

Reviewed by Siddharth Chadha

LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness

by **Antoine Damiens**.

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The past two decades have seen an exponential rise in academics studying myriad aspects of film festivals. Indeed, at least among scholars writing on the subject, film festival studies is now considered to be a legitimate academic discipline.¹ Inherently interdisciplinary, film festival scholars employ a range of theoretical and methodological tools such as network theory, film analysis, discourse analysis, history of institutions, national cinema, logics of film distribution, and gatekeeping in order to study the film festival phenomenon.² A notable strand of this scholarship addresses LGBTQ film festivals, a specific niche at the intersection of art, identity, and activism. Antoine Damiens's *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* is a timely book that attempts to intervene in this burgeoning scholarship by looking at some of the key assumptions that guide larger film festival studies based on his reflexive inquiry within LGBTQ film festival research.³

Damiens embarks on this ambitious journey on the back of two theoretical concepts: *critical festival studies* and *film festival as a method*. Critical festival studies, according to Damiens, is an “analysis of the methodolog-

1 An authoritative and comprehensive introduction to film festival research can be found in Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, eds., *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).

2 Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist, “Film Festival Studies: An Overview of a Burgeoning Field,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St Andrews, Scotland: St Andrews Film Studies, 2009).

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

ical conundrums and political projects that structure the field of festival studies.⁴ This concept illuminates how film festival scholarship is predominantly driven and shaped by its desire to gain academic legitimacy. A large number of film festival researchers, laments Damiens, are occupied with justifying why and which festivals matter, either because of their scale, influence on film distribution, position in national discourse, and so forth.⁵ The second concept, film festival as a method, attempts to draw scholars' attention to film festivals "not solely as objects of research but as ideal sites for understanding cinematic cultures."⁶ This book promises a critique, or in Damiens' lexicon, a *queering*, of the field of film festival studies by suspending the field's race toward institutional legitimacy, and it prepares the ground to think about film festivals in ways that could provide explorations of film cultures, especially using the film festival as a tool for theoretical and methodological reflection.

To that end, the first three chapters of *LGBTQ Film Festivals* are devoted to critical festival studies, and the subsequent two chapters pave the way for the further development of the film festival as a method. Chapter 1, "Festivals That (Did Not) Matter: Festival's Archival Practices and the Field Imaginary of Festival Studies," gives a detailed account of Damiens's experiences of conducting research at several public archives and private collections, including the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles), the New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, and the Archives gaies du Québec (Montréal). This chapter provides a fascinating reading of significant LGBTQ film events that were never documented and are now accessible only through their ephemeral traces. Based on his work in the archives, Damiens informs readers that as early as the late 1960s, several US-based adult theaters organized gay film festivals that were thinly documented. This is surprising because these events predate San Francisco's 1977 Gay Film Fest, largely assumed to be the first or the oldest LGBTQ film festival in the world, by almost a decade. This chapter reflects upon the principles that dictate which festivals are "deemed worthy of being preserved" and how scholars' over-reliance on these materials deemed worthy skews the field of film festival studies. Drawing on Robyn Wiegman's concept of disciplinary unconscious, it further analyzes how a specific theoretical apparatus or exclusion of ephemeral film events creates epistemological biases in the scholarly inquiry of festivals.⁷

In chapter 2, "The Queer Film Ecosystem: Symbolic Economy, Festivals, and Queer Cinema's Legs," Damiens turns his attention to the history of North American and Western European queer films and LGBTQ film cultures. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of taste-making and cultural production, the chapter examines the circulation of LGBTQ films, particularly in the United States and Western Europe. Damiens provides a historiographic account of a simultaneous circulation of queer films across networks

4 Damiens, 27.

5 Damiens, 27.

6 Damiens, 27.

7 Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

as diverse as avant-garde cinemas, art house venues, adult cinemas, queer film festivals, and mainstream commercial cinemas. The chapter is correspondingly filled with rich historical accounts about how the film festival format enabled gay and lesbian filmmakers to circumvent censorship and economic marginalization in the 1970s. Based on a historical analysis of the development of LGBTQ film cultures in this region, Damiens argues that a film festival is one of the many practices that contribute to the development of film cultures. He juxtaposes his analysis with film festival scholarship that narrowly positions the festival network as the main institution that regulates the circulation and valuation of films.

