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A Film Festival Thinking Itself: The 66th San Sebastian International Film Festival

Pablo La Parra-Pérez

Between the 21st and 29th of September 2018, the San Sebastian International Film Festival (SSIFF) celebrated its 66th edition. The editorial in the official catalogue pointed out that the festival had reached a "crossroads" in which "safe and recognisable paths branch off onto unexpected tracks, or cross others which, despite having a rather uncertain destiny, may precisely be even more tempting" ("Crossroads"). Admittedly, at this year's festival one could easily find some of the customary ingredients of the SSIFF's "success formula" that have consolidated its position as the highest-profile film event in the Spanish-speaking world, and one of the most important cultural events in Spain.[1] This year's festival offered its signature eclectic programme, ranging from high-budget international films such as *High Life* (Claire Denis, 2018) to a comprehensive panorama of current Spanish and Latin American film production. Additionally, the SSIFF's red carpet attracted a great number of stars that drew the attention of local fans and mainstream media, while the festival confirmed its audience-friendly approach with many sold-out screenings and events. Less visible in the media coverage of the festival are its industry activities, oriented at reinforcing the SSIFF's reputation as a key meeting point between Europe and Latin America. These include, among others, the 34th edition of the flagship competitive postproduction funds (established in 2002 in collaboration with the Toulouse-based Latin American film festival Cinélatino) *Cine en construcción*/*Films in Progress*, and the VII Europe-Latin America Co-Production Forum, an initiative that has seen a sustained expansion since its establishment in 2012.[2]

In this report, however, I do not wish to examine these well-trodden paths. I will not discuss awarded or critically acclaimed films that could be seen in this year's edition as could be expected from a traditional festival report, nor focus on the (often problematic) influence of the SSIFF's industry activities over contemporary Latin American film production—a topic that has already received extensive attention in a series of insightful scholarly contributions (Campos; Falicov; Triana-Toribio) and recent festival reports (Nerecan Umaran and Vallejo). Instead, I have decided to discuss how the SSIFF is trying to become a relevant "site of initiation", to borrow Marijke de Valck's term, by incorporating remarkable training and educational activities to its core line of action ("Sites"). In particular, I would like to bring to the fore the SSIFF's involvement in some educational and research initiatives that were announced at this year's edition, including the launch of a new film school—Elías Querejeta Zine Eskola (EQZE)—and a research project that aims to critically reflect on the history of the festival itself and on its role in society. But before I deal with this at any length, a better sense of the unique institutional environment of the SSIFF and its direct influence on the festival's training initiatives is necessary.

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In 2015 the SSIFF relocated its headquarters to the Tabakalera building, a former tobacco factory turned into an international centre for contemporary culture. At this new location the festival coexists with a constellation of cultural institutions, notably Tabakalera's Cultural Project (with a noteworthy year-round film programme), the Basque Film Archives, and the recently created EQZE. Over the past years the festival has forged ties with these partners pursuing a clear and transformative goal: moving away from a traditional festival logic (the intensive event concentrated in nine-to-ten days in September) to that of becoming a year-round platform of film practice, training, critical thought, and research. One clear example of the SSIFF's "turn to training" is to be found in the Ikusmira Berriak programme, established in 2015 under the umbrella of Tabakalera's multi-institutional environment. Ikusmira Berriak offers a six-week residency to support the development of five film projects in their early stages, provides mentoring and networking opportunities as part of the festival's industry activities, and awards one postproduction prize. This year's edition not only evidenced the local and global ramifications of the programme, which included one Basque filmmaker (Arantza Santesteban), one Spanish (Elena López Riera), one former participant in the SSIFF's annual encounter of film students *Nest* (Grigory Kolomytsev) and two international filmmakers (Nele Wohlatz and Manuel Abramovich). Above all, it illustrated the increasingly relevant role this kind of festival-supported training programmes play in the contemporary film circuit. López Riera's case is paradigmatic: after winning the Ikusmira Berriak postproduction award at the SSIFF for her debut feature film project *Water* (*El agua*), she keeps developing this work in progress as one of the selected filmmakers for the ongoing edition of Cannes/Cinéfondation's Résidence du Festival programme.

