

# Film Festivals as Aesthetic Experiences

## Theories of Affect and the Collective

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### Abstract

Film festivals may be distinguished by virtue of their collectively felt atmospheres, and, while oscillating between uniqueness and the generic, they equally provide and require specific moods. Characterized by an intense schedule of film projections as well as observing the elongation of the cinematic by way of meeting and celebrating film-makers, film festival phenomena comprise several elements which play into their atmospheres. The author argues that tracing the becoming of those elements draws us closer to the role of film festivals as well as to our experience thereof. Breaking down the complexity of the film festivals is effected by drawing on similarities with art exhibitions. Drawing on the argument that their prime functionality lies in supporting films as *works of art*, the study pinpoints how film festivals become aesthetic milieus where common, shared aesthetic experiences are enabled. A collective dimension of experience is to be maintained to the extent that curatorially blended festival programs group certain films or establish connections among them, thereby 'quasi-synchronously' orienting festivalgoers. Film festival events reconfigure the position of spectators within the aesthetic dimension. Applying the concepts of affect and percept is relevant to grasp both the pre- and transindividual dimensions which contribute to the experience of film festivals and make up their atmospheres. The event-like character of the film festival, as a temporal organisation feeding on film images and re-enabling affects as various bodies (spectators, film creators and so on), we may well understand its significance on a representational level. Meanwhile, looking through the lens of body studies and Deleuzian affect theory, the experiential domain of the unrepresentable, affective capacities alludes to the formation of the collective and the subjective, as both coming into being. The study ultimately aims to reveal the multidirectional dynamics between film festivals and certain ingrained structures, like spectatorship and cinephilia.

## Introduction

As sociocultural phenomena, film festivals may be distinguished by virtue of their collectively felt atmospheres, where their mood-inducing effects are related to an intense schedule of film projections. Tracing the elements which make up their fleeting atmospheres, a phenomenologically defined perspective is useful both when arguing for particularities of given film festivals and describing our experience thereof.

By taking film festivals as space-time complexes (deValck and Loist 2009, 179-2015) scholarship has been drawing attention to the processes underpinning film festival events, as well as to the composite nature and manifold functions of film festivals. As such, to the extent that aesthetic experiences remain essential aspect of participation at film festivals, we may draw an initial parallel with art exhibitions. Specifically, as socially constructed settings, film festivals appear similar to large-scale art exhibitions that feature or present a variety of artistic works. Such dynamics, it is argued, engenders modes of experience to capture art-works' inherent, autonomous significations, while the frame of the collective exhibition, or curatorial concepts constitute further layers of coding (Osborne 2013, 162). To be sure, medium-specific usages of the film are tempting as a conceptual shortcut to contemporary forms of art (as approached by art theorist Peter Osborne). However, apart from homologous recombination, such view appears to reiterate the function of art exhibitions as being dedicated to the forms of art. So, by presenting and validating films as *works of art*, or as objects with aesthetic values, a prime functionality of film festivals appears to be that of supporting film as form of art.

Not only do festival-phenomena appear as aesthetic milieus in connection with films as works of art but it has been also suggested that film festivals enable common, shared aesthetic experiences (cf. Harbord 2009, 43; Harbord 2016, 72). The fact that film festival programs constitute objects which are experienced in crowded settings may be rather obvious. Spectators' aesthetic experiences are part and parcel of the 'film festival complexity' triggered by mediatedness, especially when taking into consideration the enhancement of the cinematic by way of meeting and celebrating film-makers. Moreover, films carry the subjective imprints of their makers, while film festival programs are, in effect, emulating related festival- and film-viewing experiences of the festival programmers themselves. Specifically, discursive efforts to repackage the world or worlds thrive

on experiences of others, that is on projections of subjectivities, which in our case are already mediated since film frames are constructed and appear through subjective lenses. Film festivals contextualize everyday, mundane film screenings, and represent the world in its diversity (provided we conceive the world as diversity or in its diversity). By taking into consideration the aforementioned, curatorially blended festival programs whereby connections established among individual films are established and being operated 'quasi-synchronously' by diligent festivalgoers, we may provisionally contour a collective dimension of experience.

