



Curating as Care: La Semaine de la Critique and the Marrakech International Film Festival in the Age of Covid-19

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The health crisis caused by Covid-19 has changed the organization of film festivals around the world. Some festivals have chosen to maintain their event by creating online platforms for the distribution of films and professional meetings; others have simply canceled their physical editions. Although they were canceled, Festival de Cannes' International Critics' Week and the Marrakech International Film Festival made specific arrangements to support the local, regional, and international film industry. Faced with this extraordinary situation, I argue that the pandemic fundamentally impacted festivals' programming strategies. As such, Covid-19 redefined the work of selection committees: it created what I call "flexi-programmers."

As a PhD candidate and a member of the selection committees of both Cannes Critics' Week (for feature films) and of the Atlas Workshops (the industrial platform of the Marrakech International Film Festival), I would like in this chapter to contribute to a new ecology of knowledge on curating film festivals. Building upon the theoretical contributions of film

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festivals studies and my own experiences and knowledge as a film programmer and a curator, this contribution combines theory and personal subjective introspection in order to account for the intimate and subtle nature of the lived experience to reveal collective lessons.

First, I will present the strategies adopted by the Critics' Week and by the Marrakech International Film Festival. Then, I will underline how the notion of care may impact film programming in the age of Covid-19 and why film *curating* could be the future of film programming.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FILM PROGRAMMING AND FILM CURATING

Programming expert Peter Bosma defines the profession of film festival curator or film festival programmer (he does not differentiate between the two) as someone who aims to “succeed in presenting an attractive program, which is outstanding on the global film festival circuit” (Bosma 2015, 69). In *Curating Africa at the age of film festivals*, scholar and festival director Lindiwe Dovey underlines how festivals can materialize a certain kind of African cinema through curating (2015). In so doing, Dovey argues that we need to deconstruct the western-centeredness of film festival studies: little academic work has been devoted to festivals organized on the African continent—even though they have grown exponentially these past fifty years and have developed new cinematographic approaches, often specializing on particular forms of filmmaking (including documentaries, short films, animation, environment, citizenship) (Lelièvre 2011, 126–128). Furthermore, most of the published scholarship on African film festivals has been written by European and American scholars. For example, most of the research on film festivals in French-speaking Africa concerns questions related to the gaze (Barlet 2003), production (Forest 2018), and the place of African film festivals in the world (Ilboudo 1998; Lelièvre 2011, 126–128; Dupré 2012; Dovey 2015; Forest 2020).

I build upon these scholars in my article “The curatorial enunciation of film festivals in Africa: the case of BeninDocs—International Festival of the First Documentary Film” and highlight how “a system of mediation, staging and time, mixing the curator, the institutions, the director and the audiences, inscribes the aesthetic perception of the works presented in a particular socio-political context which creates meaning” (Dramani-Issifou 2020, 63). It seemed important to me to distinguish between film programming and film curating. Film programming for film festivals can be

defined as the activity of selecting cinematographic works according to criteria that essentially correspond to the identity of the festival, with a view to their presentation to a large audience. Curating films refers not only to the notion of care but also to the appearance in the field of visual arts of the figure of the curator. This curator corresponds to a new way of doing criticism, taking into account the interactions between the discursive, conversational, and geopolitical elements of a program. Film curating is located between caring for the film and being concerned about the impact of the films. It is about ethics, which Ricoeur defines as “the wish for a fulfilled life—with and for others—within just institutions” (1990). To be a film curator is to be the author of creative and political thoughts in which the programming of the films is both an artistic proposition and the reflection of a responsibility toward the films and the communities (film professionals, cinephiles) to which these films are addressed. To me, a curation of care is not only prompted by the pandemic but also stems from the desire to make an intervention in capitalism and its impact on our societal structures.

