

**IS IT QUEER ENOUGH?:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRITERIA AND SELECTION PROCESS FOR  
PROGRAMMING FILMS WITHIN LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER  
AND QUEER FILM FESTIVALS IN THE UNITED STATES**

by  
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This research project is an attempt to document in writing both the varying definitions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (lgbtq) film and the methods of programming that lgbtq film festivals use when selecting films for exhibition. This paper is intended to support communication and information sharing between lgbtq film festivals, providing the organizations with data that will further the professional field of queer film exhibition. I have selected to focus on lgbtq film festivals for this study due to the role they play in defining and developing the genre of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer film.

For this study, I identified 57 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer film festivals in the United States by using online databases, websites and film festival directories. I mailed a letter of introduction along with a survey to each of the festivals, asking them to provide information about their organizations, their decision-making processes, and how they define lgbtq film. Responses from 17 lgbtq film festivals are included in this study.

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The purpose of this study is to explore themes of sexuality and gender identity within the context of programming lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (lgbtq) film festivals. I have selected lgbtq film festivals as a focus for this study due to the role they play in defining and developing the genre of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer film. While queer film and video makers will continue to create their work, opportunities for exhibition within the lgbtq framework depend on the policies and guidelines of queer film festivals. Audiences of works exhibited within this framework often identify queer cinema with the offerings available through these institutions, venues and exhibitions.

While participating in an online discussion on the PopcornQ Professionals listserv in Spring 2002, I became aware of an issue that I found intriguing which warranted further study. PopcornQ, a website dedicated to queer cinema, is a valuable resource for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer film festival directors and filmmakers. The monitored listserv is an excellent opportunity for festival directors and filmmakers to share ideas, debate issues, and promote events. The particular discussion that led to this project was a debate surrounding the definition of what made a film ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ enough to be shown at an lgbtq film festival.

From the online discussion, I became aware of some basic issues that filmmakers and festival directors were facing in relation to this topic. A self-identified gay filmmaker posted a message asking for festival programmers to define what they look for when selecting films for exhibition, essentially what kind of films are ‘gay enough’ to be programmed at a queer festival. This particular filmmaker made a piece that is not gay in content and has been rejected by queer festivals. (PopcornQ Listserv, posted by H. Gunnarsdottir, April 23, 2002)

Over the next few days several queer film festival directors, filmmakers and distributors weighed in on the discussion. Cindy Emch, Program Coordinator of the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, replied with her definition of ‘gay film’ as films made by, about and for the queer community. Emch goes on to say that “If you are making a film that is not explicitly gay, has no queer sensibilities, it is hard for a queer film fest to know why you are submitting the film to a queer film fest unless you identify yourself as queer on your entry form.” She recommends that filmmakers write a letter along with their submissions to provide more information on why the work is specifically of interest to gay audiences and to assist festivals in programming and framing the work within festivals. (PopcornQ Listserv, posted by C. Emch, April 23, 2002)

Jim Carl, Director of Programming for the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, replied by offering that every festival is different and makes programming decisions in it’s own unique way.

Some [festivals] are programmed by a single individual or a small group.  
Others [festivals] are programmed by a committee of volunteers. Even more seem to be programmed by a combination of volunteers and/or a board of

directors. If you were to ask any of these festivals to define 'gay film', I suspect you would get a different response. (PopcornQ Listserv, posted by J. Carl, April 23, 2002)

Carl continues by adding "It's all subjective to the experiences that each person has ever felt, heard, had happen or wants to happen. It's also subjective to the audience's reaction to films in previous festivals."

Desi del Valle, Distribution Director at Frameline, an lgbtq film and video distribution company, added another dimension to the conversation by asking participants "If festivals (remember: I said "if") exist to promote queer visibility, how does showing non-queer content further the mission and does it just take programming slots away from queer-content work?" (PopcornQ Listserv, posted by D. del Valle, April 25, 2002) Queer filmmaker Bill Basquin replied by arguing that the films he makes are queer in content because he made them. Basquin adds:

I think that part of what we're saying by having queer film festivals is that it does matter who made the films that we're watching. I think that showing stuff that isn't overtly queer (because of its content) is part of exploring the idea of what it means to be queer and what some queer points of view might look like. (PopcornQ Listserv, posted by B. Basquin, April 30, 2002)

I have heard some queer festival programmers bemoan the need to define queer film because the genre is elusive and mutable, subject to the various opinions of filmmakers, programmers, and audiences. Yet the topic is continually addressed in venues such as the gathering at the Berlinale, the SUMMIT '99 conference convened by OUTFEST Los Angeles, the Persistent Vision queer cinema conference hosted by the San Francisco International lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 2001, and the PopcornQ online discussion.

When the PopcornQ discussion tapered off, participants were left with some knowledge of how other festivals address this issue, but no way of bringing all of the responses together into a single coherent document that could be shared. In addition, only a small number of festival programmers and coordinators participated, limiting the potential responses to those who happened to subscribe to the listserv and also checked their Email often enough to respond over that one to two week span.

Seeing a need for a more detailed study on the topic, I hope to include more participants and to document responses in a way that can be easily shared amongst not only festival programmers, but filmmakers and other interested parties as well. The purpose of this study is to support communication and information sharing between lgbtq film festivals and the organizations presenting these events. This will provide the organizations with data that will further develop the professional field of queer film exhibition, particularly in relation to the role that these organizations conduct in the ongoing definition of queer cinema. This research project is an

attempt to document in writing both the varying definitions of lgbtq film and the methods of programming that queer festivals use when programming films for exhibition. The thoughts, opinions, and policies that programmers shared in the online discussion were invaluable in directing this project, as many of the questions raised during the forum are replicated and expanded upon for the purposes of conducting this project.

## **METHOD**

For this study, I identified 57 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer film festivals in the United States by using online databases, websites and film festival directories. I mailed a letter of introduction along with a survey to each of the festivals, asking them to provide information about their organizations, their decision-making processes, and how they define lgbtq film. In addition, I asked the festivals to return the survey along with any written materials about their festivals such as past festival programs that may provide more data for the project. Finally, I contacted several of the participants for follow-up telephone or e-mail interviews to clarify their survey answers and to ask additional questions.

## **LIMITATIONS**

For the purposes of this study, film festivals that present queer work but do not identify their festivals as lgbtq venues were excluded. These festivals occasionally exhibit lgbtq work, which in turn furthers the visibility of queer filmmakers and the queer community. They provide a valuable opportunity for lgbtq work to be seen and appreciated by film festival audiences, but they do not grapple with many of the same issues as lgbtq film festivals, particularly in defining queer film.



**FILM FESTIVALS AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE**

The number of film festivals has been increasing, resulting in one for just about every city and community. Early European film festivals in Venice, Cannes and Berlin paved the way for the more recent additions of U.S. festivals such as Telluride, Sundance, and the alternative upstart Slamdance. In addition to citywide events, film festivals focusing on every imaginable theme have also emerged. From major multimillion dollar affairs filled with Hollywood studio presence and an industry perspective, to events such as a silent film festival in Italy with an audience of a small group of enthusiasts and scholars, film festivals serve many purposes. What they have in common is the medium and the desire to create forum for the exhibition of that medium, whether it be for profit or for the experience of art, politics and culture.

Publications such as *The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide* by Chris Gore (2001) attempt to bring cohesiveness to the mass proliferation of film festivals by providing information pertaining to each of the events. Recent listings in this guide include as many as 600 film festivals throughout the world. “Given that there are so many of them,” Kenneth Turan (2002) states in *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made*, “the key thing these multiple festivals share is a need to differentiate themselves from each other.” (p. 5) This need to differentiate is reflected by the identity of each of the events.

For each film festival there is an audience or community served by the theme, genre, or type of programming offered. Oftentimes, as in the case of film festivals dedicated to showcasing queer film, the events are valuable in shaping and identifying the groups being represented on screen. As Joshua Gamson states in his paper titled *The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York*, “[Film] festivals are, one might say, homes or warehouses for collective identity; they involve ongoing and quite self-conscious decision-making about the content and contours of the ‘we’ being made literally visible. (p. 9) Cinema is a cultural product, reflecting the identities and beliefs of its creators, and the exhibition of cinema within the film festival context is a brief, concentrated presentation of those identities and beliefs.

Many film festivals in the United States are a part of the non-profit media arts sector, a category including the production, exhibition, and distribution of film, video, audio and new media. The National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC), a national association of non-profit organizations and individuals committed to furthering the media arts, has a membership of over 215 organizations according to their online directory, 75 of which present at least one film festival.

