

# Book Review:

## LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness

**Damiens, Antoine**

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LGBTQ *Film Festivals*, as Damiens notes in his opening lines, is “born out of a paradox.”<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the book traverses and documents an impressive range of queer film festivals—some well-known, some minor, and some whose existence is questionable—and makes a strong case for film festival studies to turn its collective gaze toward the vast network of film festivals that operate completely outside of the circuit of A-list international festivals like Cannes and Venice. On the other hand, Damiens argues in plain terms that he does not want to simply document queer film festivals; rather, he sees *LGBTQ Film Festivals*’ real contribution as “examin[ing] the disciplinary assumptions that structure festival studies: it questions the theoretical and political narratives implied in current festival scholarship.”<sup>3</sup> Damiens treats queer film festivals as a privileged case through which to interrogate, undo, and ultimately *queer* festival studies.

In this way, *LGBTQ Film Festivals* performs the very paradox that structures much queer

media production, exhibition, and distribution: the desire to make, exhibit, and distribute images about ourselves which are not “merely” about ourselves. Throughout the book, Damiens deftly navigates this paradox and manages to produce a significant text that is both about queer film festivals and about the methods, theories, and political assumptions underpinning much film festival scholarship. Namely, *LGBTQ Film Festivals* lays bare the extent to which film festival studies’ theories and methods frequently reduce queer film festivals to being “merely” about identity instead of perceiving these festivals as central to our understanding of how knowledge is produced.

Damiens’ *LGBTQ Film Festivals* is thus a significant intervention into debates about the what and how of cinema and media festival studies, the objects of our studies, and the methods we use to understand them. This book is not a narrow case study on a corpus of minor, ephemeral queer film festivals. This book uses queer film festivals across North America and Europe to make a methodological intervention within the field as a whole.

Damiens makes his intervention by drawing largely on archival research conducted during his doctoral studies and his personal experiences as an avid festival-goer. This book is only the second monograph published on the subject of queer film festivals (after Stuart Richards’ *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics*<sup>4</sup>)—a surprising fact, given that the number of LGBTQ film festivals worldwide exceeds that of any other type of film festival.<sup>5</sup> *LGBTQ Film Festivals* is also a strong contribution to the growing body of work on film festival methodologies and builds on Marijke de Valck’s foundational *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*<sup>6</sup> and the more recent edited collection *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*.<sup>7</sup> As such, *LGBTQ Film Festivals* would be of interest to scholars working on queer film and media, as well as those grappling with larger questions around cinema and media studies methodologies.

In many ways, *LGBTQ Film Festivals* marks film festival studies’ arrival as a significant sub-field within cinema and media studies. While the field has been generating an impressive amount of scholarship over the past decade and a half, Damiens’ book is the first to offer a coherent critique of the field as a whole. In the first three chapters, Damiens lays out an agenda for what Ezra Winton has termed “critical festival studies”—an approach that aims to undo the underlying social science bias of film festival scholarship, inject a humanities perspective into the field, and critique the ways film festivals and festival studies reproduce inequalities. Chapter 1 approaches this through a discussion of film festival archives and the objects of film festival research. Damiens mobilizes an impressive body of marginal and ephemeral festivals to argue that festival studies’ penchant for privileging “festivals which have the resources, expertise, and will to preserve their own history [excludes] amateur or less legitimate events which never attempted to safeguard their historical records in the first place” from the body of festival studies proper.<sup>8</sup>

