

Frameline's Digital Activism

Stuart Richards

University of Melbourne

stuartjr@unimelb.edu.au

Now in its 37th year, the San Francisco Frameline International LGBT Film Festival is the oldest and largest queer film festival worldwide. A new venture, Frameline Voices, showcases films by, for and about marginalised identities in the LGBT community. By streaming films for free on YouTube and Vimeo, Frameline Voices allows for a global queer community to have access to films currently unavailable. This paper outlines the differences between the marketable films of gay Indiewood, films distributed by speciality divisions of major companies, and popular gay titles that receive circulation outside of the queer film festival circuit. It should be noted that while a distinction is made between the deliberately labelled popular gay films and the queer films of Frameline Voices, an in-depth discussion on identity politics and queer theory is beyond the scope of this paper.

The queer film festival will be analysed through the rubric of the social enterprise. Being a community non-profit organisation, Frameline must balance the sometimes conflicting needs to program commercial films and to support alternative cinema. This conceptual framework will highlight the importance of the social value generated by Frameline Voices.

The use of video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allows Frameline to continue their original mission statement. Introducing the 1977 "Gay Film Festival," which was a series of four exhibitions, included a programmers' declaration:

This festival was coordinated by reaching out to gay filmmakers in the bay area through word of mouth, notices on bulletin boards and in Laundromats, short articles in local magazines etc. Therefore our viewpoints and perspectives are diverse. One thing brings us together – our love

of films and our desire to reach out to the community at large. We hope you enjoy our program (The Gay Film Festival of Super-8 Films, 1977: 1).

The queer film festival was created out of a need to not only provide a forum for this work but to “reach out to the community at large.” This paper argues that the Frameline Voices initiative continues this objective through the use of video sharing sites as “online access to video has the potential to alleviate the problem of availability” (Snelson and Perkins, 2008: 17). Frameline allows for the alternative distribution of films that would otherwise be unsuccessful in the wider commercialised queer film markets.

Frameline

Frameline is now a leading player on the queer film festival circuit with an annual attendance of over 60,000. Frameline began as a grassroots collective of experimental film works screened with a rented projector and a sheet pinned to the board. This first gay film festival was a direct outcome of the queer developments in both politics and film. In the early days of Frameline, queer cinema was tantamount to experimental and independent filmmaking. According to historical accounts of the development of queer film, such as the documentary *Fabulous! The Story of Queer Cinema* (2006) or Richard Dyer’s book *Now You See It* (1990), films with a queer sensibility were initially seen both subtextually in the classical Hollywood era and underground experimental short films. As such, the queer film festival’s mission statement is to carve out a space for queer cinema to be exhibited; films and filmmakers who would otherwise not have the opportunity to be nourished or given an audience. Throughout its history, Frameline has assisted in the exhibition and distribution of films outside of the hegemony of Hollywood. Ultimately, the film festival is the “best system we have for giving movies an opportunity to be seen when commercial concerns are not the first priority” (Pickard, 1998: 11). The festival offers access to queer media outside of the compromised identities presented on television and widely released feature films.

There is a partial but steadily expanding collection of scholarly literature written on the queer film festival. It is broadly assumed amongst scholars that the queer film festival is a space for films that are by/for/about queers to be exhibited and discussed (Ferrelli, 1999; June, 2003); “Such zones are part of a concerted political project to seize the means of self-representation in the face of widespread cultural invisibility and stereotyping” (Pidduck, 2003: 267). The queer film festival plays a noteworthy role in any queer community. The queer film festival is a “destination to which folks make pilgrimages to fix memory and reclaim history, a sort of moving-image version of, say, Gettysburg” (Rich, in Straayer and Waugh, 2006: 624). A significant amount of scholarship on the queer film festival concerns itself with queer cinema’s passage into the mainstream and how this can produce a homogenised array of films programmed. Eric O. Clarke (1999) highlights the risk of niche marketing with the queer film festival homogenising ourselves, that a homosexual phantom normalcy will dissipate any semblance of diversity. B. Ruby Rich (1999: 83) is unusually cynical when she writes:

Audiences don’t want disruption. They don’t want “difference.” Instead they hunger for sameness, replication, reflection. What do queers want on their night on the town? To feel good. To feel breezy and cheesy and commercial and acceptable and stylish and desirable. A six-pack and *Jeffrey* (1995). A six-pack and *Bound* (1996). They just wanna have fun (sic). And if the occasion is serious, then it had better be predictable: the AIDS quilt or lesbian adoption rights.

Likewise in her Masters dissertation, Penney (2010: 37) argues that this mainstream “film versus niche cinema” debate on both programming and audiences occurs on a variety of levels:

The collective memory of the festivals as a social movement collides with the ‘crossing over’ of the festival into mainstream relationships with sponsors and programming choices, and this ultimately interferes with critical analysis of mainstream queer images.

Throughout the years, Frameline has developed beyond just being a community arts affair to an elite film institution. In its fourth year, the festival officially adopted the name Frameline and became a legally binding corporation (Stryker, 1996). 1980 saw the festival move to the famed Castro Theatre in the popular gay district, which would become its home indefinitely. The increasing financial success of the festival allowed for festival director Michael Lumpkin to become a full-time paid

employee. Fast track to today and the festival employs several year-round staff and several temporary positions for its peak season. This growth is a result of decreasing dependence on philanthropic donations and grants and an increase in corporate sponsorship.

Frameline attracts hundreds of stakeholders to the festival in June (San Francisco's Pride month), including directors, American and international programmers, distributors, actors and journalists. Alongside Frameline Voices, the festival also acts as a distributor for other community groups and educational institutions, holds free screenings at the nearby community centre, provides funding as part of the Frameline Completion Fund and holds the annual "Youth in Motion" filmmaking workshop, where young LGBT San Franciscans make films with community elders. Indeed, Frameline is not just an influential organisation in the San Franciscan LGBT community but also in the queer film industry at large.

The growth in the organisation's exhibition, distribution and filmmaker support can be seen as a consequence of the close ties with the burgeoning 'pink dollar economy' throughout the mid-1990s. The queer film festival's expansion lies in this junction of visibility, market economy and cultural exchange (Rich, 1999). "The proliferation of gay and lesbian film festivals around the world came out of a moment in which the political motivations of gay and lesbian film communities coincided with the economic motivations of one of the largest export industries in the United States" (Rhyne, 2006: 617-8). Chasin (2000) asserts that the noticeable enfranchisement of gay and lesbian segmented marketing is merely on the surface, stating that these advertisements evoke the consciousness of an all-white, predominately gay male community, while hypersexualising the few images of racial minorities. Chasin is ultimately fearful that this gay visibility is at the expense of queer political confrontations. It is important to note that the identity perpetuated by this marketing is overwhelmingly gay-oriented and not LGBT, as "the ambiguities of both bisexual and transgender identities present an epistemological crisis for a coherent notion of the gay market insofar as they complicate the discrete boundaries of a stabled, gendered sexuality upon which the

separation of markets depends” (Sender, 2005: 167). As such, we can see that Frameline organisationally is a balancing act between engaging with this problematic economy and socially empowering initiatives such as Frameline Voices.

Digital innovation has become an avenue for endless opportunities for film distribution. Frameline Voices endeavours to grant a broader access to films by and about queers of colour, transgender people, youth and elders. It offers streaming LGBT video content for free on YouTube and Vimeo. Hits have been collected from all over the globe including Saudi Arabia, China, India, Russia, Indonesia, Taiwan, Mexico and Egypt. Social networking websites have become increasingly significant to LGBT youth eager to find identity and a community. LGBT youth are more likely to search for community online rather than sex (Paridis, 2008). The Internet is now a primary venue for LGBT youth for the configuration of identity, self-government and sexuality (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes, 2008). Frameline Voices is an exemplary example of a social enterprise’s innovation assisting in this identity formation.