While non-profit media arts organizations exist for a variety of reasons, they are often mission-driven organizations with the interests of the communities they serve at the forefront of organizational activities and programs. (McCarthy & Ondaatje, 2003) Film festivals presented by non-profit organizations generally operate outside of the major studio framework of production

and distribution, and oftentimes focus on exhibiting independent and/or locally produced work that might not otherwise be seen. Patricia Zimmerman, a media arts advocate and author, succinctly identifies the non-profit media arts sector as “space for radical- and popular- media art to flourish in defiance.” (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 377) It is through this culture of defiance, and the need to provide alternative viewpoints to mainstream media, that many independent film festivals thrive.

Film festivals have recently experienced an increased interest from major studios as a successful alternative for marketing selected films. (Gore, 2001) Whereas the majority of these festivals previously existed outside the studio framework, Hollywood studios now view these events as opportunities to segment viewing audiences into identifiable niche markets, making it easier to market and generate an interest in specific films. In addition, there are also film festivals, such as those in Los Angeles, that specifically focus on the film buyers market. Most filmmakers submit their films to festivals with the hope that their work may be picked up by a distribution company to be widely released at theaters across the country by the exposure they receive at such events. (Gore, 2001) Thus, the proliferation of festivals once outside the Hollywood framework has come to include studio participation.

## QUEER CINEMA

The 1990's saw a record number of independent blatantly queer films exhibited in various festivals throughout the world. (Olson, 2003) In reference to the 1991 Toronto International Film Festival, cultural critic B. Ruby Rich offered, “there, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image.” (Rich, 1993, p. 164) One such important event was the 1992 Sundance Film Festival line-up of queer films that broke into the independent film festival circuit. Among these films were *Swoon* (1992) by Tom Kalin, *The Hours and Times* (1991) by Christopher Munch, and *The Living End* (1992) by Gregg Araki. Rich acknowledged the emergence of these films by dubbing this movement as New Queer Cinema.

Rich (1993) categorized New Queer Cinema as a genre “united by a common style” in which “there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with a social constructionism very much in mind.” Rich went on to say that “breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure.” (Rich, 1993, p.165) These particular films marked a moment in queer film history, a diversion from the body of work that gay and lesbian filmmakers had previously produced.

Evidenced by the extensive history of homosexuals in film outlined in *The Celluloid Closet*, author Vito Russo (1981) identifies the ways in which gays and lesbians have been involved in every aspect of film production. Gays and lesbians, employed as screenwriters, actors, directors,

and producers, have contributed to the shared cinematic cultural history of films in the United States. This shared history has not always been visible due to regulations imposed by the motion picture industry.

In 1930, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) was formed. It was a self-governing body of the film industry with the intent to avoid censorship of this new business of filmmaking. A regulation enacted by the MPAA, titled the Motion Picture Production Code, prohibited the subject of homosexuality onscreen. (Russo, 1981) Previously, countless films had been made with symbolic references and innuendos to homosexuality through the proliferation of ‘buddy’ relationships between men onscreen and through representations of sissy men or masculine women. (Dyer, 1993 & Russo, 1981)

In 1961, a revision in the Production Code led to the following terms: “ In keeping with the culture, the mores and values of our time, homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may now be treated with care, discretion, and restraint”. (Russo, 1981, p. 121) With this revision, the Motion Picture Association of America brought homosexuality “out of the closet and into the shadows”, as Russo states, thus spawning the beginning of cinematic representation of homosexuals as “pathological, predatory and dangerous; villains and fools, but never heroes.” (Russo, 1981, p.122)

The revision in the Production Code signaled a weakening Hollywood studio control over cinema exhibition. “The fall of the self-censorship system (and the installation of the ratings system) also signaled the opportunity for Hollywood films to explore taboo subjects in greater detail.” (Schlager, 1998, p. 331) Art house, alternative, independent, and foreign cinema began seeing wider distribution and exhibition throughout the United States. Among these films were studio films such as Robert Aldrich’s *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and William Friedkin’s *The Boys in the Band* (1970), which coincided with the Stonewall riots and the formation of gay liberation and activist groups across the country. They are examples of independent and Hollywood films of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s made about gays that include representations of self-hating homosexuals shown in anything but a positive light. Films such as these provided an accurate picture of the fear and ignorance surrounding homosexuality in America at the time. (Russo, 1981)

Flourishing alongside the Hollywood studio productions of the same time were underground, experimental and avant-garde cinema alternatives. It would be remiss not to mention this invaluable genre with its own network of filmmaker exhibitions and mostly non-narrative structure. It is within this marginalized cinematic language that many film scholars draw parallels between the underground genre and the “forbidden pleasures of homosexual desire.” (Schlager, 1998, p. 337) Perhaps one of the most well known independent gay filmmakers of the time, Kenneth Anger exemplifies the queer contributions to the experimental underground film world with his films such as *Fireworks* (1947) and *Scorpio Rising* (1964).

Ultimately, negative representations of homosexuals in films, the growing gay liberation movement, and the emergence of the AIDS crisis led to activism in the 1970's and 1980's. With greater access to less expensive equipment and the growing recognition of a need to identify and document the struggles that the queer community was facing, filmmaking became a tool for this activist movement. Films such as the Mariposa Film Group's *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977), which documented the lives of 26 lesbians and gays from a variety of backgrounds through the process of coming out, began to emerge.

In order to fulfill the educational project of affirming lesbian-gay identity, community, and politics, and asserting the necessity for all gays and lesbians to come out, these films more often dispense with the ambiguity inherent in avant-garde film styles and, instead, employ the straightforward style of talking head documentary. (Schlager, 1998, p. 340)

These were films made by gays for gays, with the intention of raising a consciousness parallel to that of the gay liberation movement, highlighting the importance of coming out and recognizing a gay and lesbian identity.

Filmmakers of the New Queer Cinema movement drew upon this history to produce their work. The proliferation of queer narrative films at the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals in 1991 and 1992 respectively, defined the moment where films made by gays and lesbians with gay and lesbian content received wide recognition in mixed audiences. (Rich, 1993) In contrast, films with queer content had been playing on screens in gay and lesbian film festivals for more than 15 years before this occurrence. Queer cinema has, in part, been nurtured by the exhibition opportunities provided by queer film festival circuit. Changes in the queer film genre have most often been evidenced in the programming offered by these festivals.

## **QUEER FILM FESTIVALS AND THEIR UNIQUE CHALLENGES**

The proliferation of queer film festivals in the United States is fairly recent, the oldest and largest of the festivals being the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, established in 1977. (Olson, 2003) San Francisco recently presented its 27<sup>th</sup> annual festival and boasts annual audience attendance figures at roughly 80,000, making it the largest film festival in California.

According to PlanetOut's PopcornQ Directory of International Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in April 2003, roughly 60 film festivals in the United States specialized in the exhibition of the genre of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (lgbtq) films and videos. These festivals are a segment of the over 150 gay and lesbian film festivals held worldwide that present hundreds of different works to audiences in their respective communities each year.

Queer film festivals are as varied as the communities and constituencies they serve. A few larger

metropolitan cities such as San Francisco and New York are blessed with the opportunity to host more than one festival focusing on presenting lgbtq film and video. Queer film festivals are presented by a variety of organizations, including community centers, universities, and non-profit groups. More than merely serving as sites for the exhibition of queer film, “these festivals create a unique social/cultural space where films made by, for or about the lgbtq community can be viewed, discussed, and publicly debated.” (Ferrelli, 1999, p. 5)

As a subset of the film festival context discussed previously, queer film festivals operate within the traditional film exhibition framework, dealing with many of the same issues as the field of independent cinema and the non-profit media arts sector. Recently, queer film festivals have served as an excellent example of the ways in which major motion picture companies have used the film festival circuit to target niche markets, this time focusing on lesbian and gay films. Increased industry participation in queer film festivals has changed the appearance, funding and even administration of some of these organizations, functioning as a buyer’s market for Hollywood. (Helfand, 1997) Festivals such as OUTFEST Los Angeles have close connections with not only the lgbtq community, but high-profile studios as well. Among the benefits to festivals that forge relationships with the motion picture industry, an increased visibility of lgbtq cinema is evident. (Helfand, 1997)

For example, Queer cinema author Jenni Olson describes change in the relationship between queer festivals and major studios. Samuel Goldwyn Company acquired rights to the lesbian feature film *Go Fish*, in turn marketing the film by making several high-profile appearances at lgbtq film festivals. Olson goes on to say:

This marketing strategy continues today as many distributors clamor for opening and closing night slots at the major gay film festivals as a means for creating excitement and garnering exposure for their films in an increasingly saturated marketplace. This is a drastic change from earlier prevailing attitudes when distributors went to great lengths to avoid having their films pegged as “gay” or “lesbian” and thus avoided gay film festivals. (Olson, 2003, par. 9)