To the extent that ineffable and transient qualities bumping and sliding into one another on the border of experience may be traced back to a Jamesian pure experience, an interlinking of the social component of the festival event with the film—both as a medium and form of art—, is to be viewed in terms of the pre—and transindividual levels and—occurrence. In a similar manner, moving from the aesthetic object of the film toward body studies diverges from representation. Notwithstanding a comforting relevance of the discourse of the unrepresentable, in what follows, an approach from affect theory is useful, I suggest, to break from aesthetic receptivity so that the experience of film festivals would complete that which is an unavoidable benchmark in film studies, namely the notion of 'spectatorship.'

## Embodiment, Performance and Perception

The fact that we sense the world with our bodies is a straightforward claim after Merleau-Ponty; the perspective of the body as experience builds upon the everydayness of embodiment, but any essential feature of bodyness should raise further issues (since it includes also that which about we aren't aware or conscious of). Accordingly, one can refer here to the relationship between the mental and the somatic, as well as to that between the conscious and less conscious features of perception; those, on their turn, engender different levels of experience while re-emphasizing not so much the agential role of affects, but imbuing the emergence of the social and the individual in a simultaneous manner (see for e.g. Massumi 2002; Massumi 2015; Blackman et al. 2008). In our case, we may refer to the fact that (engaged, or undistracted) film viewing means one is having cognitive

appraisals and bodily reactions; such considerations extend also to investigating the causality of emotions (Plantinga 2009), while it also reassures one's path of analysis toward the issue of perception in film studies (see for e.g. Elsaesser and Hagener 2010). Accordingly, perception is eventually grasped not just as arising from or within a body but also as simultaneously creating (different) 'bodies,' or meanings.

With regard to the cinema, an initial starting point was provided by Adorno, according to whom a spectator's eyes fixated onto the movie-screen perform the same movements as the eyes of the other viewers; it joins the 'current' of all those who are attracted to the spectacle (Adorno 1991, 183–184). Similarly, we can also refer to the illusory nature of film characters' perspectives to the extent that those betray the subjective handling of the movie camera, or they come to exist as depending on or enabled by the latter (see for e.g. Sobchack 2009). The perception of the movie image is based on mimicry, and the (function of the) film becomes ideologically inflicted, whereby we can refer to a joining of the aesthetic and sociological aspects of the film, which at the same time designates the spectatorial subject created by the film. Notwithstanding the notion of spectatorship, the film, according to the perspective put forth by the critique of ideology, falls short of its (aesthetic) potentials because of its uninhibited mass-appeal and production-enabled seriality. Consequently, collective subjectification by mass- or popular media has been widely criticized ever since; a cultural studies approach notwithstanding, the performative aspect of art forms, or their performative modalities are significant, especially if we consider specific forms of art as being conducive to expressions or enactments of what is possible, and thereby contributing to a 'diversification' of the previously de-individuated/ de-differentiated common body of the audience (Guattari 1995, 91). In a somewhat similar manner, audience – or spectators' participation that comes to be regarded as performative in terms of its active potentials may be opposed to aesthetic experience defined by habit and recognition, or being organized by anticipations and retentions, and therefore considered as having passive potential only.

The spectator appears in the Guattarian paradigm as a set of elements of subjectivity, or as a psycho-structure with multiple components, which is dependent on a sort of openness, with any perspective of the self appearing only at the starting points and endpoints of aesthetic experience. On the one hand, the outcome constitutes a token of repetition; the unrepeatable (an instance which marks artistic performances and which permeates the spatiotemporal contraction of the film festival-event) *and* the repetition are being constituted through their

interrelationship. While this may suggest a dialectical move, or even a thinking in accordance, it also conveys a flexibility of its own, much in the same way as the performative aspect comprises both a repeating occurrence and an unrepeatable, unique event. The relationship with the artwork can be thought of as an activity implying reception, transformation and return, all of which pass through countless points and variations, where the efforts of understanding and interpretation on the part of the spectator will always be to some degree a referential repetition, since he or she recreates the film frames while mentally processing it, thinking about, or re-imagining it.

