



Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

Whiteley, Mila H., "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: The Complicated Identity of the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films" (2015). *Student Publications*. 336.
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Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: The Complicated Identity of the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films

Abstract

The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films (BIFFF) is a genre festival specializing in thriller, horror, science fiction and fantasy films. Started in 1983, with an initial audience of 32,650 for a festival of 60 films, by its most recent run in April 2015, 64,400 tickets were sold for a showing of 108 films (BIFFF Presentation 4-5; "Festival 2015" 2015). The almost doubling in audience attendance over the course of the BIFFF's 33 year run emphasizes the manner in which the festival's identity has become oriented towards a specific and passionate audience. Interestingly, as the festival's audience engagement has increased, so too has its international identity, creating a unique place for the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film in the global festival sphere. On a local level Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film can be seen as a cult event, differentiated from major festivals through its film selection and fandom focus; however, the festival's proliferation of prizes and international networking demonstrates that even a genre festival is subject to the logic of proliferation described in James English's landmark work *The Economy of Prestige*.

Keywords

BIFFF, film, film festivals

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | Film and Media Studies | Other Film and Media Studies

Comments

This paper was written for Professor Jim Udden's course, *FILM 350- Film Festivals: Theory and Practice*, Spring 2015.

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Film 350

5/2/15

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: The Complicated Identity of the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films

The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films (BIFFF) is a genre festival specializing in thriller, horror, science fiction and fantasy films. Started in 1983, with an initial audience of 32,650 for a festival of 60 films, by its most recent run in April 2015, 64,400 tickets were sold for a showing of 108 films (*BIFFF Presentation 4-5*; “Festival 2015” 2015). The almost doubling in audience attendance over the course of the BIFFF’s 33 year run emphasizes the manner in which the festival’s identity has become oriented towards a specific and passionate audience. Interestingly, as the festival’s audience engagement has increased, so too has its international identity, creating a unique place for the Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film in the global festival sphere. On a local level Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film can be seen as a cult event, differentiated from major festivals through its film selection and fandom focus; however, the festival’s proliferation of prizes and international networking demonstrates that even a genre festival is subject to the logic of proliferation described in James English’s landmark work *The Economy of Prestige*.

Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film’s fan-based identity is greatly influenced by its location within the city of Brussels. The Belgium capital greatly supports the BIFFF, and one of the festival’s top sponsors is actually the Brussels capital-region, which is the federal region where Brussels is located (“Sponsors” 2015). Indeed, BIFFF’s fan identity is clearly localized to Brussels, as 63.6% of the festival attendants are actually from the city (*BIFFF Presentation 4*). This is a huge percentage of local audience involvement, especially when

compared to other international festivals like Cannes, where 59% of the 2014 attendants were not even from France (“About the Festival” 2015). Some of this local involvement must be due to the fandom friendly atmosphere of Brussels itself, which provides a hospitable environment not only for the BIFFF, but for the comic fandom.

Belgium has played a large role in the development of 20th century comics, a fact Brussels commemorates through their Comic Strip Walk. Throughout the city centre, there are 36 murals of classic Belgium comics, ranging from *The Adventures of Tin-Tin* to *Lucky Luke*, painted on the sides of buildings. These murals are integrated into the architecture of the city, interacting with other monuments, and connecting the comic culture to the larger urban history (Riva 2015). The idea that art should connect with people and the everyday is further emphasized in the “About” section of the Brussels Centre for Fine Arts, which is the primary venue for the BIFFF. Discussing their approach to art, the Centre’s policy states, “Art and people must find and recognize each other, must interact with and enrich each other” (“BOZAR Experience” 2015). Brussels’ encouragement of the interaction of art with both people and setting complements the blurring of the line between film and audience seen over the course of the BIFFF.

