LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS:

FILM PROGRAMMERS' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR CURATORIAL PROCESSES AND PRACTICES.

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Master's Thesis
June 13 2025

Word Count: 16968

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to sincerely thank all the programmers who were kind enough to speak with me, for without them this research would not have been possible. To those working at KABOOM, BIFF, Cinema Culinair, CineKid, Filmhuis Den Haag, AFFR, and KINO, I thank you for your hard work, insightfulness, and tenacity. Throughout working on this study and speaking with these experts, it gave valuable context to how delicately (and purposefully) film programs can be made. This truly reignited my personal passion for film, and also provided me with recommendations for further viewing pleasure.

I would further like to thank my supervisor Dr. Remic, who provided stability and, most of all, valuable insights into fleshing out my ideas. In times of stress, and the overall hectic nature of the thesis project, I was reassured by the potential to pivot from what I assumed must be done without faltering. His sharpness and valuable critique helped deepen my understanding of both conducting and writing this thesis project.

Above all, I am eternally grateful to my friends and family for continuously providing me unwavering support. I express special thanks to my mother for giving me such opportunities and being my role model, to Marisa who always made me laugh and eased my worries, and to Vivian who was always by my side.

I also want to thank my classmates for a lovely, likeminded, and inspiring cohort. To have a mutual and collective understanding of our struggles in these last months brought me strength and sympathy.

And finally, I thank those at Erasmus University for my completion of three of its esteemed programs in ESHCC, for my learning opportunities and material, and for providing me five wonderful years of academic rigor.

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ABSTRACT

Film programmers, as experts, possess the potential to attribute value to certain films within the cultural industries, which may similarly increase the visibility or accessibility of these goods. By weighing the balance between which films are screened, especially those made by established or emerging directors, this creates the opportunity for curating a symbolic and powerful film program: and are unique to each programmer. However, these decisions may be further influenced by their agency, personal tastes or vision, the company for which they work, or other relevant network effects. Thus, this study investigates how these decisions are negotiated first-hand between head programmers working within cinemas, business entities, and film festivals. The research question was presented as: How do film programmers reflect on their programming experience and decision-making processes, with insight into screening films from established and newcomer directors? By conducting semi-structured interviews, this allowed the programmers to discuss their professional experience first-hand and in-depth. The programmers were therefore able to provide valuable insights related to prioritizing films relevant for their audience's enjoyment above all else. Still, they also discussed the varying goals for which they program: such as entertainment, meeting demand, or being thought-provoking. These emerging topics were then formally grouped together within a thematic analysis, introducing the relevant themes of industry norms, (programmers') positionality, programming tools, and societal implications within the dataset. These foundational aspects for film programming were identified and contrasted to the notions of cultural value and gatekeeping logics, which have the potential to emerge between cultural experts. By further providing context to the ambiguous decision-making process for curation, this study identified how experts reflect on their roles to produce film programs with purpose, uplifting various genres and filmmakers, but most importantly: screening films fit for their audiences.

KEYWORDS: *Film programming, cultural value, gatekeeping, networks, institutional logics*

Table of contents

1. Introduction

The popularity attributed to modern cinema has led to transcending film beyond a medium of entertainment, but rather as a cultural good which encompasses great social, cultural, or artistic value. Film institutions take on the substantial task of viewing and selecting films to include within their programming on the side of production: taking action as the main facilitator and mediator who deliver film screenings fit for audience consumption. However, the intentions and criteria defining how film programmers arrange and attribute value to their programs are elusive and ultimately vague. The processes of deciding which films get screened, whose stories are told, and how much visibility these films receive, are heavily reliant on the vision of the programmer(s). Therefore, this decision-making process entails how film programming is deliberately constructed, communicated, and dependent on the role of the curator (programmer) and their expertise or insights.

Despite being individuals, these programmers work at an institutional level and curate a program with a unique purpose or vision. Furthermore, the film industry as a whole encompasses many existing networks even outside the institution, which has the potential to circulate information between players. This then creates a potential discrepancy between curating film between established and emerging newcomer directors in the industry, as fame also possesses qualities to circulate prestige, popularity, or value. Thus, film programming also has the potential to be shaped by various motivations and opinions, despite being chosen by the programmer and what they deem worthy of screening. In aiming to understand this aspect of the programming role, and how these nuanced decisions are ultimately made, this research explores the question of: *How do film programmers reflect on their programming experience and decision-making processes, with insight into screening films from established and newcomer directors?*

1.1 Societal relevance

The overwhelming popularity of film industries and their cultural experience were confirmed most recently by the European Commission (2024, para. 2) as cinema attendance has been continuously rising over the past years. Establishing cinema as the most consumed cultural good worldwide, this gives insight into how cinema becomes entangled in spectacle: riddled with

fame, prestige, and award nominations circling news outlets and popular culture (Ravid, 1999).

However, these established networks run the risk of limiting opportunity between a small few (established) and prestigious players (Czach, 2010, p. 141). This presents various problems for the accessibility and opportunities for emerging directors and filmmakers, starkly contrasted by the notions of superstar power. As put by Czach (2010, p. 141) , “festivals are perceived as not facilitating cinephiliac connoisseurship, but rather the consumption of stars and celebrity culture.” This aspect of festivals in particular, as popular forms of consuming film, represent a potential for asymmetric publicity between established and newcomer directors or filmmakers. Within this understanding of fame and opportunities, this creates unequal grounds in which these directors can find success and further their careers.

Such unequal grounds have implications for gatekeeping tactics and inequalities of access to cultural goods or information within the market (Janssen & Verbood, 2015, p. 444). As film programmers leverage the same reputation and prestige as other cultural experts within the field, it gives merit to understanding how they negotiate decisions related to film screenings. Especially in the context of facilitating cultural goods, these experts establish a consensus and exert value for the nature of film consumption.

1.2 Academic relevance

Previous research has shown an extensive interest in audiences’ perception, experiences, and reactions to film programming. Loyalty, satisfaction, and motivations to visit film festivals are highlighted as crucial to immersing the audience with the content and film available at the festival (Báez-Montenegro & Devesa-Fernández, 2017, p. 174). Thus, the experience offered extends the appeal for visiting film festivals over other institutions. Exploring how film programs are planned with the audience in consideration centralizes programmer roles as the foundation for which films audiences see, and how they may enjoy these film screenings.

Regardless, the opportunities given to film institutions vary greatly, especially in cases of publicly funded merit goods. Addressed by de Valck (2014, p. 42), he highlights how arthouse productions face difficulties due to a lack of adherence to industry norms due to its unique methods of production and distribution. As a result, institutions pivot in favor of commercialization and the potential economic success to garner greater revenues. This presents an interesting dichotomy in the balancing and valuation of cinema as a cultural good: one which

is inherently successful and highly demanded by the public, yet also enforces a popular consensus to engage with commercial films.

Niche genres, such as arthouse, therefore suffer as a result of this dominant viewing of commercial film, which may impose great threat to the integrity of arthouse film production if continuing to decline in popularity (de Valck, 2014, p. 44). Thus, recognizing the artistic integrity and art for arts' sake ideology are crucial to maintaining the balance by which niche genres, and their emerging filmmakers, may find success in the market. Regardless, these decisions are ultimately weighed by film programmers as experts of cultural goods: constantly consuming and evaluating them based on their profession and established tastes.

These programmers, and the motivations in which they curate film programs, thus have great effects on the accessibility and visibility of films. As mentioned previously, these vary per film institution: with theaters often leveraging the commercial success of feature films, and film festivals utilizing public funding to introduce niche (often arthouse) productions to the public. Overall, the role these programmers play in attributing value upon films as a cultural good (Bourdieu, 2018), which has further potential to be explored in the context of art market interactions and cascading network effects. By investigating how programmers are positioned within their organization, a negotiation can be made between their agency, tastes, and value compared to those applicable to the collective vision of their place of work and professional requirements.

1.3 Research context

Within the research context, film institutions refer to any organizational body with an internal structure screening film for the public. Varying between publicly or government-subsidized institutions and private business, various perspectives will be explored and contrasted with one another by interviewing film programmers directly. The study largely represents the Dutch cinema industry with relevant film institutions, with one unique perspective from Budapest, Romania. However, what relates all perspectives to one another is the role and functionality of the 'head programmer' title. By speaking with experts in the field, greater conclusions can be made concerning how they weigh their decision-making practices and reflect upon their experience as programmers.

1.4 Chapter Outline

The thesis will be structured within five chapters, following the first chapter as an introductory overview of the research context and purpose. In chapter two, the relevant theoretical understandings of film institutions and existing networks, gatekeeping theories, curatorial processes, and the building of expertise will be discussed. These notions will be discussed within the specific context of programming film within an institution and organization, as defined by the contexts of the study. This chapter references relevant overarching concepts such as cultural capital, search and experience goods, cinephilia, networks and fame, and valuation theories. The methodology employed in this study, qualitative semi-structured interviews and a following thematic analysis, will be outlined and thoroughly explained in chapter three. The in-depth analysis of the empirical data is presented in the fourth chapter of results, exploring how meaning is derived from the programmers' reflections on their decision-making processes and professional experience. Lastly, the conclusion will be presented whereby the research context of programming work and curatorial practices are reflected upon, as well as give insights for further research on the topic.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the scholarly research most integral to the current academic landscape of understanding how film programming decisions are made. Firstly, the overarching importance of programmer roles will be discussed with reference to the concepts of cultural capital and value: how value is established and constructed. Subsequently, the expert roles of programmers will be discussed in relation to their elite status and socioeconomic implications. Similarly, how these experts utilize gatekeeping logics establishes programmers as cultural mediators who manage cultural goods between producers and consumers.

The notions of taste formation are further integral to constructing the identity of a cinephile (person enthused by cinema and film) working in the film industry, blurring the distinction between professional and leisurely activities and roles. Institutional logics such as organizational structure and collective vision will be discussed thereafter, specifically in contrast to programming at the individual versus collective level. Lastly, network effects such as prestige, partnerships, or reputation, will be expanded upon as these influences may affect the visibility and accessibility of other players in the market, especially filmmakers or directors.

2.1 Cultural capital and value

In assessing any form of a cultural goods' value or importance, Bourdieu's 2018 (originally published in 1986) text may help unveil specific socio-cultural or educational contexts relevant to establishing cultural value. The building of capital refers to the leveraging of goods or resources utilized for social prestige. Bourdieu highlights three stages of cultural capital, namely: (1) embodied, (2) objectified, and (3) institutionalized. The embodied stage refers to the knowledgeability and proficiency of the goods, whereas the objectified stage refers to direct ownership of the material. The institutionalized stage refers to credentials or prestige, often awarded by an outside institution or organization.

It is interesting to refer back to the positionality of film programmers with this theory in mind. Specifically, film programmers possess the power to wield all three forms of cultural capital within their professional activities. For example, programmers hold vast knowledgeability in reviewing film as referenced by embodied cultural capital. However, their capabilities and potential for programming are largely impacted by which films are accessible to them as

objectified goods. The programmers, as individuals, may also rely on the institutionalized cultural capital (in the forms of accolades) to symbolize and uphold a film's value. These forms of wielding cultural capital remain relevant in how cultural goods themselves are evaluated or negotiated by film programmers (namely through their frameworks of knowledge or accessibility to films).

Furthermore, the value of film (as informed by Throsby's 2001 publication) may also manifest in economic value (monetary rewards) or nonmarket, cultural value (symbolic meaning and artistic integrity). While traditional economic value would only account for an artists' status defined by higher priced goods, these do not encompass values that extend beyond the market (Ginsburg et al., 2019, p. 48). As such, Throsby (2001, p. 32) urges that decisions made in developing and protecting cultural goods must account for both, albeit polarizing, perspectives. Whether these forms of valuation are balanced and accounted for is an area still underexplored in the film industries with respect to curation and programming. Therefore, this highlights the importance of this study's approach to engage with programmers firsthand and explore how they negotiate and perceive value in their film viewing and programming.