Studio involvement in the queer film festival circuit has received criticism from some involved who question the diversion from primarily serving as “community-nurturing’ events. (Helfand, 1997) “It’s as if the mainstream media have come to play a more important role in determining what a ‘gay’ film is than the queer festivals,” says Shari Frilot, programmer for MIX, the New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. (Helfand, 1997, p. 86)

These recent changes in the queer film festival circuit are reflective of the changes that the genre of queer film itself is undergoing as mentioned above. In the introduction to *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, editors Mathew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (2001) suggest that:

[It] is a pressing concern for queer studies as it addresses the subject of film culture that dissident sexualities are no longer necessarily produced solely through acts of repression but, in fact, are actively deployed as marketing tools for the industries of cinema. (Tinkcom & Villarejo, 2001, p.20)

Tinkcom and Villarejo go on to identify that which “what might once have been seen as the (relatively concealed) some-sex male and female subcultures that interpreted dominant film for their own needs now emerge as niche markets for films that are said to cater to gay men and lesbians.” (Tinkcom & Villarejo, 2001, p. 20)

This thought is echoed in an article written by B. Ruby Rich in 2000 for the British Film Institute’s *Sight and Sound* publication. In this article, Rich alters her previous definition of New Queer Cinema as a ‘moment’ rather than a ‘movement.’ She goes on to describe the success of such films as Lisa Cholodenko’s *High Art* (1998) and the ability of the film to make stars of its actresses by its wide success.

With such films, it could be a moment of triumphant consolidation for the New Queer Cinema. Yet the opposite would seem to suggest itself: that it has become so successful as to have dispersed itself in any number of elsewhere. Lacking the concentrated creative presence of the past, the New Queer Cinema has become just another niche market, another product line pitched at one particular type of discerning customer. (Rich, 2000, par. 12)

In addition to the external challenges from the film exhibition and distribution framework, queer film festivals face many more challenges unique to their mission and goals. The festivals exist for a variety of reasons, but most commonly as venues to exhibit work that is by, for, or about the LGBTQ community. Each festival must address what it is they hope to achieve and how best to serve their diverse communities by the programming they select.

Queer film festivals are organizations that are often in a unique position of being seen as playing a variety of roles in their communities. A festival can be seen as a social justice activist organization, the sole LGBTQ social outlet of a small town, and a queer youth-centered cultural event, all at the same time by different people in the community by the programming they offer. For queer filmmakers however, LGBTQ film festivals are seen largely as an opportunity to screen their work.

As noted filmmaker and film scholar Prathiba Parmar (1993) writes, “Queer festivals are essential for many film-makers, especially lesbians and people of colour, because it’s often the only place we can get our work screened and affirmed.” Parmar continues by adding, “What’s becoming clear, however, is that these festivals are programmed predominately by white gay men and women who prioritize their own constituencies, further marginalizing queers of colour. (Parmar, 1992, p.175) Filmmaker and cultural critic Isaac Julien also professes the importance



of queer film festivals to his work. “In terms of audience building, I’m absolutely indebted to lesbian and gay film festivals. My work would not be known without them.” (Helfand, 1997, p.88)

Many queer filmmakers, critics, and scholars have criticized the queer film exhibition framework for marginalizing lesbian films and films made by people of color. In an account of the organizational history of MIX: The New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, Joshua Gamson (1995) describes that, “like most gay and lesbian community organizations since the 1980’s, the Experimental Festival [MIX] was troubled by its own detachment from various segments of the population they set out to “represent,” in particular lesbians and gay men of color.” Gamson goes on to describe the changeover of programming staff at the festival to include co-directors of color.

It is through organizational restructuring, such as the one that took place at MIX, that the importance of a diverse programming body has become apparent. Those individuals who screen, select, and program work shown at lgbtq film festivals help to shape the identity of queer film. In addition, audiences of queer film festivals define queer cinema by the works that these festivals choose to exhibit. Therefore, programmers of these festivals, along with queer filmmakers, are in powerful positions to shape the future direction of queer cinema by facilitating the exhibition of these films to audiences.

The transition of queer cinema as a tool for activism to the reduction of many lgbtq films to a niche market by major studios, along with the rise of the awareness of the power that lgbtq film festivals hold in defining the genre, has led to many recent discussions amongst programmers related to defining the genre of queer cinema. One such discussion took place at the Berlinale in February 2001 in Berlin, during an annual gathering of 75 queer film festival organizers during the event. Covered by IndieWire, an online independent film journal, the topic of discussion included “What makes a queer film queer?” with input from various attendees. Sundance and OUTFEST programmer Shari Frilot is quoted as saying “We are the ones who have played a part in defining what [queer film] is. It can be whatever we want it to be as programmers—our role is inherently a political one.” (Hernandez, 2001, par. 5) Frilot goes on to say that “Part of our major goal is to create a space where gay and lesbian people can come together,” and that it “almost doesn’t matter what we put on the screen.” (Hernandez, 2001, par. 6)

**METHOD**

For this project I mailed surveys to 57 LGBTQ film festivals in the United States, gathering data to identify and analyze issues surrounding the exhibition of films within these festivals. Questions on the survey were organized into two sections: organizational information and defining lgbtq film. (see survey in appendix A)

Organizational information was collected for each of the participants. Questions in this section focused on collecting the following data: the number of years the festival has existed; information on the presenting umbrella organization, if one exists; the festival mission statement and the decision making process for film selection within each organization. The second section contained questions that attempted to define what makes a film ‘lgbtq’ enough to be programmed by each festival organization. Questions in this section were posed to identify if the festival had an existing definition of lgbtq film, what the lgbtq-related requirements were for programming work, and programming exceptions that have been made in relation to lgbtq requirements in the past. Additionally, participants were asked how they framed not overtly lgbtq-themed work within the festival and what audience responses have been to the programming of this work.

Along with the questionnaire, I requested that each participating film festival submit materials pertaining to the organization. These materials could include written program guides to festivals, web based guides to festivals, promotional materials for festivals, information concerning special events related to festival programming, and educational components of presenting film programs. In addition, I selected a few respondents to interview via telephone and email, gathering more detailed information on the subject.

**RESPONSES**

Of the 57 mailed requests for participation in the study, I received 17 completed surveys for a return rate of almost 30%. The 17 participants include OUTFEST: The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (CA), OUTFEST: The San Diego Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (CA), Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (FL), Outrageous: Santa Barbara Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (CA), Southern Alameda County Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (CA), Fresno Reel Pride International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (CA), Pikes Peak Lavender Film Festival (CO), Aspen Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (CO), Boulder Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (CO), Indianapolis LGBT Film Festival (IN), Reel Pride Michigan: Michigan’s LGBT Film Festival (MI), Long Island Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (NY), Pittsburgh International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (PA), Philadelphia International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (PA), OUT TAKES Dallas (TX), Seattle Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (WA), and Spokane Gay/Lesbian Film Festival (WA).

Of the 17 participants, one festival requested to remain anonymous for selected sections of this



report. Eight of the respondents included additional information in the form of festival programs, organization information, fact sheets, marketing materials, and calls for entries. These materials assisted in providing information in support of responses provided on the surveys.

## ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION

The first set of data collected for this project focused on organizational information about each of the participating film festivals. Aside from film festival directories and individual festival websites, there is very little written about the scope, scale, history, affiliation, and identities of queer festivals.

Participants were first asked to provide the number of years their festival has been presenting exhibitions. Responses varied from 20 years for both OUTFEST Los Angeles and Aspen, to recent festival newcomers Reel Pride Michigan, with one prior festival, and Pikes Peak, which recently presented its third annual event. Nine of the festivals (OUTFEST San Diego, Alameda County, Boulder, Miami, Long Island, Philadelphia, OUT TAKES Dallas, Spokane, and Seattle) have existed between 5-9 years, demonstrating a growth in queer film festivals between 1994 and 1998. (Figure 3.1)

Participants were then asked if their festival was produced by an umbrella organization such as a community non-profit, university, or distribution company. Analysis of this data was performed to reveal affiliations between the festivals and other organizations or businesses in their communities and how this affected programming for the festival. Of the 17 respondents, 10 festivals are presented by umbrella organizations and 7 are independent organizations. (Figure 3.2)

These presenting umbrella organizations can further be subdivided into community funds and foundations (Aspen, Santa Barbara, and Reel Pride Michigan), non-profits dedicated to presenting queer cinema (OUTFEST Los Angeles, OUTFEST San Diego, and Seattle), non-profits dedicated to presenting cinema in general (the Philadelphia festival is presented by the Philadelphia Film Society) and youth related organizations (OUT TAKES Dallas whose proceeds benefit Walt Whitman High School for gay, lesbian and transgender students, and the Indianapolis festival which is presented by the Indiana Youth Group for lgbtq youth). In addition, the Alameda County festival is presented CommPre, Community Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems, a program of Horizon Services, Inc. (Figure 3.3)

Of the seven festivals produced by independent organizations, six identified they already are, or are in the process of becoming, non-profit organizations. These festivals include Fresno Reel Pride, Pikes Peak, Boulder, Miami, Long Island, and Pittsburgh. The Spokane festival identifies itself as a non-profit business. In all, 10 of the 17 festivals are specifically presented by non-profit media arts organizations.

