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Defining Queer: The Criteria and Selection Process for Programming Queer Film Festivals

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This advisory explores 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 advisory 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. Those interested in a fuller treatment of this topic may wish to download the original .PDF Master's Project [here](#).

Surveying the Field

For this Advisory, 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. ¹



Discoveries

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.

History

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.

Organization

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.

Decision-Making

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.

Mission Statements

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

Programming Decisions to Define LGBTQ Film

Participants in this survey were asked to identify the lgbtq-related requirements they used when considering works for exhibition. Every participant in this survey 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.

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.

What is Queer enough?

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.

Data was gathered 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.

Recommendations

Committing to Community

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. 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.

Committing to Inclusion and Access

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.

I 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. [2](#)

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.

Commitment to Audiences

Lgbtq film festivals surveyed demonstrate 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.

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 is 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 separately 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.

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.

Footnotes:

¹Of 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 OUFEST: 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

²This 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 its 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.

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