Other scholars, however, take a purely sociological approach in the nature of programming for film festivals, whereby such cultural goods must be seen as tools for progressing social evolution rather than products (Haslan, 2004, p. 50). This perspective gives further understanding to film programming as its own facilitator and production of a social culture, especially for film festivals which aim to be thought-provoking. Regardless, between all film institutions, the economic viability of film markets cannot entirely be ignored. Between juggling economic and cultural value, these curatorial decision-making processes must be considered from various perspectives for a balanced program.

Cultural intermediaries act as another applicable concept to consider, also formalized by Bourdieu (1979, as cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 226). Cultural intermediaries act as facilitators of culture between the stages of production and consumption, often traditionally noted to be of a hierarchical 'expert' nature (Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 226). By investigating film programmers who interpret films, curate them, and write promotional materials for their programs, the complexity of the profession (and tasks undertaken) may be explored upon. Here, programmers once again possess a unique role in mediating production and consumption also by working closely together with other relevant stakeholders of filmmakers, audiences, and

distributors to exert cultural capital and value.

2.2 Expert roles, gatekeeping practices, and cultural goods

Experts in the cultural industries are defined as those attributing cultural value and streamlining information concerning cultural goods: guaranteeing authenticity or virtue (Ginsburg et al., 2019, p. 37). However, this expert status must still be met with caution, specifically in the potential for gatekeeping practices to occur in cultural curation. This is due to the duality of film programming, whereby programmers exert their own cultural value to films but also program for goals in mind within their institution. These may be defined between the opposing economic and cultural relevance of certain films, but are unique to each programmer and their positionality. This research therefore highlights the role of film programmers cultural gatekeepers, acting as a facilitator for curating a film program and signaling value to the audience.

Gatekeeping is defined by explicitly accepting or rejecting cultural products before reaching the stage of audience consumption (Janssen & Verbood, 2015, p. 444), thus 'keeping the gate' closed. For example, film institutions exert gatekeeping tactics in the mass-purchasing of distribution rights (Smits, 2016, p. 30), monopolizing the market for a greater acquisition of goods. Although gatekeeping can also happen through collective institutions, film programming also possess gatekeeping potential at the individual level. Specifically, the selective nature of programming is akin to the notions of gatekeeping practices as programmers maintain the capacity to contextualize, screen, and support certain types of film over others. This once again highlights the power given to experts within the cultural industries, giving merit to further researching how these gatekeeping practices manifest between film programmers' decision-making processes.

Regardless, it remains interesting to highlight the change in gatekeeping tactics from introducing digital affordances. In the past, gatekeeping traditionally provided cultural products to the audience in a closed market, characterized by incomplete information and accessibility to certain goods. Defined by Nelson (1970, p. 314) as relevant signals for quality, cultural goods can either be 'searched' or 'experienced' by consumers to guide purchase and consumption. Search goods refer to goods that can be researched beforehand to be fit for purchase, such as clothes or electronics. Experience goods, however, must be consumed first-hand to provide a

holistic evaluation of the goods (relating to film or delicacies).

As mentioned previously, experts in the cultural industries signal the quality of experience goods such as film through firsthand experience and evaluation (Ginsburg et al., 2019, p. 48). Therefore, film programming helps reduce consumer fatigue in searching for information entirely by evaluating the (abundance of) cultural goods within the market. By combining the nature of search and experience goods, audiences may experience a new catalog of film whose quality has been previously evaluated prior to their viewing. This acts as the (academic) foundation for the merit of film programming and curatorship.

Although centered on consumer behavior, the understanding of search and experience goods remains applicable to film programmers as these experts must also interpret film through quality and information signalling. However, to reiterate the purpose of this study, these experts remain susceptible to outside influences (consumer demand, established reputation, potential partnerships) for ensuring the success of their programs. The understanding of programmers negotiating this responsibility, and reflecting on the dynamic nature of their curatorial work, remains currently underdeveloped.

2.3 Tastes and cultural elites

To further contextualize the nature of programming as a gatekeeping tool, the foundation of personal tastes must also be discussed. Best put by Stevens & Stevens (2016, p. 138), "if events function to construct taste, they equally operate as sites where such taste can be recognised and apprehended by an audience…as culturally relevant and artistically worthy." Aligned with the notions of cultural value and capital, taste may also be exerted from a cultural intermediary onto the audience. Thus, audience taste is largely constructed by what programs they experience: and what film programmers deem worthy of screening (per *their* tastes or vision).

Falk & Katz-Gerro (2015, p. 129) provide another relevant viewpoint in defining tastes as socially constructed and linked to social class, occupational status, income, and higher education. Expanded upon from Bourdieu (1987), personal tastes lay the groundwork for the consumption of cultural goods between both audiences and experts (programmers). Thus, one's positionality is integral to understanding their accessibility to and interaction with cultural goods such as film: which further reinforce how tastes influence cultural value, and vice versa. The contribution of

expert roles thus signals that these tastes, and relevant cultural goods, are more refined than others.

Cultural elites, defined by their social class and consumption of cultural goods, are a closed and stratified group. O'Brien and Ianni (2023, p. 201) reflect on contemporary cultural elites as "reflexive, able to play with, and question, ideas of taste alongside conceptions of artistic or cultural legitimacy" especially in the greater context of socio-cultural values. However, these elites are classified beyond traditional consumers in their (1) frequency of consumption, (2) depth of appreciation, and (3) willingness to engage with social culture which are, once again, abstract concepts (O'Brien & Ianni, 2023, p. 201). These attributes lay the foundation for how experts, opposed to others, evaluate cultural goods in a hierarchical way.

Lastly, pertinent to the discussion of such decision-making processes is the understanding of bounded rationality. Drawn upon by Simon (1997, as cited in Katsikopoulos, 2014) bounded rationality refers to how decisions are restricted by the paradigms, knowledge frameworks, and positionality of the decision-maker. How bounded rationality manifests, however, differs between idealistic and pragmatic logics (Katsikopoulos, 2014, pp. 361–363). In a utopian setting, decisions are not restricted by a lack of access to information: making a holistic, optimal, and logically reasonable decision in all circumstances (thus labelled ideal). In actuality, however, decisions may also be made by assumptions or rule-of-thumb assessments: grounded in real-life, imperfect circumstances (pragmatic).

How experts experience bounded rationality, especially in regards to the greater access of information they possess for cultural goods, could expand upon how experts make selective decisions. Although film programmers possess more refined heuristic techniques through curating as cultural experts, they are still restricted by various factors such as time, budget, or their limited access to cultural goods (thus, relying on incomplete information). Thus, this research aims to extend the reasoning behind how these decisions are made by film programmers: in which they simultaneously establish their personal tastes and exert cultural capital while also being bounded by their imperfect access to information.

2.4 Cinephilia and auteurism

This notion of taste, linked to social class and consensus, further aligns with the popular emerging identity of cinephiles. Cinephelia is one core framework within film studies, particularly in exploring how film is consumed, perceived, and valued between fans. Cinephiles are classified as those with a particular love and understanding for film, separating them from casual viewers (Shambu, 2019, p. 33). The concept of cinephilia is relevant to this research as it establishes an inherent passion and interest for film, and gives further context to how identity is constructed (and how taste is developed) between such groups.

An enhanced passion for film also echoes existing discourse of intrinsic motivation:

This intrinsic motivation is crucial to understanding programmers not only by their role and tasks, but also aligned with their positionality as people who frequently view and enjoy the cinematic experience in their free time.

Cinephilia also contributes to the existing discourse of Post-Fordist culture in the arts market: abandoning traditional bureaucracy in favor of a relaxed, informal, and flexible workspace (Per Mangset et al., 2012, p. 161). The blurring between the boundaries of work and pleasure-related activities (viewing film) defy traditional organizational structures where work is done purely under obligation. While this may incentivize passion for those working in the cultural industries, it may also cause overworking and difficulty to adhere to other schedules, as a lot of free time is also spent in relation to work activities (Per Mangset et al., 2012, p. 165).

As a result, creative professionals may fall under a charismatic trap, defined by the lack of separation between work and leisure time or activities. Thus, the potential to differentiate professional and leisure tasks remains unclear within the cultural industries as many cultural experts are continuously consuming and evaluating cultural goods. In order to understand how programmers themselves make this distinction, to omit any potential for overlap in what they view for (personal) pleasure and what is best for the vision of the program at the collective (organizational) level.

Auteurism was also a previous cornerstone of cinephilia, whereby the auteur of a film held prestige over non-auteurs in a classic hierarchical scheme (Shambu, 2019, p. 33). Hereby invoking a class system which differentiated between filmmakers with prestige and those without, modern cinephilia aims to diversify itself in both participation and adoration between the dominant group (usually white men from the United States or Hollywood). As a result,

diverse groups and independent filmmakers face a disparity in the opportunities given to them and to the established auteurs within the industry.

This divide between auteurs provides an interesting context to the market dynamics of film industries, whereby prestige and popularity are awarded sparsely. As a result, this may affect the potential for emerging players (debuting filmmakers) to occupy space in the market and reach success, if in the same way. However, as auteurism highlights prestige within the industry as a potential hindrance to emerging filmmakers, the same prestige may also leverage a film's value. Advertising and reputation, in particular, are also powerful tools to provide further information and signal the quality of cultural goods (Nelson, 1970, p. 318)

Prestige therefore acts as an interesting phenomenon in the film industries, as it is largely awarded based on reputation or implications for success (whether artistic or commercial). The same prestige that may be awarded from critics at the Oscars ceremony, for example, may also catapult a film's success or relevance in the eyes of audiences and generate word-of-mouth publicity: in other words, the 'cultural zeitgeist.' Thus, the valuation of film between different players or entities (formal or informal, individual or collective) may happen through both top-down and bottom-up approaches and achieve mainstream success. How film programmers position themselves within this dynamic is yet to be explored, and is especially valuable considering their multifaceted roles as both cultural experts as well as avid consumers of film (cinephiles).

2.5 Programming at the institutional level

Within this study, it is important to contextualize the nature of the arts market once more in allocating taxpayer funds and subsidies; rules and regulations help regulate art market interactions. Abbing (2022) highlights various intricacies of the arts market in the 21st century: now defined by digital tools and affordances, the rising costs for institutions, decreasing public funding for the arts, and a change in tastes and preferences between consumers. Thus, identifying these obstacles help contextualize the aims of (specific) organizations at the broader institutional level and within the arts market.

Abbing (2022, pp. 245–253) also identifies four spheres in which the arts landscape operates: (1) consumer-oriented, (2) bohemian, (3) research, and (4) hybrid. In this study, the consumer-oriented sphere is defined by the sureness of predicting revenue, resulting in a

non-experimental production of cultural goods. The bohemian sphere is more contextual to artists' work, as they navigate the differences between creating art for hobby purposes or for corporate production. The sphere of research, contrary to the consumer-oriented sphere, relies on experimental appeal and thus does not have the same sureness of success as consumer demand is unclear. Hybrid spheres entail balancing between commercial and experimental cultural goods, and are defined by organizational behavior and vision.

Here, the consumer-oriented, research, and hybrid spheres are most applicable to the context of film organizations and programming. As programs curate film with specific visions in mind, collective or individual, they balance between cultural goods rich in economic and social value. Thus, the films which may be thought-provoking (experimental) may not always be successful in ticket sales (due to less consumer demand). These goals for programming, especially at the organizational level, thus orientate the programmer in clarifying which decisions should be made for what purposes. More importantly, these decisions are unique to the positionality of the programmer and their place of work.

Film festivals and theaters still modernize the traditional cinematic experience, however, and have proven to still act as a widely accessible and consumed form of viewing film (Council of Europe, 2023) operating in a consumer-oriented sphere fit for profitmaking. As established, cultural goods such as film may possess both economic and social value, although these have the potential to overlap (Throsby, 2001). Especially in film institutions, where curatorial practices are regulated, identifying the purpose for these film programs may help contextualize how value is established by the programmers themselves.

