

## Dispatches from the dark: A conversation with Neil Young at the 2015 International Film Festival Rotterdam

Daniel Steinhart

Most large film festivals contain a constellation of attendees: casual moviegoers, devoted cinephiles, filmmakers, distributors, sales agents, and programmers – all of these figures help form the rich culture of film festivals. Central to this culture is the film critic, who travels the festival circuit filing film reviews and reports for media outlets.<sup>25</sup> The festival film critic is a profession. While not always a financially sustainable one it is a sub-field of film journalism that rewards a commitment to intensive writing, viewing, and travelling.<sup>26</sup> Propelled by the desire for discovery, these critics shape the discourse of film and sometimes the fortunes of filmmakers. For researchers these critics serve as indispensable guides whose dispatches from the front lines of film culture can help us make sense of trends in both cinema and the affairs of festivals. The culture of festival film critics, whose vigorous drive to see new films, debate them with fellow critics, and write about them in ever faster turnarounds, can seem like a competitive sport to outsiders.

One of the most tireless festival film critics is Sunderland-based (England) Neil Young. In an era when media publications are constrained by tight festival budgets Young has managed to make a living traversing the European circuit by writing for a number of key English-language outlets.<sup>27</sup> He balances this work with consultation and programming for various festivals, including the Bradford International Film Festival, where he serves as director.<sup>28</sup> In 2011, Young left his job as an official horse racing handicapper to dedicate himself full-time to film festival criticism and reporting.<sup>29</sup> His festival tours can seem daunting. Last year he attended 26 European festivals, totalling some 572 films by his estimation. Summing up his experiences in a piece for the online journal *MUBI Notebook*, he writes:

[m]ost professional film-journalists and festival-programmers attend perhaps 10-12 festivals a year, 15 at a push. 20 is regarded as freakish. To go beyond 25, though, and attend the equivalent of a festival a fortnight, every fortnight, over the course of 52 weeks... Are we in the realm of addiction? Pathological compulsion?<sup>30</sup>

As Young eventually reveals, part of the point of attending festivals for him is 'to get *away* from the festival, at least for a few hours, and explore the city or town where it's taking place'. Wanderlust aside, what is the work of the festival film critic really like? To find out I sat down with Young at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, where he was reporting for *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Sight & Sound*. In the following edited interview he discusses the labor and culture of film critics.

*Steinhart:* I know it's a job but what is it that drives you to spend the better part of a year on the festival circuit?

*Young:* Well, it *is* my job. Before 2011, I was a horse racing official for 15 years. During that period I was going to festivals and writing articles. Then I decided to see if I could make a go of it and spend the whole year doing festivals. Up to that point I had been turning down invitations to festivals like Cannes and Venice because of the racing year. I could always go to Berlin and Rotterdam, but Cannes and Venice clashed with big horse racing events, so I couldn't go. I thought, well, I'm getting sick of turning down all these invites, and I see people who are able to make a living on the circuit. If they can do it maybe I can do it. But it's not just journalism. I was also working for film festivals and still am. In fact, most of my income up until last year was half journalism and half film festival programming. Many people do wear two hats. There are some pure film journalists who never program and there are some programmers who never write. But there's a large middle area where you do get journalists who either run their own film festivals or are employed as programmers or advisors. So there was an obvious framework around the calendar whereby I could plot my festivals around the big ones and the small ones, the ones that I work for doing introductions and discussions, and then ones where I'm representing *The Hollywood Reporter* or whoever it is that I'm writing for. Of course some festivals pay for accommodation and flights. Some festivals don't pay for anything. Each of those has to be negotiated within a financial framework, because at the end of the day I have to make enough money to be able to keep it going, which these days is becoming increasingly difficult because the number of paying outlets is diminishing. I think [film journalists] are shifting more to [covering] film festivals because that seems to be a more thriving area. So in a way you're reporting on the phenomenon and then helping it to grow.

*Steinhart:* I'm curious about the boundaries between work and leisure for you during a film festival. Are there times when you're not working at a festival? Are those boundaries really blurred?

