

17. – 22. April in Cologne, IWFF Dortmund | Cologne

Minutes of the Meeting “Dialogue on Women’s Film Festivals”

(April 20th, 2012 in Cologne)

„Women directors want to be seen as directors, not as women directors.“ (Melissa Silverstein)

- I) Welcoming speech and introduction by Silke J. Rübiger (*IWFF Dortmund | Cologne*)
- II) Key Note Speech by Skadi Loist (University Hamburg)
- III) Discussion: moderated by Rachel Millward, *Birds Eye View* (London)

II) Key Note Speech Skadi Loist

Skadi Loist introduced 5 theses for debate:

- Counterpublic
- Feminist Movement
- Networking, Niche/Ghetto
- Professionalisation

(Complete text:

http://www.frauenfilmfestival.eu/fileadmin/Bilder/Downloaddateien/Women_s_Film_Festivals_in_Dialogue_keynote_Skadi_Loist.pdf)

III) Discussion, moderated by Rachel Milward

- Women’s Film Festivals as global niche; all operate within this niche and it lacks specific opportunities to meet on an international level for exchange; therefore the discussion at the *IWFF Dortmund | Cologne 2012* offered a great occasion to define the status quo of women’s film festivals, to renew co-operations, to develop strategies.
- Three questions/aspects of discussion are being focused on:
 - What goals do women’s film festivals aim at? („What do we dream of? What are our goals?“)
 - What challenges do women’s film festivals face? What are the obstacles we have in common?
 - What could be new ways of collaboration?

Screening- and premiere politics

The film makers’ answers to the question what they expected by presenting their films at a women’s film festival and what that meant for the image of their film were very different. Some reported that their distributor decides where the film is being sent to and where it will be shown and that they hardly have an influence on these decisions. One film maker said that her films would mostly not be shown at women’s film festivals because they wouldn’t meet a specific style and be too commercial. Another director emphasised that she would submit her films to women’s film festivals with conviction on grounds of defining herself as a feminist („I submit because I’m a feminist“). It is also mentioned that participating at a women’s film festival is connected to a special and more pleasant experience. The note of a director that one is being pushed into making a very definite decision on which festival one is to premiere their film, opens a longer debate on current premiere politics of distributors and festivals.

The festival curator Stefanie Görtz states that the festival scene is being immensely pressured to show premieres which she claims to be absurd. Out of ten requested films one might get one premiere. That is frustrating and not to be understood. The competition between the festivals is simply too big and yields by now bizarre results. To not get a film because the distributors are putting their hope on a premiere taking place later in a different city (whose audience realistically doesn't compete with the former), shows an industry which is not interested in generating a preferably large audience. The premiere debate turns the struggle for particular films into a purely economic battle which is simply based on money while the focus should be on a festival's contents and curatorial accomplishments.

Melissa Silverstein (*Women in Hollywood* and *Athena Film Festival*, New York) talks about another perspective regarding the current framework of the film- and festival market: „I focus on leadership“. In the United States the films would go on festival tour for six months. The particular festivals would create new premieres to emphasise their exclusiveness, e.g. “North-West premiere”, “New York premiere” etc. It would be good to adopt this strategy and become creative in order to get the films one wants to get. This would be an opportunity to present new ways to the distributors and to get involved.

Goals and perspectives of success

Which goals do the particular women's film festivals pursue? What target audiences do they define for themselves?

For the attending film makers all following aspects are of the same importance: subsidy of women directors, establishing branch networks, presentation of films that might otherwise not be seen by an audience. The discussion of feminist topics is to some extent also part of the profile. Yet contributions by the two representatives of the Latin-American sister festivals (Antonella Estévez, *FEM Cine*, Santiago de Chile, and Paula Alves, *Femina*, Rio de Janeiro) show that they are still facing other challenges and ideological obstacles in their festival work than the established Western European or North American festivals. Alongside the aspects of encouraging young women film makers and offering a platform to women directors finally being able to present their work on a big screen, their focus is on topics and gender questions. Within a conservative environment it is firstly important to establish subjects like sexuality, gender diversity, abortion etc. and to provide a platform for discussion to not only let women film makers but also social minorities know: “You are not alone.”