Additionally, the art for arts' sake mentality remains relevant in uplifting experimental films: and especially when contrasted with the commercialization of film festivals as an experience good. As mentioned previously, grants still exist within maintaining artistic integrity and allocating funds to smaller film productions (de Valck, 2014), ensuring that film festivals deter from screening blockbuster films with high commercial success (Ravid, 1999). Therefore, films screened at a festival are typically less commercial (and more niche or experimental) than those screened in theaters. This allows the potential for less established filmmakers to find opportunities to debut their work in the context of experimentality, social value, and cultural discourse. This therefore uplifts the notion of making and screening art for arts' sake films for programmers and directors, extending beyond commercial appeal.

Noted once more by Hadida (2009, p. 46), the valuation of film is often subjective in its artistic practice and integrity, as opposed to purely in its economic performance. However, as opposed to objective figures such as revenue, the assessment of cultural goods still relies on personal tastes and evaluation. Especially when considering film festivals' commercial success, a blend between dominant genres and artistic merit can be determined: highlighting how this personalized evaluation process unfolds in the grander scheme or vision of the organization.

Thus, the potential to differentiate agency and the larger (collective) institutional goal at hand is crucial to investigating the decision-making processes of film programmers. This applies largely to film programmers' knowledgeability, opportunities, and prioritization of screening films within their programming. For instance, the option to set quota's or criteria upon themselves to create a balanced program between commercially viable or culturally diverse films. Or, programmers may seek help from others to gain a second opinion. These are matters that concern the personal agency of programmers and how they curate, as opposed to their positionality within the (collective) organization.

2.6 Network effects

Additionally, institutional considerations such as partnerships, network opportunities, or a collective vision also influence the potential for film programming. Institutional capital also has effects within the film industry in introducing network connections, prestige, and reputable figures or entities. In combination with objectified capital, the acquisition of materials for film programming (such as distribution rights) may be influenced heavily by pre-existing network ties and organizational partnerships (Stevens & Stevens, 2016, p. 138).

Lately, however, the network effects in the film industries have largely come to bypass any transnational borders and contribute to globalization. Both in the screening of international film in local places, and the relevance of dominant film networks such as Hollywood, pre-existing network effects largely impact how films are made and distributed. Notarized by Powell (1990, p. 300), organizational firms exist in a greater market through networks: coordinating economic activity on the basis of relationships and interaction. Network systems therefore allow for the inclusion of many individual actors across different firms, representing a large community based on shared interests (Powell, 1990, p. 313). As such, network-based organizations are best-suited to understand mass- produced, consumed, and distributed cultural

products such as film on a global scale.

Thus, this creates a dilemma in understanding the accessibility of film between both local and international film networks. Especially with established genres of film based on place, such as Hollywood, these introduce more powerful networks and players linked to prestige or auteurism (Shambu, 2019, p. 33). A potential competition between market players also exists due to network interactions: whereby resources are monopolized or not shared in favor of increasing one's cultural capital. This manifests most commonly in fame, whereby film stars can signal quality or value to the public due to their reputation and previous work in higher-grossing films (Ravid, 1999, p. 446).

As such, networks may create an imbalance in how film is evaluated between programmers in the same network, once again recognizing the potential in gatekeeping practices between players. This was confirmed by Smits (2016, p. 39) as varying levels of distributors only usually interact with one another. Interestingly, the distributors in the mid-range (major independents) had more potential network connections due to interacting with both the biggest (major) and smallest (independant) players: resulting in access to more films overall. However, what differentiates these major and independent distributors is prestige and integrity alike, as there also exists a fundamental division between the arthouse and mainstream market. This gives further insight into the nature of producing films that fit specifically within one category.

Hoyler and Watson (2018, p. 950) further identify large mass-distribution film networks all over the world, but most importantly in the local contexts of the United States, France, Germany, and China. Here, these networks act as relevant markers for how film institutions may collaborate with one another within the market: engaging in a dialogue, relationship, and greater cultural exchange. However, what Hoyler and Watson (2018) fail to include in their framework of global film networks are the importance of funding practices. Integral to the arts market, public funding allows for the furthering of artistic creation under regulation. Here, funds may introduce quotas or criteria which film programs must meet: such as screening a percentage of national cinema or films at a film festival (de Valck, 2014, p. 52). Thus, public funding also influences the interactions between film networks in screening films from (inter)national filmmakers.

Smits (2016, p. 36) has further clarified the positionality between major independents: film distributors with network connections to both large and small scale players in the market

(Hollywood versus independent filmmakers, for example). These major independents emphasised the importance of three notions:

1. (Co-)production partners contribute to the value of projects
2. The reputation of well-known film stars and other high profile creative talent emphasize the potential for promotion, and
3. Business relations do not emerge in a vacuum

These points further emphasize the relevance of this research: investigating how these points are interpreted and utilized between film programmers and other outside influences. These all offer substantial aid to film programming, in (1) attributing value, (2) emphasizing prestige, and (3) relying on network connections in the film industry. In an ideal setting, film programmers have the ability to weigh the balance between all three principles for a nuanced program: but ultimately, this emphasizes programming as a dynamic, non-individual process.

Overall, network effects present themselves in dynamic ways in the processes of both film distribution and curation. Investigating these networks may unveil how programmers further evaluate, access, and acquire film as a cultural good. Thus, networks, fame, and prestige also present relevant ties between programmers and distributors alike, which further contribute to the complexity of the decision-making processes for programming film between established and newcomer directors.

3. Method

Within this study, the primary stakeholders of head programmers were identified as central to answering the research question of: *How do film programmers reflect on their programming and decision-making processes, with insights into screening films from established and newcomer directors?* Within tackling socially relevant themes, topics, and personal experiences described by the experts, a qualitative research scheme was utilized throughout this study to acquire empirical data through semi-structured interviews. The experts contacted were selected on the basis of their relevant work and curatorial experience within their institutions, which are highly personal and differ per individual. These interviews therefore best helped qualitatively explore the programmers' relevant professional experience, reflections, and expertise, and were further interpreted by the researcher through an inductive approach and thematic analysis.

3.1 Research method and design

Qualitative methods best suit this study due to its prioritization of deriving meaning from personal anecdotes, samples of text, and other relevant empirical data as points of interest (Hollstein, 2011, p. 405). In appointing programmers as the main point of interest, largely due to the curatorial expertise, their meaning-making processes and reflections on their job title would best be explored by speaking with them directly. Thus, this research was conducted through six semi-structured interviews of head film programmers (as experts in the field) from different film institutions, with a seventh interview planned in June. These experts were mainly based in different cities of the Netherlands with one example from Budapest, Hungary. These experts all worked at different film institutions to avoid overlap between information and data. Subsequently, a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted through two holistic rounds of inductive coding.

As identified by Hollstein (2011, p. 400) qualitative studies explore contexts of meaning, gauging a more detailed explanation of implicit and explicit meanings derived inherently from the empirical data. When interviewing the experts, the researcher took on the role of the interviewer and asked questions circulated around the interviewee's curatorial work and

experience, their insights and skills built from programming, personal tastes and cinephilia, and network connections within the film industry. Hereby collecting data from the source, the programmers' first-hand experience was shared further eliciting their decision- and meaning-making processes within their work.

Bryman (2012, p. 471) highlights various strengths to conducting semi-structured interviews, particularly in the planning and arranging of questions before conducting the interviews, but not being restricted by the order or flow of the questions within the interview itself. This freedom allowed the researcher to be immersed in the data, while also maintaining flexibility and keeping up with the pace and natural progression of the conversation at hand: another strength to semi-structured interviewing as highlighted by Adeoye‐Olatunde and Olenik (2021, p. 1358). Additionally, the semi-structured interview, as opposed to the structured interview, allows for more follow-up and probing questions to ensure greater saturation of relevant data (Bryman, 2012, p. 476).

Due to the nature of semi-structured interviews, the researcher relied on the interview guide (see *Appendix A*) primarily as a foundation, but also in times of need or as relevant guiding material. The use of the interview guide helped stabilize the course of conversation while also allowing for the questions to be asked in whichever relevant order. For example, if the participant would highlight a certain topic, this would entice the researcher to ask follow-up questions or other questions within the guide for a smooth progression.

The research design was largely guided by the foundational theoretical framework, highlighting important areas for questioning based on the relevant academic understanding of phenomena such as cinephilia, commercial success, prestige and fame, niche and artistic logics, gatekeeping roles, and experience and search goods.

3.2 Sampling strategy

For this study, the role of the participant within the industry was the most valuable and relevant factor in relation to recruiting them and seeking contact. The sampling criteria were therefore very firm with little room for accommodation. As a result, fewer interviews were held but with greater attention to acquiring expert opinions. The sampling criteria was defined by the following traits: (1) participant is currently working as a (head) programmer at a film institute, (2) participant has professional experience programming and curating for film audiences. The

criteria meant recruiting established and currently employed curators with built up experience.

This method of recruitment directly was directly taken from the popular sampling method of purposive sampling, whereby participants are recruited through a shared identification (in this case, their role as a programmer) for the purpose of meeting the sampling criteria. The sampling criteria were explicitly their current job profession as head of programming within their institution, although the type of institution varied between participants. For example, programmers from film festivals, theaters, and independent cinematic business were all interviewed despite their differences in which institution they program for.

Described by Rapley (2014, p. 57), purposive sampling is predominantly information-rich, established as purposeful and valuable to the research context by the researcher. The researcher therefore gives such samples heightened clarity through investigation, exploring how the sample best represents the phenomena of interest. Here, the interviewees' roles as programmers helped contextualize their identities and profession (of cinephilia and curatorship), decision-making processes (and organizational tasks), and interactions with other stakeholders in the film industry (such as distributors or other programmers in the network).

3.3 Data collection process

Within the research design, the recruitment and selection of participants is integral to acquiring and conducting interviews with the relevant population sample (Campbell et al., p. 654). Through her Erasmus University email address, the researcher reached out to 21 different film institutions asking to interview the head of programming, or directly to the programmers' email if available on the website. While various emails were sent in Dutch, especially for national festivals and theaters, most were sent in English.

However, only seven employees of these institutions replied and were willing to participate. Most of the respondents were working as head programmers (HP) either alone or together with a colleague. No participants were recruited from the participants' personal or extended network, as all interviewees were new connections. This left little room for bias or pre-established relations, especially within the method of purposive (maximum variation) sampling that was utilized. The sample acquired was primarily male, with only two female programmers recruited (interviewees D and E). Represented in Table 1 below, the demographics of the interviewees may be seen.

Table 1

Overview of interviewees

Person	Role	Gender	Film institution	Location	Years of experience
A	HP	M	KABOOM Animation Festival	Amsterdam	5 (HP Kaboom) 12 (general)
B	Co-HP	M	Budapest International Film Festival	Budapest	3
C	HP	M	Cinema Culinair	Randstad[1]	3.5
D	HP of short films	F	CineKid Film Festival	Multiple[2]	4
E	HP	F	Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam (AFFR)	Rotterdam	2 (HP), 10 (general program)
F	Co-HP	M	Filmhuis Den Haag	The Hague	2.5 (HP), 8 (within organization)
G	HP	M	KINO Rotterdam	Rotterdam	14

Various head and co-head programmers from different institutions were recruited in this

[1] Randstad refers to the most densely populated areas and cities in the Netherlands, specifically in the regions of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and the Hague.

[2] CineKid operates across 40+ cities in the Netherlands, but their main location is in a Pathé theater within Amsterdam North.

study. The majority of programmers (three of seven) worked for film festivals, with two Dutch perspectives and one international perspective from Budapest. These were the KABOOM Animation festival, Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam (AFFR) and Budapest International Film Festival (BIFF). These festivals specialized in animated film, film focused on architecture, and international feature films respectively, and often took place in one or two weeks with year-long planning preparations.

Two programmers from arthouse theaters Filmhuis Den Haag and KINO Rotterdam were also recruited. Here, it is relevant to mention their specialization for arthouse cinema and programming of specific events, retrospectives, and classics with year-round residency and visitation opportunities. Lastly, the owner and head programmer of a private business, Cinema Culinair, was also recruited. This business was started to fill a gap between the market, specifically in combining fine dining with film screenings and entertainment. Thus, their film selection revolves around culinary themes, motifs, and menu opportunities.