To better understand each participating organizations goals and objectives and how this affects programming selections, the festival coordinators were then asked if they had a mission statement, and if so to provide it. For non-profit organizations, a mission statement “in tandem with its mandates, provides its *raison d’etre*- the social justification for its existence.” (Herman, 1994, p.161) Three festivals either did not have a mission statement or did not include it for the study.

The remaining 14 festivals provided varying statements with a wide range of missions. The diversity of the organizations and their programming is reflected in what each festival identifies as its central reason for existence. Some examples of these mission statements are (italics are the my own emphasis):

OUTFEST is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to build bridges among audiences, filmmakers, and the entertainment industry through the exhibition of *high-quality gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender themed* films and video, highlighted by an annual festival, that *enlighten, educate and entertain* the *diverse* communities of Southern California.

The mission of Fresno Reel Pride is to *increase the awareness of the gay and lesbian community* through the exhibition of films and videos exploring *gay and lesbian themes* at an annual festival in Fresno. Fresno Reel Pride, through the universal appeal of movies, works to produce a major cultural event *for the entire Central Valley community* designed to enhance community *acceptance and understanding* while adding to the *diversity* of a culturally-rich city.

The mission of the Pikes Peak Lavender Film Festival is to bring *quality* international gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender films to Colorado Springs. While the obvious function of a film festival is *entertainment*, its deeper purpose is to *strengthen understanding, validation and tolerance* by promoting the recognition of our common community.

The mission of the Indianapolis LGBT Film Festival is to *celebrate LGBT diversity* through film, and to *provide positive LGBT characters in film* for LGBT youth to experience.

Reel Pride Michigan is devoted to bringing films that celebrate the *love, life and diversity* of the GLBT *and allied* communities in Michigan.

The mission of Pittsburgh International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival is to provide a cultural event in the tri-state region designed to *support LGBT artists*, and to provide a *needed cultural outlet for the LGBT community* in Pittsburgh and the surrounding area.

The mission of OUT TAKES Dallas is to *enlighten, educate, enrich and entertain diverse communities* about gays and lesbians through the medium of film and video and to contribute funds to organizations seeking to foster similar goals.

The mission of the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival is to *enrich, entertain and educate* the public, *encourage a sense of community* through international and culturally *diverse* film, video and other media that offer historical and contemporary perspectives on the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered *experience*.

The mission of the Boulder Gay and Lesbian Film Festival is to create a dynamic *showcase for established and emerging independent filmmakers* and to encourage a *thoughtful forum for countering invisibility and misinformation* regarding the GLBT community.

The Spokane Gay/Lesbian Film Festival is dedicated to promoting a *realistic and positive event* that reflects our lives and community.

Common themes in these mission statements include the presentation of quality films and videos; the goals of enlightening, entertaining, educating, and enriching lives; the importance of diverse programming; promoting visibility, understanding, and strengthening the LGBTQ community; and providing a cultural event. In addition, several other festivals mentioned the importance of supporting LGBTQ filmmakers, providing positive images and events, and the identification that the events exist for entire regions, including audiences beyond LGBTQ communities.

In an effort to examine the structure of programming entities at each of the festivals, I asked participants the following questions: How are films selected for exhibition in the festival? How are individuals selected to serve on the programming committee, jury or other programming body? Gathering information concerning the decision-making structure for each organization provides some insight into what actually is programmed for the event.

When asked how films were selected for exhibition, the most frequent response was a programming or screening committee comprised of between 3 and 12 people (depending upon the festival) with the final approval coming from a programming or artistic director. Screening committees were often listed as filtering mechanisms where films were first viewed before continuing on in the system. Some festivals said that they used a rating system, while others used a jury to determine the final outcome. Respondents said that oftentimes a great amount of discussion takes place around the process of whether or not to include a film for a variety of reasons. Quality, cost, and print scheduling are also taken into consideration.

Programmer Joseph Ferrelli for OUTFEST San Diego thoughtfully described his programming process as an integrated approach. With access to most films that OUFEST Los Angeles exhibits, Ferrelli also programs local short films. Along with a co-director, he looks at each possible film

and asks himself how it will play to different people in his diverse community. Other festivals, such as Philadelphia, enlist different programmers and committees for the various programs they offer within their festival. One respondent outlined the need for all films to be subjected to board approval before being programmed.

When asked how individuals were selected to serve on the programming body, most festivals said that an individual needed only to demonstrate an interest to be involved as a volunteer. Often festivals, such as Philadelphia, Reel Pride Michigan, Miami, Aspen, Fresno and OUTFEST Los Angeles also identified that interested volunteers needed to either go through an application, interview, or additional screening process before serving. In contrast, two festivals outlined a connection between board membership or the executive committee and the nomination or selection of individuals to be involved in the programming process. Only one festival stated that they also looked for individuals that had previous film experience.

#### DEFINING LGBTQ FILM BY EXISTING DEFINITIONS

The remaining questions on the survey addressed the issue of defining lgbtq film within the queer film festival context by the programming criteria and decisions of each respondent. The first question in this section asked participants if their festival operated using a definition of lgbtq film. This question was asked with the intention of immediately identifying festivals that have thought about the topic of defining lgbtq film to the point of actually arriving at a working definition to operate from.

Of the 17 respondents, nine identified that they do not operate using a definition of lgbtq film. The remaining eight festivals provided a wide range of answers. OUTFEST Los Angeles and OUTFEST San Diego referred to their mission statements for a definition that stated that work must be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender *themed* to be defined lgbtq, though San Diego festival director Joseph Ferrelli stated that this is a subject he questions often when considering work for programming.

The Pittsburgh festival operates using the following definition: any film or video by and about lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgendered people either in fiction or fact. Pittsburgh goes on to add that the filmmaker need not be gay-identified for their work to be considered. The Boulder festival had a broader definition of lgbtq film, which includes “works that help place our ideas about gender, love and sexuality within a cultural and historical context.” In addition, the Long Island festival stated that they defined lgbtq film to be “a film that is by, about, or of interest to the GLBT community.” The remaining three festivals responded by “there is no written definition”, “it is understood what each means and entails”, and lgbtq film is work that contains “LGBT characters, plot or filmmaker.”

## DEFINING LGBTQ FILM BY PROGRAMMING REQUIREMENTS

Respondents were asked to clearly state the requirements for consideration of work in relation to lgbtq content, characters, and filmmaker orientation. This question was asked with the intention of gathering information related to how the participants define lgbtq film by their programming decisions, as opposed to a formal definition requested in the previous question. To gather this information, participants were asked if their festival requires work that is exhibited at their festival to:

- be made by a filmmaker that identifies as lgbtq
- have specifically lgbtq content
- have specifically lgbtq characters
- be of interest to the lgbtq community, or
- identify if there were other requirements for work.

All 17 festivals responded that a film must be of interest to the lgbtq community to be exhibited. For eight festivals, this is the only lgbtq-related requirement for work to be considered for exhibition. Fresno Reel Pride stated that this requirement was the most important element in the selection of a film for programming, although they would consider works as long as they had one or more of the above requirements. The phrase ‘be of interest to the lgbtq’ community can be widely defined to include any works that resonate with the lgbtq community on any number of levels, including films with queer sensibilities or camp. (Doty,1995)

The remaining nine festivals stated that they had other lgbtq-related requirements for work in addition to being of interest to the lgbtq community. All nine of these festivals require the work to have specifically lgbtq content and characters to be considered for exhibition. In addition, three of these festivals also require the work to be made by a filmmaker that identifies as lgbtq. (Figure 3.4)

A few respondents further identified what they look for while programming work. The Pittsburgh festival stated that they are a smaller festival that only screens about 20-25 programs each festival year, which allows them the opportunity to sift through the multitude of lgbtq films available and select the works that “most strongly and accurately, though subjectively, reflect our lives.” Pikes Peak explained, “Since we are an LGBT festival, 99% of our programming has some LGBT content.” Southern Alameda County also stated that their event is only a 2-day event, which necessitated the festival “narrow it down to films that are mostly GLBTQ” which mean that ‘the main characters have to be GLBTQ or the work has to deal with LGBTQ issues.’ In addition, the festival in Aspen responded by saying that “programmed are films with gay sensibilities. If Gay characters are peripheral, it [the film] is likely not programmed.”

