authors, and, arguably the most important, opportunities to keep working and creating in such a competitive environment.

The questions I made the titles of this paper, “Who Chooses? Who Speaks?”, are about these two groups of people, festival programmers and film critics, who, together, play a major role in building what I would call a *chamber of recognition*. This symbolic space with very material effects has a story, or better said, belong to history – which is only natural, but of course this history, our history, can and should be questioned. It was built in tight connexion with the history of cinema itself, a history that, as we know, is not the accumulation of facts and objects but a certain construction based on these facts and objects. To put it simply, the history of cinema has been, till recent times, a massively dominant ideological discourse about the cinema of the world that was made of what was produced between Moscow and Los Angeles by white men.

When, during the last decade of the Twentieth Century, Jean-Luc Godard has dedicated a huge amount of work, of thinking, of passion to elaborate with his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* about interrelation between the History of cinema and the History of the world, only one film by a non-Caucasian (Mizoguchi) and only two made by a woman (Ida Lupino and Agnès Varda) appear among hundreds and hundreds of filmmakers and of films he calls on the screen.

At this moment, the last decade of 20th century, things had already begun to change, thanks to a specific dimension of what is called globalization, and to which film festivals and critic played a significant role. After a few Japanese directors (Akira Kurosawa and Kenji Mizoguchi to begin with), the solitary figure of Satyajit Ray from Bengal and the brief but significant attention toward Brazilian Cinema Novo, a vast array of works from all over the world had finally reached the “international screens” during the 1980s. “International” meaning

here the Western “chamber of recognition”, and the mentioned “works from all over the world” means they come from Asia, from Latin America, from Sub-Saharan Africa, from the Arab world, from black Americans, from immigrants of various origins making what Hamid Naficy calls *Accented Cinema* (2001) – and still very little from native peoples. This massive arrival meant an immense variety of encounters with stories, bodies, languages, landscapes, rhythms, etc. Encounters that were and are experienced by expanding audiences, due to the rise of the festival phenomenon. But clearly most of these films were chosen and discussed by programmers and critics who did belong to the old Western “chamber of recognition”, or if not most of the time they were educated according to its vision, wherever they would come from.

So, what did they do, as open minded and good willing those who were in charge of selecting and highlighting these films may have been? What kind of films did they choose? They choose films that allow to relate with the set of expectations toward cinema they have. And how could this be otherwise? Here we reach several distinct and rather touchy points. Are these expectations wrong, or at least not to be referred to outside the historical context in which they were elaborated? To a certain extent, this is a specific formulation of the general issue of universalism, it is like to wonder whether “freedom”, “democracy”, as principles, are valued everywhere, even acknowledging that in the name of these values an immense amount of crimes and destructions of all kind have been accomplished, and still are. This philosophical question has been, and is extensively discussed, but I would allow myself here to keep answering that yes, Freedom and Democracy are valuable *per se*. Not taking too many risks, right?

In the field of cinema, it means that films that are considered as opening eyes on various cultures, films that are perceived as giving time and space, visual and sound and rhythmic seduction to all kind of humans and non-humans, landscapes, situations, with emotion and thinking, should be seen and shared.

But according to which guidelines for choice? There is no, and hopefully there will never be a straight answer to that, only a vast modulation of options. The fact that most of the ways it actually functions was actually built and formulated by people born and raised in the area and the culture that did oppress and deny others for ages must have influences on their way of thinking and their taste, and should be questioned. But if it is acknowledged that, with all their flaws and bias, these people and the structures they work for globally meant and to a certain extent did actually improve the interest and understanding of other kinds of proposals, they should not be dismissed. They should be criticised and challenged any time they deserve, and this is obviously happening. They should share their positions with others from different backgrounds, but the need for the continuation of an effort that has proven to be significantly and efficiently fruitful should be increased and diversified, not sabotaged.

Simultaneously, it is more than obvious that there is a need for other visions, other sensibilities, other understandings based on different backgrounds, backgrounds that do include the memory and the contemporary experience of oppressions and un-equality. But it seems very unlikely that the unique fact of “belonging” (and the word “belonging” itself should be questioned) to a group of people who have different perceptions related with their racial and/or gender, or many other factors, entitles anyone to have access to decision position in terms of choosing and saying. The main issue is and should remain their personal capacity to implement different visions and discourses.