Six relevant interviews with the experts (film programmers) took place between April 28th and May 20th, with the final seventh interview planned for June 4th. The majority of interviews (four out of seven) were done online through Microsoft Teams or phone call, with three taking place face-to-face. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Within most interviews, the interviewer and interviewee could see one another's expressions and body language, which are important indicators of comfort and conversation to take note of while interviewing.

In all interviews, verbal consent was confirmed particularly in the recording of the audio and audiovisual. For the in-person interviews, an additional consent form was signed by the participants with their rights, permissions, and other relevant research goals listed in all transparency. By reaching out via email in all cases, the interviewees could also contact the researcher at any time to potentially opt out or omit their data from the study entirely without repercussions. The consent forms were made in English, along with a majority of the interviews (four out of seven) being in English. The remaining three interviews were held in Dutch (with interviewees A, C, and G), at the interviewees' convenience.

The interviewees held in Dutch were subsequently transcribed in the same language, but were coded in English. As the researcher held fluency in both languages, it was less time consuming to translate the relevant transcripts and instead opted for flexibility between units.

Regardless, all relevant quotations included in this study were translated into English by the researcher.

3.4 Operationalization and coding process

Identified by Roulston (2013, p. 298), analyzing interviews depends largely on the identified research context and theoretical backdrop in aiding the operationalization. It is thus important to recognize interviews (and the relevant studying of them) as a construction of meaning, whereby individual accounts are collected and analyzed as data points by the research. The representation, thoughts, feelings, anecdotes, and stories accounted for in the interviews thus exist in a greater societal, cultural, and organizational context. In this research, this relied heavily on knowledge concerning the film industry, relevant film and cinema, and networks within the film sector which have interplay with the programmers' decision-making processes.

As mentioned previously, this study was guided by the theoretical understanding of the concepts of (1) curatorial work and professional experience, (2) programmers insights and skills, (3) personal tastes and cinephilia, (4) gatekeeping theories and motivations, and (5) potential and existing network connections within the film sector. These concepts guided the coding process for the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts,

The relevant measuring instruments were thus the interview guide and relevant codebook finalized at the end of the inductive coding process. Further measuring tools conducted by the researcher were the utilization of transcription software available on Microsoft Teams and Word for Web. These transcripts were double-checked by the researcher to avoid grammatical errors or improper diction. Lastly, the digital program Atlas.ti was used by the researcher for quick and efficient coding of the transcripts, resulting in various codes being created simultaneously. The researcher had previous experience using the software, and utilized memos, merge functions, and code groupings to further stratify and group the data. This allowed for the arranging and exploration of various themes, emerging from the data, on the software.

For example, the codes which emerged were both descriptive and interpretive, which were later refined by clustering these codes into their relevant themes. For example, the functionality of producer roles were marked with codes such as 'role,' 'tasks,' 'expectation,' 'success,' and 'failure,' which were objective insights described by the interviewees. These codes were clustered into the theme of 'industry standard,' as these processes happen on a larger

and less personal scale outside of the programmers' personal decisions and reflections. A similar cluster was formed for processes outside of the programmers control, such as societal or cultural implications of their work. This theme was thus labelled 'societal implications' and consisted of codes related to 'diversity and inclusion' and 'community,' which operate on a broader scale and were similarly less individualistic (yet still occurred as a result of the programmers' actions).

Opposingly, codes which were interpretive related largely to the programmers' insights and subsequent reflections on their roles. These codes highlighted greater personal involvement, and were clustered into the themes of positionality and programming tools. The positionality theme … It is relevant to note that the codes emerged first from the data, and were later clustered into themes rather than vice versa.

Later on, the generated inductive codes were grouped into relevant emerging themes and subthemes and included in the subsequent codebook generated throughout the rounds of inducted coding. By coding the same material numerous times, codes were implemented and developed across these rounds. For example, codes such as 'development' and 'growth,' although categorized into the same theme, held different meanings. In such cases, the relevant codebook (see *Appendix B*) was incredibly useful to differentiate between existing codes with established meaning and examples. The codebook therefore consisted of codes identified within the latent and explicit meaning derived from the interview transcripts.

3.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis, popularized by researchers Clarke and Braune (2017, p. 298), is a valuable method of social research which pertains to grouping themes emerging from empirical data units. Although traditional thematic analysis acts as a tool and extension of the research design, rather than an explicit research method in and of itself, it is highly valuable in aiding the coding process. Specifically, the flexibility of this analysis allows for themes to be made and grouped from existing codes which have the possibility to change throughout conducting research. This method pairs nicely with the logic of semi-structured interviews, whereby the emerging patterns from the data may present themselves as the research context is expanded upon and developed.Although rooted in psychology, Clarke and Braun's (2017, originally published in 2006) work on thematic analysis prioritizes the notion of the lived experience and personal perspective, insights, and practices. This aligns well with the scope of the research

design, particularly in aiming to understand the decision-making processes of film programmers in the greater context of the film industry, its existing networks, and their personal values, tastes, and passion for cinema.

The goal of these coding processes and thematic grouping, aligned with the greater goal of the research, was still to explore the meaning attributed to the decision-making processes required of programmers in film institutions. Throughout the coding processes of the transcripts, the aim was to understand how these programmers reflected on their experience, personal values, and professional skills in the greater context of programming for a certain audience. These allowed for the results to remain highly contextual and individual to the programmer and their experiences, yet highly valuable within the greater role of programming work and recognizing the artistic and commercial appeal to film research.

Although thematic analysis is typically double-checked and cross-referenced by other researchers in a similar field, it is important to note the entirety of this study being conducted through individual work. By acknowledging the reflexive nature of this sociological research, consistency was ensured through the proper definition of codes, themes, and measuring instruments. By conducting the interviews and coding each transcript with a clearly defined codebook, which emerged from the inductive analysis, codes were re-evaluated on the basis of each code's definition and contribution to the research goal.

For example, codes which emerged under ten times ($n<10$) throughout the entire dataset were discarded completely to account for a greater saturation of relevant codes within the dataset. Codes were also often reformatted and reformulated throughout the first round of inductive coding, and a second round was completed to account for the emergence of new codes throughout the dataset (to account for greater saturation between all units of analysis). However, this somewhat undermines the quality assurance and validity of the data acquired as the thematic grouping was done solely by the researcher.

3.6 Ethical considerations

To best consider and acknowledge the relevant ethical implications present within both methods of data collection, aspects such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and anonymity were explained in depth to the interviewees. Having agreed on a standardized method of recording the conversations and keeping the interviewees' identities hidden, audio files were

kept to store the conversations and will be deleted at the end of the researcher's academic year. However, what remained utmost priority was keeping the identity of participants anonymous, as well as them giving informed consent to participate in the study.

Allowing the interviews to be kept anonymous was done explicitly by the researcher, in order to protect the identity of those involved. As these interviews contained questions regarding their professional experiences, personal opinions and values, and established networks or connections, such information could be detrimental and highly personal. Therefore, to avoid tracing the participants to this study, they were given aliases with letters (interviewees A, B, etc.) and will be addressed as such within the publication.

3.7 Role of the researcher

Understood in all forms contextually, meaning-making within qualitative methods derives heavily from the researchers involved. Herein it remains important to highlight the role of the researcher as the main facilitator of this study. Across all qualitative methods, the researcher(s) themselves define the context, meaning and interpretation of any findings. Therefore, it is integral to acknowledge the researcher's role as an avid film enthusiast with passion for the inner workings of the industry. While having no formal knowledge of the professional activities in the film sector, the interest for this study was largely developed from her personal interests.

Aligned with Holmes (2020, p. 1), researcher positionality is an amalgamation of a researcher's lived experiences and beliefs. A researcher's inherent positionality within the research context may "affect the totality of the research process" altogether, especially within qualitative research and contextual understanding (Holmes, 2020, p. 3). As such, although an established understanding of the research context may appear useful, it may also provide inherent biases. Understood in 'insider' and 'outsider' terms, it is misguided to assume that a researcher's insider understanding will always produce data that is true (Heron, 1999, as cited in Holmes, 2020, p. 7).

Although the research was conducted with an identified passion for film as a medium and art form, the recruitment of participants and analysis of the data was conducted in a vessel, to the best of the researcher's ability. Particularly in identifying relevant academic concepts outside of what is socially relevant for film enthusiasts, a formal understanding of the research context helped stabilize the process of identifying interesting themes emerging from the empirical data.

Rather than using a deductive approach to confirm existing theories, the data remained most valuable in the molding and constructing of relevant themes and patterns across programmers' reflections on their decision-making processes within their work.

4. Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the key findings of the research are discussed through the empirical data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with head programmers (HPs), and the subsequent thematic analysis and coding. Here, it is important to call upon the given research question once more: *How do film programmers reflect on their programming experience and decision-making processes, with insight into screening films from established and newcomer directors?* By sharing their recollections of their professional experiences and decision-making processes, these interviews were able to provide an overview of how such practices are shaped and developed throughout a programmer's career. Differentiating between each programmers' identity and passion for cinema, network connections and opportunities, as well as their role as an 'expert,' these aspects could be understood in a highly intricate and personal way contrasted with one another.

These aspects being understood in the lived experience of the programmers gives further weight and attributes meaning to the objectivity of the academic concepts identified in the previous chapters. Specifically in the exploration of building networks, the processes happening between programmers differ from what is understood in a vacuum. Furthermore, the importance of roles seemed more relaxed and natural given the method of interviewing the participants, whereby they spoke freely of their struggles and passion for their jobs. Altogether, the findings presented in this chapter help reference how themes emerged from the programmers' experiences themselves.

4.1 Relevant themes

In conducting semi-structured interviews, the research goal was to extract meaning and data from the conversations held with programmers as experts in the field. Specific to their experiences in their profession, the decision-making processes for screening films from established and newcomer directors were explored through inductive coding. Often, this meaning was established through subtext, whereby codes emerged and were later grouped into themes.

The interviews focused primarily on film programming and how these experts choose to select and evaluate film as a cultural good. This helped establish the dominant themes of industry norms (n=913) and programming tools (n=890) within the dataset. These themes reference both

the agency (individual) of programmer tasks, while also contextualizing these expert roles in the greater film industry or collective organization. The secondary themes found were related to positionality (*n*=460), which referenced personal traits and feelings, and societal implications (*n*=280), which focused on greater socio-cultural discourse such as inclusion or diversity. The relevant information can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Theme frequency report

Theme	Codes in group (*n*)	Coded units identified (*n*)
Industry norms	22	913
Positionality	9	460
Programming tools	13	892
Societal implications	8	280
Total	53	2545

4.1.1 The individual versus collective

It is interesting to note that the themes are divided between individual and greater (group) functions. Specifically, the themes of programming tools and positionality are unique to each programmer, making them highly individualistic. The themes of industry norms and societal implications, however, require a greater contextual understanding of the film industry and market, as well as any following implications for social or global values. Reaffirming that programmers do not work within a closed bubble, this highlights the importance of recognizing that a programmer's decisions may be shaped by individual preferences, their organization's vision, and network interactions with other cultures and people.

For example, when asked "Who do you curate for?" Interviewee F (HP Filmhuis Den Haag, 2.5 years) mentioned that "If there's people [saying] we find it very important to dive into the cinema of Kenya, I would set up a meeting with the Kenyan ambassador, the Cultural Department, and see if we could get anything done with filmmakers." While not stating who would guide the direction of this (hypothetical) interest in Kenyan cinema, this indicated that

curating was not an individual process for him. Instead, any newfound interest in partnerships, especially those from culturally diverse cinema, would be fueled by a confirmed interest from another party (whether internal or external to the organization). In these ways, Interviewee F expressed his role in programming in the context of an existing demand or interest, thereby fueling his pursuit in potential partnerships with filmmakers from other backgrounds.

This relevant extension of interest in film from diverse backgrounds, especially those beyond the programmers' own nationality, has interesting implications for introducing international cinema in local contexts. By introducing the audience to such diverse films, this can capture their interest and exert social value and interest for other cultures (as highlighted by Throsby, 2001). Thus, rather than capitalizing on a demand, film institutions may opt to convey international messages through film and uplift underrepresented nations (de Valck, 2014, p. 46).