*Young:* I always keep all of my receipts when I go to a film festival because every penny that is spent at a festival is work expenditure. So when you arrive at a festival you do kind of go into work mode. But then there are many people who drink themselves silly every night and may or may not get up for the 12h screening. Are they at work? Well, I suppose they are. Or does the work begin simply when you're sitting watching the film, making notes in your pad, and then writing about it? Or is work how you negotiate the bureaucracy of the festival, how you deal with the organisers of the festival? It doesn't do you any harm to maintain those relationships or whatever they may be. So is that work? Well, I suppose it is. But it feels more like work when I'm writing a review. Let's put it like that. If you're in Berlin and you have 45 minutes to review the new Terrence Malick film, then that's something that not many people could do. That's what you're being paid for because you're not just going to sit in front of the computer and freeze. You're going to be able to deal with a complex work like a Malick film, which people are going to spend 10 years unpacking. It's like the news is the first draft of history, as they say. A review written immediately is the first draft of criticism.

*Steinhart:* As you talk about this I realise that the writing process really begins in the screening room when you're taking notes. What is your writing process like?

*Young:* I always make notes during the film. Sometimes they'll just be lines of dialogue. Sometimes they'll be character names. Sometimes they'll be points that I want to make. Occasionally they will be the seeds of what then become reviews. Ideally, what I do is write the notes in my notebook. I then type them out, print off that piece of paper, and use that as the basis for the review.<sup>31</sup> This is a more time-intensive way of doing it. Other times I'll make the notes, write the review without looking at the notes, then look at the notes to see what I've missed and in the second draft put those extra details in. That's probably my default way of doing it. The third way is not to make any notes and try to write the review afterwards. I'm comfortable with the systems I've developed over the last 16 years. It's different if you're on a strict deadline and you don't have the luxury of being able to type out your notes onto a nice, beautiful A4 sheet.

*Steinhart:* So you're here writing for *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Sight & Sound*. One a trade publication and the other a film culture magazine. How do you approach writing for two different kinds of publications?



Fig. 1: Young's numerical screening notes on *Hard to Be a God* (Aleksi German, 2013), taken at Rotterdam in 2014. These notes became the basis for a film review published in *Indiewire*.

Young: I've been writing for *The Hollywood Reporter* since 2008 and for *Sight & Sound* on and off for about four or five years. It's two completely different modes of thinking. Even a trade review has to have your own opinion in it, but it has to go through the filter of where this film will be in the ecology of cinema. Does this film have commercial prospects? Does this film have festival prospects? With *Sight & Sound* it's an overview of the whole festival. If I were reviewing a film for *Sight & Sound* I would never write it in the manner of a trade review. The skill of the trade reviewer is to be able to express individual opinions in a coherent way within the format of the trade review, because that format is pretty rigid. With *Sight & Sound* one has freer reign, but the reader of *Sight & Sound* is expecting a certain tenor, a certain register of voice, a certain erudition. Here at Rotterdam it is the last year with Rutger Wolfson as director. To what degree are *Sight & Sound* readers actually interested in the machinations of film festival politics? Answer: not very much. So the emphasis there has to be that these are worthwhile new films which have either premiered or emerged here.

Steinhart: What's your strategy for approaching a festival like Rotterdam? I'm sure part of it is informed by whom you're writing for.

*Young:* Oh, exactly. A reporter would want to know about the competition and the most interesting films in competition because they're the ones that are going to go to all the festivals and have exposure. I do try to write about retrospective films, leave some time for extracurricular activities, whether that's walks or seeing the city, or going for lunch and dinner with friends. I draw up a day-by-day schedule which I print out before I leave for the festival and put in my wallet. But there has to be flexibility. These are not set-in-stone orders. If I'm at a festival for more than a couple of days, which I normally am, I want to know that I'm covering all the things I want to cover. Before I set off for Rotterdam my decision was to see all the films that are in competition: 20 shorts and 13 features. So that was the starting point. There were other promising world premieres which I wanted to see for *The Hollywood Reporter* review purposes, and then some retrospective titles by Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien. So those went in. I do try to be organised and do it a few days before the festival. The difficulty with that is if you're going from festival to festival. There were three instances last year when I did three in a row, so you just have to fly by the seat of your pants a little bit.

*Steinhart:* I'm curious about the community of people that you run into on the festival circuit. Do you tend to encounter the same people? Is that an important part of your job, in terms of sharing information?

