

# FILM ARTS

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## Lust, Caution

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANG LEE

# Festivals of Flight

A TALE OF TWO FESTS AN OCEAN APART

by Mark Street

Over the past few months, I've had two vastly different but immensely satisfying film festival experiences. No awards, no gleaming headlines, not even packed houses, but just a vague but edifying feeling that it makes sense to travel and show work and throw myself into the vortex.

I haven't always felt this way. Some of the most alienated vignettes in my life (and there have been many) have happened at film festivals. I've felt an odd mix of galloping expectations, social awkwardness, and misanthropy as I approach these gatherings. At other times I've felt like a junior high student carrying my lunch tray past various cliques, wondering who my tribe is.

One recent festival visit confirmed my reclusive and anti-social propensities, while another surprised me with its heartening, seemingly effortless stab at creating community. Both have given me a chance to think about why I both look forward to and fear these gatherings in equal measure. What makes for a good, or at least tolerable experience? What am I looking for, realistically, when I choose to enter a film in one of the many festivals that stretch out like beacons of possibility as I thumb through the back pages of *Film Arts* magazine?

## TO STAY OR NOT TO STAY?

In 1990, my film *Winterheat* got into a festival in Utah called the U.S. Film Festival. I was quite happy with the news, but didn't know quite how to place it. "Are you going?" asked my roommates on Page Street. It hadn't even occurred to me. It seemed like a case of misplaced values to travel for an eight-minute film screening. So I drank in the Mission District the night of the screening, facing east, vaguely, wondering what I was missing.

The U.S. Film Festival changed its name the next year to the Sundance Film Festival, and I kept my name but decided not to sit home and stew any more. The next time a similar situation arose, I would displace myself, face my expectations and fears, and make a trip out of it.

In 2001 I did travel to Park City from Baltimore with an even shorter film, *Sliding off the Edge of the World*. A family member in the know told me that the Frontier section was the cutting-edge part of the program and that I was in good stead. Still, I had agoraphobic

visions of being on the outskirts, and on the plane I felt foolish and silly for coming so far for such a short film.

Before I left Baltimore I'd called up my doctor to see about visiting him to get some antibiotics for a cough I had. "Everybody's got a cough. Dr. Silverman is too busy," said his secretary. "But I'm coughing up blood," I said. "Everybody's coughing up blood," she replied.

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

So it was off to Park City with a hacking cough and a seven-minute silent 35mm film. "You must be so nervous; there's so much at stake," said the twenty-something casting agent at the cocktail party. "Not really," I thought to myself. "I'm not nervous, and there's not that much at stake." Seven-minute silent 35mm films out on the frontier don't exactly inspire market forces, as we all know. Later that night I visited a 24-hour clinic and got some antibiotics from a kindly nurse. Not exactly the Dionysian recreational drug experience I'd dreamed of, but I felt better.

Once I got a call from a festival in the Southwest about visiting with my first feature, *At Home and Asea*. "I'm glad to come, but I don't want to come all the way out there if there are only six people in the audience," I told them. I received some vague assurances. Sure enough, when the lights went dim on my Sunday afternoon screening, there were exactly six people in the audience. But it didn't stay that way; a couple got up and walked out after ten minutes.

Restless, I popped into the theater next door to size up the competition, as it were. A huge crowd was watching a compendium of the "best" car commercials of the year.

## AT HOME AFTER ALL

To prove I'd really cured myself of my avoidance of travel, I once made it all the way to the European Media Arts Festival to show my short, *Sweep*. A trans-Atlantic flight to Amsterdam, followed by a two-hour train ride into Germany left me worn and battered but focused on the unsalable reason for the trip. Just before entering the film festival office it all seemed to slip away. Why had I come all this distance for something so small and insignificant? What if nobody liked the film? What if no one showed up and I felt ridiculous for having come all this way? I wanted to stay an anonymous traveler for a few more moments. I knew that when I entered those doors I'd be a festival attendee, with all its pursuant expectations and vagaries.



I walked around the block to preserve the purity of the moment. When one hurtles oneself across the world for any inane reason there's a humility and simplicity to it. To attend a festival is something else: it's being open to being let down, to having one's ironclad purpose and resolve be buffeted around in unpredictable circumstances.

But enough grouchy negativity. What about these recent festivals had worked out so well for me? The 2007 Tribeca Film Festival premiered my latest diary film (*A Year*) in a group show, and I attended several other screenings and parties. I enjoyed standing on the outskirts, sipping vodka and nibbling on nuts as people swirled around me. "It's so anonymous here," a fellow filmmaker complained. Maybe as I get older and more disassociated I have come to see the value of more distant social relations. Besides, in some sense shouldn't a festival party mirror the essential state of film spectatorship: that we are at once alone and in company but simultaneously locked in our own private voyeuristic fantasy?

On the more intimate end of the scale, in July I took a detour from a family vacation to descend on Marseille for a screening at the Festival des Films Contre La Nature (Festival of Films Against Nature.) I can't imagine a more engaging mix of people, good-hearted and kind, welcoming and hospitable. The films looked great up on a big screen in a small auditorium in the hills of Marseille.

There was a mistral that weekend, and you could hear the ferocious wind outside the theater like a ghostly soundtrack. It was an honor to see subversive and charged work bursting off the screen in such an exalted environment. It was a small group of people, but discussions were vibrant, wine flowed freely, and I loved every minute of it. Every night after the last screening, large tables were set up and our hosts served dinner—Last Supper style—to anyone who wanted to stay. I was moved by this committed and indefatigable collection of people. Perhaps my misanthropy is weakening.

So what is it I want from a festival? Splashy spreads? Heartfelt human interaction? Given the utter impossibility of any kind of tangible benefits, I'm left to grasp onto small and unquantifiable rewards: a nice conversation, a feeling of belonging, a fleeting image on a screen glimpsed in an afternoon screening on the way to a wine bar. I like brushing up against filmmakers except when I don't, and I often want to talk to people until I engage them, and then I just want to run away. I keep wondering if a plumbers' convention is just as fraught with contradictions, complications, and anxieties. How could it not be?

A few weeks ago I was walking home in Brooklyn and a woman yelled my name from across the street. It was Kristen Nutile, whose heart-wrenching and wonderful film about her father, *Loss*, had played with mine at Tribeca. We waved and smiled at each other from across the street, and I thought again about her film, which resonated so deeply with me. Later that week I got a package from Marseille: my mini-DV tape returned and also the prescription sunglasses I'd left on the table at the Last Supper. What a sweet and thoughtful gesture to send the glasses across the Atlantic to a scattered filmmaker! I've always resisted the notion of joining, but the community of festival participants seems like where I most belong. ■ **Mark Street's** shorts and features have appeared at film festivals around the world including the Toronto Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. He is currently editing a collection of cinematic portraits of cities called *Hidden in Plain Sight*, which will premiere at a film festival that does not take umbrage at the opinions expressed in this article.



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