



PROJECT MUSE®

Film Festivals, Programming, and the Building of a National Cinema

Liz Czach

The Moving Image, Volume 4, Number 1, Spring 2004, pp. 76-88 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mov.2004.0004>

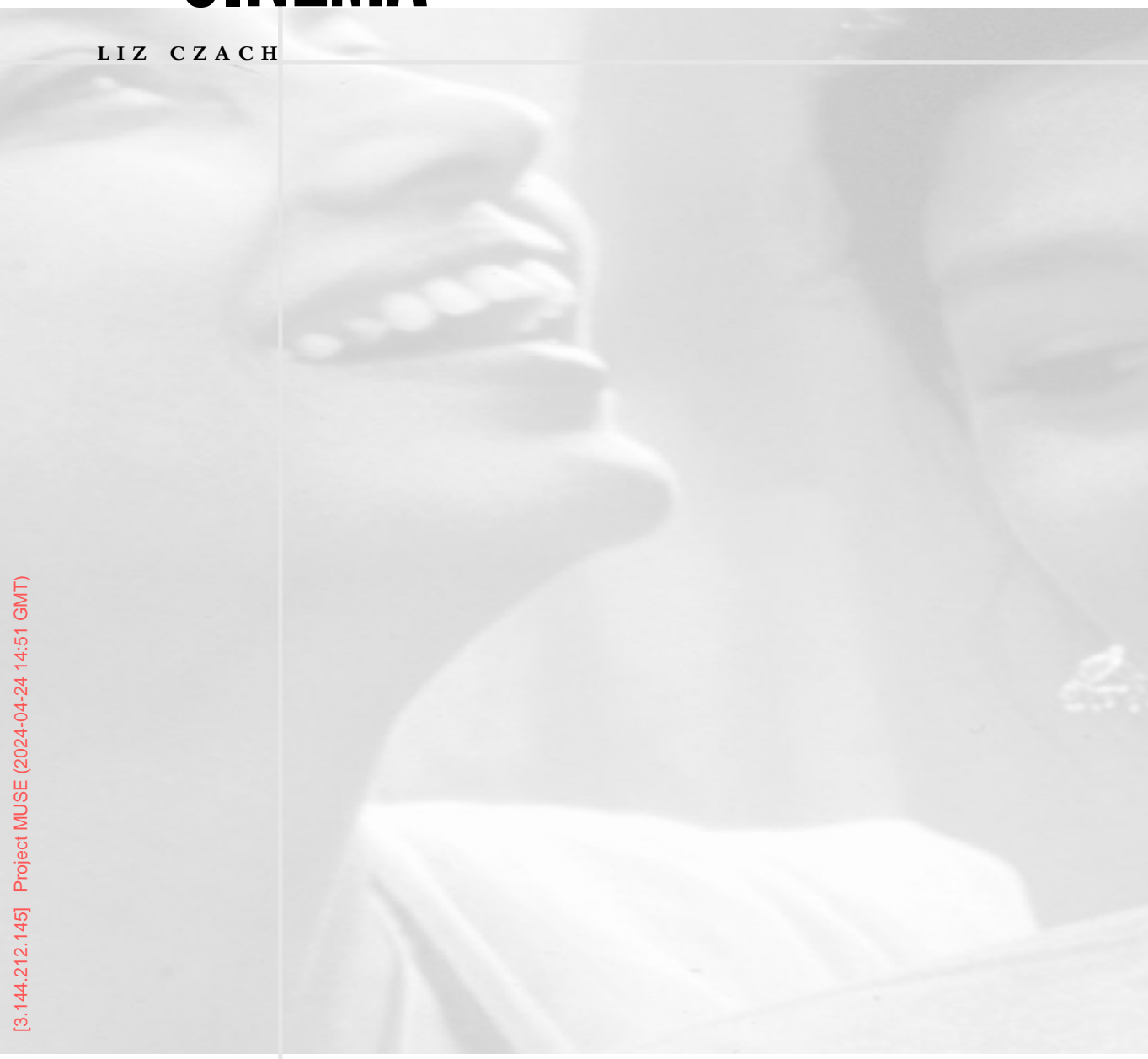


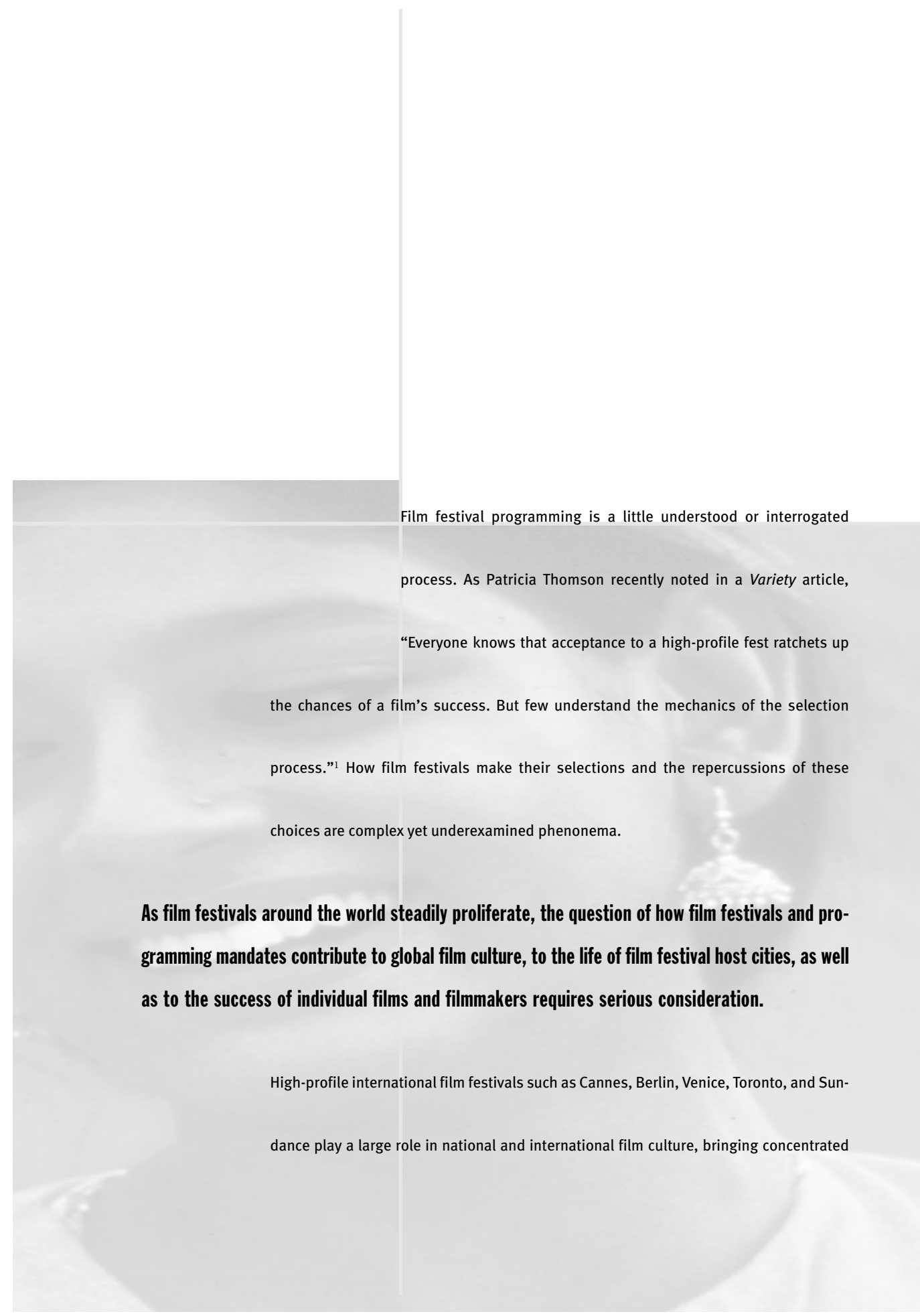
➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/171115>

FILM FESTIVALS, PROGRAMMING, AND THE BUILDING OF A NATIONAL CINEMA

LIZ CZACH





Film festival programming is a little understood or interrogated process. As Patricia Thomson recently noted in a *Variety* article, “Everyone knows that acceptance to a high-profile fest ratchets up the chances of a film’s success. But few understand the mechanics of the selection process.”¹ How film festivals make their selections and the repercussions of these choices are complex yet underexamined phenomena.