Alongside a theoretical grounding in film festival studies, my methodology is based on research creation. Indeed, this reflection builds upon my experiences as both a film curator (for Cannes Critics’ Week and the Marrakech International Film Festival) and a PhD candidate. My methodology hinges on narrative of my experiences and takes into account my relationship with others in cultural and social contexts. This perspective uniquely enables me to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). My personal experience as a curator allows me to complement existing theories of festival programming by creating a space that reflects my exchanges with various other voices and experiences and that shows “the multiplicity, the overlap and the complexity through polyvocal, dialogical, juxtaposed, composite stories or visuals” (Berbary 2015, 27). Considering that experience is the springboard for a broader understanding of the social world, I use my practice of film festival programming for Cannes and Marrakesh and of film curating for the BeninDocs Festival in Benin, the Festival des Nouveaux Cinémas Documentaires in France, and the Centre Yennenga in Dakar in order to create a form of “situated” knowledge (Haraway 2009) that constitutes a complementary approach to more academically minded research work. I thus embrace by choice the movement of “decolonization of thought” which invites researchers to build a scientific

discourse that is the emanation of material life, of its socio-political context, which is an apprehension of oneself by oneself (Mudimbe 1988). Indeed, in a context where Western countries are characterized by a colonial aphasia, I register my reflections in a questioning of the hegemony and the universal authority of speeches and knowledge. What is at stake here is the coloniality of power and “geopolitics of knowledge” that highlights the historical conditions for the emergence of a “monotopic episteme” of modernity (Mignolo 2009).

My experience of being a minority, as a Black woman curator in France, is a condition for bringing out other forms of knowledge, voices, world-views, and perspectives. As such, this enables us to focus on a plurality of experiences of modernity—its promises as well as its disillusionments and on the subjectivities that Western modernity has produced, ignored, or even erased. Refusing to succumb to the temptation of universalism, I aim to question the practices and forms of thought of those who constitute what Enrique Dussel calls the “exteriority” (1998) of the hegemonic system in order to find alternatives. My wish in this chapter is to help change the terms of the conversation, to move away from an analysis in terms of international relations, and favor a cosmological geopolitics (Simbao 2020, 148)—to allow for multiple possibilities, to produce and to find knowledge, including a variety of spatial and bodily references, to blossom and to contribute to a project of liberation of the Humanities.

SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: TAKING CARE OF MOVIES

Created in 1962 at the initiative of the French Union of Film Critics, the *Semaine de la critique* [Critics’ Week] is a parallel section of the Cannes Film Festival that presents the first and second feature films of the new generation of filmmakers at an international level. The festival is programmed by two selection committees (short and feature films) made up of members of the French Union of Film Critics. The members of the selection committees are recruited after a call for candidates. Usually, the selection process lasts almost three months and spans from late January to late April. For the Feature Films Committee, it revolves around both collective theatrical screenings and individual screenings. Programming meetings are organized weekly. This greatly differs from the Short Film Committee: the entire selection process is done online.

In “normal” years, the feature film selection committee watches around 1400 films during the selection period—some in the movie theater (three or four times a week), some at home. Films are typically viewed in DCP, DVD, or Blue-ray formats. When watching a film at home, each programmer has to decide whether the film should be eliminated, seen by another programmer, or sent to the collective for an eventual selection. The weekly programming meetings are used to discuss the films that were seen collectively, semi-collectively, or individually. The discussions we have during the meetings are used to develop the program over time. Several shortlists are developed based on the committee’s interest in films. The program must take into account not only subjective criteria such as aesthetics, staging, script, or even acting but also the trends of world cinema. The committee also pays attention to cinematographic diversity (in terms of both genre and geographic origin). At the end of April, the short and feature film selection committees usually unveil a program of ten shorts and eleven feature films (seven in competition and three in special screenings). An international jury awards the following prizes during the festival: the Nespresso Grand Prize (for feature films), the Leitz Ciné Discovery Prize (for short films), the Louis Roederer Foundation Prize for Revelation (awarded to an actress from one of the seven feature films in competition), the Gan Foundation Prize for Broadcasting, the SACD Prize, and the Canal + Short Film Prize. First feature films in the Critics’ week selection also compete for the Camera d’Or (an award given by the jury of the official Cannes film festival).