Regarding marketing, subsidy and premieres there don't seem to be relevant differences: „I need a big film to have sponsors or press reviews“ (Antonella Estévez) and Paula Alves confirms that she could show some international premieres but Brazilian premieres are very difficult to get hold of due to the festival competition in the country.

Funding / Festival subsidy

Skadi Loist provokingly asks which festivals would pay the film makers for sending in or showing their films.

The example of the *IWFF Dortmund | Cologne* clearly shows that the answer depends on the definition of the term “payment”. The *IWFF Dortmund | Cologne* for example refunds travel expenses and pays for the guests' accommodation as far as possible. Curator Betty Schiel reports that due to a tight budget only little screening fees can be paid. The strongly diverging

frame of negotiation within the range of screening fees refers to a change of the overall situation. Gradually festivals seem to take the place of Art House Cinemas. By now the distributors too have realised this and increasingly try to lucratively place their films there. Partially screening fees are set so high that they can't be afforded regarding the difficult financial situation. Later it becomes clear that the film makers too suffer from this movement. The Greek director Annetta Papatthanassiou sadly observes that festivals decreasingly pay for expenses like travel and accommodation costs and that therefore festivals are becoming less worthwhile. In this case it depends of course on how much one works independently or whether one already has a strong partner (production company, distributor). Very renowned festivals and meanwhile also financially weak, smaller festivals require a submission fee. At A-festivals it's a standard and presents the first obstacle for some directors. Thus smaller and bigger film productions are having very different starting conditions.

This diversity of interests is complex and can't be separated from the shortage of funds in the section of festival funding. Resentment can be felt among the representatives of women film festivals: "The filmmakers are not getting enough money! I'm forced to work in a structure that doesn't value neither culture nor the filmmakers". (Betty Schiel). And Rachel Millward adds that here problems of festival funding become clearly visible: "There's no valuation of what the festivals do for the filmmakers. It's a very uncomfortable situation".

One of the attending directors suggests to abstain from expensive hotels and resort to private accommodation instead. That would mostly create a much better atmosphere and serve their main purpose of establishing networks.

Even if not all seem to agree with this suggestion, they all agree that networking is one of the essential functions of a women's film festival.

Networking

How can women's film festivals become yet more active within the field of networking?

Silke J. Rübiger (*IWFF Dortmund | Cologne*) refers to the connection of awards and networking. The competition for young DOPs at the *IWFF Dortmund | Cologne* for example proves to be a successful model. The award winners and those who have been nominated regularly report that not only the appreciation of their work and the prize money were important to them but that they especially appreciate the direct contact with their colleagues. The festival has established itself as meeting point for women DOPs and professional co-operations have in fact resulted from it. Awards are also important!

In this context it is also being talked about a changed self-concept, a new self-confidence of women's film festivals: Why do we speak about a niche at all, is being asked. This kind of network, over 60 participants meeting at this discussion, already is a great success, not even Cannes has to offer such intense exchange. So either the term "niche" is beside the point or one should convince oneself and others that one can become globally active as and in the niche.

"We should use the brand of "woman". We should use the power of women!" (Melissa Silverstein)

The question of how the upcoming networks could become professionally fruitful comes up and the makers of *EWA* (<http://www.ewanetwork.eu>) introduce their project. *EWA* pursues the goal of a European network for women of the film industry and invites all to make contacts through their platform.