## DEFINING LGBTQ FILM BY PROGRAMMING EXCEPTIONS

The final section of the survey included questions posed with the intention of identifying possible work that festivals have exhibited in the past that may not be easily construed as lgbtq work by the definitions and requirements identified in the previous section. These questions were posed to further attempt to define lgbtq film by the exceptions, if any, that the festivals allowed related to lgbtq requirements and how audiences responded to the work. The first question asked if the festival has ever exhibited work that is:

- not overtly lgbtq in content
- not overtly lgbtq in character representation
- not made by an lgbtq filmmaker, or
- not overtly an lgbtq film by the definition that the festival uses.

Almost all of the festivals selected more than one of the options. Of the 17 respondents, 15 festivals stated that they have programmed work that is not made by a filmmaker that identifies as lgbtq, 13 festivals have programmed work that was not overtly lgbtq in content, 11 festivals have programmed work that is not overtly lgbtq in character representation, and 4 festivals have programmed work that is not an lgbtq film by the definition the festival uses. (Figure 3.5) Several festivals added that they do not ask for the filmmaker's sexual orientation when considering the work for exhibition, and therefore could not attest to the lgbtq identity of the artist.

Kirsten Schaffer, Director of Programming for OUTFEST Los Angeles, notes that their festival, particularly in the Platinum section, is committed to exhibiting work that pushes boundaries and definitions of lgbtq and that challenges traditional ideas of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation. "We are also committed to screening films and videos that address and incorporate race and class, which means showing work that doesn't always have the most overt queer content," says Schaffer. For example, their 2003 festival program included a screening of Yvonne Welbon's *SISTERS IN CINEMA*, a documentary about the history of African American women filmmakers. Schaffer adds "Only three of the approximately 30 women interviewed are lesbians but the subject is important and of interest to our lesbian audience."

The second question in this section asked how the work mentioned above was framed within the event. Respondents were given the following options:

- question and answer session with filmmakers
- additional information was provided in festival program
- work was programmed with other films of related interest
- no special efforts were made to frame this work within the festivals, or
- other methods were used to frame this work.

Out of the 17 respondents, 7 stated that they do not make any special efforts to frame any work that is not overtly lgbtq-related in content, character representation, definition, or made by an lgbtq filmmaker within the festival. Most of the festivals utilize more than one method of



framing work. The strategy used most frequently by the respondents is to program the work with other films of related interest, which is used by 8 of the respondents. In addition, 7 of the respondents also provided additional information about the film or filmmaker in the festival program. Question and answer sessions with filmmakers were also used by 4 of the festivals to explain possibly questionable lgbtq-related work to audiences.

The third question in this section asked what audiences responses have been, if any, concerning the inclusion of the above mentioned work. This question was asked with the intention of gathering information related to how audiences members of not overtly lgbtq-related films within the queer film festival context react to the inclusion of the work and how the festivals, in turn, address their concerns. Six of the 17 festivals stated that there has been no audience response, and one festival did not answer the question.

The remaining 10 respondents had a wide range of responses. Kirsten Schaffer, Director of Programming for OUTFEST Los Angeles, stated that occasionally audience members complain about the inclusion of these films in the festival. Schaffer adds, “If they speak with me or write to me directly, I explain why we made the choice to include the work. The explanations range from ‘the filmmaker is gay’ to ‘the work is campy or feminist’ to ‘it challenges ideas about sexuality and gender’, which is of interest to the queer community.” The Philadelphia festival had a similar response, stating, “Audiences do not always appreciate or come to films which are on the fringes of GLBT issues. We attempt to explain why a film is included, most times because the filmmaker is GLBT.” In addition, the Spokane festival responded by saying that they have exhibited “films of obvious feminist nature. While they [the films] are not overtly gay or lesbian, audience response is that they are of obvious interest to the lesbian community.” Reel Pride Michigan responded by providing that “generally audiences accept films that help to challenge what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender”.

A few of the festivals identified that they utilize written audience ballots, surveys or evaluation forms which are frequently used by audience members to voice their concerns about the inclusion of this work in the festival. Among these respondents, the Boulder festival said that “our audiences tend to be rather opinionated (and rightfully so) via our audience surveys, but can generally appreciate a film that isn’t ‘overtly GLBT’, if programmed in a relevant context.” Another such festival is Fresno Reel Pride, whose audience members fill out ballots that are “carefully read and react[ed] to in future years.” In addition, Fresno goes another step further, stating, “If an audience member is really reactive, we invite them to join our newly formed screening committee.”

#### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS RELATED TO PROGRAMMING

The quality of the work is another factor that most festivals consider when programming films for their events, and can occasionally be a reason for considering an exception of specific films that may not easily be identified as lgbtq. Fresno Reel Pride Program Director Stephen

Mintz stated, “The higher and more exciting the gay content, the more we allow for lapses in production value, theme, performance or quality.” Mintz goes on to say that “super quality stories can be lower in gay content” and that sometimes a film is “simply visually pleasing, and therefore of interest to the lgbtq community.”

The Miami festival is frequently seen as the premier queer destination for Spanish, Latin American, Cuban and Hispanic filmmakers due to the fact that the majority language is Spanish. Miami also stated that they didn’t feel they have a vocal transgendered or Asian community, though they will still continue to program the work. A few festivals, such as Boulder, stated that they have received requests to expand their programming to include films that address the intersexed population and polyamory movement. One festival also clearly outlined in their survey that pornography is not programmed or exhibited.



**ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION: EFFECTS ON PROGRAMMING**

Complex internal and external factors may affect decisions made by queer film festival programmers. Among these factors are: responsibilities and agreements between the festival and their constituencies, benefactors and audiences; the length of time the festival has existed; the way in which the festival is structured in relation to making programming decisions; the diversity of the programming body; and the mission, goals, and objectives of the festival. Each of these factors has a role in determining what films are queer enough to be programmed for the event. Most often this decision is an unconscious one, rarely discussed and implicitly implied. The following data was analyzed with the intention of thinking about the ways in which these factors contribute to the process of defining lgbtq film within the festival context.

As previously stated, over half of the festivals that participated in this survey have been exhibiting work for 5-9 years, which demonstrates a growth in queer film festivals between 1994 and 1998. This significant number of upstarts is congruent with the emergence of New Queer Cinema in 1991-1992 and the increase in queer identified feature films, which gained wider acceptance at film festivals during that time. Lgbtq film festivals that came of age during this period may have different lgbtq-related requirements for works than their predecessors did. According to responses on the surveys, 8 festivals stated that the only lgbtq-related requirement they had for exhibiting work was that the film “be of interest to the lgbtq community.” Of these festivals with the most liberal definition of lgbtq film, 5 began exhibiting between 1994-1998.

Of the 17 respondents, 10 festivals are presented by umbrella organizations. These 10 festivals most likely have responsibilities and constituencies to serve beyond presenting an annual lgbtq film festival. In the case of two of these festivals, the need for a youth-related positive event is an important factor that affects programming decisions. Three of these festivals are accountable to a community fund or foundation, which may impose additional requirements for programming work. The remaining 7 festivals that identify as independent non-profits most often have lgbtq film screenings throughout the year in addition to an annual festival. These screenings provide for more opportunities to exhibit lgbtq film beyond the annual event, and may also affect programming decisions for the festival. To further examine the effects of the umbrella organizations on festival programming decisions, additional data would need to be collected in this area.

The decision-making process and the make-up of the programming bodies are two factors that directly affect programming for each of these events. Participants in this study identified that the most frequently used method of selecting films was by a programming or screening committee comprised of between 3 and 12 people, with the final approval coming from a senior programmer or artistic director. This common process allows for more opinions regarding a particular film, with the final decision resting on one responsible party. However, if the programming body is less accessible to join, it will include only a limited number of differing viewpoints.

The most accessible programming committees are the five participants whose rules stated that an individual needed only to demonstrate an interest to be involved as a volunteer, with an additional 6 adding that interested volunteers needed to either go through an application, interview, or additional screening process before serving. In contrast, two festivals outlined a connection between board membership or the executive committee and the nomination or selection of individuals to be involved in the programming process. Additional data would be necessary to outline the diversity of the programming bodies and whether or not the bodies accurately reflected the mission and constituents of each organization.