The Social Enterprise

This balance between socially empowering initiatives and engaging with the pink dollar can be elucidated with the conceptual framework of the social enterprise. Being a film institution that attracts over 60,000 filmgoers at its film festival every year, it has to program films that represent the diverse array of identities that are at play in the queer community while still remaining financially sustainable. Loosely characterised, the social enterprise refers to market-centred economic activities serving a social purpose (Doherty et al., 2009). Westall (2001: 1) writes:

SE is a loose umbrella term which rouses the awareness of a variety of organizations that highlight alternative ways to do business that directly incorporate social and environmental concerns. This gives the possibility of creating revenue streams that enable an organisation to create sustainable social change without being reliant on time-limited funding or charitable donations.

The objective of the social enterprise is to create *sustainable social transformations* where, through the utilisation of pertinent business expertise, there is an innovative social impact and a mustering of resources (Alvord, Brown and Letts, 2004). An integral feature of the social enterprise is the need to view social and economic value as equal. Hypothetically, if we were to compare a sold-out screening of a gay male romantic comedy to a transgender focused documentary that screened at a smaller venue (thus having a smaller box office intake), neither can or should be judged as being more successful than the other. Social and cultural factors are just as important as financial returns.

The purpose for the social enterprise is to target a market failure. For Helen Haugh (2005: 4), this concerns the organisation's environmental milieu:

In places where there are low levels of economic activity, poor market conditions, 'gaps' have arisen from market failure and the inability of the state to fulfil its social responsibilities (OECD 1999). Market failure may be due to inadequate financial returns, information asymmetries and other externalities (OECD 1999). Gaps in state provision of services may be explained by financial limitations, bureaucracy, inflexibility, inability to define societal and individual needs and heterogeneous client needs.

Put in simpler terms, social enterprises become indispensable when the desires of marginalised communities are not being delivered for a variety of causes, resulting in these 'gaps' being disagreeable to mainstream conservative organisations and as such the requirements of these marginalised communities going unmet (Weisbrod, 1988; Salamon, 1995; Hansmann, 1987). It is this circumstance within which the social enterprise thrives and capitalises on these sub-market opportunities.

Frameline programmes films that otherwise would not receive a commercial release. If we look at current examples of mainstream queer representations we see a narrow showcase of mainly affluent monogamous white gay men and lesbians. Prominent examples on television are *Glee*, *Modern Family* and reruns of *Queer as Folk* and *Will & Grace*. Recently released films include *I Love You Philip Morris* (2009), *a Single Man* (2009) and *the Kids are Alright* (2010). American LGBT media monitoring lobby group GLAAD's *Network Responsibility Index* for the season 2011-2012 highlights

the sheer dominance gay television storylines have over lesbian, bisexual and transgender content combined. The only major American networks that are the exception are ABC Family, TBS and USA. As such, it is this homogenous narrow representation of LGBT identities that creates these gaps, which the queer film festival is successful at addressing.

Furthermore, online video-on-demand streaming sites prioritise conventional gay (and the occasional) lesbian narrative. For instance, the greater part of films under Netflix's "gay and lesbian" tab present a limited quantity of documentaries, such as the *Adonis Factor* (2010), a film which has a severe lack of comprehension in basic gender studies, romantic comedies such as *Adam & Steve* (2005) and *The Big Gay Musical* (2009), and dramas such as *Yossi & Jagger* (2002). The vast majority of these films were the more exposed films on the queer film festival circuit. Edgier and unconventional films such as *Fig Trees* (2009) were not as auspicious in securing this distribution. As such, we can see that Frameline's role has always been to provide alternative distribution to films otherwise deemed economically undesirable.