Indeed, though Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films shows about one hundred thriller, horror, science fiction and fantasy films during its festival period, it is the audience’s responses to these films that define the festival as a cult event. Cult films become cult films when audiences “engage in repeated screenings, ritualized behavior, and specific reading strategies” (Church 1). These patterns and rituals can be seen clearly in the BIFFF film screenings. The festival’s audience has a reputation for being interactive during film presentations, responding to events on screen by screaming warnings or simply howling at

images of the moon during horror films. The BIFFF audiences also engage in ritualized behavior before the films begin, asking visiting directors such as Luc Besson, who visited the festival in 2010, to sing for the crowd before their movie is screened (Adams 2015). Director Paul Schrader, who presented his film *Paul Schrader's The Exorcist: The Prequel* at the festival in 2005, praised the unique spectators, saying "These people are so far ahead of you in the genre: You have an audience that cheers when a woman gets a screwdriver stuck in her eye"(Cendrowicz 2005). By participating in these interactive screenings and being part of the festival's community, audience members are integrated into a passionate fandom. As author Henry Jenkins writes "many fans characterize their entry into fandom in terms of a movement from the social and cultural isolation doubly imposed upon them as women within a patriarchal society and as seekers after alternative pleasures within dominant media representation" (41). The BIFFF provides an atmosphere where fans can engage in this "movement" towards a community based around their mutual interests and passions, which may not have been acknowledged by the dominant culture.

Undeniably, cult fandoms are often bonded together through their appreciation of a product disregarded or rejected by general mainstream culture (Jenkins 39). By nature of being a genre festival, BIFFF demonstrates appreciation for products not seen at other, more well known events; after all, "since many genre films are considered to be popular and commercial...they are not the most welcome additions to film festivals" (Wong 87). Thus, through BIFFF's identity as a specialized festival, it is able to promote films that differ from the mainstream, and are, in some cases, considered "bad," as these are often the films that fans enjoy the most (Mathijs, Sexton 38). BIFFF's Courts mais Trash highlights these sorts of films, screening films unlikely to ever be shown again on the big screen for the festival's attendants. A few film titles from the 2015

Courts mais Trash include *Banana Motherfuckers*, *L'Accouchement de Wendy*, and *M is for Menstruation*, none of which, based on their titles alone, seem to promise any quality other than in entertainment value. (*BIFFF Press File 69-70*). Similarly, back in 2011, the festival screened a fake film trailer in an event known as Trailer Off. A description of the trailer posted on the festivals' Facebook page reads, "Lovers of freaky stories where blood flows like a waterfall on acid; this is right up your ally: they're with five, they're young and they're going to suffer a horrible fate. Why? Because this is the BIFFF, of course!" ("Trailer off" 2011). Misspelled words aside, the connection made in this description between "freaky stories where blood flows like waterfall on acid" and BIFFF fans promotes the cult-like side of the festival's identity. At the BIFFF, not only are genre films screened, but fans are encouraged to interact with the films in a manner not be permitted at more major festivals. Programmers and festivalgoers at counterculture festivals like the BIFFF demand the same thing: "more blood, more gore, more full moons, more sorcery, more time travel, and more vampires" (Mathijs, Sexton 41).

The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic festival goes out of its way in order to meet these demands, not only in their selections of genre films, but in their creation of a genre environment for the fans. The festival holds numerous events every year that engage the fandom outside the films, such as the Vampire's Ball, the Make-up Contest and the Cosplay Competition (*BIFFF Press File 112,115, 98*). The BIFFF is also home to a Zombie Parade and, newly created in 2015, a ZomBIFFFlympics, in which fans dressed as zombies compete in activities such as "intestine pulling" and "spinal cord throwing". For both events, the BIFFF pays make-up professionals to make up the faces of amateurs, propagating the blurring of lines between fans and the genre films they love (*BIFFF Press file 118- 120*). The BIFFF further promotes the lack of distance between fans and films through their demystification of celebrities associated with