It becomes clear that the creation of networks and financing are connected. The question of public funding seems to be a central point for festivals as well as for productions. The colleagues of the Women's Film Festival Brussels *Elles Tournent* talk about a Belgian study on how much women are taken into account when it comes to public funding. The numbers are self-explanatory: Only 26% of the projects supported were projects by women and only 11% of the entire budget was given to women. Film schools in Europe (Western Europe?) seem to mostly offer equal opportunities, 50 % of all graduates are women. So why do women afterwards often fade out of sight? Where is the cause of a downright blockade when it comes to real, also economic equal opportunities for men and women in the film industry? And can women's film festivals influence this situation at all?

Irit Neidhardt of the film distribution *mec film* provides insight into the challenges that distributors encounter and explains that the problems are complex. At workshops and professional trainings, e.g. to develop distribution and marketing strategies, totally exaggerated expectations of what is possible are being awakened in the directors. This makes co-operating very difficult and she asks herself to what extent young women film makers too are establishing a way of thinking that is influenced by a turbo-capitalist system.

Precise strategies / Suggestions / Re-orientations

Commenting on professional training one of the film makers returns to the theme of financing by clearly stating: "I don't need training, I need money"! Festival experiences are mostly very pleasant as by then the work is mainly finished. Yet most of the time she finds herself in difficult production processes and is busy to secure her work financially.

This contribution evokes a direct demand: Women's film festivals should invite film makers not only with finished films but also be a platform for women in the middle of production process. One suggestion is a market meeting with producers and distributors where directors can by means of pitching and speed-dating solicit money. Paths to money are to be provided, to connect the relevant decision makers and protagonists of the film industry with the women film makers.

Kristen Fitzpatrick of *Women Make Movies* (New York) advises film makers as well as women's film festivals to recollect their own strength. One can't get everything and one can't offer everything: „Focus on what you're good at. Certain festivals are good at special things, some are better than others”.

The festivals should co-operate more, one participant requests. Mutual guest programmes during the festivals or an exchange of programming are suggested. A list with the films presented and the corresponding short film trailers etc. could be set up via Google and all would be able to access it. "Sharing" is the catchword: it could reach out as far as to the areas of subtitles and film technique. It would make sense to share resources and knowledge to mutually gain strength. Also a periodic meeting should be initiated, e.g. following the example of the *Queer Programmer's Meetings* that regularly takes place in Berlin and London.

These suggestions are not altogether new, someone notes. In the 1990s such regular exchange was happening for a few years – To begin with, in the early 1990s there was the network *pandora - network for cultural exchanges and support of artistic creation by women in cinema and the audiovisual arts*, set up at the *Université des femmes* in Brussels. At the end of the 1990s there was the *Working Group: Women and Film in Europe* which was part of the *European Coordination of Film Festivals*. *The European Coordination* was dissolved around 2007 and hereby also the *Working Group*. Over time it has become more difficult. Betty Schiel of the IWFF Dortmund | Cologne reckons that on a long run informal meetings would be more profitable. If this idea becomes too complicated or bureaucratic it might soon run the risk of coming to nothing. Melissa Silverstein adds that the possibilities of Web 2.0 make many things much easier. To initiate a Google group as starting platform would be very easy (and is by now being realised).

The lack of interest of very successful film makers is being criticised. Here it lacks solidarity and willingness to commitment. If such directors had been guests at the *IWFF Dortmund | Cologne* for example, they generally enjoyed it very much but to keep in touch afterwards proves to be rather seldom.

How to integrate these women more who happen to have a role model function, is being asked. One suggestion to this question evokes a lot of interest: women's film festivals should offer master classes with successful film makers. Kristen Fitzpatrick (*Women Make Movies*) quotes an exemplary project in the USA which kicks off so-called "production assistance projects". Even the *Geena Davis Foundation* is meanwhile involved in such projects.

Claudia Landsberger (EYE Film International) concludes appealing to the group of women to prospectively take into account more severely the entire film industry, to not only integrate women of the creative areas but also decision makers of the film industry and to remind other "gatekeepers" of their responsibilities.

Quoting her own festival *Birds Eye View* (London), Rachel Millward suggests that festivals have to partially rethink their focus in the years to come and to adapt to an altered general framework.