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***Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong. New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 2011 (318 pages). ISBN: 978-0-8135-5065-7.**

A Review by Fiona Lee, City University of New York – The Graduate Center

This book is both an excellent introduction to and in-depth analysis of the world of film festivals. Based on ethnographic research, interviews, archival work and film analysis, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong's book offers both a big picture view of the role of festivals within the global film industry and a close-up scrutiny of specific events, films and people to give a sense of the culture-making activity that happens in these spaces. Whereas Marijke de Valck's *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (2007) narrates a history of film festivals that is Euro-American centric, Wong's analysis engages with how films and filmmakers from less wealthy film industries around the world gain wider recognition via major European festivals, as well as examining the development of important festivals in East Asia. In this regard, Wong's book not only serves as an important contribution to understanding the position of film festivals as they are embedded within postcolonial global relations; it also demonstrates that film festivals can serve as site for examining how the world—particularly as it is implicitly invoked in discourses of globalisation and world/transnational cinema—is imagined and constituted through cinema.

In film studies, scholars have looked to film festivals as sites of exhibition and examined their significance for small national cinemas in particular, whether economically, politically or culturally. Supplementing these analyses with a wide-angle lens approach, Wong sees festivals as sites of knowledge production. In addition to considering films and their filmmakers, Wong also examines discussions generated amongst the press, festival programmers, audiences and scholars to map the processes of how a film travels beyond festivals to a wider viewership—as well as how and when it does not—and how the contemporary canon of international film is shaped. Incorporating interview excerpts, field notes, festival-generated publicity material and press articles, the book underscores the multiple and contesting voices that constitute the film festival as a knowledge-making institution. Effectively, the book maps out a political economy of the film festival. Chapter One presents a historical overview of the festival, noting its evolving structure from its early days as a site of geopolitical contestation between European powers leading up to World War II, to its function as a space for artistic innovation and experimentation, to its current proliferation worldwide as a platform to showcase movies and seal business deals. Today, festivals continue to serve multiple functions—as political, artistic and business arenas—

which are not separate, but overlapping and mutually constitutive spheres.

Whereas star-studded affairs like Cannes, Venice and Berlin tend to dominate headlines, Wong also looks at the less glamorous but no less important festivals around the world to observe how activities both on and off screen shape the international film industry. Collectively constituting a circuit, festivals serve as nodal points, each developing its own unique characteristics and functions, whether it is in setting aesthetic trends (New York); securing business deals (Toronto); showcasing and developing Third World, political, underground, and independent cinema (Rotterdam); or, serving as a gateway for Asian films to an international audience (Hong Kong).

Within this global network, niche spaces also thrive. There are festivals that highlight the works of regional, marginalised and minoritised artists; human rights; environmental issues; as well as those organised around formats and genres such as documentary, animation, and silent film. Wong's survey of this broad and diverse range of festivals points to their flexible nature. Critically deploying Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere (Chapter Four), Wong argues that while festivals lend themselves to contesting conventional forms of cinema and the norms of their social contexts, they also reproduce the hierarchical structures that they critique. The case of LGBTQ films is an illuminating example. Gay and lesbian festivals serve as counterpublics that provide a home to films that discuss LGBTQ issues while bringing together filmmakers, activists and scholars from various local and national spaces to challenge the heteronormative standards of culture and society in and through film. While providing a space for films that would not otherwise be screened at mainstream festivals or commercial sites, these events have also generated films that cross over to "A" list festivals, such as *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), which reshape the dominant discourses of cinema. However, the vast majority of LGBTQ films remained trapped inside a glass cage, visible but contained in their sub-cultural festival circuit. The case calls for closer analysis of the conditions of cross-over and the kinds of films that achieve this, in order to examine how institutions such as festivals are able to absorb the new and cutting edge, while reproducing its own elitist hierarchies and sustaining a lucrative industry that unevenly distributes its profits.

Nevertheless, as Wong astutely points out, despite the diverse range and aims of festivals, they all share in common a devotion to the art of cinema. In her words, "Films constitute the raison d'être of the festivals" (65). Thus, Chapter Two pursues the question, what kinds of films are screened at festivals? Beyond their exhibition venues, are there common traits shared by, as Wong calls them, festival films? Acknowledging the futility of distilling a wide variety of films into a single formula, Wong identifies key characteristics that feature commonly in films that have garnered recognition at top festivals and points to a penchant for newness. In addition to favouring films that differentiate themselves from more commercial fare whether in terms of tone, style, narrative or technique, festivals tend to identify films outside the West in terms of waves—hence, the popularity of films from China and Iran in recent years, and the current spotlight on emerging films from Israel, Argentina, Malaysia and so on.

