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Supporting art cinema at a time of commercialization: Principles and practices, the case of the International Film Festival Rotterdam



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ABSTRACT

This article examines how social agents negotiate the tension between an art for art's sake ideology and a commercializing subfield—using the specific case of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR). Drawing on Bourdieu's sociology of the arts and recent film festival studies, I discuss both the “autonomous” logics as one of the driving forces in the festival network's commitment to cinema and the “heteronomous” festival practice that facilitates industry needs. To do so, I offer an analysis of interviews with (former) IFFR staff. The results of this study show that the social agents quite comfortably mix and match art for art's sake values with the new ideal of cultural entrepreneurship. While there is positive synergy between the festival's core (artistic) task of programming and the new business activities of CineMart and the Hubert Bals Fund, the reality of festival work also involves negotiation between diverging interests and a settling for compromises. Behind closed doors, the industry has replaced the filmmaker as the festival's premier stakeholder. By extending the use of Bourdieuan approaches, in conclusion, this study offers a more nuanced look at the ways in which classic “autonomous” principles are constantly negotiated in the practice of festival work.

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1. Introduction

Following the expansion of the world economy into a capitalist world-system (Wallerstein, 1979, 2004), the past decades have brought a trend towards an increased market logic in the cultural sector.

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The pressure on cultural industries to commercialize especially intensified after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when neo-liberal approaches triumphed in cultural policy and cultural development was considered as a form of economic development by local governments (O’Conner, 2007, p. 26). Bourdieu has argued that the effects of commercialization are felt as more or less disruptive in the field of cultural production depending on whether a subfield is more heteronomously organized—described as interrelated with other fields and expressing their values—or autonomously organized—understood as operating according to principles derived from the field itself (Bourdieu, 1993). In this article, I concern myself with the subfield of art cinema—sometimes also referred to as “independent cinema”—and, more specifically, with film festivals. Art cinema is typically produced outside the major film studio system and directed at niche markets instead of a mass, mainstream audience. When applying a Bourdieuan framework to the world of art cinema, one can argue that it belongs to the autonomous pole of the field of cultural production—displaying a high level of symbolic capital (e.g., prestige) and a low level of economic capital. Film festivals are important sites for the consecration of art films. Prestigious competitions, like the ones in Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, bring cultural recognition to their participants and prizewinners, and such acknowledgement is considered more valuable than the commercial potential of a film (Baumann, 2001; De Valck, 2007; Elsaesser, 2005). However, although imbued with “autonomous” values, the system in which art cinema is produced and circulated doesn’t sit squarely with Bourdieu’s “autonomous” category of small-scale or restricted production. One example that suggests a far greater complexity is that some of the “independent” companies involved in the production of art films, in fact, are subsidiaries of special divisions of Hollywood studios. In the words of David Hesmondhalgh, who criticizes Bourdieu for neglecting the importance of the rise of the cultural industries, “...restricted production has become introduced *into* the field of mass production” (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 222). The progressively complex organization of our cultural industries makes it difficult to understand processes of commercialization. While cultural and economic fields become more and more intertwined—at the autonomous, as well as at the heteronomous pole—people continue to believe in the value of art, culture and creativity in itself, for itself and as something essentially not correlated with money (Bourdieu, 1996; Caves, 2000; Hyde, 1983).

This article examines how social agents negotiate the tension between an art for art’s sake ideology and a commercializing subfield, using the specific case of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR). Film festivals provide valuable opportunities to research the changing intersections between art and commerce because—while traditionally committed to screen cinema as art, in celebration of its artistic achievements or for its sociopolitical relevance—the major festivals have also always doubled as meeting points for the international film industry. With the industry as one of its key stakeholders, festivals are likely to be affected by the recent trend of commercialization. This study aims to shed light specifically on the attitudes and behaviour of film festival staff vis-à-vis commercialization. To what extent do they subscribe to classic art for art’s sake principles? Are such principles brought in line with the degree to which they can be implemented? Is commercialization seen as a threat or an opportunity? And do actual practices underwrite the dominant principles of the festival staff?

The empirical heart of my argument is formed by the analysis of interviews conducted with (former) IFFR staff on these issues. In order to assess their accounts and remarks, I will begin by considering both the “autonomous” logics as one of the driving forces in the festival network’s commitment to cinema and the “heteronomous” festival practice that facilitates industry needs. After positioning the study, I first hone in on the characteristic festival discourse on art cinema to identify the ideological position underlying festivals’ core activity of programming. I analyze how, at festivals, art cinema is positioned at the autonomous pole of the field of cultural production, and I argue festivals play a central role in the cultural consecration of films and filmmakers (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). Second, I turn to cinema’s identity as commodity and focus on the ways that festivals also have always related to the film industry (Rhynes, 2009; Rühling, 2009). I discuss some of the major transformations in the organization and orientation of film industries—in particular, the rise of industry niches dedicated to art cinema—and explain how festivals have responded to the changing needs of industry stakeholders. Combining the two contexts, the question emerges regarding whether the diverging interests of “art” and “commerce” clash. By analyzing the principles and practices of key social agents of one specific festival, I aim to gain more insight into the way festivals strike a balance between the two and negotiate their position vis-à-vis current commercialization processes.

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