*Young:* Yeah. The question that is always asked is 'what have you seen that's good?' Or, 'what have you seen that's terrible?' I can put those titles down lower on my list of things to see in a festival like Rotterdam where the catalog is hundreds of pages. This year I've been watching the competition shorts and features, which in theory should be the heart of the festival and – am I naïve to say – the best films. That's clearly not the case. So you have to rely on colleagues, because at a festival like this it's physically impossible for anybody to see more than half of the program. So there is a social network, for want of a better word, of people that you do see. Particularly in Europe, where you have an amazing concentration of festivals. You only realise how strange that is when you go to North America or South America, because the distances there are so huge. Whereas in Europe, for a Portuguese person to go to Helsinki is not really a big deal, partly because we have cheap airfares and partly because of [the open] EU borders. With the development of a kind of European cultural identity and just about everybody speaking English nowadays it's really one territory of festivals.

*Steinhart:* What do you see as the role of the festival film critic in terms of cultivating film culture?

*Young:* Anybody who is a film critic should be somebody who loves cinema and loves the whole business of it. Otherwise you could just be writing basketball game reports. That person should therefore want cinema to continue to exist and get better. They can have some small influence on the improvement of cinema and festivals through what they're writing. I know for a fact that at this festival last year, when various articles were written, there were discussions and some strategies were changed as a reasonably direct response to what was published.<sup>32</sup> So there has to be a dialogue between the festival and the journalist. What the journalist should not be is a PR person for the festival, a corporate shill. Personally, I think one of my tasks, or what critics should try to do, is to point out lesser-known films. So if I'm here at this festival the last thing I want to write about is *The Tribe* (Myroslav Slaboshpytsky, 2014), which is one of my favorite films of the year.<sup>33</sup> But if I can point out some lesser-known films in *Sight & Sound* the help that gives to those filmmakers and that film can be huge. That can help a person's career and give them confidence.

The other thing is the more festivals you go to the more you can assess one against the other. When I [first] came to Rotterdam, Locarno was really out. Then various changes at Locarno raised their profile, but Rotterdam has gone down. It used to be that Torino was this hot festival and then that went down. I'm not suggesting that people should go to 25 festivals a year, but if you do that it's like having an overview of the film festival world. I'd like to think I've got a reasonable sense of the European film festival scene. It's a bit like reviewing films. The more films you see the better of a reviewer you are. The more festivals you go to the better a reviewer of festivals you become. But the danger is that actually living outside this world becomes much harder. It's like the line about cricket by C.L.R. James: '[w]hat do they know of cricket, who only cricket know?'<sup>34</sup> The critic has to have a balanced approach to everything. You've got to see as many films as possible and go to as many festivals as possible – but you've still got to be aware that there was an election in Greece and that the Patriots and the Seahawks were in the Super Bowl. If you view life entirely through the prism of the festival and through cinema then, to me, that's a recipe for (a) being a bad critic and (b) being miserable. It's a tempting trap, the world of film festivals. It's up to you to actually have the wherewithal to realise that the average person in Britain watches one film in the cinema per year. I watched 465. So clearly there's an aberration. They should be watching more and I should be watching less.

## References

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## Notes

25. The perspectives on the festival work of various film critics are collected in Porton 2009.
26. The views of a number of English-language critics on the state of film criticism, including its financial challenges, are expressed in *Cineaste* 2008 and 2013.
27. These publications include *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Sight & Sound*, and *Indiewire*.
28. The 2015 edition of the Bradford International Film Festival was cancelled to undergo a review of its future prospects. The festival's 2014 site still remains: <http://www.national-mediapark.org.uk/bradfordinternationalfilmfestival>.
29. A clearinghouse for Young's writing can be found on his website, where he applies his odds-making strategies to festival award contenders: [www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/](http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/).
30. Young, 'In a Year of 26 Festivals', 2014.
31. Young, 'Why a Visionary Work', 2014.
32. The 2014 edition of the Rotterdam Film Festival sparked a series of reports by journalists who were critical of the festival's course and the stewardship of director Rutger Wolfson. This attitude was reflected in Young's 2014 piece for *Indiewire*.
33. Myroslav Slaboshpytsky's *The Tribe* premiered in 2014 at La Semaine de la Critique in Cannes where it won the Grand Prix. It subsequently toured international film festivals, including a stop at Rotterdam, which had provided partial financing through the Hubert Bals Fund.
34. The quote derives from James' examination of cricket in the colonial West Indies in James 1993. Young later explained via email that James' famous line was inspired by Rudyard Kipling: '[w]hat should they know of England, who only England know?'

## About the author

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