A great strength of this book is Wong's grounding of her general observations and analyses of festivals in specific case studies of films and auteurs. Her discussion of festival films

culminates in an analysis of the winner of the 2007 Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival, Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days*, which she reads not for singular meaning, but to encapsulate larger claims into a specific example. Similarly, Wong studies the careers of filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Abbas Kiarostami and Jia Zhangke by way of examining how the shaping of the auteur serves as a kind of social text to read the relationships between the financial, production, reception, scholarship and geopolitical aspects of filmmaking. If the readings of films and auteurs lend the impression of a textualised approach to studying her topic, Chapter Six's close analysis of the Hong Kong International Film Festival, which also anchors Wong's overall arguments, drives home the point that festivals are as much about encounters between people, whether in movie theatres, on the red carpet, at parties, business meetings or press conferences.

Significantly, Wong's excellent study of film festivals, lends itself, if indirectly, to a philosophical reflection on art and social life. Discussing the world of contemporary fine arts and the museum, Susan Buck-Morss provocatively argues that "[t]he contemporary art world values artists, but not art" (68). Noting the revival of museums in the last couple of decades, serving both as tourist attractions—much in the same way that certain film festivals support the local tourist economy—and as gatekeepers to the art world, Buck-Morss argues that these institutions separate art from social and political life by emphasising the centrality of the artist in art making. Thus, the "epistemologically formulated question—what is art? (what counts as good art? what has value as art?)" is provided with an ontological answer: whatever the artist—enshrined as such by the museum—creates is art (Buck-Morss 67). Though seemingly radical, the deregulation of artistic practices in effect raises a barrier between the art world and everything else. "The institutions of cultural power are not threatened by what the artist creates", Buck-Morss writes, "so long as it is done within the authorized, artworld space" (68).

Wong's study of film festivals, though not articulated as such, grapples with a similar concern. "If festival films are closer to art (which itself has its complicated logic to commodification) than to a mass market commodity", Wong muses, "the long history of Western art demands that the art has a creator, be it a painter, a writer, or in terms of film, a director" (73). As she points out, film directors who are anointed with auteur status, such as Antonioni, Wong Kar-Wai and, more recently, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, can depend on festivals to support their careers regardless of the critical reception of their films. While the artist-equivalent role of the auteur facilitates the reproduction of the festivals' condition of possibility, the singling out of the film director—and sometimes, its lead celebrity actors—renders invisible the collective labour of the rest of the crew and cast that is essential to filmmaking. Moreover, although festivals' penchant for the new may create spaces for avant-garde, experimental work, the notion of newness is hardly neutral as evident in the colonial baggage embedded in the discourse of discovery—as in Columbus "discovering" the new world—that frame the introduction of new films from the Global South in the West. Demonstrating how "the top festivals are the ones holding the power to decide what 'others' are to be liked", Wong cites a letter to *Time* magazine written by Malaysian filmmaker, Mansor bin Puteh, who observes that only Asian films that meet the Western idea of what constitutes the East are given attention (103). The director makes a valid and important point, one that corroborates Wong's argument, yet his critique ought to be read simultaneously for its significance within the Malaysian context of filmmaking. In a longer

version of the letter posted on his personal website, Mansor bin Puteh makes a subtle jibe at Chinese-Malaysian-directed films. In the last decade, these films have been increasingly noticed and celebrated internationally, arguably because the respected status of Chinese films at festivals is opening doors for these diasporic filmmakers, who are otherwise discriminated against in the Malay-dominated local film industry of their home country. The subtle jibe in the Malay Malaysian director's letter hints at the racial politics that play out within the local industry and features more prominently in the other writings of the vocal commentator elsewhere in various fora on Malaysian film, both online and off. My aim here is neither to discredit Mansor bin Puteh nor to challenge Wong's point. Rather, in observing how the letter functions differently within the international festival and Malaysian contexts, my point is that the politics of knowledge production in both sites feed one another, even if the film discourses they generate differ substantially.

In this vein, I recommend Wong's study of film festivals as an essential read for those who are interested both in the global dimensions of the industry, as well as in parsing out the cultural political nuances of particular sites.

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