It is interesting to note that these decisions in this case, although hypothetical, are introduced by another party. This clarifies the distinction between the agency of the programmer in arranging and curating diverse films, and the intentions of the organization guiding these decisions. These intentions could be to showcase a willingness to engage with social culture (O'Brien & Ianni, 2023, p. 1), or potentially create a network between Kenyan and Dutch cinema for interactions within the market (Powell, 1990). In both cases, this scenario would serve to strengthen the potential for capital of both parties in both cultural and economic value.

4.1.2 Programming motivations and flexibility

Other relevant observations from the coding frequencies included the most applied codes, which can be seen below in Table 3. In particular, the codes within the theme of programming tools (n=538) were the most dominant, with five relevant codes included: awareness of audience (n=209), strategy (n=134), vision (n=128), role (n=114), and opportunity (n=111). This was due to the programmers' extensive descriptions and reflections on their decision-making processes and experiences, which were central to the research. Additionally, these tools were often mentioned by the interviewee in combination with one another, which led to being coded more often.

Table 3

Highest code frequency report

Code	Theme	Coding units identified (*n*)
Awareness of audience	Programming tools	209
Strategy	Programming tools	134
Network	Industry norms	129
Vision	Programming tools	128
Difficulty	Industry norms	118
Role	Programming tools	114
Opportunity	Programming tools	111

For instance, when speaking with Interviewee D (HP of shorts at CineKid, 4 years), the researcher shared her impression of the flexible nature of programming for various audiences, stating "That's good to hear that there's also flexibility there." Interviewee D responded with "Yeah, [schools] just have different needs, I think. But you know, the public, they want to see new stuff or, or at least we think they want to see new stuff." This quotation was coded with awareness of audience (*n*=209) as well as vision (*n*=128) as it concerned meeting audience demands as well as CineKid's mission for education. Here, in prioritizing newness and originality, Interviewee D made use of her insights to differentiate between programming for the general public (audience) and schools while maintaining the integrity of the festival at large.

The code of awareness of audience (*n*=209) was also far more identified than any of its predecessors. This refers back to the nature of film programming for the audience, whereby film institutions still exist in a consumer-oriented cultural sphere (Abbing, 2022). In predicting consumer behavior and demand, and thus altering the film program to be liked by audiences, film programmers ensure greater chances of success and thus avoid experimental or risky choices. For CineKid, a children's film festival, it is understandable why programming may be more tame as these are intended to be viewed by younger audiences or families.

Thus, this degree of consumer-orientation also largely depends on the type of audience relevant to the film institution. For example, some audiences are defined with specific interests in

arthouse or niche productions. This may give more freedom in programming for experimentality rather than commercial success: although this audience orientation will not guarantee success for other productions. Interviewee G (HP KINO, 14 years) referenced this explicitly for introducing smaller productions into the cinema, stating: “Sometimes a film is absolutely incredible, and we screen it, but we know that people won’t be going. Or, at least, that it’ll be difficult [to get them to come].”

Therefore, film institutions often take the hybrid approach to including both risky (experimental) and foolproof (consumer-oriented) choices, defined by individual programmers' strategies. For example, Interviewee A (HP KABOOM, 12 years) mentioned in a tangent that:

> There are also many festivals that primarily screen the ‘great hits,’ right? Those which are very popular at the moment, the big names. And I think we do that very intentionally. That we screen some, but also some other [films] that very few festivals are screening because we find them interesting.

It is interesting to note that these decisions, although strategic by the programmer, also depend on the (financial) freedom and viability of the film institutions. Specifically for KABOOM as a film festival, their budget is amplified by various forms of public funding. KINO, as a cinema and business, does not receive public funding. Rather, KINO is able to diversify their film program in relation to their financial goals and tickets sold, by including experimental films only after meeting financial goals through other box office successes. Interviewee G highlighted the popularity of the film *The Salt Path* (dir. Marianne Elliott) as a crucial, commercially viable option: “Did I find the film amazing? Well, no. It’s adequately made… But we thought that there would be an audience for it, and that was enough to screen it. And, in doing that, it helped [us breakeven] in May.”

Furthermore, in contrasting KABOOM Animation festival to KINO as a theater, the nature of the event also plays a role in the potential for programming, as this can influence consumer behavior. Consumers experience the film in real-time at film festivals, in a specific location, whereby tickets may hold access to multiple screenings: film festivals thus act as an

experience good (Nelson, 1970). Contrastingly, the one-time usage of cinema tickets mirror search goods in how consumers may research beforehand if the film suits their tastes and is worth the purchase. Thus, consumers may feel more free at film festivals altogether whereby their tastes are challenged and they are encouraged to experience various screenings available in one (bundled) ticket.

4.1.3 Experts' consumption and evaluation

As mentioned previously, various codes in the programming tools theme were coded in combination with one another, which were identified as code co-occurrences by Atlas.ti. The highest code occurrences was identified predominantly within this theme, and especially within the code of awareness of audience (*n*=209). Thus, the highest frequency of code co-occurances between unique codes were found and displayed in Table 4. The two instances of code co-occurrences not both from the theme of programming tools were those combining personal tastes (positionality) and sacrifice (programming tools) as well as time constraints (industry norm) and tasks (programming tools).

Table 4

Code co-occurrence frequency report

Code 1	Code 2	Co-occurrences identified (*n*)
Awareness of audience	Strategy	30
Opportunity	Network	20
Role	Vision	15
Personal tastes	Sacrifice	12
Time constraints	Tasks	12

The interesting combinations of personal tastes (*n*=62) and sacrifice (*n*=50) represents an interesting dilemma in the arts market: separating work from pleasure. Characterized by a relaxed nature, creative professionals may find it hard to differentiate between their interactions with cultural goods between leisure and professional activity (Per Mangset et al., 2012, p. 165).

Especially in the continuous consumption of film by programmers, both within their profession and within their spare time, this may result in a fatigue in the (over)consumption of cultural goods.

When asked “How do you manage the oversaturation or fatigue that [the job] brings?” Interviewee E (HP AFFR, 2 years) replied “So I always try to start as early as possible.. I think now that I have more responsibility, I also have less time, so I rely a lot more on the critics and also my colleagues.” Here, she mentioned relying on the jury and colleagues within AFFR to effectively evaluate film due to her higher responsibility and time constraints. By relying on other professionals, especially those within the same organization, this reinforces the intricacies of expert roles establishing the value of cultural goods (Ginsburg et al., 2019, p. 37).

This quotation also highlights some additional context in how cultural experts would first rely on industry professionals within their organization. This is likely due to a pre-established understanding of value, as defined by the organization they work for and are familiar with. However, the terms by which this value (social or economic) is attributed are not disclosed or mentioned outright. As a result, this reinforces the notions of traditional gatekeeping by evaluating film before reaching the stage of audience consumption (Janssen & Verbood, 2015, p. 444), especially between cultural experts’ valuation strategies.

Furthermore, this also demonstrates how bounded rationality manifests within the programmer due to time constraints. In making this rule-of-thumb assessment and delegating tasks to other members of the organization, a similar evaluation of films may be reached without wasting the time of the head programmer (Katsikopoulos, 2014). This then provides a more dynamic understanding of valuation theories within the film industries and how programmers may rely on other members to signal the quality of certain films, especially when time becomes an obstacle.

4.2 Constructing tastes and positionality

While the main motivation for this study was to explore how gatekeeping tactics may manifest in film programming, the programmers’ insights did display a reluctance to let their personal tastes interfere with their jobs. When Interviewee F (HP Filmhuis Den Haag, 2.5 years) was asked about how he separated the films he watched for his work and in his spare time, or whether this was blended, he went on to say that “I think a short answer would be [that] as a

programmer, it's best to program not for yourself, but for the audience. So you never program to have your own opinion and taste being dominant." This sentiment was shared by Interviewee D (HP of shorts at CineKid, 4 years of experience), who stated "I can really kind of turn off my own preferences." She further describes watching films for work with a metaphorical lens that veils her preferences.

The urgency to avoid any potential for personal tastes interfering with professional evaluations have great implications for cultural reflexivity, as described by O'Brien and Ianni (2023. More specifically, the relevance for the depth of these experts' appreciation reaches a standstill whereby they do not personally value or appreciate the good, but will acknowledge its relevance for the organization's identity or programming. Thus, in addition to being defined by the individualistic (1) frequency of consumption, (2) depth of appreciation, and (3) willingness to engage with social culture (O'Brian and Ianni, 2023, p. 201), cultural reflexivity may also be defined in (4) contributions to the collective vision.

Conflicting feelings were expressed by Interviewee E (HP AFFR, 2 years), who shared how personal tastes can uplift the programming rather than hinder it. In asking her "How do you manage to integrate [your interests] into your work, or do you want to separate the two?" she responded:

> Oh, you cannot separate the two. It's part of making a statement. It's also about challenging your audience. On one hand, I am following what is important right now, what people are talking about, what architecture, as I feel, is busy with, and here is what film can bring into this discourse. But it's also about saying "this is also something that maybe you should be talking about." Or, "this is a very interesting way to talk about something." And I think that you shouldn't try to claim some sort of neutral [stance].

In aiming to make a thought-provoking program, Interviewee E highlighted that these

decisions were largely guided by what she recognized as impactful or relevant to furthering the knowledge about architecture through film. Thus, by centralizing her agency in film programming, she relied more heavily on her personal knowledgeability and morals to guide her decision-making.

4.3 The accumulation of (local) networks

Within the dataset, various connections emerged from each interviewee's discussion of networks within the film industry. Networks held great significance for some programmers in obtaining the rights to their screening, with Interviewee F (HP Filmhuis Den Haag, 2.5 years) describing his connection to other programmers as very pleasant. Specifically, he mentioned that "there are a lot of WhatsApp groups which are [available for programmers to ask each other questions]...So we tend to help each other, which is very nice." In these ways, fostering connections with other programmers could lead to better opportunities for the institution with regards to screening rights and outsourcing information from others.

This display of unity and friendliness among programmers was largely aligned with the pre-existing network of arthouse cinema in the Netherlands, as opposed to private and commercial theaters. Interviewee F further mentioned "So of course you have Pathé and KinePolis, which are very commercial islanders [chains], but all the arthouse cinemas tend to work together." This was not experienced by Interviewee D, however, who mentioned that she was "never really in touch with other programmers…I'm either in touch with filmmakers, distributors, sales agents or people who are offering films."

This resurfaces the notions by Smits (2016, p. 39) in the division between arthouse and mainstream distributors: whereby they do not interact due to oppositional modes of productions and aesthetic preferences. Although this limits the amount of network interactions between mid-range (arthouse) and major (mainstream) distributors, the result is a strengthening of pre-existing network ties between same-sized players in the market.

Gatekeeping logics also emerge here due to the exclusivity of these network interactions at hand. By not having access to this closed network, Interviewee D's potential access to further information was cut off (although she also had other relevant points of contact). On the other hand, by also sharing distribution rights, resources, or information between one another, these networks help circulate information and provide accessibility to more cultural goods across

organizations. By deterring traditional gatekeeping and withholding of information in these strong network ties, this may provide a greater incentive to join in as an arthouse film programmer.

Still, a point of interest specific to the context of this research would be the interplay between programmers within the local and larger national network of the Netherlands. Due to the smaller population and pool of film programmers, network connections presented themselves frequently amongst various interviewees. However, the breadth of these network connections extended beyond cultural experts. For example, Interviewee A (HP KABOOM, 12 years) had mentioned his work as a professor and coordinator of the animation master at St. Joost's Academy in Den Bosch.

Along with his professional connections from working at KABOOM Animation Festival, he knew various colleagues and students who would submit their work. These unique and interpersonal network ties made recognizing these colleagues easy, but he often opted out of evaluating or rating their work:

> I always cut myself off [from rating certain films] when I know too much about the process. I don't find it fair. This year, I had a case with a colleague of mine where I thought: "I've already seen 25 versions of this film while it was being made," so I can't fully give my honest opinion. It's the same with my students, I never rate their work… I know them as people.