As film festivals around the world steadily proliferate, the question of how film festivals and programming mandates contribute to global film culture, to the life of film festival host cities, as well as to the success of individual films and filmmakers requires serious consideration.

High-profile international film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, and Sundance play a large role in national and international film culture, bringing concentrated

attention from press, industry, and the public to indigenous and foreign films. While each of these festivals provides a platform for showcasing their international selections, highlighting indigenous filmmaking is also common in programs such as Perspektive Deutsches Kino at the Berlin Festival, American Showcase and American Spectrum at Sundance, or Perspective Canada at the Toronto festival. Each of these forums undoubtedly plays a role in the formation of that specific country's national cinema culture as well as its reception and reputation abroad. To further develop this line of inquiry, I will consider what roles film festivals and film festival programming play in the process of forming a national cinema by paying particular attention to Canadian national cinema and the Perspective Canada series at the Toronto International Film Festival.

How might film festivals be considered one of the institutional mechanisms that contribute to the formation of a national cinema, and what issues arise from the intersections of film festivals, programming, and the building of a national cinema?

While the concept of film canons has come increasingly under scrutiny both within and outside the academy, the twin concepts of national cinemas and canonical great works continue to provide some of the primary ways we teach, study, and understand film history. National cinemas have been largely organized in terms of a body of great works by extraordinary filmmakers. This development of national cinemas in conjunction with auteur theory has been, by and large, readily adopted by film studies. In Canada, this conjunction of national cinema culture and auteurism has led to the canonization of directors such as Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg, Claude Jutra, and Denys Arcand, among others. Of course, the formation of a canon is not an automatic, innate procedure but rather a contested cultural process. The processes of inclusion in and exclusion from film canons share some of the attributes of, without being synonymous with, the selection process of film festivals. Film festivals provide an important site to help shape and confirm as well as contest the canon.

Canon formation, like film festival programming, necessitates a series of exclusionary practices. How a canon is formed and which films are excluded depend on a series of mechanisms, some of which Janet Staiger outlines in her essay "The Politics of Film Canons."² Among the most important processes, according to Staiger, are critical attention, film scholarship, and inclusion in film histories. In addition to these, Staiger outlines how a "politics of selection" engages with various discourses of value, art, and exemplary works to inform decisions related to canon formation. Although Staiger does not discuss film festivals or festival programming, similar discourses are engaged in the



Figure 1. *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta

process of programming a festival. Selection decisions made regarding the canon sometimes correspond strongly with the kind of evaluative judgments made in programming. But before turning to this relationship, the other processes of canonization that Staiger proposes, such as scholarly film histories and popular criticism, merit consideration.

The role of popular and scholarly writing on the formation of a canon in the Canadian context has been directly addressed by Peter Morris in his article “In Our Own Eyes: The Canonizing of Canadian Film.”³ Morris points out that one of the characteristics of writing on Canadian film is the “predictable list of films in the canon” and that such lists “raise questions not only about what is *included* but also about what is *excluded*.”⁴ A cursory look at the plethora of recent publications on Canadian cinema underscores how scholarly and popular works both explicitly and implicitly engage with the discourses of nationalism, canonization, and the debates that such undertakings entail. Acknowledging this tradition for canonical list making, Chris Gittings, in his *Canadian National Cinema*, begins his survey of Canadian cinema with the understanding that “inevitably, questions of inclusion and exclusion—canon-formation—confront the author of a book on national cinema.”⁵ Gittings analyzes some films that are considered part of the canon, but he challenges the traditional canon by looking at lesser-known Canadian films and filmmakers while examining the exclusionary/racist practices of Canadian nation building

that these works demonstrate. Gittings refuses the auteurist model and examines nationalist discourses in films designed to define Canada as a nation. He consciously seeks to make “the canon strange.”⁶ On the other hand, *Canada’s Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*, edited by Eugene Walz, reasserts the “best of” model but updates the list to include more contemporary filmmakers and women.⁷ The anthology also shifts from a bicultural (Quebécois and English-Canadian directors) to a (slightly) more multicultural model. Thus, while this list still includes previously canonized Québécois directors such as Michel Brault and Denys Arcand, it also incorporates newcomer Srinivas Krishna. The book’s focus on individual features gives the authors more leeway in covering filmmakers with significant films who may not have a substantial body of work.