Contemporary Gay Cinema

The growth of queer cinema has been momentous. Following the success of the independent films of the New Queer Cinema wave, such as Todd Hayne's *Poison* (1991), Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1991) and Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992) (Rich, 1992; Aaron, 2004), queer cinema found a new audience. Through the 1990s and beyond queer cinema went from this radical impulse to a niche market with films such *All Over the Guy* (2001), *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999), *Broken Hearts Club* (2000) and television shows such as *The L Word* (2004) and the U.S. version of *Queer as Folk* (2000 – 2005).

At present there are two significant queer film distribution markets. There are gay Indiewood titles intended for mainstream release and those that are solely intended to play on the queer film festival circuit and distributed within a niche market. Whilst there are few exceptions, such as *Weekend* (2011) that received a limited theatrical release, or *Prodigal Sons* (2009) and *Keep*

the Lights On (2012) that are fortunate to screen at mainstream international film festivals, most films that are marketed for a gay and lesbian audience do not have that crossover potential. The Indiewood film indicates the transference in production, distribution and exhibition of scores of independent films, where speciality divisions owned by major media conglomerates distribute technically independent films (King, 2009; McDonald, 2009). For example, archetypal gay Indiewood films *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *The Kids are Alright* (2010) are both distributed by Focus Features, which is an arthouse film division of NBC Universal, which is an American media and entertainment company owned by Universal. The problematic identity politics of these films have been called into question, particularly in regards to *Brokeback Mountain* (Pointek, 2012; Boucher and Pinto, 2007; Kakmi, 2006; Hart, 2006; Leung, 2008; Evans, 2009; Manalansan, 2007). In his 2008 Masters thesis, Knegt argues that these texts present a noticeably constricted vision of what it means to be gay and lesbian. Frequently the characters are white, conventionally good looking and gender appropriate.

FILM	STUDIO	RELEASE DATE	LIFETIME GROSS
<i>Brokeback Mountain</i>	Focus	12/09/2005	\$83,043,761
<i>The Hours</i>	Par.	12/27/2009	\$41,675,994
<i>Monster</i>	Newmarket	12/24/2003	\$34,469,210
<i>Milk</i>	Focus	11/26/2008	\$31,841,299
<i>Capote</i>	Sony Classics	09/30/2005	\$28,750,530
<i>Frida</i>	Miramax	10/25/2002	\$25,885,000
<i>The Kids Are Alright</i>	Focus	7/09/2010	\$20,811,365
<i>Far From Heaven</i>	Focus	11/08/2002	\$15,901,849
<i>Y Tu Mama Tambien</i>	Ind. Film Channel	03/15/2002	\$13,839,658

<i>Kinsey</i>	Fox Searchlight	11/12/2004	\$10,254,979
<i>A Single Man</i>	Weinstein Company	12/11/2009	\$9,176,000
<i>Transamerica</i>	Weinstein Company	12/02/2005	\$9,015,303

Figure 1: Highest grossing gay Indiewood films from the year 2000 onwards.

This wave of gay-themed films distributed by specialty divisions of major distributors is an economic trend above all else. These films must be palatable to a wide audience outside of the queer community as “Indiewood” distributors are much less likely to promote solely to niches, as their level of grosses, despite profits, “would not be sizeable enough in the new economic environment” (Knegt, 2008: 36). Since these distributors select which films to pick up, we can classify certain trends of LGBT narratives that are more profitable towards a predominantly heterosexual audience. Looking at the highest grossing gay-themed Indiewood films since 2000 in Figure 1, all of the gay male characters featured (or the male characters exhibiting same-sex attraction) are overtly masculine, with the exception of Phillip Seymour Hoffman’s portrayal of the protagonist in *Capote* (2005). While it is difficult to categorise the female characters, we often see glamorous female actresses undergoing a transformation, with the most notable examples being Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (2002), Selma Hayek in *Frida* (2002), Felicity Huffman in *Transamerica* (2005) and Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003). The films on the list all feature predominantly white casts as well, with the obvious exceptions of *Frida* and *Y Tu Mama Tambien* (2001). For Knegt, this is a process of power, both in terms of finance and decision-making, from independent queer filmmakers to a conglomerate Hollywood. These films are infiltrating hegemonic practices by “aligning themselves with dominant practices” (Knegt, 2008: 69). In terms of the idyllic gay consumer when dealing with marketability, the reputable homosexual inhibits any overt displays of sexuality or promiscuity and exhibits normative gender characteristics (Sender, 2004). Hegemonic identity relations evident in mainstream cinema are now manifesting in contemporary gay cinema.