By demonstrating how network effects may impact cultural evaluation, this gives greater merit to the delegation of tasks as defined by the programmer's positionality. In these cases with higher emotional attachment, the notions of bounded rationality are not applicable as these network ties present inherent and strong potential for bias. Thus, film programmers choosing to abstain from evaluating specific goods stands as more ethical than giving an unfair evaluation, although potentially being more time-consuming.

Lastly, it is further relevant to mention the smaller size of film institution networks in the

Netherlands, as these play a role in the familiarity between programmers, filmmakers, and directors within the industry. Interviewee D described this in her evaluation of Dutch children's film directors: “they are more established to us because we've grown up with their films.” In recognizing film between auteurs and their established reputation (Shambu, 2019, p. 33), it is also important to contextualize the increased visibility of directors within niche genres of film production.

4.4 How expertise is built

4.4.1 Expert roles within organizations

Roles and team dynamics between programmers differed greatly per institution, yet the programmers interviews rarely worked on their own. The main differences between the institutional logics displayed between the three film festivals, two theaters, and one private business were the organization of a jury and employees within the programming committee. Specifically, the film festivals of KABOOM Animation, Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam (AFFR), and CineKid all had external committees helping with the reviewing, watching, and filtering of film submissions they receive over an extended month-long period. These committees differed in names (reviewers, critical watchers, and committee per festival respectively), but had similarities in the functions they provided the institutions.

The juries acted as a way to bypass various organizational obstacles, such as time constraints, an oversaturation of submissions, and quality control. In all three festivals, the juries were described as external to the organization, often with relevant secondary jobs, but still experts in the field. Furthermore, the most relevant factor to the juries’ assistance was their understanding of the festival’s vision. Such unseen contributions were also addressed by Interviewee B (Co-HP BIFF, 3 years of experience) in discussing the role of subtitling teams and technical experts. He mentioned, “Yeah, it's the two of us having the programming [role]. But in reality it's at least 15 people, and it just gets even bigger for this year too.” This helps broaden the understanding of the film industry and relevant contributions at an organizational level, which often extend beyond the head programmer and contain a multitude of expert opinions.

As mentioned previously, the intricate details of how multiple experts established a consensus for film programming and value were not disclosed within the interviews. However, by recognizing the teamwork between cultural experts, film programming is made further

legitimate with an extra set of eyes, opinions, and knowledge frameworks outside those of the head programmer. Thus helping reduce the amount of tasks taken on by the head of program, various experts can help delegate tasks to confirm the value attributed to film (Ginsburg et al., 2019, p. 48) and also potentially increase efficiency.

Even in the context of a private business entity, Interviewee C (HP Cinema Culinair, 3.5 years) displayed great value in teamwork with staff for the enhancing of the experience. As Cinema Culinair offers a dining experience and film viewing (often in the 'eat the menu' format), he, as a programmer, must work together with the kitchen staff. He mentioned that "So, you'll have a look with the head chef [for which films fit the program]. So I'll also have a look and how I could come up with a menu." Interestingly, however, Interviewee B still referred to this as an individual process with his decision as the final say through usage of the pronoun 'I' rather than 'we.' Still, the elements of teamwork, especially within the institution, apply throughout various film institutions different in nature and organizational structure.

One difficulty that arose between many of the interviews was the possibility (or struggle) with personal involvement in the theater as a measure of the program's success. While some programmers such as Interviewee B (Co-HP BIFF, 3 years) had a more optimistic outlook by mentioning "I'll try to be inside the screenings as much as possible to see audience reactions and to hear audience reactions." Interviewee D (HP CineKid, 4 years) reflected on her experiences more realistically especially during the hectic festival period itself:

> I really try to [be present at the screenings] but I have to do a lot of other things at the festival that prevent me from doing that, even when I think that is the best way to feel response from the audience and to see if this will work or not… Sometimes after the festival, there are certain films or certain screenings where none of us [programmers] were present and we were like, "Did that work? I don't know." "There was a Q&A there. I wasn't there. Was it a good Q&A? I don't know." So that's a shame, I think, but you can't

be everywhere at once because there's a lot happening.

Overall, as a programmer's role develops within the organization and they take on more tasks, there remains little room for engagement with the aftermath of the program as a learning tool. Thus, by being susceptible to audience reactions and opinion, cultural experts may build upon their ability to evaluate cultural goods and assess their quality (Ginsburg et al., 2019, p. 48). By continuously learning from how films are experienced by audiences, this establishes cultural valuation as a dynamic and potentially ongoing process: building upon public consensus and audience engagement with the material.

Lastly, contrary to the aftermath of attending film screenings, film programmers also rely on outsourcing and acquiring information related to audience demand and consensus among films in the planning stages of manufacturing a program. Shared by Interviewee F (HP Filmhuis Den Haag, 2.5 years) when asked "Do you have any reviewers that you typically gravitate towards?" he answered: "To be honest, Letterboxd works the best. I mean, that's where the audience is, so the audience you want to attract with your quality classics or deep dive cinema films, that audience is there."

Letterboxd, an online reviewing site for films, is popular among cinema enjoyers and cinephiles. Thus, by choosing to garner public impressions and reviews of certain films via this website, a holistic overview of public perception was achieved. In this case, the popularization of audience-reviewed content helps circulate information and discussions which even reach film programmers: which they can then use to account for the potential reception to certain films included in the programming. In this case, digital affordances are also helping extend the processes of evaluating cultural goods by providing programmes to greater sources of information and the emerging cultural zeitgeist.

4.4.2 Purpose and vision

As mentioned previously, the interviewees displayed varying stances on combining programming with their personal tastes. This insight into programming, especially potentially aligned with one's interests, begs to question the purposes and motivations for programming. Interviewee B (Co-HP BIFF, 3 years), for instance, shared how the festival wanted to make a mark in the Budapest scene and "be brave in its programming." More specifically, he listed his

motivations for organizing the first edition of the Budapest International Film Festival (BIFF) as "I felt that there are so many films that are not getting shown [in Budapest]. So many interesting films. And I wanted to show them."

This case was unique amongst the others due to the strife experienced in organizing a film festival from the ground up, which helped contextualize the intrinsic motivation expressed by Interviewee B. This once again reconfirmed the art for arts' sake mentality for film programming: screening films high in aesthetic appeal as opposed to purely commercial motivations (Ravid, 1999). Additionally, the lack of film institutions operating in Budapest further added to Interviewee B's urgency to expand the market potential for film festivals there.

Interviewee C (HP Cinema Culinair, 4 years) felt differently about his programming tactics largely due to the nature of Cinema Culinair as a private business, combining fine dining and film screening. Still largely programmed on the basis of cooking themes and motifs, various Cinema Culinair films were also selected for screening based on pre-established popularity and mainstream success. Cinema Culinair was further differentiated in its nature due to not debuting films or working with independent filmmakers or institutions, instead relying on the public (and demand) due to their revenue income largely dependent on ticket sales. Thus, fame and prestige played a more significant role in the programming of commercial films for Cinema Culinair more focused on filling a gap within the market and meeting public (and popular) demand.

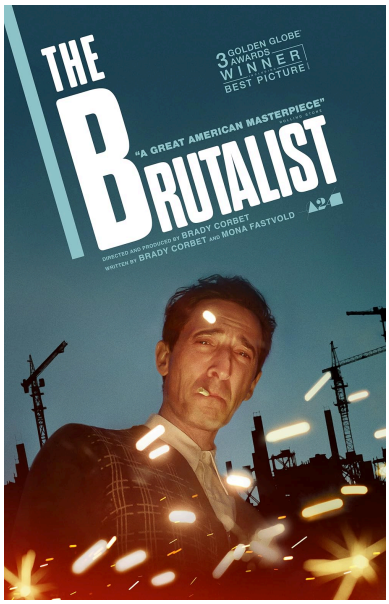
Above all, programmers heavily involved and passionate about the act of curation felt strongly about how they view themselves as cultural intermediaries, exerting their evaluations and programs onto the audience. Interviewee G (HP KINO, 14 years) had an interesting perspective in programming films without seeming too educational or formal: "I think that if you program purely from enthusiasm instead of an obligation to a subsidy or requirements within an institution… That gives another connotation, I'd say, to your programming."

Here, the roles of cultural intermediaries (and how they facilitate culture) were discussed beyond the notions of Bourdieu (1979, as cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2006, p. 226) by stratifying intermediaries' agency and collective obligations. While it is crucial to recognize how these factors may influence film programming, the intrinsic passion for film and cinema (cinephilia) also establishes a nuanced perspective in film programming characterized by enthusiasm. Thus, cinephilia and the intense passion for film may also be seen as a prerequisite to constructing a film program sincerely.

The Brutalist, whose poster may be seen in Figure 1 below, was a film mentioned by Interviewees B and E due to its gargantuan success, various accolades, and award nominations. For Interviewee B, he saw potential to screen The Brutalist as a gateway to attract a larger audience. In asking, "Do you consider screening films more than once?" he replied "Well, we screen the big films that we know are gonna be big, you know. The Hungarian premier of The Brutalist, for example. I'm sure you remember that film." Furthermore, in a later section of the interview, he once again brought up the example: "Like *The Brutalist* that we had last year. [We have] some more, like American blockbusters for the audience that are less interested in the art house kind of stuff."

Figure 1

The Brutalist (2025, dir. Brady Corbet) theatrical release poster



Note. Image acquired from Corbet, B. (2025) via https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8999762/

Although the inclusion of a majorly successful film helped attract a larger audience and was beneficial to BIFF, it also enforced a stereotypical and banal portrayal of architects relevant for AFFR's programming. In asking Interviewee E (HP AFFR Rotterdam, 2 years) how she identifies and values artistic principles, as an extension of discussing the opposite 'guilty

pleasure' film, she said:

> Some films try to be a little bit more popular or easygoing and it's very hard to actually make something that doesn't border on the stereotypical. It's very hard. So somehow yeah, I don't know, I don't think we've ever had… something that is very literal or made with this very accessible, popular kind of language [in the program]. But that's always because, yeah, you are like, "Ah, is this really how you see architects? Is this the only thing that you can make out of it? Is this, again, the same story?"

Here, the spectacle of popular film becomes interesting in the context of film programming as it may attract more audiences and attention yet also enforce a (harmful) consensus or stereotype due to the same attention given to the work. Although for BIFF, not centered around architects' narratives, *The Brutalist* was a successful inclusion in attracting a wider audience, AFFR would not consider screening the film due to its lackluster representation of architectural values. These polarizing reflections on the film, aligned with the vision specific to the festival, both displayed merit as they were made in the best interest of the festival's vision, integrity, or success.

On the other hand, other institutions were more inclined to screen only arthouse films due to the institution's vision, purpose, and specialization within this genre. … In these ways, arthouse cinemas opt to screen more artistically valuable films in favor of commercially successful or popular ones. However, in doing so, programmers may run the risk of not diversifying their program. For example, Interviewee F (HP Filmhuis Den Haag, 2.5 years) expressed how with "super eclectic, diverse, like very deep films, you're going to get a certain audience," which narrows the scope of audiences interested in the eclectic arthouse films.

4.5 Prestige and reputation

4.5.1 Leveraging fame

Although various interviewees discussed the strategies present in including established (and prestigious) films and filmmakers within the program, the same could not be said for the strategies in including smaller filmmakers. Relevant again to the importance of prestige, auteurism helps circulate information and communicate which films are subject to praise based on the filmmakers or actors' reputations. Even in the context of film experts, such information signalling helped develop a film program encompassing popular film.

Additionally, these auteurs, or filmmakers, were given different opportunities to showcase their work within the contexts of film festivals. Largely, the role in uplifting newcomer filmmakers was aligned with educational programs, whereas established auteurs were giving masterclasses or Q&A sessions with audiences. Thus, this choice to highlight stars helps market the festival as more attractive by leveraging their fame and popularity.