genre cinema. The BIFFF does not have a red carpet, and its media presence is such that it is simply alluded to on the website (“Accreditation” 2015). Thus directors and actors presenting films are painted as normal people, a humanizing process furthered through the festival’s manner of encouraging their fans, as seen in the Screen Writing Contest entry form. The Contest form points out that, prior to becoming known for their genre work, filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino had normal, unglamorous jobs like working in a video store (*BIFFF Press File* 124). Before directors became famous for their movies, there were just fans; through festivals like the BIFFF, a fan’s role in the creation of genre is acknowledged and celebrated in an atmosphere similar to that of a fan convention (Mathijs, Sexton 42). Indeed, when attendees of the 2015 BIFFF were asked what they valued about the festival, 100% noted atmosphere, showing how important ambiance is to BIFFF’s local identity (*BIFFF Presentation* 4).

However, despite the fact that BIFFF is considered primarily oriented around its fandom, since its inception the festival has shared features with mainstream festivals, namely, its competitions. The festival has held a competition for its long features since its initial 1983 session, a trait not usually seen in audience-centered festivals, which often lack a market or a competition (*BIFFF presentation* 5; Wong 55). Indeed, “in general the aim of thematic festivals is inclusion, not competition; the aim of festival competitions by contrast is *exclusion* based on distinction” (Udden 9). Though the BIFFF attempts to differentiate itself from the mainstream through their embrace of films and fans often rejected by major festivals, through their competitions the festival is still involved in the logic of proliferation described by James English. In his book *The Economy of Prestige*, English discusses the recent proliferation of cultural prizes. Though new prizes are continually created in order to make up for some lack in an established prize, as time goes on, these new prizes come to resemble the very prize they were

differentiating themselves from. Thus, the logic of proliferation continues as “each successful act of differentiated imitation in turn gives rise to another order of imitators, and so on” (English 65). As was discussed earlier, BIFFF differentiates itself from the festival norm through its genre and fandom focus. However, even its top prize of the Golden Raven connects the BIFFF to major festivals like Venice and Berlin, whose top prizes are, respectively, the animals of the Golden Lion and the Golden Bear. The festival’s interaction in the economy of prestige is further emphasized by its own proliferation of prizes. Although only about 100 films are screened during the BIFFF, along with Golden and Silver Raven the festival has prizes for the Thriller, the Audience, and Short Films (“BIFFF Awards” 2015). This proliferation of prizes mirrors that of major festivals such as Venice or Locarno, showing the converging structure of the BIFFF with the “big” festivals (“Official Awards” 2015; “Sections and Awards” 2015)

One of the new awards that Brussels International Festival of Fantastic film has added since 1983 is the Méliés d’Argent. The winner of the Méliés d’Argent goes on to compete for the Méliés d’Or in the larger network of the European Fantastic Film Festival Federation (EFFFF). This federation, which was started in 1987 by the BIFFF and four other fantastic film festivals, is now a festival network consisting of 22 festivals and spanning 15 countries (“History” 2015; “The Federation” 2015). With such a large number of festivals involved, the Méliés d’Or is promoted on the EFFFF website as a prize which “generates visibility for films, its producers and directors. It’s an award that stands for quality, creativity, and imagination” (“Méliés Competition” 2015). In this description, great emphasis is placed on the idea that the Méliés d’Or grants a sort of cultural capital and prestige to its winners, an idea discussed at length by English in his book. Writing of the value of cultural prizes within the modern cultural society, English states that though many believe there are too many prizes, the listing of prizes on people’s

obituaries and biographies seems to signal “an intensified obligation on the part of journalists and others to accept the purported equivalency between cultural prizes and cultural value, to accept the medals and trophies as a legitimate measure...of a person’s cultural worth” (English 22). The cultural prestige attached to the international prize of the Méliés d’Or and the BIFFF’s involvement in the federation seemingly contradict the festival’s modes of cultural valuation. Through their programming, the BIFFF features numerous films not just for their value as “quality” cinema, but for their value as an entertainment object for the local fandom. Still, the BIFFF’s participation in the international network of EFFFF and the Méliés d’Or competition can simply be seen as another step in the festival’s process of “differentiated imitation”.

The Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Film’s imitation of major festivals can be further observed in the festival’s increasing emphasis on economics, epitomized by the incorporation of the Frontières’ market in 2014. Frontières is the only international co-production market that focuses specifically on financing and producing genre films (“Film Market” 2015). Founded by the Fantasia International Film Festival in Montreal, Frontières is greatly promoted by BIFFF, with the festival giving it a prominent location on festival posters and creating a video to promote the market (“Film Market” 2015; *BIFFF Presentation* 1). In the video, the BIFFF’s chairman Georges Delmote discusses Frontières, saying “We simply noticed that many great movie directors started their career with Genre films...We think in Europe, especially in Belgium, there are not enough genre movies” (*Frontieres Returns* 2014). This quote provides a lot of information about the manner in which the BIFFF has become integrated into the economy of prestige. While Delmote’s statement emphasizes BIFFF’s continuing focus on the promotion of genre films, through Frontières films are the *only* aspect of the festival being promoted. The fandom experience, which is a huge part of the BIFFF’s identity, is completely

abandoned, as the festival attempts to create a market for genre film similar to the markets of Berlin or Cannes. Speaking of the International Animation Festival at Annecy, author Cindy Wong states that though the festival is solely animation focused, “Annecy is not a ‘small’ festival at all; the primary difference is that it focuses on animation to the exclusion of other more publicized genres”(53). This statement applies to the BIFFF as well. Though the BIFFF attempts to create a separate space for genre film, which has been largely disregarded by major festivals, the striking similarities between the structure of BIFFF and major film festivals cannot be ignored.

The BIFFF’s international identity should not be discussed without some exploration of the international identity of Brussels itself, and the manner in which the city aids in the festivals’ process of “differentiated imitation”. Though Brussels’ local environment and citizens promote the BIFFF’s cult-like identity, the city itself is an international hub. Brussels and all of Belgium are located in the middle of Europe, surrounded by Germany, France, Luxemburg and the Netherlands (“Home” 2015). According to the Frontières video, the festival’s location within the city of Brussels was one of the major factors in the selection of BIFFF as Frontières’ European base. Brussels’ international centrality is further seen through the city’s identity as the headquarters of both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (“Brussels in Figures” 2015). Even the festival’s venue of Brussels’ Centre for Fine Arts has connections to numerous international European Union events, hosting occasions such as the Citizens’ Summit on Europe, where participants can discuss their problems and future hopes for the EU (“Citizens’ Summit” 2015). With access to international connections all around them, the BIFFF’s global expansion and involvement is almost guaranteed to increase. Brussels’

provides the BIFFF the perfect atmosphere to define themselves as a major international power in the festival world, possibly to the detriment of their local audience.

While on a local level Brussels International Festival of Fantastic Films is an audience-centered genre festival where fans can engage in cult-like rituals and enjoy films and experiences not highlighted in mainstream festivals, on a global stage the BIFFF demonstrates English's logic of proliferation through its involvement in international networks such as EFFFF and its proliferation of prizes. Despite the BIFFF's attempts to differentiate itself from major festivals through its specialized genre focus, due to the festival's inclusion of prizes and its international position, both in the multi-cultural city of Brussels and as founding member in the EFFFF, the BIFFF is clearly engaging in the economy of prestige described by English in his book. BIFFF could disengage from these ideals and simply embrace their local fan-oriented identity, but the festival would likely suffer economically due to the lack of the prominent status and international reputation that the festival currently benefits from. The BIFFF's struggle emphasizes the difficulties in adapting to an increasingly global economy of prestige: either sacrifice some individuality in order to gain cultural capital, or maintain individuality at the expense of the festival's potential prosperity. Hopefully, as the BIFFF continues to develop, it will be able to maintain enough of its cult-like atmosphere to entice back the audience that have helped make the festival the fan event it is today.

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