I am perfectly aware that saying this seems to avoid the fact that, here as anywhere, those who already occupy power situations are not likely to abandon them to newcomers, wherever they come from. Which means there is a need for procedures and regulations, proactive measures, to open access to much various personalities. Following the terms of the leading thinker in post-colonial studies Dipesh Chakrabarty said, there is a need to *provincialize* the inherited set of ways to understand cinema, not to destroy it. The obvious and very happy growth of ideas and of number of individuals who are making themselves heard and are, slowly, always too slowly, gaining means of action in whatever position is the best possible news. But only thanks to their merits and the merit of their skills and thoughts.

What has been happening in the recent relations toward films themselves is a very useful guideline here. Against the supposed domination of aesthetical choices dictated by the influence of the white male heritage, I would like to mention what I see as two major examples, and to my view negative examples of what has been used to promote alternative approaches. I believe they both embody the dangers of a systematic perception

of what is at stake here, which is the temptation to privilege certain films or type of films for reasons that have nothing to do with cinema.

The first one is about what is known as Nollywood. The huge commercial success of fictions on video originally made in Nigeria (and since in various other West African countries) has been used as a call for respect for the taste of African people, a taste that is not acknowledged and glorified by festival programmers and film critics. This did deserve attention, also since there was, and there is, a huge amount of products, and an apparent diversity due to the three major cultural and ethnical eras in Nigeria, each one moment building its own production (now almost disappeared in the Muslim part of the country), then replicas in several neighbour countries. But all this said, you had to do what programmers and critics should do: not to look at statistics, but to watch films.

Since its very beginning, programming and practicing film criticism was not meant to follow trends, but to influence, distort and challenge them. They had no legitimacy to do such thing other than to offer an alternative option to the dominance of forms, a dominance that is related with conformism and acceptance of the master discourse – of course I don't pretend this is what film festivals and film critics always actually did, but it is the ultimate reason of their existence and action, whether they fulfil it or not. The set of alternative proposals they were likely to support and promote should be based on something that has to do both with beauty as a defying strength against our habits, and rebellion against dominant patterns in society, including regarding storytelling and shapes. And this is what is actually happening whenever programmers and critics are not just loudspeakers for a government or a group with a specific agenda.

Programming, writing critics (and teaching) are essentially meant to disturb. And even if, to remain in the film festival field, each festival practically has to also welcome more conventional and socially desired elements, to attract financial, political and media support, its reason of being remains to provide disruption, innovation.

If, as we know at least since Tom Gunning (2006), cinema since its birth was about attraction, it never was only that, even in the very first years. Should it have been only that, there would never have been neither film festivals nor film critics – only commercial weeks and propaganda. And what happened with Nollywood turns out to be only based on attraction, being a type of entertainment that should maybe not even be called cinema.

There is a common but questionable belief about filmmaking which is that quantity will at one point generate quality: meaning that if enough terrible films are made, ultimately good ones will, somehow, naturally emerge from the lot. This may happen in certain conditions, a good example would be how South Korean “quota quickies” finally gave birth to good films and great filmmakers. But this is certainly not the rule, and to happen it demands a certain amount of factors that are not happening anywhere anytime. And certainly, twenty-five years or so after the appearance of Nollywood, it did not happen in Nigeria. The repetition of the same recipes, the simplistic stories, the over-use of a few tricks, the moral conformism (not to mention the sexism and the fascination for consumerism as driving forces) all together make more than legitimate that these products are, to a large extent, not in their place in film festivals and that they do not generate significant critical work. The repeated assessment that since it has popular success (soft drinks and porno websites and many other objects for sale also have popular success) qualifies them for film festivals is just wrong, and the idea that since their success is happening among non-white, formerly colonized people make them a significant comment against domination and colonialism is just meaningless.