Established directors were mentioned specifically in strategizing for more audience engagement and participation specifically in KABOOM Animation Festival which runs for one week in October and March. To help sell more tickets during the two working days of Thursday and Friday, which sell less than in the weekend, Interviewee A (HP KABOOM, 12 years) discussed the inclusion of prestigious directors . Specifically, he said:

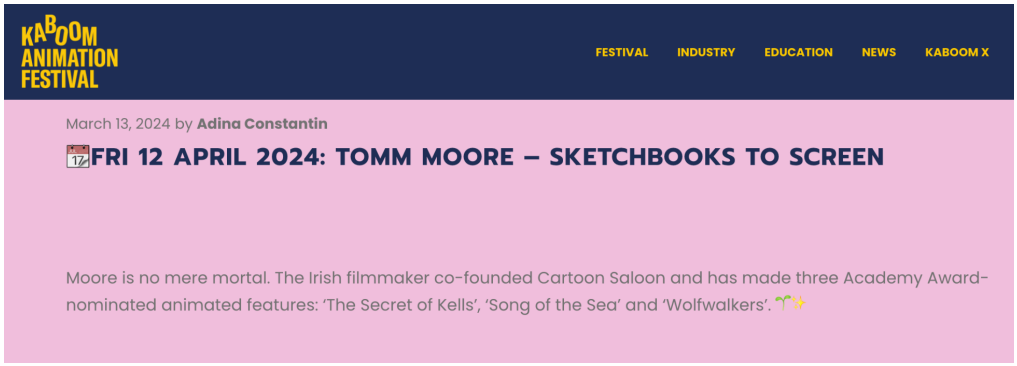
> So last year we also [strategized] with, for example, [including] Tomm Moore from Cartoon Saloon. He's also a huge name with *Wolfwalkers*, [he's] someone that's doing really well in the industry. And the speaker, if you put them on for Friday's program, you already have quite an audience ready.

This inclusion of established director Tomm Moore, and his relevant achievements, was further shared via KABOOM Animation's webpage, which can be seen in Figure 2 below. In introducing the event, their text read: "Moore is no mere mortal. The Irish filmmaker co-founded Cartoon Saloon and has made three Academy Award-nominated animated features: *The Secret of*

Kells, *Song of the Sea* and *Wolfwalkers*." (Constantin, 2024, para. 1). Once again reiterating the success of Moore as an established director, proven by his Academy award nominations and prestige, this portrays the event as unmissable and acts as a great strategy to amass a bigger audience.

Figure 2

Introduction of Tomm Moore on KABOOM's website.



Note. Content and text courtesy of Constantin, A. (2024, February 7) via https://www.kaboomfestival.nl/%F0%9F%93%86fri-12-april-tomm-moore-sketchbooks-to-screen/

Altogether, it seems that the opportunities for newcomer filmmakers to emerge within the market are limited, but not impossible. As mentioned previously, newcomer directors may find better chances of success within niche genres of film to overcome this aspect of competition in open submissions. Although filmmakers, new and established, were both required to participate by the same rules (by submitting their films for consideration, rather than automatic acceptance), established filmmakers have a greater audience pull.

Fame in particular thus has a dual-objective in the context of film programming: it can signal prestige, leveraged by the celebrity, while also enlarging the gap between opportunities given to established and emerging directors. Although film festivals also pride themselves with working with all filmmakers and giving them a platform to screen their work, they simultaneously value the reputation of auteurs in promotional material and advertising (Nelson, 1970, p. 318).

What may create tension between programmers, and other relevant cultural experts or

elites, are thus the motivations for programming and leveraging fame once more. Best put by Smits (2016, p. 30), some players in the market aim to hoard information by mass-purchasing distribution rights and monopolizing the market, thus becoming a more powerful player. However, how these actions manifest between programmers as individuals is starkly different. Interviewee G (HP KINO, 14 years) for example mentions that "film for people who can think, those exist in abundance. Only, that usually gets ignored because people no longer invest in filmstars, but in IP."

With the current trend being the purchasing of intellectual property (IP) to contribute to an organization's objectified and institutional capital, we must reference Bourdieu (2018) to reintroduce the importance of embodied cultural capital (knowledgeability). With film programmers opting to wield only two forms of cultural capital over the balanced three, this contributes to the lack of accessibility in information and resources and further reinforces gatekeeping tactics. By recognizing the potential in investing beyond a film's IP, but in tandem with its production, this may encourage less capitalistic market behavior.

4.5.2 Socio-cultural implications

The localization and diversity of film was a topical discussion within the interviews, although discussion of eurocentric narratives were mentioned most explicitly by Interviewee D (HP CineKid, 4 years). The researcher asked "And then also with [including films from various] geographical locations, how do you make sure that these are diverse and not too Eurocentric?" whereby she replied:

> I'd say our program is pretty Eurocentric because we get funding from Europe… I don't know these percentages, but let's say 50% [of the program] has to be European. Or maybe even more. But that does align with the [type of] submissions we get. But also besides the submissions, of course, we do a lot of research of our own: and of course, we *are* in Europe. And the people that we're in touch with are all, a lot of the time, also European. So yeah, maybe

it's a self fulfilling prophecy.

However, this explicit mention of eurocentrism was likely due to the phrasing of the question and fault of the researcher (as this question strayed from being fully open-ended).

Other relevant social implications were expressed by Interviewee E (HP AFFR Rotterdam, 2 years) in her programming method for the AFFR. She mentioned that, “It’s thinking about the balance of the program. So you want to have films on architects and buildings, but you want to have films on more urban topics or social topics and more environmental topics.” Thus, a topical program about environmental or social issues may help diversify the lineup between films that center around architectural subjects, while also being thought-provoking and contributing to the existing discourse.

Contrastingly, these social implications can also manifest in more lighthearted (and less thought-provoking) ways. For example, Interviewee F (HP Filmhuis Den Haag, 2.5 years) highlighted similar struggles within his work experience in programming a ‘discomfort series,’ screening two comfort films and two discomfort films. In explaining the program, he stated that the comfort movies were “more difficult to program because a comfort movie is very different for everyone.” The discomfort films were therefore easier to program for the same audience, as uncomfortable topics are typically more dark or gruesome regardless of context.

However, comfort films rely a lot on emotional depth, and differ between audiences and their backgrounds. In the end, he mentioned screening a film related to the Swedish band ABBA for one of the comfort films: combining cinema and popular music. While still a global sensation, ABBA have a much greater ‘comfort’ factor in the context of European fans as they are a Swedish band. Although this is justifiable in the context of typical Dutch visitors to Filmhuis Den Haag, this choice in programming still re-establishes a Eurocentric perspective.

Applicable to Bourdieu (1987, as cited in Falk & Katz-Gerro, 2015, p. 129), the complexity of film programming in a greater socio-cultural context once again reinforces how tastes are socially constructed and often linked to class or, in this case, nationality. Programmers found it easier to rely on their own socio-cultural (Eurocentric) contexts in film programming, but were not always aware of it. Rather, by uplifting global discourse of topics such as diversity and inclusivity or environmentalism, film programs may be relevant beyond these geographical contexts.

4.5 Overview of results

Overall, this chapter presented and discussed the relevant themes that emerged from the dataset: industry norms, programming tools, positionality, and societal implications. In speaking with various film programmers, similarities were drawn between their usage of tools for strategic programming. These strategies included leveraging the prestige and fame of established filmmakers to attract greater audiences to the program. However, by comparison, this restricted the opportunities available for emerging directors not yet established in the industry. Similarly, programmers' local networks were highlighted in providing opportunities to acquire film distribution rights or seek further contact: but is highly specific due to the smaller national cinema culture in the Netherlands. Therefore, interpersonal and familiar network connections are unavoidable, yet should not interfere with the aspect of curating an unbiased program if the correct measures are taken to avoid bias.

Furthermore, the programmers' recollections highly favored audience involvement and opinion, as they were recognized as the determinant to the program's success. Ironically, these audiences' opinions could not be measured by the programmers in real-life, as many faced struggles with being fully involved and present for film screenings. Thus, some sought information in audience-catered online forums and review sites such as Letterboxd to outsource information. This helped further contextualize the aspect of sacrificing personal tastes from the program and collective vision at large: although this was contested among the participants and sometimes difficult to separate agency within the programmer role. Lastly, the participants exemplified a great understanding and insight for other socio-cultural narratives and discourse aided by their motivations and flexibility within programming. These decision-making processes typically included engaging in socio-cultural dialogue or balancing experimental and commercial motivations for film programming.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the question: *How do film programmers reflect on their programming experience and decision-making processes, with insight into screening films from established and newcomer directors?* Within the study, various head programmers were interviewed from different film institutions. These experts, curating cultural goods for the consumer in film programs, often draw upon their own frameworks of knowledge to guide their decision-making. This positionality was thus explored within this research, constructing film programmers as cultural intermediaries and gatekeepers regulating film on the side of film production.

However, in answering the research question, programmers were found to value the potential for success among audiences as integral to programming success more favorably than ensuring the visibility for directors or emerging filmmakers. In centralizing consumers as the focal point of curatorship research, this aligns with the contemporary commercialization and economic appeal of film market dynamics (de Valck, 2014, p. 50). However, programmers' motivations for programming were also balanced by the potential for commercial success (defined by the limitations of the organization) and in the potential for experimental programming (relying on the agency of the programmer).

5.1 Key Findings

Aligned with Abbing's (2022, pp. 245–253) relevant classification of arts markets in a consumer-oriented sphere, film programmers rely on their knowledgeability of audiences and cultural goods to curate a successful program. This successful nature is largely attributed to market dynamics of financial or commercial success, with tickets sold. However, film programmers may take a more experimental approach to uplift socio-cultural topics of discourse (such as environmentalism, the gender gap, and diversity and inclusion). The possibility to take such (calculated) risks still remains dependent on both the programmers' agency and the resources available within the organization.

Thus, the integration of morals and opinion may result in a more thought-provoking and experimental film program. By allowing film programmers to make statements in their film

curation, notions of cultural capital and value (revolutionized by Bourdieu, 2018) are exerted onto the audience once more. In positioning the programmer as a cultural intermediary, mediating goods between the stages of production and consumption, this study explores the nuanced decision-making processes that they undertake.

For example, constraint was demonstrated by various programmers for the greater good of film curation. In one instance, films which did not meet the programmers' personal tastes or standards still had merit in being included for the vision of CineKid's emphasis on children's films and educational integrity. Additionally, the head programmer at KABOOM expressed constraint in abstaining from reviewing any films made by those he had interpersonal connections with. In abstaining from personal involvement with the material, both programmers were able to ensure fairness and accuracy in programming at the institutional level (thus with less agency).

Also exemplified in the context of their bounded rationality, various organizations delegated the tasks of reviewing (evaluating) film across head programmers and juries in a joint effort. Influenced by the pragmatic and imperfect nature of the arts market (Katsikopoulos, 2014, p. 361), the delegation of tasks was done in favor of saving time and avoiding fatigue for the head programmers' tasks at AFFR. However, what helped solidify this delegation was the contribution of other expert opinions specifically working within the organization. These experts thus had an understanding of the aims for film programming at the collective and institutional level.

Film institutions were also found to differ between the functionality of their programs. In referencing Nelson (1970, p. 314), cultural goods fit for consumption may be either researched (as search goods) or interpreted (as experience goods) to direct consumer behavior and purchasing. However, with digital affordances, consumers now have greater access to information and search goods: influencing how they may want to invest in curated or niche films. Film festivals then offer the experience of viewing film in a confined space through bundled tickets, allowing consumers to explore more genres of film within the same location. Cinemas have less dynamic pricing strategies and are curated year-round.

Furthermore, the boundaries between programming with personal agency and at the collective institutional level were also clarified in the evaluation of cultural goods. This study affirmed how programmers possess an interesting role as cultural experts due to their higher rates

of consumption, knowledgeability, and appreciation for film as a cultural good (O'Brien and Ianni, 2023, p. 210). These facets of film programming still rely on Throsby's (2001) notions of economic and social value, whereby films as cultural goods can be differentiated in their commercial or cultural worth. Regardless, these expert roles must still be met with caution as they act as a boundary between consumers and greater access to information through gatekeeping tactics.

These gatekeeping practices also emerged in the relevance of network connections and market dynamics, whereby mid-range organizations often work together and share resources between one another. Commonly, this concerns the acquisition of distribution rights and IP (Stevens & Stevens, 2016, p. 138), but has the potential to direct decision-making in opportunistic and capitalistic ways. These manifested typically within arthouse productions and distributors. Thus, players in the market extend their cultural capital by managing these network connections and opportunities.