Mission statements provided by participants were the first set of organizational data collected with the intention of defining lgbtq film within each festival's context. Mission statements provide guidance to organizations for making program-related decisions and were considered a useful source of information for this study. For a few of the participants, a definition of lgbtq film can be found directly in their mission statements. These festivals clearly state considerations for inclusion in their events in relation to lgbtq content, characters, themes, or filmmaker sexual orientation.

Most participants' mission statements contained key phrases of what they look for when programming work. Some of these mentioned the importance of supporting lgbtq filmmakers and artists, the value of presenting diverse work, and the identification that the events exist for entire regions, including audiences beyond lgbtq communities. These three themes have been the most relevant in the attempt to define what work is 'queer enough' to be exhibited at an lgbtq film festival. For the festivals that outlined these themes, there is an awareness of the importance of these festivals to lgbtq filmmakers and the greater communities they exist within, as well as the need to program diverse work for audiences. These are all factors that may affect the programming decisions they make.

For instance, the three festivals that expressed their commitment to lgbtq filmmakers in their mission statements may consider this element when programming a film which may not have lgbtq content or characters, but is made by an lgbtq filmmaker. Likewise, festivals that recognize their value and importance to their entire community, beyond the lgbtq audience, may make programming decisions that highlight this factor by screening a film that may be accessible to all audiences, and not necessarily overtly queer. In addition, festivals whose mission statements identify the requirement for programming diverse work may also consider exhibiting films that may be questionably lgbtq in content or characters, but provide a unique viewpoint that adds to the diversity of the event.

## **USING PROGRAMMING DECISIONS TO DEFINE LGBTQ FILM**

Participants in this study were asked to identify the lgbtq-related requirements they used when considering works for exhibition. Every participant in this study identified that a film must 'be of

interest to the lgbtq community' to be programmed for exhibition. For 8 of these film festivals, 48% of participants, this is the only lgbtq-related requirement for work.

Examples of films that are of interest to the lgbtq community, but lack lgbtq content, characters, or lgbtq identified filmmakers include musicals such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Sound of Music* (1965), both of which have screened widely at lgbtq festivals. As Joseph Ferrelli, of OUTFEST San Diego states, “no one would really object to seeing them in a festival. They aren't gay themed, but there is something there that resonates with audiences.” Other films that include a camp style or gay sensibilities can also be grouped with works that resonate with the lgbtq community, but aren't 'lgbtq films' as far as content, characters, or filmmaker identity.

The remaining 9 festivals have further lgbtq-related requirements that can be divided into 2 groups: one group requiring a) lgbtq content and b) lgbtq characters and the second group requiring a) lgbtq content, b) lgbtq characters, and c) an lgbtq identified filmmaker. One conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that out of 17 participants, 9 festivals require some sort of lgbtq content and characters to be considered for programming. In addition, only 4 of the 17 festivals also require that the work to be programmed at their lgbtq film festival be made by a filmmaker that identifies as lgbtq. This leaves 13 lgbtq festival participants that consider programming work that is not made by lgbtq filmmakers. (see Figure 3.4)

Utilizing the lgbtq-related programming criteria provided above, the question “what is queer enough to be programmed at a queer film festival” could be answered using the following definition: Lgbtq film, within the queer film festival context, is any film that is of interest to the lgbtq community and is likely to contain lgbtq content and characters, but is not necessarily made by a filmmaker that identifies as lgbtq.

Of course exceptions are made, and these exceptions can provide unique insight into how the participants add films to the lgbtq film exhibition field based on certain factors. Almost every participant concurred that they have programmed work in the past that is either not overtly lgbtq in content or character representation. In addition, all but 2 participants have programmed work that is not made by a filmmaker who identifies as lgbtq. This study did not collect data concerning the reasons for including these works or examples of films that fit into these categories. This data could be gathered in future studies to further the concept of why particular works are excepted from lgbtq-related criteria.

Data was gathered in this study concerning the range of methods within each festival of framing work that is not overtly lgbtq in content, characters or made by an lgbtq filmmaker and how audiences responded to the inclusion of this work. The most frequent methods of framing work that is not easily identified as lgbtq include providing additional information about the film or filmmaker in the program, and programming the film with other works that are of related interest. Participants also stated that question and answer sessions with filmmakers were helpful in presenting work that challenged the definition of lgbtq film.

Seven participants of this study stated that they have actively engaged in some form of communication with audience members that have questioned the reasons for exhibiting not overtly lgbtq work within their festivals. This not only demonstrates that these festivals are programming work that challenges the definitions of lgbtq film, but also that audiences have developed their own criteria for what an lgbtq film should consist of that doesn't necessarily correlate with festival or filmmaker definitions of the genre.

**RECOMMENDATION: COMMITMENT TO LGBTQ FILMMAKERS****PROGRAMMING SUPPORT**

The community building value of queer film festivals to lgbtq audiences and filmmakers is prevalent in the rich history of programming that these festivals have offered. As queer film festivals garner increased interest from major studios and more images and representations of the lgbtq community are made available in the mainstream film and television market, queer cinema is destined to evolve even further.

The queer film festival circuit was developed in response to the limited lgbtq images, thus creating opportunities for lgbtq films to be exhibited in other venues. This segmenting of lgbtq audiences at these events has led to the possibility of creating a niche market that could be exploited by those outside the queer film festival framework. For example, the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival has offered its mailing list for sale, which includes more than 14,000 contacts. (Gamson, 1995) In addition, corporate sponsorship of many queer film festivals has guaranteed the future of these organizations in financially difficult times when public funding has become virtually nonexistent.

Distinct lines separating the major studio Hollywood framework and the queer film exhibition framework are becoming less apparent. Queer film festivals, initially a network of events dedicated to exhibiting a genre of film and video with roots in activism and opposition to the norm, are facing new issues with the increased connections to Hollywood. Many of these issues affect lgbtq filmmakers. While few lgbtq filmmakers benefit from these connections in terms of distribution, the overall effect of studio presence at queer festivals is unknown.

Lgbtq film festivals need to readdress their commitment to lgbtq filmmakers. As previously stated, queer film festivals are a valuable, and often primary, arena for work made by lgbtq filmmakers to be seen. If queer film festivals use valuable programming slots to form or affirm connections with major studios, they must do so carefully and with full consideration of the effects decisions may have upon lgbtq filmmakers, especially those who may not have an opportunity to have their works programmed. Festivals such as OUTFEST Los Angeles are known for having successfully navigated this territory with one foot firmly in each exhibition framework and a clear dedication to lgbtq filmmakers by the development of the Platinum section in their festival.

**STATEMENT OF LGBTQ-RELATED GUIDELINES**

There is a need for lgbtq film festivals to clearly state lgbtq-related criteria for work that is to be submitted for consideration in their festivals. Requirements related to lgbtq content, characters, themes, and filmmaker orientation exist but are most often not made available to filmmakers on submission forms.

Stating lgbtq-related requirements on submission guidelines can only benefit both festivals and filmmakers. Festivals will have to preview fewer works that do not meet the guidelines, saving valuable time and resources. Filmmakers will save money on dubbing costs and submission fees to festivals that would not consider their work. It is possible, however, that previewing fewer works with questionable lgbtq-related content or characters will lead to fewer discussions surrounding the debate about what makes a film ‘queer enough’ to be programmed.

I would propose that festivals evaluate their current lgbtq-related guidelines to ensure that they are inclusive of and accessible to all lgbtq filmmakers and their work. Many lgbtq filmmakers produce work that is not overtly lgbtq-themed but may still be of interest to queer film festival audiences. Queer film festivals that stressed on their surveys that the most important lgbtq-related factor when considering a film is that it must be of interest to the lgbtq community may want to consider revising their submission guidelines to reflect this requirement.

To assist festival programmers in programming work that may not be overtly lgbtq-themed, submission guidelines could also include a note to filmmakers to provide an artist statement or letter along with their forms that would outline the relevance of the work to the lgbtq community. This recommendation is congruent with comments made in the introduction to this paper by Cindy Emch, Program Coordinator of the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

The University of Oregon Queer Film Festival, a festival not profiled in this study, made a similar change in their submission guidelines for 2003. Their new submission guidelines read as follows:

Works must be produced by individuals who identify as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexed, or two-spirit and/or be of particular interest to the LGBTQ community. This year, to more equally serve queer media artists and to provide a diverse film going experience for the audience, the festival is changing its policy to include work that does not contain specifically queer-themed content or characters. To assist festival programmers in framing this work within the festival, all entrants will be asked to provide a statement concerning their work and it’s relevance to the queer community. (University of Oregon Queer Film Festival Submission Form, 2003)

The UO Queer Film Festival received approximately 20% more submissions than the previous year, almost all of which arrived with an artist statement. A few of the questionable lgbtq entries were selected by the programming committee, and the festival opted to utilize the statements provided by the filmmakers to assist in framing the work and its relevance to lgbtq audiences in the written program.