Here we may observe a concentration of many perspectives: any claim to an essence of the movie performance, as it comes into being in the specific setting, rests on multiple objectifications; the film as production targets the ideal spectator, or the impersonal, and therefore a collective. And, a similar claim of objectification marks the perceptual act of the spectator, as well as aspects of desire (even if such concerning desire has been mutated or modified so that it isn't obvious anymore who or what constitutes its object, or whether it has any object at all...). Here the 'deterritorializing' and 'reterritorializing' processes applied to grasp the effect of artwork serve to revisit the idea of perception as being the starting point (therefore, the spectator should remain neither starting point nor endpoint for analysis).

## Aesthetic Affects

Spectators captivated by the screen or captured by it is another way of saying that the movie performance bears affects and intensities; what is bound to settle the contradiction between its impersonal focusing on multiple poles *and* the active participation as being part of the aesthetic event concerns both the unusual, habit-disrupting quality as well as a playing into subjective experiences (cf. Guattari 2007, 258–64). The superimposition of subjective becoming and of 'being positioned' may be not so obvious: within the discursive mode of filmic representation the ultimate stake is world-creation, that is 'worlding', where we become 'worlds' as stipulated by Deleuze and Guattari (2011) to grasp the inner transformation through reception of artworks. As the change induced by aesthetic sensation is inducing also a becoming into someone or something else, the appearance of percepts in the filmic context means the human becoming is relaying the former; therefore, considering the differentiated relationship of films

and spectators, the qualities which are felt (and therefore personal and contextual) may coexist with the affects and percepts beyond subjective experiences. In other words, we can think of the context as being initially constituted by a film, but the actual (visual or audio) content of which arrives from outside of that context by virtue of being recorded elsewhere and/or previously – a fact which means that it will be actualized in the form of percepts and, by the way of mediation, their effect will be exerted as affects or will create affects.

The perspective of 'presentification'<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the fact that cognition is subsequent to the act of sensory perception which is, to a degree, always a past event (Manning in Massumi 2015, 149); therefore, being both retroactive and forced to be directed toward the future, perception and the perceivers' subjectivity are coupled as a follow-up (we may add that such a perspective lays bare the contemporary significance attributed to immersive environments as the Deleuzian 'power of the false'). As visual perception proceeds with proprioceptive input, movie watching in communal spaces, among a crowd of people moulds the experience of one's body and other human and non-human bodies.<sup>2</sup> The underlying claim is that bodies stay or 'hang' together due to the affects, or forces and processes organising them and which may be recognized as such only partially.

Based on one of the most echoed starting points of Deleuzian film philosophy, the characteristic images of contemporary cultures of consumption exert such affective, suggestive influence that they uncouple from what is visually present and directly conveyed by the components of images. The emphasis on or the turning to what lies outside the picture frame concerns the not givens of perception, or the components that aren't (yet) visual or representable; ultimately, the plane of representation won't capture the affect-percept couplet. With cinema itself being enmeshed with visibility and spectacle while spatially conditioned, the experiential domain finds its escape route (or its necessary 'lines of flight') via unrepresentable, affective capacities. Aesthetic sensations not only evidence the intertwining of physiological and mental states, but enable a correspondingly intensive becoming which doubles the performative event effected by a work of art. Taking into consideration the emergence of aesthetic sensation, the aesthetic dimension enfolds the corporeal, material and the incorporeal, immaterial, all of which are palpable as different levels of experience but connectable and sliding into one another by way of blocks of affects and percepts.