On March 12, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron announced new containment measures, including a lockdown. The work of selecting feature films had already begun before these new social distancing measures: films were seen in the usual conditions (either during collective theatrical screenings or individual screenings at home and discussed collectively in weekly meetings). Unfortunately, these new social distancing measures changed viewing conditions. Starting in mid-March 2020, it was impossible to meet for collective viewing and discussion of films. This context profoundly changed the working conditions of programmers: all films were viewed individually, thus accelerating the digitization and individualization of the film programming work. Programmers could see and rate films on the festival’s viewing platform. Along with the individual screenings, the weekly meetings continued to be held—not in their usual face-to-face format, but online. This digitization of programming had the consequence of isolating programmers: almost all informal exchanges

disappeared. The digitization of festival programming meant that only formal discussions around films (during programming meetings, following the agenda established by the film office) were possible. This impacted not our appreciation of the films, but rather our experience of working as film programmers.

On April 12, 2020, the Critics' Week and two other parallel sections of the Festival (the Directors' Fortnight and ACID) announced in a joint press release the cancelation of their physical edition. Importantly, Cannes had not yet canceled the festival: as of April 12, 2020, a festival was still planned in 2020. After weeks without being able to draw specific perspectives and strategies, the parallel sections thus chose to take a direction opposed to that taken by Thierry Frémaux, the artistic director of the Cannes Film Festival, for whom it was still impossible at this time to give up the physical organization of the Festival. For the Critics' Week, it had become extremely complicated to maintain its operation in a totally uncertain context: it seemed impossible to continue working with salaried teams, selection committees, producers, broadcasters, and filmmakers in the context of the pandemic.

The choice to cancel the physical edition of the Critics' Week made it possible to think about alternatives and to define a framework that would enable us to continue the selection work we had started almost two months before. In this context, the call for submissions of films and the viewing period for programmers were extended until the end of May 2020. Most importantly, a Critics' Week label was created. This *Semaine de la Critique* label aimed to support the films that would be released in theaters. Instead of presenting eleven feature films, the programming committee selected a larger list of films.

Although it was favorably received by distributors and producers, this support system was difficult to set up due to both the pandemic context of instability and competition between festivals. Indeed, some distributors and producers preferred to withdraw their films from consideration in order to submit them to the Venice Film Festival or the Toronto International Film Festival. Others decided to wait for the 2021 edition of the Cannes Film Festival to try their luck once again to be selected for the prestigious festival. Importantly, *L'Officiel* (Cannes Film Festival, excluding parallel sections) waited several months before clearly communicating on its strategy and finally opting for the creation of a label. This unclear situation on the part of the *Officiel* in terms of strategy (first deciding to postpone the festival, then announcing that its selection would be

presented in Venice, before finally deciding to create a label) made our programming work more difficult than usual: most producers and broadcasters wanted to wait for the *Officiel* to announce their solution. In that context, we had to adapt our programming choices not only to the evolution of the health crisis but also to the strategies of the various stakeholders (festivals, distributors, and producers), thus complicating the programming procedures. Some accepting the label, others refusing it for the reasons mentioned above. The *Semaine de la Critique* unveiled its selection of labeled films in a press released on June 4, 2020:

To address this unprecedented situation, *La Semaine de la Critique* kicks off a tailored-made support programme for the films that Charles Tesson—artistic director—and his selection committees chose to actively support over the next few months. Accordingly, five features and ten short films will receive the “2020 *Semaine de la Critique* label”. The 59th edition of *La Semaine de la Critique 2020* honouring its commitment, the parallel section of the Cannes festival nevertheless continues to shine a light on emerging talents in order to support filmmakers and the film industry.