Nollywood has been often used in polemics against what is known as “festival films”. The repetitive assessment that these so-called festival films, a very questionable notion, should be dismissed because they are not liked in the countries they come from, deserves at least three answers. First, many western films that are discovered thanks to film festivals, film critics and occasionally brave distributors and exhibitors are also not commercially successful in their own country. Does that make Philippe Garrel or Andrei Tarkovsky or Abbas Kiarostami a less important filmmaker? Second, many of these films (by far not all of them) are seen by others than the people from their country. So what? As it is said in *The Merchant of Venice*, do not festival goers have eyes and ears, and hearts, and brains? Who is to say that there is a territorial obligation for filmmakers? If Claire Denis is more popular in the US and in Japan than in France, these viewers from abroad have something to do with her films that is as fair and legitimate than anyone else. We, and this “we” is made of many, had to do

with Souleyman Cissé's work, with Youssef Chahine's work, with Tarik Teguia's work, with Lisandro Alonso's work, with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's work. And it is because *we* did have to do with their work that Jia Zhangke or Hou Hsiao-hsien or Idrissa Ouédraogo or Pablo Trapero at one point also became watched and appreciated by *them*, the inhabitants of their own country. And third, for films from the "South", this lack of response in their own country testifies more for the lack of infrastructure and film culture, which are never already there but can be built – as we watched for instance during the brief period when Thomas Sankara was able to make the FESPACO (*Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou*) a huge popular event without diminishing the level of quality in films in Burkina Faso. Film festivals and film critics from all over the world are resources to help this being developed in places where it's missing. They are not the problem; they are part of the solution – together with political and economic local forces. More than once, they have been able to initiate changes they certainly cannot eternally carry on alone.

Another significant example of questionable appraisal of a film, also about Black people, is the huge praise that went together with the massive commercial success of Hollywood superhero blockbuster *Black Panther*. It was written thousand of times that this fiction was empowering black people, in terms that most of time implied, and sometimes explicitly mentioned, it was a better weapon for diversity that whatever film festival and critics support. It is a very important and complex issue to consider how and when movies may empower groups or individuals. But it makes sense only as long as what kind of power at stake is questioned at the same time, and to what extent the apparent valorisation of certain characters by the story and the directing really provides any increase of power (even limited ones) to real person who are likely to identify with the fictional characters. The Ryan Coogler film is based on the same simplistic patterns, in terms of story, image, sound, editing that are characteristic of the basic Hollywood comic based super-productions, except that the characters are black, as well as the director. This kind of film reproduces an imaginary and real set of representations that are part of the oppression of Black people in the US, and the dominance of the world that, among other misdeeds, marginalises and exploits African societies with the help of local despots. Not only it is similar to a drug that would make believe the dominated that they are not, but it conveys the idea that any discriminated person would destroy or at least diminish discrimination and injustice by acting as the oppressors do. It reproduces the stereotypes of consumerism and individualism that are the core of the domination system.

Now comes the next question: *who* is legitimate to discuss this kind of topics? The only acceptable answer, the only logical one actually is: everyone. Meaning that there is an urgent need that voices and choices from members of discriminated minorities (who are by far, all together, the majority, obviously at least since the women are already half of humanity). But that no one is entitled to claim that he (or she, or they) detain a privileged point of view. To provincialize a formerly, and still dominant group does not mean to build another one capital, but to dismiss the very notion of capital, dominant centre. Decisions should be made, procedures should be created, lobbying should be enforced to make this diversity happen, since it won't happen by itself or by the goodwill of those in charge at the moment – everybody knows that, as I do, being myself an old white man. Proactive decisions, in terms of artistic programming, in management, in communication have to be implemented, they work and they will work. The goal is to build access to more voices, more ways of feeling and of thinking, not to silence anybody – at least not to silence anybody who welcomes the diversity of presences and voices.

As an example, which could make sense in many other countries, in France since the blooming of #MeToo, filmmakers, professionals, the dedicated administration and activists created an initiative called the "Collectif 50-50", focused on the presence of women in every domain connected with cinema. It includes a chapter about film festivals. The important statistic survey implemented by the "50-50" movement shows, in this specific field, a significant improvement and, at the same time, that there is still much to do.^[1] Due to a much larger evolution, it already achieved in 18 months a very significant change though obviously by far not complete. And if it is unlikely that other groups of discriminated people can proceed exactly the same way the women and the feminist movement did, other methods of action have to be found, but the process is certainly to be continued.