In addition to academic histories and overviews, popular writing plays an important role in the canonization of Canadian film. Film criticism is the most common form of popular writing, and Katherine Monk’s *Weird Sex and Snowshoes* is a book-length study aimed at a nonacademic audience. Monk’s book doesn’t set out consciously to rewrite the canon but hopes to capture “the essence of the Canadian film experience.”⁸ While nowhere in her introduction does Monk mention the word “canon,” she too is aware of the need for decisions of inclusion/exclusion. “My goal is to turn people on to Canadian film, not bore them to tears, and so I had to make some difficult choices along the way about what to include and what to cut.”⁹ Monk’s updating of the canon is grounded in a populist writing more current than much scholarly work and doesn’t suffer under the weight of needing to either affirm or contest the canon.

Despite the problematic nature of film canons and their exclusionary politics, they can still be an important means to value (as well as evaluate) a national cinema. Gittings states this succinctly: “The establishing of a canon is not necessarily a ‘bad thing’; in Canada, a country where feature film production has really become viable only in the last thirty years, the delineation of a canon was proof-positive that we had a national cinema.”¹⁰ It is not coincidental that this rise of Canadian cinema in the last thirty years emerges with the founding of two of Canada’s top film festivals—the Montreal World Film Festival in 1975 and the Toronto International Film Festival in 1976. Both festivals have played a large role in promoting homegrown talent and have helped bring Anglo-Canadian and Québécois directors to a national and international audience. The rise of these two festivals might also be seen as emblematic of the “two-cinemas” tradition that persists in Canadian cinema, where Anglo-Canadian films are considered separately from Quebec productions.¹¹ This two-cinemas tradition raises important issues about how one defines a national cinema, how different festivals such as Toronto and Montreal support or contest these traditions, and whether it is even legitimate to discuss *one* Canadian cin-

ematic canon. Yet, despite the establishment of two distinct cinema traditions, the Canadian film canon has been bicultural. As Peter Morris points out, the inclusion of Quebec films in the Canadian film canon may be attributed in part to “a consensus that Québec films were more artistically valuable. They were generally considered more innovative, less subject to commercial pressures and more likely to be created by writer-directors as *auteurs*.”¹² The Canadian film canon has been predominately bicultural, and both the Perspective Canada program at the Toronto International Film Festival and Panorama Canada at the Montreal World Film Festival include Quebecois and English-Canadian productions. This biculturalism engenders a unique situation for Canadian film programmers, but it is possible to refer to the Canadian film canon as a singular entity while maintaining the distinction between Quebecois and English-Canadian productions.

National spotlight programs in Montreal and Toronto (followed by similar programs at the Vancouver International Film Festival and the Atlantic Film Festival, to name but two) have forged a public space for English-Canadian and Quebecois cinema. If part of the process of canonization requires attention from critics, film festivals are a prime vehicle for English-Canadian and Quebecois cinema to garner this kind of attention. A rudimentary requirement for a film’s potential inclusion in the canon is the need for it to be seen by scholars, critics, and the public. To be included in the canon, Canadian films need to be seen—yet, as Charles Acland has pointed out, “Canadian film’s absence has an unusual presence in the popular imaginary.”¹³ The absence to which Acland refers is the extremely low percentage of Canadian films on theater screens. Canadian films notoriously occupy very little screen space in Canada. Yet, unlike the rest of the year when little critical or popular support seems to be mustered for Canadian films, festivals generate crucial critical, public, and industry interest in Canadian films. For example, the vast majority of the screenings of Canadian films at the 2003 edition of the Toronto International Film Festival were sold out.¹⁴

While few audience members—be they press, industry, or the public—would make a point of only attending Canadian films, festivals such as Toronto provide a context in which Canadian films are positioned on an international stage.

While filmgoers may hesitate to see a Canadian film during the year, a festival screening provides a context in which a Canadian film can perform as well as a foreign film, often because Canadian cinema is viewed by Canadians as similarly “other.”

In his essay “Global Cities and International Film Festival Economy,” Julian Stringer nicely outlines some of the broader issues at play in the contemporary film

festival circuit.¹⁵ He persuasively argues for the need to consider how cultural nationalism and national identity is bound up in the histories of film festivals. As telling examples, Stringer recounts how Venice was organized to legitimize Mussolini's fascism on a world stage, whereas the Berlin festival emerged in the 1950s as a spectacle of democratization after the fall of Hitler and the rise of an East German communist state.