This then built upon the relevant academic understanding of auteurism, fame, and prestige in how reputation leverages the cultural capital (and increases visibility) for film institutions. By working with established directors or film stars, their fame could attract bigger audiences as reputation similarly acts as an indicator of quality or value. At the same time, fame could also restrict the opportunities of emerging directors in film as they have not yet built the same reputation. Thus, in order to uplift underrepresented perspectives, these films were reviewed more so in the context of social (cultural) value and relevance rather than economic (commercial) appeal.

5.2 Academic and societal implications

de Valck (2014, p. 49) found that a "love for cinema, a strong belief in the value of non-mainstream cinema, and a personal wish to foster cinematic cultural diversity appear as main motivators for [film] festival professionals." However, this study provided further clarity in how programmers are bounded by both their rationality and the (financial) capabilities of the organization they work for. This could sway film programmers to be more experimental or consumer-oriented (commercial) within their programming. This introduces a dilemma between balancing personal agency with the collective vision for film programming within organizations.

Furthermore, this research presented relevant experiences head programmers faced in a

capitalistic market defined largely by economic (commercial) value. Although most programmers expressed an intense love for cinema, akin to cinephilia, their curatorship potential was at times limited by the financial capabilities, quota's, or relevant funding requirements plaguing the organization. Thus, even between cultural experts, there exist inequalities in access and information. Programmers therefore found alternative ways of gauging program success: typically by outsourcing information from audience reviews on Letterboxd or between journalists.

Additionally, the delegation of tasks between film curation (between other experts, juries, or artistic directors) have further merit to be researched given their complexity. How various expert roles and classifications determine value may vary greatly between one another, and these delegations of task rely heavily on trust and reputation. How this trust is built is largely leveraged by reputation, especially amongst prestigious and famous figures. However, in the context of organizational structure and hierarchy, cultural experts are also defined by their reputation in their knowledgeability, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018).

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One strength within this research would be its focus on the Dutch cinema industry and its relevant networks. By interviewing various head programmers from the established (small) population, a scope of national cinema scenes and opportunities could be found and contrasted to one another. However, this representation of national cinema did have one outlier with the example from Budapest, making this representation somewhat asymmetrical. For a better research specialization, the sample criteria of participants would adapt to only national (Dutch or Hungarian) programmers' perspectives for a more holistic overview of the national cinema landscape.

Another focal point within this study, although defined by its asymmetric nature, was the breadth of institutions recruited. Varying between three film festivals, two theaters, and one private business, a multitude of perspectives were discussed and represented. This decision was made to, once again, aim to best represent the scope and cinema landscape which is never uniform. Aligned with the chosen method of qualitative research, this study succeeded in thoroughly dissecting various unique opinions rather than results applicable to a larger, more general population.

These strengths and limitations make way for further research to build upon these faults: specifically in the interplay between national and international cinema. One area of interest may therefore be to explore the national contexts of Budapest and Amsterdam, as capital cities, and whether the professional role of a curator differs. This notion of a curator and established expert may present different opportunities within different national contexts, furthering the implications for network connections and industry standards.

Additionally, investigating the transparency of film programming, and quotas or criteria demanded by public funding, this could account for a more equitable film program overall. Specifically within the instability of public funding for the arts and culture sector, in this case within film festivals, this differentiates private business and subsidized film institutions. As mentioned previously, despite the popular demand and consumption of (commercial) film, arthouse productions and film festivals still make heavy use of subsidies which allow for a greater leniency in programming art for arts' sake (socially relevant) films.

In conclusion, this study confirmed the relevance of audiences to programmers: reiterating the value of audience demand, opinion, and consensus for the decision-making processes in film screening selection. However, programmers' personal agency, positionality, and role within the collective organization also influenced the potential for experimental programming. Thus, potential opportunities could be given to a greater number of films deemed valuable by the programmers, symbolizing social or cultural value. The balance between these two opposing forms of cultural evaluation further differed between the financial capabilities and freedom to diverge from economic appeal, introducing audiences to more niche genres, albeit with a generally lower chance of (commercial) success.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introductory Questions — Interviewee

- Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your line of work? What are your typical tasks within the organization?
- What inspired you to start working in the film industry?
- How did you come to join or start the label?
- Have you worked professionally in other locations, or are you specialized within the NL film scene?
- How did you gain the expertise to establish yourself as a curator, rather than a consumer?
- What are some current issues or challenges in the film industry as a whole, from your experience? Do these have similar effects to the establishment of film festivals?
- How have your tasks changed since joining the label? Have you taken on more extensive challenges as a result of the festival's growth/success?
- How long have you been curating the lineup for your festival?
- How do you balance your personal interest/hobby in filmmaking to your work? Do you feel like you can leave your work at the workplace?
    - Has this changed your passion or interest within the form of cinema?

Introductory Questions — Institution/Job

- Does your festival debut its own films? What types of films are typically screened at the festival?
- What are the various programs taking place at the festival? How do you make sure to diversify the experience?
    - Do you have a hand in curating each program or is there effort from others also in place?
- How many people typically work within the festival? Do they work in divisions or collectively?
- How have you helped spread the word about the festival? Was there any time in particular you noticed a spike in popularity?

- What is your most important communication channel? How do you communicate with consumers, stakeholders, and other partners?
- Is there a list of requirements or determinants for a film to be screened? How do you gauge whether a film may be appropriate for the festival?
- How would you describe the pacing of curatorship/programming work?

Consumers/audience

- How would you describe your typical visitor?
- Do you have any audience picks for films to be included in the festival's lineup?
    - Are these open submissions or chosen from a list specific films?

Tastes and gatekeeping

- How would you define your personal taste in films?
- Alternatively, how would you define the film festival's identity?
    - Does this identity exist in established film genres or themes?
- Have you had to expand your own taste in films for the purposes of your work?
- Where do you take your personal inspirations from, in regards to film you consume and curate?
- What would you define as 'successes' in the films you watch for the purposes of programming?
    - How have you learned to pick up on such tactics?
- Do you believe in the idea of 'guilty pleasure' films, tropes, or genres? May these ever find place in a more refined cultural setting such as film festivals? (highbrow/lowbrow arts argument)
- How do you try to diversify your lineup between film genres, time periods, or mediums?
- Are you in contact with other curators in the film festival scene? Is there a collaborative process at play?
- Are there any topics or motifs within films that your festival is strictly opposed to screenings? Do these ever circulate in potential negotiations?
- What would you consider a 'niche' genre in the general industry? Does your festival opt for screening these underrepresented genres?

Existing relationships/partnerships

- Does the festival have any partnerships between artistic institutions or up-and-coming filmmakers?
- Are there any grants present for newly emerging filmmakers to make their debut at the festival?
- How do you allow various filmmakers a chance to showcase their work?
- Do you work closely with filmmakers themselves in the festival? How big of a role do they play in the screenings of their films?
- How do you balance between cinema from national and international talent and topics?
- Has a film ever been screened across multiple years? Would you ever re-showcase a film based on extensive popularity?

Other relevant topics to fall back on or ask follow-up questions: Funding (and changes in budget, market, opportunities), patronage (partnerships, private/public)

Appendix B: Finalized Codebook

Theme	Code	Description	Example
Industry norms	Artistic integrity	The perceived artistic value or flair of a film	"Wes Anderson created his own unique genre."
	Budget	The funds allocated to a scheme or strategy	"We didn't have the funds for that plan."
	Commercial	Overwhelming commercial success or popularity	Conglomerate entities, such as Disney or Marvel
	Development	Change in plan over a period of time	"Our initial idea was that…"
	Difficulty	Hardship, obstacle, or frustration	"But that wasn't easy."
	Digitalization	Online and media affordances	"Letterboxd is a great website to read audience reviews."
	Established	Reputation and consensus	"This film was really a heavy hitter."
	Expectation	Intended outcome	"Sometimes a film performs surprisingly well."
	Failure	Failure in intended success	"We couldn't maintain that plan."
	Financial costs	Numerical value or cost of an action	"It costs a lot of money to translate a film."
	Growth	Increase in commercial success	"We had more visitors this year than last."

Industry standard	Typical behavior or regulations in the film industry	“This is commonplace for film studios.”
Institutional division	Division between tasks, roles, or labels in the institution	“My colleague actually deals with this more often than I do.”
Localizing	The act of making a cultural product palatable to be consumed locally	Subtitling film for a national audience.
Network	Ties between existing players or people in the market	“Only industry professionals can go to Cannes.”
Niche	Underrepresented or atypical genre	“I’m also a fan of obscure film noir movies.”
Not supported	Lack of support or uplifting	“We didn’t receive any funding from the government.”
Patronage	Financial support received from individual patrons or companies, the act of patronage	“Our main investor had this idea in mind for us.”
Prestige	Formal reputation, often fame-oriented	“The film won so many Oscars.”
Success	Accomplished goal	Box office success, numerous tickets sold
Support	Funding and financial support from other entities, i.e. government	“We had a lot of opportunities because of our subsidies.”
Time constraints	Difficulties in time, short-term or longevity	“We don’t always have enough time to watch everything.”

Positionality	Cinephelia	Identity reliant on an established and intense passion for film	“I don’t believe in the idea of guilty pleasures. Why would you feel guilty for something you enjoy?”
	Comparison	Reference to another example for clarity	“In Amsterdam, however…”
	Expertise	Programmers’ established framework of knowledge or professional experience	“So I worked there for about five years.”
	Foundation	Background to forming personal opinion, a beginning	“In any way, we thought we already had some people willing to come see the film.”
	Meticulous	Detail-oriented	“We had so many meetings about this.”
	Passion	Excitement	“That’s the fun thing about programming!”
	Personal tastes	Individual likeness towards certain goods over others	“That’s why I always keep watching the Classics.”
	Positive outlook	Positive point of view	“So we celebrated that.”
Programming tools	Awareness of the audience	Referencing the audiences’ opinions or existence, as a stakeholder and consumer	“We wondered how the audience would react to this.”
	Insight	Personal understanding of something and its potential outcome	“So I asked myself, does this fit into the programming?”
	Involvement	Engagement or investment with	“I go to loads of film festivals

	film industry activities	around the world."
Negotiation	Juggling between options	"So there was a dilemma on how many timeslots were available."
Opportunity	Chance or area for development	"So I asked if there were any chances to open a theater in another city."
Outsourcing information	Retrieving information from secondary sources	"We also check the reviews in the newspaper."
Role	Reference to programmer or expert role	"The audience is getting something that is custom curated."
Sacrifice	Loss of attention given to something for another intended purpose	"So you have to draw the line between films to include."
Skill building	Development in personal skills	"We had educational workshops available."
Strategy	Formal planning set into motion by the institution	"In order to entice people to come see the film, we…"
Takeaway	Lesson, opinion, or stance that was learned through experience or time	"In the end, it was a learning lesson."
Tasks	Division of labor, professional activities	"We wrote the texts, designed posters, and promoted the film."
Teamwork	Teamwork within the organization (between members) or industry (partnerships)	"My current (working) partner, Frank." "We were able to help each other."

	Vision	Goal or insights at the broader (collective) institutional level	"Part of our mission is that someone could submit a film without any money."
Societal implications	Community	Large group of people with a shared interest	"I loved to watch films and show them to my friends."
	Exchange	Exchange of cultural goods or values	"It's like communicating that we find Czech films pretty interesting."
	Diversity and inclusion	Recognizing global issues concerning diversity and inclusion, such as the gender gap or uplifting (inter)national cinema	"You always have Asian films, or European films. This is something we pay attention to."
	Eurocentric	Focus on European cultural goods	"To abide by their funding, a certain percentage of films must be European."
	Longevity	The ability to be relevant for a long time	"Some people are still screening the film even now."
	Socio-cultural implications	Implications for films' greater discussions on cultural or social values, lingering effects	"There's a big political tension there."
	Underrepresented	People, goods, or ideas given little attention	"It doesn't get mentioned a lot."
	Variation	Perceived difference between items, goods or people	"There's a great mix between films."