Four of the five feature films that benefited from the label “Critics’ Week 2020” were French films (*La Nuée* by Just Philippot, *Gold for dogs* by Anna Cazenave Cambet, *Sous le ciel d’Alice* by Chloé Mazlo, and *La Terre des hommes* by Naël Marandin). I hypothesize that French producers were more interested than their foreign counterparts in the label created by the *Semaine de la Critique* because of the direct impact that such a label can have on the release of films in France. For first or second French films, the main market remains the domestic market. *La Semaine de la Critique* decided to guide the selected features throughout their premieres and their theatrical releases in France. The French films were presented during a “*La Semaine de la Critique carte blanche*” event at the Angoulême Francophone Film Festival, which took place between August 28 and September 2, 2020. They then premiered at the Cinémathèque française in Paris (October 16–18, 2020). Some awards were still given:

Under these circumstances, the Gan Foundation for Cinema, *La Semaine de la Critique*’s partner, confirms its desire to support young filmmakers and vehemently continues to support first and second feature films by bestowing the Gan Foundation Award for Distribution to *After Love* by Aleem Khan (United Kingdom).

THE 2020 MARRAKECH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL:
 CANCELING THE FESTIVAL, DEVELOPING
 THE ATLAS WORKSHOPS

The Marrakech International Film Festival was created in 2001 by His Majesty King Mohammed VI to promote and develop cinema in Morocco. Its initial ambition was “to create a bridge between the cinemas of the North and the South, to reveal films and talents of different genres, and to promote the promotion of Moroccan film”. Each year, the Marrakech International Film Festival offers a wide selection of films of different genres and nationalities. Its program also includes masterclasses, tributes, a panorama section devoted to Moroccan cinema, “the 11th continent program” (a section created in 2018 which explores new territories in cinematographic creation), films in audio description, outdoor screenings on the Jemma El Fna square, and sessions for young audiences.

The Atlas Workshops were created in 2017 by Rémi Bonhomme (who was at the time the general coordinator of Cannes’ Critics Week) as part of the “industry” program of the Marrakech International Film Festival and organized with the support of Netflix. Intended to support projects in development and films in (post)production made by directors from Morocco, the African continent, and the “Arab world,” the Atlas Workshops target directors and producers who are developing and producing their first, second, or third feature film. They offer selected projects personalized support through screenplay, production, sales, editing and musical composition (according to needs and production stages), co-production meetings, pitch sessions projects, roundtables, and networking sessions with professionals from the sub-region. Rémi Bonhomme, who became the artistic director of the Festival in January 2020, chose the composition of the new programming team of the festival. The work of selecting films was supposed to take place between May and September 2020. Two members of the festival’s programming team (me and Hanna Mroué) also selected projects supported by the Workshops.

The state of health emergency entered into force on March 20, 2020, in Morocco. The population was ordered to stay at home, effectively stopping the work of the festival’s programming team just when it was beginning to get to work. Indeed, a first delegation made up of Rémi Bonhomme, Ali Hajji, Thibaut Bracq, and I went to the 21st edition of the Tangier National Film Festival (from February 28 to March 7, 2020) to meet Moroccan film professionals. Faced with the continual progression of the virus, the

activities of the programming committee never really started: it took six months for the Foundation to decide on a strategy to face these unprecedented circumstances, leaving the programming committee in an extremely vague situation. After a long period of uncertainty, the Festival Foundation announced on September 4, 2020 the cancelation of the 19th edition of the festival. However, five days later, the Foundation confirmed in a second press release that it would maintain the third edition of the Atlas Workshops in online form from November 30 to December 3, 2020.