But the main issue is not, by far, only a question of numbers. It is a question of what anyone does with these films. And this connects with the specificity of what is discussed here: films, works of arts, stories, sensitive objects. Going back to the 1980s and the discoveries in the West of Chinese cinema, Iranian cinema, South

Korean cinema, films from Mali and Burkina, etc. We – we the European festival programmers, critics, audiences – saw them and liked them a lot. Did we fully understand them? It's very likely that the answer is no. Then so what? What we did is actually what any film viewer should do and should be not only allowed but encouraged to do: we appropriated them, with our sensibility, our knowledge, our prejudices even. If we chose them, like them, discuss them with praise, it means that we had something to do with them, something pleasant and fruitful and enlightening to do from these movies. Including based on misunderstanding? Yes! Of course! Again: so what? This is anyway what we always do, with a vast amount of films of any kind and from anywhere, but we did it even more with objects arriving from a longer distance, a more different background than those we are used to. Again: so what?

There is nothing more depressing and frightening, regarding films, that the requirement of transparency. It is true about films, it is true about any work of art, it is even true about human relations at large, as the great pioneer of decolonial thinking Édouard Glissant wrote in his strong and poetic tone (and I quote):

I claim for everyone the right to opacity, which is not the same as closing oneself off. It is a mean of reacting against all the ways of reducing us to the false clarity of universal models. I do not have to 'understand' anyone, individual, community, people – i.e. to 'take them with me' at the cost of smothering them, of losing them in a boring totality that I would be in charge of – in order to agree to live with them, to build with them, to take risks with them. Let opacity, whether it be ours for the other or maybe the other's for us, not close down in obscurantism or apartheid; let it be a celebration, not a terror. Let the right to opacity, whereby Diversity will best be preserved and acceptance strengthened, be a lamp watching over our poetics. (2020: 16-17)

So here, to conclude, I have to go back to the second question in the title of this text: "Can Festival Programmers and Film Critics stand away from the market diktats but not from societal issues?" Of course, they cannot, and they should not even try, not only because they would be meant to fail but because it is a mistake, a wrongdoing. Films, festivals, texts about them are in the world and need to be. But they have the possibility and the opportunity to build specific approaches, away or even against the market driven forces – which is as well the dominant taste, since the massively dominant taste is determined by marketing. They can do so by constantly, restlessly recombining new high demands toward films, toward audiences *and toward themselves*, according to the contemporary understanding of our society, and especially of its dimensions of injustice. It is their very nature as well as their moral obligations to be permanently insecure and questioning, and, with a lot of slowdowns and resistance as one would expect, I believe this is exactly what is happening now.

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Jean-Michel Frodon – Sciences Po Paris (France)✉ jmfrodon@gmail.com

Jean-Michel Frodon is a journalist and film critic, who wrote for daily “Le Monde” (1990-2003), was the editorial director of “Cahiers du cinema” (2003-2009), now regularly writes for Slate.fr and many journals and magazines, both in-print and online, in France, but also USA, South Korea, Spain and the Balkans. He is also professor at Sciences Po Paris (Political Sciences Institute) and Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews (Scotland, UK). As a film historian, he is the author or editor of many books, including *La Projection nationale*, *Hou Hsiao-hsien*, *Conversation avec Woody Allen*, *Le Cinéma chinois*, *Cinema and the Shoah*, *Robert Bresson*, *Gilles Deleuze et les images*, *La Critique de cinéma*, *Amos Gitai*, *Genèses*, *Le Cinéma d'Edward Yang*, *Le Cinéma français de la Nouvelle Vague à nos jours*, *Assayas par Assayas*, *Cinemas of Paris*, *The World of Jia Zhangke*, *Chris Marker*, *13xOzu*, *Abbas Kiarostami l'œuvre ouverte*, *Le Cinéma à l'épreuve du divers*. He also acts as a programmer and a curator in festivals and exhibitions (Centre Pompidou, Cinémathèque française, ZKM, Taipei Biennial, Centre Pompidou Metz, LUMA-Arles).