Nonetheless, perhaps the most striking and ambitious outcome of the expansive redefinition of the SSIFF within the new Tabakalera environment is to be found in the festival's active involvement in the conceptualisation and establishment of the EQZE. This new film school welcomed its first cohort of forty-five students during the 66th SSIFF, the festival being the landmark that articulates its academic calendar. Funded by the Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa and designed by the SSIFF, the Basque Film Archives and Tabakalera's Cultural Project, the EQZE offers one-year postgraduate degrees in Film Curating, Film Preservation, and Filmmaking. As the school's foundational principles put it, the EQZE does not offer an industry-oriented specialised formation but rather promotes a holistic conception in which the activities of archiving, programming, and creating—what the school's literature specifically terms "the three tenses of cinema"—are understood as necessarily intertwined iterations of an expanded concept of practice that embraces the past, present, and future of cinema ("Three").

The active involvement of the SSIFF in a year-round academic project such as the EQZE from its inception is, to the best of my knowledge, unparalleled in the international landscape of major film festivals. Besides having a seat at the school's board of academic directors, the SSIFF participates in the everyday activity of the school at many levels. Take for instance the seminar "Festival Under Construction", addressed to Film Curating students. With a syllabus designed by the SSIFF's departments themselves, the course aims to become a permanent seminar in which to discuss the step-by-step configuration of the forthcoming edition of the festival (thus becoming a training activity addressed to festival professionals of the future) and an open forum to discuss the ongoing transformation of the festival circuit (envisioning the participation of guests from other international film festivals throughout the year).

If this seminar can be seen as an attempt to critically examine the SSIFF's ongoing working procedures and imagine how the festival of the future should look like, I would like to turn to

another initiative that was announced this year—one that instead looks back to the festival's past: the research project "Zinemaldia 70: All Possible Histories". Launched by the SSIFF and the EQZE with the support of the Basque Film Archives and Tabakalera's creation library Ubik, this four-year research project aims to make the historical archive of the SSIFF available to the general public and the academic community in 2022, coinciding with the festival's seventieth anniversary. As the principal investigator of "Zinemaldia 70", I would like to briefly introduce the project to the academic community. This initiative, I contend, represents a unique opportunity not only to delve into some understudied aspects of the SSIFF's history, but also to contribute to the specialised literature in festival studies at large.

Although "Zinemaldia 70" is still in its earliest stages, preliminary work on the collection already allows us to conclude that the SSIFF's archive is extraordinarily well preserved. With materials dating back to the festival's foundation in 1953, the collection includes correspondence and administration documents, an extensive collection of photography and audiovisual materials, a small collection of awarded films, comprehensive yearly press dossiers, all the journals, catalogues, and books published by the festival, and a wide array of ephemera and miscellaneous materials. Such a well-kept collection, virtually intact, could be best described as one of those "ideal archives" that, according to Marijke de Valck, allows for a "thick" historical analysis of the festival's history (*Festivals* 22). In this regard, it is important to observe that, despite the spectacular development of the "burgeoning field" of film festival studies over the last decade (de Valck and Loist), the SSIFF has been largely overlooked by the specialised literature so far—with the noteworthy exception of the aforementioned studies on the SSIFF's industry activities and its intricate relation with contemporary Latin American film production. From the point of view of cultural history, however, most of the available secondary literature on the SSIFF has a very limited international projection and fails to provide us with an insightful analysis. The only available historical accounts of the festival rather belong to the traditional categories of institutional anniversary publications,[3] memoirs of emblematic directors that tend to focus on glamour and celebrities (Galán, *Lemmon*), and journalistic chronicles that despite their informative value suffer from several methodological problems from a scholarly point of view (Tuduri Calvo, *San Sebastián 1953–1966*; *San Sebastián 1967–1977*).

In contrast, following Stuart Hall, it can be argued that the SSIFF's decision to open its own archive to a scholarly research project might represent a turning point in this uncritical historical self-representation:

> Constituting an archive represents a significant moment, on which we need to reflect with care. It occurs at that moment when a relatively random collection of works … is at the point of becoming something more ordered and considered: an object of reflection and debate. The moment of the archive represents the end of a certain kind of creative innocence, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity. (Hall 89)

I would like to conclude by briefly observing two major areas (among many) in which the ongoing critical examination of the SSIFF's archived history might open up promising paths for forthcoming research: the role of the festival in the Cold War era and its relevance as a site of resistance and political struggle in the mid- and late 1970s.

