

Review

Lindiwe Dovey, *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015.

Lindiwe Dovey's *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* is one of very few single-authored full length studies focused on film festivals, and the only one, next to Jeffrey Ruoff's, which makes curating in the context of film festivals its primary focus. Dovey's study is also a contribution to the vibrant and rich scholarship on African screen media.

Read from the vantage point of film festivals and film studies Dovey's book is refreshing and thought-provoking in that it addresses a range of fundamental questions underpinning the relationship between these two areas. The issue for film festival scholars has been whether it is justifiable to study film festivals as single standing entities 'a phenomenon completed in itself' or whether the scholarship can only be sustained when embedded in other areas of study, i.e. African or other screen cultures (Iordanova xii). As a scholar of African screen media Dovey is naturally interested and invested in exploring this area of studies, and is probably unlikely to write about film festivals outside this context. However, she also wants to make a wider claim with her study which goes beyond the focus on African film-making namely she writes 'the arguments I will make about Africa's (lack of a) place in the international film festival circuit should thus be firmly within the context of the positioning of marginalized cinemas of all kinds (e.g., Latin American film, Asian film, women's filmmaking, LGBT filmmaking, and black filmmaking), which have much in common (p. 3)'. This suggests that when it comes to certain types of film-making they can only be explored and investigated properly through the lens of film festivals, and in her book Dovey demonstrates how complex and often flawed the process of formulating canons of film-making through film festivals is. In other words films, curators and audiences as well as the film cultures they belong to are all engaged and invested in various ways in the process of curating film festivals and thus are also part and parcel of the study of film festivals.

One of the very important elements of Dovey's book is to demonstrate how to write about film festivals to convey a spirit of "liveness". Chapter 3 "Where is Africa?" at the 2010 International Film Festival in Rotterdam presents very insightful analysis of "live festival interactions" (p. 64). Dovey demonstrates that it is possible to articulate very powerful arguments about film festivals through the sensitive, patient and careful working through a tension or even conflict between "the embodied sensations and the intellectual analysis" triggered through live film festival interactions and events (p. 16).

But to see the “liveness” of film festivals only as a neat methodological tool does not do justice to ‘the form of disruption the liveness of film festivals potentially generates ... in festival’s participants, and particularly its audiences’ (p. 15). Dovey takes us on a fascinating journey where ‘potential disruption that occur through the spontaneous liveness of festivals can manifest as either conflict or consensus, or sometimes both at once’ (p. 15) a dynamic she describes through a concept of “(dis)sensus communis”.

The picture of African cinema emerging through Dovey’s study is fractured and dynamic. It is as much about film-makers as it is about the curators of film festivals and the choices they make, and crucially about the audiences – among whom there are not just the audiences of critics and festival viewers, but also academic audiences which do the work of writing, analyzing and teaching about films which populate screens of film festivals across Europe, and to much lesser extend – Africa itself. The study also offers reminders of how difficult it is to generate this kind of new knowledge – fifteen years in the making, involving a great deal of travelling, interviewing film festivals participants and conducting focus groups with audiences on two continents, in Africa and in Europe.

Ultimately, the heart of this study is curating as proclaimed in its title. It is curating which is Dovey’s bridge among all the different disciplinary, methodological, theoretical and historical plates that her study activates and brings together. For Dovey, curating is a critical debate around films which is generated not only by critics but also by audiences and by academics. This debate precedes the event of a festival and starts with the curating gesture which may involve travelling to the locale where the films originate. It then continues after the festival has finished with the ongoing reception and framing of the work by academics and other commentators. Furthermore curating is about production of knowledge about certain phenomena which are not just rendered on film but which are created in the live event of their production. In this way the role of audiences as both objects and subjects of curating is critical to Dovey’s understanding of the concept. Curating is also an artistic and creative practice and gesture – often unpredictable – whose value only begins to be revealed at the moment of reception – leading at times to the “(dis)sensus communis”.

Dovey switches seamlessly and effortlessly between brief accounts of personal experience of festivals, historical analysis, film analysis and philosophical insights, which are all rooted in comprehensive knowledge of the literature meticulously researched, and in hours of fieldwork consisting of interviews with curators and audiences, and other film professionals and activists. The result is a strikingly vivid, passionate and erudite account of the world of the African film festivals – a pageant Dovey not only unfolds generously and gracefully in front of her readers’ eyes but of which she makes them part in the truly festive spirit her topic commands.

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References:

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- Ruoff, Jeffrey (ed.). *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals*. St. Andrews: St Andrews Film Books, 2012.