

Field Notes \ Who Are Film Festivals For?

Eli Horwatt with
Cecilia Aldarondo and
Sean Farnel

The advocacy efforts of Cecilia Aldarondo and Sean Farnel were instrumental to framing the *World Records* article “Who Are Film Festivals For?,” which addresses strategies for compelling film festivals to pay screening fees and to rectify long-standing financial inequities built into the political economy of cultural festivals writ large. In this conversation, Aldarondo and Farnel speak about their experiences in convincing festivals to rethink their policies regarding filmmaker remuneration, and about the tactics they have used to make the case for festival exhibition as a revenue stream for independent filmmakers.

INTERVIEW

Eli Horwatt

Sean, could you talk about the articles you’ve written, “Towards a Filmmaker’s Bill of Rights for Festivals” and “Fair Trade for Filmmakers: Is It Time For Festivals To Share Their Revenue?,” both of which speak to revenue sharing?¹ Could you explain the genesis of your interest in screening fees as the director of programming for Hot Docs, and how you advise filmmakers now?

Sean Farnel

Advocating on behalf of filmmakers was something I started doing even before Hot Docs. It began at TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival] when I was a submissions manager and we started discussing submission fees. I pointed out that the only people that were going to pay submission fees were filmmakers that probably didn’t have a chance of getting into the festival. I’d already seen that less than 2 percent or 1 percent of the unsolicited submissions were even in the running, let alone selected. And so I saw there was really an inequity there.

At Hot Docs, it was just a matter of pointing out that we were generating significant revenues from selling tickets to the films being shown and yet didn't have a coherent policy on remunerating filmmakers for artist fees. That started me speaking about it internally. There were good-faith efforts to see if we could figure it out. Then I began speaking about it when I was on panels—you know, "Hey, we should start really thinking about this. It's ridiculous that we have an international exhibition circuit in the form of this burgeoning festival landscape, and there are no coherent policies around screening fees." The other reality is that we were paying the French distributors when we really wanted a film to play, because these distributors were, for the first time, very insistent on a yes or no around screening fees. If you didn't pay, you didn't get the film. We'd want the Agnès Varda film or whatever. So it was like, well, let's do this fairly.

After Hot Docs I became freer to really advocate. I wrote a series of articles in IndieWire that caused discussion; this is almost ten years ago. And there have not been any significant changes. So I've started writing about it and advocating again. In this universe of 5,000-plus festivals, we have to figure out a way to remunerate filmmakers that's fair and standardized, so that when a film we're involved with gets selected, it's not this continuous negotiation—it's just, "here's my festival license," you know?

EH

Cecilia, could you talk about your experience with *Landfall* (2020) and premiering a film you'd worked on for a long time and put a huge amount of energy into, and how suddenly you were confronted with a lack of the rollout you had envisaged because of COVID? In our previous dis-

cussions you've also talked about disaster capitalism and how you see COVID as having reinforced that premise. Could you speak to that, and to how new opportunities have appeared financially, because filmmaker presence isn't guaranteed anymore?

Cecilia Aldarondo

I directed a film called *Landfall* that was due to premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in April 2020—which I think, now if you say "April 2020," everybody just has a flashback to wherever they were on lockdown. You know, not our favorite time. Tribeca and South by Southwest [SXSW] were probably the two major US-based festivals to be swept up in the first wave of the pandemic. Those of us with Tribeca premieres and SXSW premieres were really caught up in this mess. We had our flights and hotels booked. My press notes were done; everything was ready to go. And then Tribeca just didn't happen. They really didn't seem to know what they wanted to do, or could do, and so we just didn't have a festival. It was a really chaotic time.

One of the things that did happen was that Tribeca went ahead with certain aspects of the festival, like awards, for example. And so what that meant was that we were faced with this choice, which essentially was: Do we premiere anyway, in a non-festival? Or do we sit on the film and try and get a premiere somewhere else? And some filmmakers did do that. We had a partnership with *POV* [PBS documentary series], we knew where the film was going to go, we didn't actually have to sell the film out of the festival. And so for a number of different reasons, we decided to forge ahead on this crazy path. Since then, the film has almost entirely screened virtually in festivals. It's been in this virtual circuit. We have done some drive-ins, and

we organized our own in-person tour in Puerto Rico, but I've never seen the film in a cinema with an audience, ever. And I'm saying that because I've had a lot of direct experiences now with festivals, large and small, and with the wide range of treatment of filmmakers in that ecosystem.