In chapter 2—the strongest chapter in the book and a revision of an article previously published in *Studies in European Cinema*—Damiens offers a persuasive critique of festival studies’ reliance on Bourdieu and the concept of the “circuit” to understand the relationships between festivals. He challenges the orthodoxy that festivals produce regimes of taste; instead, he argues, “festivals do not produce but reproduce the cultural value associated with particular films; they select films that already correspond to particular regimes of

taste.”<sup>9</sup> Here, it is instructive to consider the decisions distributors make regarding which queer films will screen at a particular festival. The distributor’s decision not to screen, for example, *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2017) at any queer festival and circulate it only at the so-called A-list festivals evinces a festival ecosystem wherein regimes of taste are already inscribed before the film enters distribution. Damiens suggests that when distributors refuse to screen queer films at queer festivals, it is because they fear that the film may accrue negative capital and limit the film’s success to the queer market. Distributors worry that their film will be seen one-dimensionally as a film about queer identity—a worry, Damiens notes, that “often structure[s] academic research: gay film scholarship is often relegated as being *solely* about identity.”<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 3 offers one final critique of festival studies through the lens of labor and makes the case that there is no easy distinction to be made between festival criticism, festival organizing, and festival scholarship. By tracing the careers of a number of critic-scholars including Richard Dyer, Tom Waugh, Vito Russo, B. Ruby Rich, and Robin Wood, Damiens argues that the very discipline of cinema and media studies is structured by the festival format. Teaching, research, and festival organization are all fundamentally acts of curation, and Damiens argues that the relationships between these various types of academic and nonacademic labor need to be further studied within cinema and media studies.

Chapters 1 through 3 thus represent an inward-gazing critique of festival studies itself. In chapters 4 and 5, Damiens turns his attention to the festival format and offers a critique of how festivals produce knowledge. He outlines what he terms the “festival as a method,” and through an analysis of the material “stuff” of film festivals—trailers, programs, posters, and other sorts of ephemera—argues that film festivals produce a significant body of knowledge that allows us to understand the relationship between queer people and cinema. Festivals are not simply objects of research, but producers of knowledge in and of themselves.

As a book attuned to the problematics of knowledge production, methodology, and disciplinarity, *LGBTQ Film Festivals* makes transparent its limitations and paradoxes. The book is largely Americentric and Eurocentric and focuses largely on a corpus of festivals in Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. While chapter 1 appears to outline a promise that the book would center minor and ephemeral festivals throughout the book, this promise is largely unrealized. By chapter 3, Damiens focuses largely on festivals located in major urban centers that have achieved some institutional longevity. In the North American context at least, Damiens leaves out more ephemeral festivals held in the American South and Midwest, the Canadian Prairies, and the Atlantic Region. However, Damiens’ book, by orienting us toward minor festivals, makes us aware of these gaps and encourages us to think about small festivals outside of major urban centers.

Damiens’ exclusion of Asian, South American, and African queer film festivals is perhaps all the more curious given his investment in challenging festival studies’ orthodoxy toward studying major film festivals. This elision is likely due to a lack of access to research funding and precarious employment rather than ideological blind spots. As a result, we should situate any gaps in Damiens’ scholarship within broader conversations around research funding and precarious labor. Indeed, Damiens’ use of dissertations as a key secondary source in the

book, as well as his lengthy discussion of the various roles festival stakeholders take at any given moment, further underscores how precarious labor affects film festival studies as a subfield within cinema studies.

Although Damiens cites his own privilege as a cisgender, gay, white man for the exclusion of some festivals, I would argue that Damiens' economic precarity offers the most fruitful lens for understanding the value of LGBTQ Festivals. As such, Damiens' book is part of the "critical festival studies" he identifies, as well as a contribution to the field of *precarious festival studies*—a body of scholarship about precarious ephemeral festivals written by precarious scholars. Reading and reviewing this book in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, *LGBTQ Film Festivals* makes clear just how vulnerable festivals and festival research are to shifts in the global economy and exchange of ideas. When this pandemic is over, how many festivals and festival scholars will survive and thrive, and how many will exist only as furtive, ephemeral traces in the archives?

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- <sup>2</sup> Antoine Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 18.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>4</sup> Stuart James Richards, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> Leanne Dawson and Skadi Loist, "Queer/Ing Film Festivals: History, Theory, Impact," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 1 (2018): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2018.1442901>.
- <sup>6</sup> Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinophilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, eds, *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- <sup>8</sup> Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals*, 50.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.