Chapter 3, “Out of the Celluloid Closet, into the Theaters! Towards a Genealogy of Queer Film Festivals and Gay and Lesbian Film Studies,” further develops the concept of critical festival studies by tracing how gay and lesbian studies infiltrated the malleable boundaries between film criticism, academic scholarship, and community-based activism in the United States. By focusing on the careers of specific film scholars and critics, including Vito Russo, Richard Dyer, Thomas Waugh, and B. Ruby Rich, the chapter attempts to highlight how organizing and curating have been instrumental in shaping LGBTQ cinema as an object of knowledge. This chapter is an attempt to destabilize a core methodology of film festival studies that emphasizes the rigid distinctions between scholarly inquiry, film criticism, and festival organizing; Damiens urges scholars to instead theorize “how our disciplinary, affective and personal attachments to festivals shape our scholarship.”⁸

Having evidenced in detail how film festival scholarship is deeply structured through its own assumptions, assumptions often made in scholars’ attempts to legitimize the field, Damiens turns in the following two chapters to elaborating his second concept, film festival as a method. Chapter 4, “Festivals as Archives: Collective Memory and LGBTQ Festivals’ Temporality,” teases out various aspects of LGBTQ film festivals that make them a part of gay and lesbian history. Placing a special emphasis on the visual elements of film festivals, that is, not only their films but also other materials such as decorations of the venue, trailers, and posters, he argues that “LGBTQ film festivals both reveal and visualize queerness.”⁹ The film festival as such is a site where a complex set of practices are performed, including self-representation, shaping and enabling access to queer practices, and development of an archive of gay and lesbian cultural memories. The chapter provides a nuanced account of these practices while also reflecting on the fact that festivals often refract conflicting images of the subject they attempt to represent. This means that festivals “do not seek to establish a definitive historical truth, nor do they entail a linear relationship with/of history.” Rather, they “create memories—of one’s friends and loves, of films, of community.”¹⁰

Chapter 5, “Images+Translation: Imagining Queerness and Its Homoscapes,” focuses on the discursive aspects of LGBTQ film festivals. This chapter draws heavily from the case of Image+Nation, a Montréal-based

8 Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals*, 146.

9 Damiens, 159.

10 Damiens, 178–179.

LGBTQ film festival that caters to both French Québécois and Anglophone audiences. Based on an analysis of Image+Nation's bilingual texts and the subtle differences in the way the festival constructs discourses of sexuality, Damiens argues that LGBTQ festivals do not necessarily refract global LGBTQ discourses but rather redefine the notions of *global* and *local* in their specific contexts. Even if this chapter is perhaps the weakest in contributing to the author's argument about film festivals as a method, it makes a coherent contribution to the topic of globalization and sexuality.

As a scholar who recently completed a doctorate on LGBTQ film festivals in Sweden, I was particularly impressed with the breadth and scope of literature and empirical material that the book encompasses. Along with its academic authority, I was also taken by Damiens's self-reflexivity and acute awareness of his own limitations. Although the book does not address film festivals outside the United States or Europe, and at times reproduces the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, Damiens deftly acknowledges such shortcomings in his work. As a reader, I was charmed by the earnestness with which Damiens frames this book as an homage to the several people he befriended during his research. In his own words, "friendship and fucking, be it in an academic context or at festivals, structure artistic and intellectual productions."¹¹

One of the many valuable contributions of this book is to draw attention to the paradoxes of film festival studies, a rising field of inquiry that seems to be trapped in justifying its own object of research. The book also presents an exceptional example of how a study largely pertaining to LGBTQ subjects is not simply an investigation of identity but productively examines broader social phenomena and makes wide-ranging theoretical and methodological interventions. Damiens's book can reach far beyond its primary audience of film festival scholars to researchers in adjacent fields including political science, gender studies, anthropology, and sociology by offering critical insights into how LGBTQ film festivals are not simply cultural events where films about gender and sexuality are screened, but places through which the lives of LGBTQ communities become intelligible.

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11 Damiens, 29.