When I think about disaster capitalism, one of the most salient things is that people think about disasters as singular events. Like they just happened, right? But they are really accelerants. They are these cataclysmic moments that happen on the basis of things that were already inequalities, things that were already fragile, that were already not working. So, as Sean has pointed out, the system has not been serving filmmakers for a very long time. As much as we want to think of ourselves as artists—and I do think of myself as an artist—we're making films, especially in a place like the United States, in a hyper-capitalist landscape. We're making saleable products. This is commerce. And most often filmmakers are the last ones to benefit from that system. So this practice of selling a film to an audience and asking the filmmaker to essentially give you their free labor is made in exchange for perks like a hotel room, or a flight, or a swag bag, or some glory. . . . I have so many filmmaker friends who have, by all measures of the system, done well on the festival circuit, and they're still broke at the end of it. Literally broke, you know? They're winning awards at Sundance and still broke. So it's actually a really egregious thing that was already happening. It's theft. What's been true in the pandemic was also true before, which is that the biggest festivals are the ones that tend to pay the least, or the least often, or are the least likely to waive a submission fee. In my experience with the virtual circuit, it was mostly the smaller festivals, which were the most at risk, that were likely to

pay a screening fee without us even having to ask.

Hot Docs was actually our first virtual screening where the film could be watched. They did a revenue share and that was something that actually worked for us. We saw more money from that than I've seen from any other screening fee. And the other thing that they did—and I don't know that any other festival did this—was that they shared data. They actually told us how many people watched the film. Unfortunately, I also knew how many people didn't finish the film. I saw the drop-off in viewership. I think about 50 percent of people started the film but didn't finish it. But that's really useful information to understand how the virtual environment serves or doesn't serve a film.

EH

Cecilia, you said something really interesting in our first interview, about being brave, about having more choice, about possessing the product that the festival needs to survive. Where do you both see these power dynamics shifting to, post-COVID? Where do you see this new horizon of possibility? Are you optimistic?

SF

It's obviously a complex economy, and the first thing I'm always careful about doing is painting some homogenous kind of brush over all of this, because even comparing the US festival and filmmaking landscape to Western Europe or Canada is tricky. These are different economies. Both the festivals and the filmmakers in Western Europe and in Canada are subsidized through public funds to a degree that's not seen in the US. The notion of applying a straightforward, capitalist lens to the economy of filmmaking—where, okay, here's this product, and we're gonna

receive funds for exhibiting it—it doesn't apply.

Hopefully, festivals like Hot Docs have realized that it's actually to their benefit to have a transparent revenue-sharing arrangement with their rights holders. But I wonder if they're still doing that now that we're getting into our third year of the COVID situation. I'll be curious to know what the terms are for those films this year. In general, more festivals are realizing they have to proactively offer something if they want to compete in this economy. Festivals are becoming a kind of first window, a combination of theatrical, premium pay-per-view, and VOD window. So that could be a good thing. But negotiating with fifty to a hundred different festivals over the course of the year is a lot of work for small licenses when you look at it, so that's not ideal in terms of efficiency.

I want to get back to this idea of having standard terms across festivals, so that filmmakers and rights holders don't have to deal with fifty different scenarios. That's one thing that I find very frustrating. What typically happens now is that you receive a festival invite, and then it's a series of questions I have to ask back, including the questions around fees. "How much are you looking for?" "How much you got?" This lengthy back-and-forth is just not efficient. And it's not only about the fees, but about getting information back from the festival. What happened to, "How many people saw it? Was there any buzz? Can we share links with your audience?" It's all kind of broken right now. And I understand our festivals are really struggling as well. What this looks like two years from now, it's hard to say, except that I don't see the problems that existed five years ago being alleviated in some kind of new utopian post-pandemic festival landscape. I'm not optimistic. I think it's really tough to navigate for most in-

dependent rights holders, especially new ones.

CA

I see a lot of parallels between my film about resistance, and what I got caught up in during the pandemic. *Landfall* is a film about people that are taking advantage of a disastrous situation, to benefit themselves. One of the few silver linings in the pandemic is that I have found a lot of solidarity with other filmmakers. Documentary filmmakers, particularly directors, are not exactly known for their collectivity. I think this landscape breeds a tremendous amount of individualism, territorialism, and competition. But I've seen a really important shift in people realizing that they have common cause and that we need to share information. We should be transparent with one another, and that degree of information sharing really helped save me time and effort.

I was part of a group that ended up starting IDD [Independent Documentary Directors], which now is an international network of independent documentary directors that have been getting together to basically just talk about what we're all dealing with. There's a growing number of alliances: the Documentary Producers Alliance; the work that Rebecca Green is doing. On the fiction side, we also have a BIPOC focus, collectives like the Undocumented Filmmakers Collective, and initiatives like Beyond Inclusion. There's a lot of really interesting activism.