The arrival in the mid-1970s of the Toronto International Film Festival (or the Festival of Festivals as it was initially known) coincides with the advent of Canadian cultural nationalism.¹⁶ In this period, the distinctiveness of Canadian cinema as Canadian was to be revealed.

Since its inception, the Toronto festival has played a key role in attempting to build a distinctively Canadian cinema, and the establishment, in 1984, of the Perspective Canada series to highlight Canadian film solidified this role of national cinema building.

The festival circuit and festival screenings function to gather potential critical, public, and scholarly attention for individual films and directors. While sales, foreign distribution deals, and the interest of talent agents are some of the hoped-for outcomes of festival exposure, those films and directors regularly represented in festivals are also likely to garner something else—*critical capital*. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, I employ the term "critical capital" to refer to the value that a film accrues through its success in the festival circuit.¹⁷ Through approval of the tastemakers—festival programmers and critics—the film attains a level of distinction above its unselected peers. Films that gather a considerable amount of critical capital are more likely to find a place in the history of Canadian national cinema as a part of the canon than those films that do not. In part, a film's critical capital depends on the status of the festivals in which it is screened, the critics who review it, and the responses it receives. For example, a screening at Cannes undoubtedly accrues more critical capital than a screening anywhere else. In addition, prestigious competitive festivals that bestow awards are crucial to a film's critical capital even, and perhaps precisely, when it may not translate into box office gold. For example, while the awarding of a Palme d'Or in Cannes doesn't promise box office success, it does signal crucial critical capital that may aid a film's entry into the canon.

If critical capital is accrued from being selected for a prestigious festival, further distinctions are determined through the film's placement within the festival structure. In the case of the noncompetitive Toronto festival, the Opening Night Gala slot is often considered one of the prime slots of the festival, and programs such as Galas, Special Presentations, and Masters are eagerly sought by distributors, producers, and filmmakers for

the positioning of their films. In this hierarchy, regionally defined programs such as Planet Africa and Perspective Canada are often perceived as ghettos for underperforming work.

In the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival, a large number of Canadian films were programmed outside of the Perspective Canada series. Canadian films were scattered in Gala slots, Special Presentations, the Master series, and a number of co-productions were presented in Contemporary World Cinema, Discovery, and Reel to Reel. This dispersal of Canadian films throughout the festival raises questions about the long-term necessity of a national cinema series. If a spotlight program is seen as a means of bolstering a national cinema, does broader integration signal the successful assimilation of Canadian film into world cinema? Is a dissolution of a national cinema series the ultimate sign of success?

In a context where foreign sales and worldwide distribution for Canadian films is difficult, critical capital becomes a major way of determining a film's success. Given the weakness of the domestic box office for Canadian film, "award-winning" and "official selection" are employed more often than "box office hit."

Rather than bemoan this situation, Atom Egoyan suggests that

While it may sound perverse, we benefit from not having a strong internal market. We don't compete with each other over box-office share, gigantic fees or star treatment, because it's simply not an issue. This is both a blessing and a curse. As artists, it means that our survival is not set by public taste, but by the opinion of our peers—festival programmers (the most influential is actually called Piers!), art council juries, and even Telefilm.¹⁸

This quote from Egoyan highlights the importance of programmer opinion and taste in Canadian cinema. Yet, despite the importance that a national spotlight such as the Perspective Canada series can play within a high-profile festival such as the Toronto International Film Festival, the politics of the series are complex in that they can not only conform to dominant notions of canon formation and nation building but also contest them. I want to stress that the road to canonization takes place on a myriad of levels, and the film festival is *only one part* of a larger, more complex procedure.