## **RECOMMENDATION: COMMITMENT TO AUDIENCES**

Lgbtq film festivals surveyed in this study have demonstrated the desire to create a valuable and relevant experience for their audiences. Through the wording of mission statements and the importance of programming work that is of interest to the lgbtq community, study participants identified their events as exhibitions for lgbtq audiences as well as greater surrounding communities.

The importance of programming diverse, relevant quality films and videos was mentioned frequently by participants. In addition, participants also identified their desire to program work that is challenging and engaging. By maintaining their commitment to their audiences at the forefront of organizational decisions and understanding the valuable roles that they serve to their constituents, lgbtq film festivals can continue to serve as cultural and social outlets in their communities.

## **RECOMMENDATION: COMMITMENT TO ONE ANOTHER**

The lgbtq film festival framework includes a unique set of values with challenges unlike that of other film festivals. The importance of these events to lgbtq filmmakers and to audiences as well as their dedication to exhibiting lgbtq work is what sets them apart. Queer film festivals continually play a role in defining the genre of lgbtq film by the programming decisions that they make. Thus, these decisions need to be made consciously and deliberately, with each festival determining what is appropriate for itself.

Alternately, lgbtq film festivals do not function separate from one another. Oftentimes work that is selected for programming at larger, more established festivals is then picked up for programming at smaller lgbtq festivals around the world. Festival programmers attend other lgbtq film festivals to get programming ideas and make contacts with filmmakers. Online resources such as the PopcornQ festival listserv and website, as well as the gatherings and conferences mentioned previously are dedicated to communication and information sharing between lgbtq film festivals.

Acknowledging that lgbtq film festivals operate within an established framework with unique challenges and opportunities that require their own resources and places for communicating solidifies the need for commitment to one another. Participating in this ongoing dialogue helps to ensure the future of lgbtq film festivals as viable cultural events. For those festival organizations which have not participated in these discussions, this is a recommendation to encourage involvement in shaping the future of the framework you operate within. As stewards of lgbtq film and video exhibition, queer film festivals make the vital link between filmmakers and audiences. Festivals must engage with one another to encourage the maintenance of an exhibition framework that is being affected by not only corporate and studio interest, but growing technology involving online streaming media and alternate television venues as well.



## CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to support information sharing and communication between lgbtq film festivals in the United States. By participating in this study, festivals may understand more about each other on the topic of programming criteria and selection process, as well as how festivals determine what is queer enough to exhibit in their venues. Understanding how other organizations address these similar issues furthers more conscious decision-making policies and structures.

Findings of this study are congruent with the PopcornQ online discussion mentioned at the beginning of this paper. As Jim Carl, Director of Programming for the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival suggested, programming requirements vary from festival to festival, with many factors involved in the process of defining what films are queer enough to be exhibited. Each festival needs to determine how to best support filmmakers and provide audiences with programming that is congruent with their mission and constituents. Understanding the larger queer film exhibition framework may also provide support to these festivals.

To ensure the future of lgbtq film festivals as valuable avenues for lgbtq filmmakers and audiences, lgbtq film festivals must evaluate their commitment to these constituents and to each other. By offering programming support and stating lgbtq-related requirements in submission guidelines, queer film festivals can assist lgbtq filmmakers in finding suitable organizations to submit their work. By continually striving to program diverse, relevant and challenging work, festivals can continue to provide an important cultural and social outlet to their communities. By participating in ongoing dialogue with each other, lgbtq film festivals can participate in the evolution of the exhibition framework.



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**Queer Film Festival Programming Survey- Attach Additional Sheets If Necessary**

Festival Name _____			
Name of Person Completing Survey _____		Job Title _____	
Festival Address _____			
	street	city	state      ZIP
Festival Telephone _____		Festival E-mail Address _____	

1) How long has the festival existed? \_\_\_\_yrs. \_\_\_\_mos.    2) Number of festivals that have occurred:\_\_\_\_\_

3) Is the festival an event that is produced by an umbrella organization such as a community non-profit, university, or distribution company?  
 \_\_\_ YES      If yes, what is the name of the organization? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_ NO

4) If the festival is an independent organization, please identify the type of organization:  
 \_\_\_ non-profit (501c3 or State equivalent)                      \_\_\_ for-profit organization  
 \_\_\_ unincorporated (informal and/or underground)            \_\_\_ other (please identify)\_\_\_\_\_

5) Does the festival have a mission statement?  
 \_\_\_ YES      If yes, what is it? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_ NO

6) Does the festival operate using a definition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer film?  
 \_\_\_ YES      If yes, please define: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_ NO

7) Does the festival require that the work that is exhibited: (Check all that apply)  
 \_\_\_ be made by a filmmaker that identifies as LGBTQ  
 \_\_\_ have specifically LGBTQ content  
 \_\_\_ have specifically LGBTQ characters  
 \_\_\_ be of interest to the LGBTQ community  
 \_\_\_ other requirements for work (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_

8) Has the festival ever exhibited work that is: (Check all that apply)  
 \_\_\_ not overtly LGBTQ in content  
 \_\_\_ not overtly LGBTQ in character representation  
 \_\_\_ not made by an LGBTQ filmmaker  
 \_\_\_ not overtly an LGBTQ film by the definition that the festival uses  
 (If none of these options are selected, go to C.)

A)    If so, how did the festival frame this work within the event? (Check all that apply)  
 \_\_\_ question & answer session with filmmakers  
 \_\_\_ additional information provided in festival program  
 \_\_\_ programmed the film with other films of related interest  
 \_\_\_ no special efforts were made to frame this work within the festival  
 \_\_\_ other methods (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_

B) If so, what have audience responses been, if any, concerning the inclusion of the work?  
 no audience response  
Please describe audience response and how the festival addressed the response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

C) If not, what are the barriers to exhibiting this work within the festival?  
 exhibiting this work does not support the mission of the festival  
 other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9) How are films selected for exhibition in the festival? (Check all that apply)  
 programming committee comprised of # \_\_\_\_\_ people  
 jury comprised of # \_\_\_\_\_ people  
 an individual  
 other methods (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10) How are individuals selected to serve on the programming committee, jury, or other programming body?  
(Check all that apply)  
 interview  
 application process  
 individuals need only to demonstrate interest  
 other process (please identify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11) Please select one:  
 I am available to answer follow-up questions that may arise from the answers that I have provided.  
Please contact me using (circle one): E-mail or Telephone \_\_\_\_\_  
 I am not available to answer follow-up questions.

12) Is there anything else that you would like to add for inclusion in this study? Please feel free to use this space for additional comments or attach additional sheets if necessary.

**Please mail this survey, along with the Statement of Informed Consent, the Information Disclosure Form (both on yellow paper), and any written materials such as a festival program in the provided prepaid envelope by June 15th. Thank you for participating in this study.**