The Atlas Workshops function as a revealer of talents. Through them, the Festival supports a new generation of Moroccan, Arab, and African filmmakers and creates a space for exchange between international professionals and regional talents. During the first two editions of the Workshops, the selection of films was made in-house, mainly by Rémi Bonhomme. For the third edition, the new artistic director wished to compose a committee tasked with reading and selecting projects for the Atlas Workshops. Alongside the Atlas Workshops team (artistic director of the festival and director of the Atlas Workshops Rémi Bonhomme, general coordinator of the Marrakech International Film Festival Ali Hajji, head of the Atlas Workshops Thibaut Bracq, coordinator Camille Hébert Benazet, and manager of the Atlas Close-Ups and of the co-production market Lucas Rosant), we read over 150 projects received after a call for candidates. Twenty-three projects were selected during several Zoom meetings. During these meetings, the reading and selection committee reviewed and discussed collectively all of the received projects. From November 16–27, the people behind the twenty-three selected projects benefited from individual (on script and production) and collective (on international distribution, production, and pitch preparation) consultations with international experts. Furthermore, the Atlas Workshops organized an online edition from November 30 to December 3, 2020. A total of 280 professionals were accredited. One hundred and twenty people participated in the online co-production market, accounting for around 350 appointments. About a hundred professionals took part in the presentation sessions of projects in development and in the screenings of films in production and post-production. More than 200 spectators attended the three webinars we organized. Prizes were awarded to the projects *Among Us* by Sofia Alaoui (Morocco), *Rising Up at Night* (Tongosa) by Nelson Makengo (Democratic Republic of Congo), and *Feathers of a Father* by Omar El Zohairy (Egypt). Finally, to support project leaders during this exceptional year, all projects were awarded a grant of 5000 euros.

CURATING FILMS AS CARING FOR FILMS AND COMMUNITIES

This chapter has shown how Covid-19 changed the work of film festival selection committees, accelerating the digitization of programming activities and increasing the flexibility of the film programmer profession. As we have seen, both the *Semaine de la Critique* and the Marrakech International Film Festival through the Atlas Workshops had to invent new ways of working with the selection committees, to imagine new mechanisms to promote the films they selected, and to think of new methods to guarantee the smooth running of professional meetings. Faced with the crisis, “flexi-programmers” continue to adapt to the incessant evolutions of the strategies (when they exist) implemented by film festivals so that they retain their role of platform for exchanges, meetings of various actors, and construction of meaning (Rueda 2009, 149–171).

As I am writing this chapter, the programming committees are preparing the 60th edition of the Critics’ Week. Faced with a constantly changing health context, the work of the programming committee (screening of feature films and meetings) is for the moment mainly—but not exclusively—held online. In a press release dated January 28, 2021, Thierry Frémaux announced the postponing of the Cannes festival from May 11–22 to July 6–17. A complete reorganization of the schedules and of the methods of viewing films is underway within the Critics’ Week, the outlines of which cannot be precisely known on the eve of an intervention by President Macron on the subject of a possible new lockdown in France. For its part, the Marrakesh International Film Festival is currently considering various strategies for its next edition, which should be held at the end of November 2021.

The understanding of films being linked to their context of distribution and reception and the extension of an unstable health situation leads me to hypothesize that film curating could be the future of film programming. I believe this crisis forces us to envision the work of programmers not simply as establishing a selection that will be seen at a later date but rather as taking care of the films and as creating a commitment to filmmakers, producers, and audiences. This ethics of curation is particularly needed given the many crises we are collectively confronted with. Going back to the origins of the term “curating” is essential: historically, curators were keepers and scientists, in charge of managing, preserving, and displaying art. As a film curator, I believe that festivals need a clear investment in caring: they should intervene in local issues and communities to invent a new

“mondialité” (Glissant 1997). By curating films that narrate a singular experience and vision of the world, faced with a health emergency and with the fact that people had to constantly adapt to capitalistic violence, film festivals and film curators should create a geopoetics that calls for the globality of the commons and for global cooperation rather than competition. Multiple, diffracted, and unpredictable, the Tout-Monde (Glissant 1997) is a moving space where identities, languages, and cultures are created and disappear. It is in this “Chaos-Monde” that a new humanity is formed, able to face the unforeseen. This “Relationship,” complex, arduous, unpredictable, and the link between cultures, is a demand for a poetic relationship to the world. As a film curator, I think that rather than merely “presenting an attractive program, which is outstanding on the global film festival circuit (Bosma 2015, 69) or following Dina Iordanova’s three curatorial purposes for niche festivals, as “a tool of diplomacy, or a promoting of a particular identity or exploring the economic potential of diasporic talents” (as paraphrased in Bosma 2015, 70), such geopoetics can be the starting point for conceiving a thought in action on the world for film festivals: a poetic and political responsibility toward films, collaborators, programmers, filmmakers, and audiences.

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