Film festivals: history and theory of a European phenomenon that became a global network

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This book offers an introduction to film festivals. It traces the now ubiquitous phenomenon of film festivals to its historic origin on the European mainland and identifies the key transition moments in the development of film festivals since then. The growth, global spread and institutionalisation of festivals raises relevant questions on how to explain and understand their “success”. This study sets out to answer these questions. It introduces the concept of the festival network: a broad and complex network in which film festivals are the nodal events that interrelate with a diverse set of actors, among which Hollywood, the avant-garde, municipal policies and (inter)national politics. It is demonstrated that festivals serve the interests of a variety of actors and that this is decisive in the preservation of the festival network. Together these actors help sustain an “alternative” film culture that revolves around cultural value, aesthetic quality and socio-political relevance instead of maximised economic profitability. This book presents four case studies that explore different sets of linkages in the festival network and examines the various mechanisms of self-sustainment in more detail. The case studies focus respectively on the international film festivals in Berlin, Cannes, Venice and Rotterdam. Issues that are addressed range from programming and prizes to national legitimisation and city marketing. The study, however, does not aim to be a teleological account of great progress. It also questions whether “successful” is in fact the appropriate term to understand a development that has arguably become dogmatic in framing filmmakers as “auteurs” and films as belonging to “new waves”. While acknowledging the important achievements of the festival network, it at the same time, points to the limitations of film festivals as cultural safe haven for art, political and world cinema.