Recent scholarship has explored how film festivals became major political actors during the Cold War (Kötzing and Moine; Moine, *Screened*). The SSIFF however has been largely ignored, or only just mentioned in passing in this field of inquiry. And yet, from its inception in 1953 the evolution of the SSIFF overlaps with and is largely influenced by a series of crucial diplomatic shifts of the Franco dictatorial regime. From the mid- and late 1950s, the Spanish dictatorship broke its international isolation and confirmed its new strategic role as an anti-Communist stronghold in the Cold War arena. The international whitewashing of the regime largely relied on the projection of an image of liberalisation and modernity abroad, the establishment of a high-profile international film festival in a prestigious tourist location such as San Sebastian being soon perceived as a powerful diplomatic tool in the hands of the regime. The quick international homologation of the SSIFF—recognised by the FIAPF with an A-category rating in 1957, in a moment in which this organisation was anything but politically innocent (Moine, "Fédération")—or the influential position of American majors in the festival at a time when the US and Spanish governments strengthened their diplomatic, commercial and military agreements—are just two examples of the many promising points of departure from which to explore the festival's archival collection in search of evidence to examine how the festival's early history intertwined with transnational Cold War politics.

Another promising line of inquiry concerns the exploration of the SSIFF's role as a site of political mobilisation and dissent. Much has been written about the crucial effect that "The Long 1968" struggles had on film festivals across Europe. For instance, the disruptions of Cannes, Venice and Berlin in the late 1960s and early 1970s represent one of the major concerns in de Valck's classic three-stage historical analysis of film festivals (*Festivals*). The "anomalous" situation of the SSIFF—under rigid control of a dictatorial regime until 1975—seems to have prevented international scholars to reflect on the effects that the 1968 revolutionary wave might have had on the Spanish festival. However, as recent scholarly contributions point out, the intricate relations between 1968 and global cinema can be better illuminated in an enlarged periodicity that goes well into the 1970s (Gerhardt and Saljoughi). This wider perspective allows for a reconsideration of the deep political turbulences that the SSIFF experienced during the so-called "transition to democracy" that followed Franco's death in 1975. In a heated political atmosphere in the Basque Country, the festival became a major site of protest and political experimentation between 1976 and 1979. These "radical years" saw a series of remarkable initiatives to "democratise" the venue, including a stable programme to bring film screenings from luxury downtown venues to popular screenings held in working-class neighbourhoods, the organisation of roundtables to discuss pressing political issues (i.e. the role of film culture in stateless nations, in a context in which the national liberation struggles in the Basque Country were a burning question), and the programming of film series with a clear political perspective. A rigorous study of such a vibrant period of political experimentation is yet to be written, and the ongoing locating and critical analysis of its documental traces at the SSIFF's archives is a crucial step to pave the way for forthcoming research projects on this topic.

As I emphasised throughout this report, the "Zinemaldia 70" research project must be understood in the wider framework of a series of remarkable transformations that the SSIFF has been experiencing over the last few years. In a context of accelerated changes in the film industry and viewing habits in the digital era, proliferation of festivals and increasing competition for major premieres, film festivals are not only expanding their activities beyond their traditional role as prestigious showcases, but also rethinking their own raison d'être from scratch. The specificity of the SSIFF's integration in the year-round activities of the multi-institutional Tabakalera building

is resulting in a series of unparalleled training and educational activities that might radically alter the festival's physiognomy in the near future. The announcement of an archive-based research initiative that specifically aims to critically rethink the festival's own history cannot be dissociated from this ongoing effort to keep imagining the festival to come. For, as Hall would put it, "an archive may be largely about 'the past' but it is always 're-read' in the light of the present and the future" (92).

Notes

[1] Together with Mar del Plata (Argentina), the SSIFF is the only festival in a Spanish-speaking country recognised with an "A category" by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF). Recent reports rank the SSIFF as the fourth most relevant Spanish cultural institution, only after the largest national museums in Madrid (Reina Sofía and Prado) and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Observatorio 9).

[2] Postfestival preliminary balances coincide in pointing at the spectacular growth of the coproduction forum, that this year received more than two hundred film applications (seventeen of which were selected) and attracted almost one thousand participants to San Sebastian during the SSIFF (Riba and Luffiego; Rebordinos).

[3] These include a twelfth-anniversary anthology of texts published in 1965 (Ferrer and Gasca) and two coffee-table books published in occasion of the fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries, respectively (Ruiz de Garibay and Torquemada; Galán, *50 años*).

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