International film festival programmer, scholar, and critic Ruby Rich has suggested that any hint of agenda—political, national, or otherwise—within film selection

is treated with suspicion and is seen as interfering with the magical and utterly unsubstantiated notion of quality.¹⁹ Selecting films for a national spotlight is highly politicized because of the fraught notion of the nation and the “imagined community” that it must service (to invoke Benedict Anderson’s well-known formulation).²⁰ Films in a national spotlight program are often seen as conforming to a political or national agenda and thus as being judged not solely on the merits of quality. Yet, film programming for a national cinema series does necessitate a specific set of considerations. A national spotlight as a whole needs to reflect the cinematic output of an entire nation so it must represent a wide diversity of genres and cinematic practices. For example, the *Perspective Canada* program represents all cinematic genres including narratives, documentaries, and experimental work in both short and feature form. Consequently, films selected for inclusion in a program like *Perspective Canada* are seen as being selected because they are “representative” and adhere to a political agenda of what is good for the nation and good for Canadian film—not necessarily driven by quality, value, or good taste.

Programming is precisely about tastemaking—on an individual, national, and international level. While the personalities and personal tastes of some international film programmers are readily expressed, others are seen to be submerged within larger discourses, such as the discourse of national cinema.

Personal taste and value judgments might be downplayed more often in national spotlight programs than in other programming decisions as these decisions are in the national interest—so to speak. The question is whether this is endemic to Canadian film only, or whether a national spotlight, regardless of the country in which it transpires, is perceived as inherently problematic. Are the films selected to be shown in *Berlinale*’s focus on German cinema or Irish films at the *Cork International Film Festival* equally politicized?

The “taste” of the programmer can never be extinguished. While matters of taste, and specifically programmer taste, are inherent in the representation of a national cinema at a festival, taste is often perceived as subsumed by politics. Matters of taste are often downplayed in the programming of a national cinema. If what Rich calls “the worship of taste” dominates the international film festival circuit’s programming agenda, then the suspicion of any agenda—political, national—is seen to interfere with the magical and utterly unsubstantiated notion of quality. While this tyranny of taste may call for the dominance of aesthetics (if only a perceived dominance) in film festival programming decisions, politics is never removed from the question of taste. As Pierre Bourdieu has

pointed out, we can never escape taste, and all matters of taste have political dimensions and consequences. Thus, all programming decisions and questions of taste have inherent politics, but national spotlight cinemas *appear* to have an agenda while other programs may appear to be driven only by the agenda of quality.

Programming under these conditions seems to necessitate foregrounding taste while downplaying a political and national agenda. Yet programming inevitably defines and reflects what is important for inclusion. Programmers are making powerful decisions. In this respect, reflecting the state of Canadian film makes an argument about both what is considered important filmmaking and what is considered Canadian filmmaking. In the context of the Perspective Canada series, this amounts to what Canadian cinema *is*. If the programming of Perspective Canada defines Canadian cinema, other programming work performs a similar function. Queer festivals help define what gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered cinema is; a festival such as Views from the Avant-Garde comments on the state of experimental cinema; and so on. The programming decisions amount to an argument about what defines that field, genre, or national cinema.

Despite my argument that film festival programming informs canon formation, the relationship between these processes is uneven. The process of canon formation takes place on multiple levels, and the role that film festival programming plays in defining a national cinema or in forming a canon is variable. For example, in 1988 Guy Maddin's beautiful and surreal film *Tales from Gimli Hospital* was rejected from the Toronto International Film Festival. At the time, there was not a large outcry about the rejection. Maddin was not yet a known quantity, he had not made any previous features, and his films had not yet regularly played the international or Canadian film circuit. In short, Maddin was not part of the canon. Of course, in retrospect the exclusion of this film seems a large oversight. The film meanwhile managed to gain a cult following and become a Canadian classic without the benefit of a Toronto International Film Festival screening. Although a festival screening may be a factor in a film's canonization, it is by no means the only factor. However, as the stature of the festival increases, the weight of that one factor can have significant bearing on a film's life. In the case of the Toronto International Film Festival and its ability to contribute to a film's critical capital, it can be potentially very important. As film critic and regular Toronto Festival attendee Roger Ebert has pointed out, "You can go to Toronto with a film nobody has heard of and you can leave with a success on your hands."²¹

While film festival programming may be only one in a series of events that can lead to a film becoming part of the canon, it can also work to define and redefine the concept of nation itself. In 1996 the Perspective Canada series opened with Deepa Mehta's



Figure 2. *Tales from Gimli Hospital* (1988) by Guy Maddin

Fire. The film, an Indian-Canadian coproduction, was shot in India and explored a lesbian relationship between two married Indian women. The film's Canadianness was called into question by numerous institutional bodies, including the media, which questioned the "ethnic" slant of the programming choice. In addition, Telefilm Canada initially hesitated funding the distribution of *Fire* as it didn't fulfill the requirements to be deemed Canadian. (For Telefilm Canada's purposes, a film's Canadianness is evaluated on a point system according to the nationality of talent and craftspeople involved with the film.)