In a similar manner, if media images, thanks to their affective charges and intensities do become body-images, they depend on 'bodies-without-image', or a condition whereby the mental image of the body becomes problematic precisely because of the inherent mirror-image content (cf. Blackman 2012, 15, 177). In other words, the notion of 'mirror vision' views bodies as static entities, the aspect of being 'without-image' goes against a representational view of the world and refers to a fundamentally affective mode of existence. With change as a consequence of intensities and force effects, movement is eventually exposed, which, in its turn, requires 'movement vision' (cf. Massumi 2002, 48–57). Obviously, a model is provided here by the diachronical organization of the Deleuzian 'cinema image' (i.e. the seriality of movie images, the interval between them, and the cut as synthesis). And, for the same reason, the aforementioned different registers (i.e. the body-image and the body-without-image, 'mirror vision' and 'movement vision', affect and emotion, subject and object, as well as the dynamics between visceral and proprioceptive intensities) while remaining grouped under a sort of conceptual multiplicity, they denote the 'doubling' of the body-subject (Blackman 2012, 16), or bring about cleavages in subjectively felt experiences.

## Festival-Body and the Collective

Film screenings and film-viewing experiences, as well as social interactions in-between and public meetings with film-makers mean the communal context of film festival-events. Thereby we may acknowledge the intertwining of various registers which encompass the particular and the plural, individual 'body-subjects' and the 'festival-body', where spectator-bodies carry tension. First, it can be easily acknowledged that the above-listed appear relevant in the case of events and experiences involving a multitude of participants. The affect theorist Lisa Blackman has proposed the conceptual variant of 'body subjects' to account for a particular condition designating human bodies as being involved in communication in affective terms. Accordingly, the embodiment of the psychological subject has been envisaged as overlapping planes of the intersubjective and the intercorporeal; thereby experiences appear as mediated through connections with other human and non-human bodies (Blackman 2012, 9, 12-13). Here we may observe also that a default mediation of experience means being embodied within the process of mediation. Amidst a temporally fixed organisation of film images and living bodies (spectators, actors and so on), we may advance from a representational level of film festivals.

The Deleuzian concept of the body concerns relationships among bodies in terms of intensities, degrees and fluxes; as such, it is relevant for both 'body-subjects' and the unity conferred to community, or as form of the collective. On the one hand, any forces meeting each other bring about or create bodies, a claim which hits the composition of bodies of (m)any kind(s). Bodies coming together multiply such relations and create additional bodies (Brown and Stenner 2009, 186). Therefore, an emerging sense of collectivity is considered as doubling the multitude coming together: similarly to the Deleuzian assemblage, such understanding of the collectivity becomes a potential, which is open, pure, with 'every body connecting to every other such that their very difference becomes indiscernible' (Brown and Stenner 2009, 194).

A cognitive perspective makes it clear that within the process of perception there is an extraction from the film image so that the latter is transformed subsequently and projected back onto its object; therefore, the processual events encompass both the presently unfolding acts of perception and the corresponding changes of states. Thus, on the other hand, sensations register both objects and tendencies which differ from another in the sense that objects refer to countable, separable and spatially defined elements, while tendencies are being grasped in an inherent multiplicity denoting spatial and temporal inseparability. Here, as the affect theorist Paul Massumi argues, it is about a qualitatively different aspect which is 'tendential' to the extent that, while encompassing an activation of tendencies together at once, it sets the stage for the actual unfolding of a single tendency; thereby, it accounts for pluralities which fill the moment of experience ultimately making it unitary (for the moment) but only to disappear (Massumi 2015, 185-189). This logic of operation underscores the virtual multiplicity as qualitatively different perspective which accounts for 'becomings' and the collective in qualitative terms; it also draws the attention to the transient character of unity based on pluralities. The notion of the collective can have a tendential character because the unity of its elements may appear only virtually, i.e. in the light of the multiplicity. Tendency, on its turn, may refer to the common movement and encounter of bodies within the event whereby the intensity of affects are indicative as their attractive force, or as the folding out of oneself and thus generating belonging, in parallel with the notion of 'becoming' understood in the sense of change or transformation; such belonging is to be conceived as not yet bodily felt, but enveloped within the relational setting of the event; in other words, an opening that is set free from any relationship of the participating elements.



