

# “Audience Suffering: The Pandemic of Poorly Programmed Film Festivals”

by Lee Lanier

According to FilmFestivals.com, there are more than *two thousand* film festivals worldwide. The sad truth is, however, that many of these festivals are poorly programmed and feature questionable blocks of short films. Despite the fact that many of these festivals receive *several thousand* short film entries, bad choices abound.

Admittedly, film selection is never an easy task. For a small festival, which may receive several hundred short films entries, the organizing staff is often able to watch everything submitted. However, for medium and large size festivals, a single person is incapable of watching all the films. Selection committees help to distribute the submission load. However, such committees are rarely unified in their sensibilities or tastes. The result is often short film programs that vary wildly in their content and style. An even worse scenario requires a festival to recruit volunteer selection committee members, in which case those involved have no serious connection to filmmaking and are simply reviewing films because it “sounded interesting” or “keeps me busy.”

Agendas also interfere with the selection process. It’s an unfortunate fact that many festival organizers impose a strong personal beliefs and tastes on the selection choices. The desire to make a particular political or lifestyle statement often trumps the basic of good filmmaking. Although the subjective quality of film selection can never be removed, such attention to an agenda prevents many fine short films from finding a screening. Even worse, films with poor technical quality that happen to contain the correct message are often thrust upon the audience.

Speaking of audiences, many festivals fail to consider who their audience is. Aside from large festivals that cater to the motion picture industry (such as Sundance) the majority of festivals find their audiences from the local population. Although many people are thrilled by the prospect of a film festival, others are quickly turned off by poor programming. From personal experience, I know many average citizens who attended a single film festival, never to return again. Most often, the displeasure comes from poorly selected films that offend the viewer on some level. The offense may be lousy technique, a disagreeable political statement, or nasty characters doing unsympathetic activities in an unpleasant storyline. From my personal perspective, there are festivals I will never again attend because I found very little material that was enlightening or just plain worthy of my time and attention.

Obviously, a film festival can never present a perfect program when so much is based on personal taste. However, it takes very little effort to please the

majority of an audience. There simply has to be a will to do so. In fact, here are a few suggestions along those lines:

- Examine your audience more carefully. Where do they come from? What do they do for a living? Are they simply locals with a curiosity about short films, or are they hardened industry veterans? The answer will help determine the content of a successful program. While film industry folk will be impressed with clever cinematography or stories about fame and fortune, the locals are most often impressed by life dramas that they can relate to. Audience survey sheets and other market research can help you determine the exact audience demographics.
- Compare audience attendance with programming content. Don't stick to the same schedule each year if some programs pack very few people in. For example, at the Dam Short Film Festival, we've determined that documentaries are always well received on Thursday afternoon and horror films can only be programmed at late night time slots where attendance is not critical.
- When participating on a selection committee, ask yourself "Will my audience appreciate this film on some level? Will they laugh, cry, or talk about this film a year from now?" This question is ultimately more important than "Do I like this film? Do I think this film is really cool?"
- Don't underestimate the taste and sophistication of the audience. Your mission is to find good films that your audience will enjoy. If your mission is to put forward a particular agenda, to make a grand statement, or to offend those you don't like, you're setting yourself for eventual failure or, at least, derision and disrespect.
- While this discussion centers on short films, all the points apply to feature films as well. In fact, they are doubly important since an audience must suffer much longer through a poorly chosen feature film than a poorly chosen short film.

If you ask a room full of people what the best short film is, they will undoubtedly disagree. Nevertheless, if there is a desire to please your audience, the majority will be satisfied and thankful for your choices. In the end, this will lead to larger audiences, more money in the till, and many more successful years for the festival.



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