Perspective Canada has no point system; *Fire*, it was decided, was Canadian. If programming does help define and reflect the state of Canadian film, it can also challenge what gets defined as Canadian.

Although a national cinema spotlight such as Perspective Canada has played a significant role in the building of a national cinema culture, its future in an era dominated by so-called postnationalism seems uncertain. When coproductions and co-ventures as funding models are gaining popularity, the ability to easily define and delineate a national cinema becomes increasingly more difficult. Current attitudes have departed from the

fervent cultural nationalism of the 1970s toward a globalism that focuses on the world market. The rationale of a national cinema series in this context is increasingly challenged. Whether the program continues in its current conception or not, it has nonetheless significantly contributed to the canonization and recognition of a number of Canadian filmmakers. While arguing for the role of Perspective Canada as one of the mechanisms in canon formation, it needs to be stressed that it is only one of the factors in a film's success and that other factors contributing to a film's inclusion or exclusion need also to be accounted for.

NOTES

Many thanks to Jan-Christopher Horak and my anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful suggestions and comments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at "Terms of Address: The Pedagogy and Politics of Film and Video Programming and Curating," organized by the Centre for Media and Culture in Education (CMCE) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, March 2003; and the Film Studies Association of Canada, Halifax, Nova Scotia, May 2003. My thanks to the organizers of those conferences and the invaluable feedback from participants and respondents. For aiding me in the acquisition of stills, many thanks to the Toronto Film Reference Library.

1. Patricia Thomson, "Clutterbusters: Programmers at Five Leading Festivals Expound on Heady Process of Selecting Films," *Variety*, August 18, 2003, 47.
2. Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 191–209.
3. Peter Morris, "In Our Own Eyes: The Canonizing of Canadian Film," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 3, no. 1 (spring 1994): 27–44.
4. *Ibid.*, 30–31; emphasis in original.
5. Chris Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. Eugene Walz, ed., *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002).
8. Katherine Monk, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes: And Other Canadian Film Phenomena* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2002), 6.
9. *Ibid.*, 7. A regular film festival attendee, Monk's book highlights numerous contemporary filmmakers and includes discussions of directors such as Deepa Mehta, John Greyson, Denis Villeneuve, Robert Lepage, and Gary Burns, while still acknowledging veteran directors such as David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, and Denys Arcand.
10. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema*, 2.
11. In scholarly publication, this is often manifested in books that focus on one or the other of the traditions. For example, William Beard and Jerry White's *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema since 1980*

(Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002) deals specifically with English-language production, whereas Bill Marshall's *Québec National Cinema* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) and Scott MacKenzie's *Screening Québec: Québécois Cinema, National Identity, and the Public Sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) examine Quebec cinema.

12. Morris, "In Our Own Eyes," 33–34.
13. Charles Acland, "Screen Space, Screen Time, and Canadian Film Exhibition," in *North of Everything*, ed. Beard and White, 2–18. While Acland goes to great lengths to challenge this perception and how screen time is calculated, the amount of time Canadian films are on screen remains small no matter how you add it up.
14. Statistics provided by the Toronto International Film Festival.
15. Julian Stringer, "Global Cities and International Film Festival Economy," in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (London: Blackwell, 2001), 134–44.
16. Film critic Brian D. Johnson's history of the Toronto festival, *Brave Films, Wild Nights: 25 Years of Festival Fever* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2000), doesn't address these issues.
17. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
18. Atom Egoyan, foreword to Monk's *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*, 2. Egoyan is referring to Piers Handling, the director of the Toronto International Film Festival.
19. Ruby Rich, abstract from "Terms of Address: The Pedagogy and Politics of Film and Video Programming and Curating," organized by the Centre for Media and Culture in Education (CMCE) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, March 2003.
20. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
21. Roger Ebert, interviewed by Kendon Polak, *Inside Entertainment*, September 2003, 55.