I think it's happening because things are very scary. One of the issues we haven't talked about is the spectral presence of the streamers and those who really have benefited from our virtual lockdown life. We all know that Netflix has made many billions in the past two years, but they have not used that wealth to pick up more independent films. I'll

give you an example: I was at an awards season screening for a film that was actually in theaters a few months ago, and Netflix sent us all at-home COVID tests—the ones that are at the PCR level which retail for around \$70 a pop. They're sending them to each person attending a screening for their one film in the Oscars race. This is what they're spending their money on. They're spending it on a small group of films that are Netflix originals. I think that truly independent filmmaking was already really precarious. Now, I don't know how long it's going to last. I'm concerned for the future of our public television system, which has really been eroded over the past several decades. I don't know how much longer documentary programs like *POV* and *Independent Lens* are going to be around as alternatives, and they are really important alternatives. My examples are really US focused, because that's where I'm trying to live to fight another day as a filmmaker. But I think these things are related. Festivals can't really be understood on their own. They have to be understood in relation to the wider ecosystem of distribution and production. How are films getting distributed, but also how are they getting made in the first place? I think we all need to have more no-holds-barred conversations. We should all be looking at the way that these things are being chipped away.

SF

To pick up on the thread that Cecilia was getting at, it's not just around the economy we're working in here. It's around the form itself. All the things that I loved about documentary, that got me excited about the form, in such a way that I specialized in it as a curator to start . . . I wonder about how this economy is serving the form, where the more ambitious, fluid, and cinematic films are being squeezed

out. Then the question is: What are festivals for if not to champion this kind of work? The festivals can all point to those films in their programs and say, "Oh, we're still showing that stuff." But what gets the good placement? What gets the publicity? What are they really getting behind? It tends to be the more generic stuff that's already with the streamers, or the celebrity bio docs. I like a sense of discovery at a festival, where you're seeing the most interesting new work and films that are pushing the form, expanding it in some way, or playing with it. Those works are being squeezed out. That's where I think festivals have lost their way. This goes beyond economics and back again, to how economics are impacting the advancement of the form, and that troubles me.

CA

I discovered documentary when I was a programming assistant working for the Florida Film Festival. I sat in on the submissions process, because people actually met up to watch submissions together. I was introduced to this whole wild, unusual, cacophonous, heterogeneous space of formal experimentation, and now I'm seeing, more and more, very stylistically silly, conservative, glossy, high-production-value docs which satisfy our preexisting ideas. *Landfall* is not the most wildly unconventional film, but it is poetic, lyrical, and associative. It doesn't have a conventional three-act structure, so no wonder people didn't finish it. They were probably getting text messages while the movie was on. I think we also need to talk about in-person space and how cinema spaces are really necessary for this. I'm a little worried that a lot of festivals are becoming, as Sean suggested, showcases for the streamers. We have to look at this holistically. We can't understand how screening fees are impacting us if we're

not also thinking about things like the rise of the streamers.

One of the things I've felt since the pandemic began is a certain kind of loneliness. When I've taken a political risk and said something candid, whether on social media or in a conversation like this, I've had a lot of people say, "Oh, I'm so glad. Thank you for saying that. You're saying what I've been thinking." But I've seen comparatively fewer people enter the conversation. My final appeal here would be to say that if you feel like this is something that rhymes with your experiences, join us in being vocal. Join some of these incredible initiatives. It's not easy to be candid and to speak up. I don't just say that because I'm doing it, but because I want to acknowledge that it's scary, to be frank. But I think that the more we do this, the more pressure actually builds, and that can cause change. The one thing that I find really works is collective effort. So don't just leave it to the few salty people.

SF

To put an exclamation point on that, when you do get an invitation from a film festival, it's a good beginning for a negotiation. It's not just about screening fees, but about how your work is being presented: In which program? Will you have an opportunity to, either virtually or live, be part of that presentation? Are there screening fees? Is there a flat fee? Are there guest expenses being offered? If you're a filmmaker who doesn't like speaking about money, or is just happy to get a laurel, these are really hard questions to ask. But the more people ask a set of questions, the more festivals will have to offer these things transparently upon the invitation. The more the independent filmmakers are asking the questions, the more the festival will have to be accountable to those in that constituency.

Endnotes

- 1 Sean Farnel, "Towards a Filmmaker's Bill of Rights for Festivals," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St Andrews, Scotland: St Andrews Film Studies), 223–29; Sean Farnel, "Fair Trade for Filmmakers: Is It Time For Festivals to Share Their Revenue?," IndieWire, February 6, 2013, <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/02/fair-trade-for-filmmakers-is-it-time-for-festivals-to-share-their-revenue-41358>.