The eventness of gathering a multitude of people carries 'bodies' in several understandings so that we may go beyond the crowd-essence in spite of its Adornian relevance for matters of culture. Notwithstanding mass-psychology, or the obviousness of the crowd-effect, 'bodyness' is sought not in terms of physical bodies *within and creating* the multitude, and neither referring to body as extensity, but rather taking affective, incorporeal and transcorporeal transitions as carriers. Considered in such terms, if (any) collective determination is considered necessary also for the production of the subjectivity, then, the collectivity cannot be reduced to experience of the communal 'we'. Therefore, community ideas generally derived from the necessities of social coexistence also imply that a collectivity is formed as an effect, or will be organised around something in a Durkheimian way, and thereby is endowed with or differentiated through a force of its own (such as, for e.g. cohesion). Here one may remind the notion of the 'quasi-object' as introduced by Michel Serres (1982) in order to serve as common focus for the dispersed multiplicity to emerge as a collective (Brown and Stenner *ibid.*). Similarly to the insight that the collective may have multiple appearances, the multiplicity is applied both beyond/above the individual, i.e. on the social level *and* before the emerging of the personal, on the side pre-verbal intensities; in other words, it follows the logic of affects rather than those of designated sets (Guattari 1995, 9). In this way the 'transversal' character of the collective appears as valid for communal and individual or personal levels, while simultaneously enables speaking about subjectivity as both emerging in a shared manner (and so applicable at group levels), while also as having multiple components on the level of a single individual. Accordingly, due to the ways in which it is produced, we may refer also to a collective determination of subjectivity, where the Guattarian insight could be regarded as a double-edged sword with regard to exposing both the workings of the discursive and the limited potential to subvert power positions in active, that is discursive ways. And, as a consequence, one may rightly cut through the notion of the bounded and walled psychological subject, as well as re-assess its causal determination (so far captured by crowd- or mass psychology, which, on its turn correlates the affective overspill of the individual with a de-differentiating melt into a group, or the multitude, see Massumi 2015, 206). Instead, the common embeddedness of subjects and objects is a point of entry having ceased to be static, and which means that situated, and thereby individuated contents and the 'transindividual' dimension (the latter understood as 'correlated differentiation,' see Massumi *ibid.*) may simultaneously be grasped.

While taking interpersonal relations, or separation into individuals or groups is helpful to designate a functional sociality, when viewed through the lens of transindividual becoming, the processes of formation of cultural or social forms entail a 'pure' sociality which refers to the potential to formation, or the potential as power that enables the 'becoming' of any sociality whatsoever (Massumi *ibid.*). Thus, the Deleuzo-Guattarian thought of a 'community to come' is bound to appear, but which shouldn't be mistaken for a ready-formed collective consisting of particular components or individuals, or with empirical variants of the social (cf. Massumi 2002, 253). We need to carefully observe that we are always at the beginning of that activity in the course of which the 'incoming' can be thought; this openness is not to be conflated with a specific own quality of the collective. Likewise, it doesn't draw the temporal plane where the collective will eventually become resilient to change. The openness as correlated with the undefinable enables for the relation to emerge into existence, but which, on its turn, will determine the elements of the relation.

In accordance with the above, the concept of the 'time event' in relation to film festival phenomena (Harbord 2009, 2016) underlines a qualitative change also in the sense of organizing experience and subsequently creating subjectivities. The emergence and disappearance of references, or 'anchoring points' can be interpreted and approximated through differential movements and sensations. As such, differential relationships might as well be interpenetrating though they shouldn't be confused with the *subjective* dimension of the experience of change. We may remind that film festivals bring about changes by virtue of their well-versed functionalities (like for e.g., the mediation of films as works of art), and such changes concern spectatorship and cinephilia, to the extent that those are ingrained structures developed and maintained by the film festivals themselves.

## Author Biography

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## Notes

1. Further evidence for a spectatorship operating on the basis of hypotheses could be provided through neuroscientific findings on perceptual best-guessing (see for e.g. Seth 2021).
2. It should be noted that 'bodies' which are not considered works of art get also configured along their affecting capacities since they are shaped by planes of composition. Nonetheless, viewing the human as expressive, or an artistic expression shouldn't be regarded as an instant claim for affects, but rather as suggesting a step back so as to conceive percepts as organizing the human frame of perception, and only thereby turning to affective contours and tonalities which are endowed with aesthetic qualities.

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