There are similar trends in popular gay films on the queer film festival circuit. The archetypal gay male figure, as described by Chasin (2000) and Sender (2004) (masculine, sexually conservative, muscular, white, desiring monogamy), is repeated in many of the films that receive distribution outside of the queer film festival circuit through both video on demand sites and on DVD. The character is recreated again and again in *A Four Letter Word* (2007) which, when one looks at Casper Andreas' filmography, is typical of his work *Shelter* (2007). *Were the World Mine* (2008), *Between Love and Goodbye* (2008), *Dog Tags* (2008), *Mr. Right* (2008), *Mulligans* (2008), *The Big Gay Musical* (2009), *Eating Out 3: All you can eat* (2009), *Hollywood Je T'aime* (2009), *Redwoods* (2009), *Is it Just Me?* (2010), *Violet Tendencies* (2010), *Eating Out 5: the Open Weekend* (2011), *eCupid* (2011), *Going Down in La-La Land* (2011) and *The Green* (2010). Video on demand sites and other distribution companies do not have the same commitment or responsibility to the queer community that Frameline does. They are not social enterprises.

The Films of Frameline Voices

The films of Frameline Voices directly challenge the hierarchy of identities evident in both dominant queer film markets. By focusing on lesbians, transgendered people and people of colour, Frameline Voices supports filmmakers and opens up new avenues for exhibition and distribution. At the opening night of Frameline 35 Board President Randy Quebec declared what a prevailing thing Frameline Voices was, that optimistically it could save lives one film at a time. The channels are accessible all over America and any country that has access to these websites, which has translated into hits from countries as far as Indonesia, Egypt, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Hopefully this initiative can tackle the isolation experienced being LGBT in remote communities or areas where it is unsafe to be openly queer. Not only does the project promote lesbian films, such as *Little Mutinies* (2008) and *Tears of the Goddess* (2006); trans films, such as *Swim Suit* (2006) and *Just Call me Kade* (2001); people of colour, such as *Harsh Beauty* (2005), *El Abuelo* (2008) and *If She Grows up Gay* (1983), but also experimental work with films such as *Lady* (1993), *Perception* (2010) and *Group*

(2002). Staying true to its social entrepreneurial status, Frameline is providing a space for the exhibition of these films, where they would otherwise struggle to achieve such a platform.

The queer film festival's objective has always been to support the exhibition of cinema that otherwise would be financially undesirable for mainstream film distribution channels. As such, Frameline Voices is a clear indication of it continuing to do so, given the current climate of contemporary queer cinema. The audience for these short films can continue to grow once their journey on the queer film festival circuit has expired. The Frameline Voices films are challenging the hegemonic relations of more commercial gay cinema while also supporting the short film format.

Conclusion

New digital media platforms are allowing Frameline to continue to pursue its original social mission. The use of video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allows for increased access to otherwise unavailable material. As a social enterprise, filling these gaps created by commercialised networks is a key objective for the queer film festival. As such, we must view the social empowerment produced by Frameline Voices as of equal value to a sold-out screening of a gay romantic comedy, such as *eCupid* or *Eating Out 5*. While Frameline has grown to become a leading organisation on the queer film festival circuit, the legitimacy and innovation invoked by Frameline Voices is integral to the festival's connection with the queer community.

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