Figure 3.1

**Number of Years Festivals Have Presented**

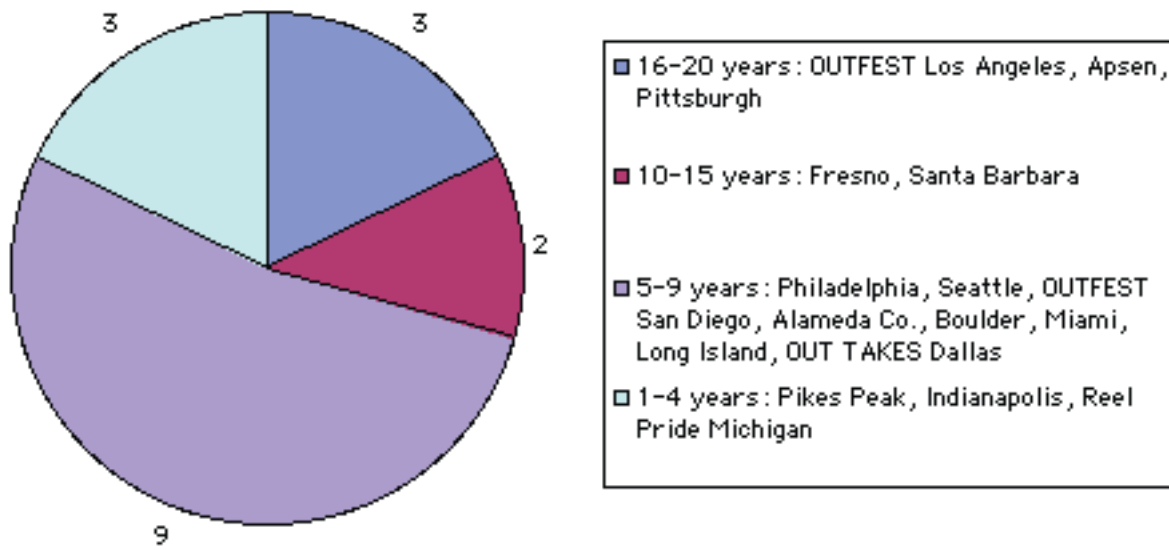


Figure 3.2

### Organizational Affiliation of Participants

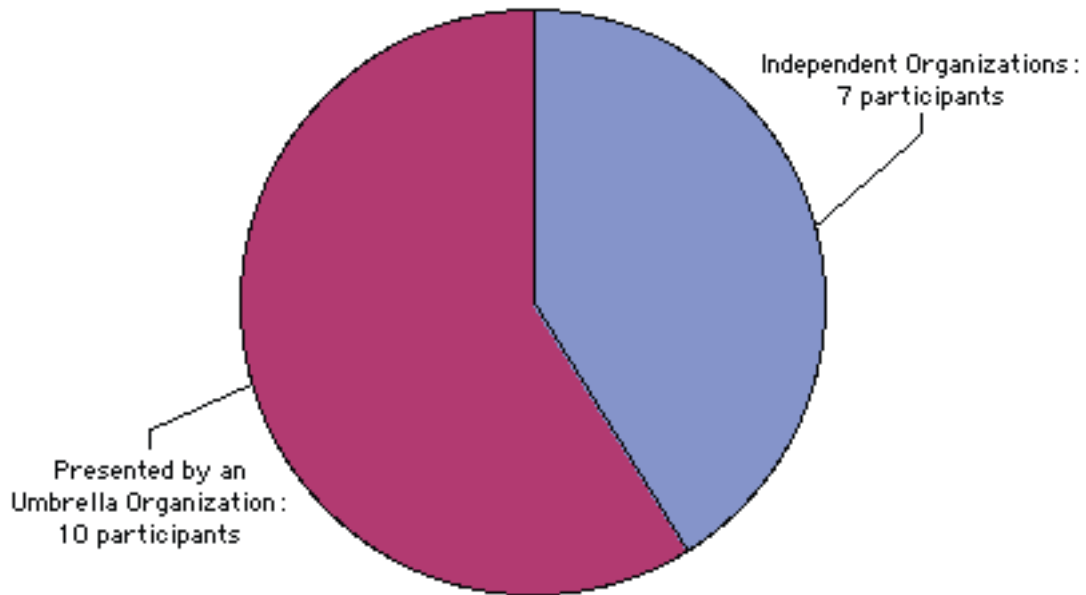


Figure 3.3

### Breakdown of Festivals Presented by Umbrella Organizations

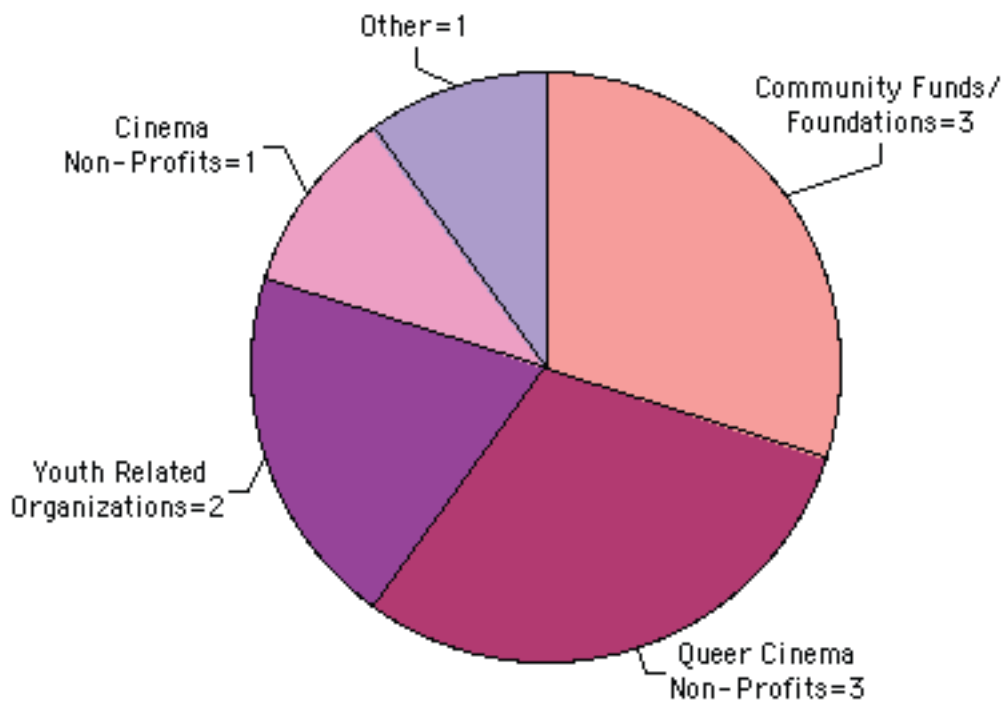


Figure 3.4

### LGBTQ-Related Requirements For Work To Be Exhibited

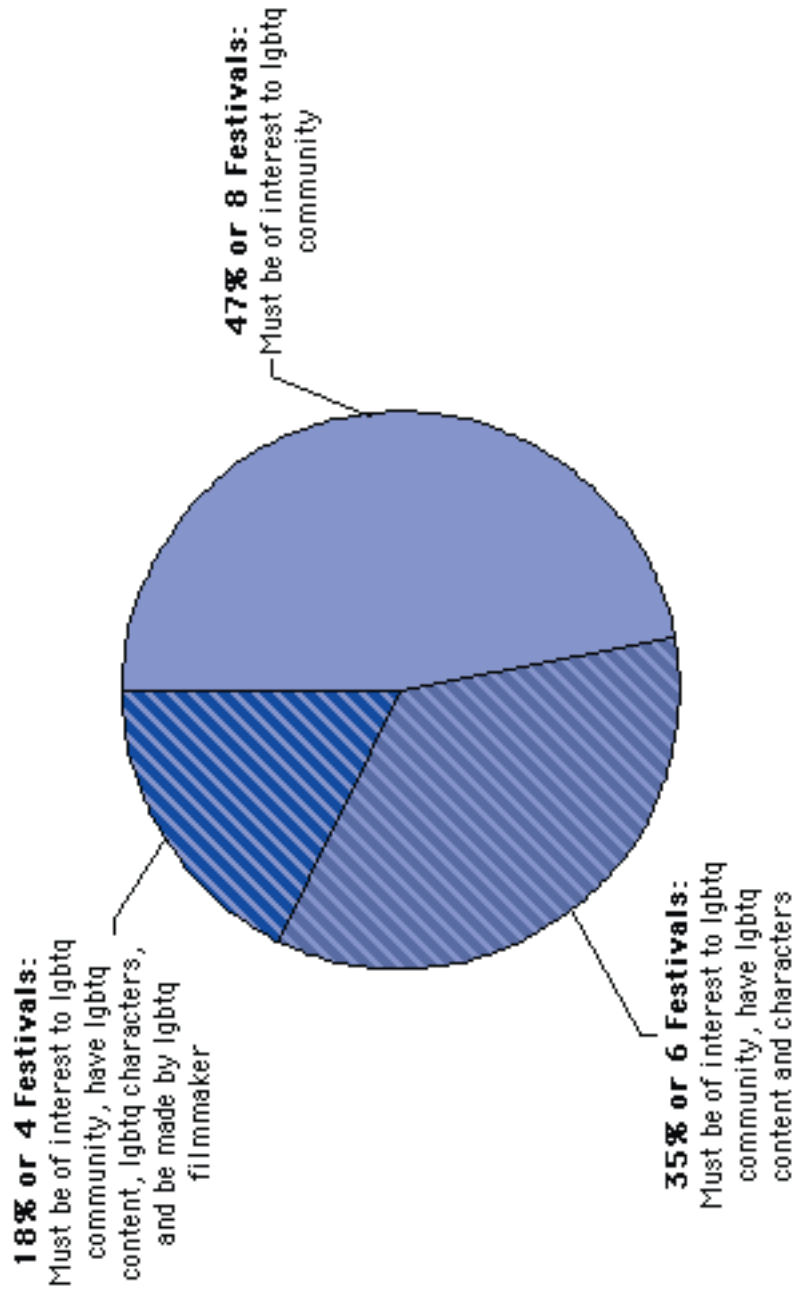


Figure 3.5

**LGBTQ-Related Programming Exceptions Made By Participants**

