

San Luis Obispo International Film Festival: The social responsibility of redesigning an American film festival

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I grew up in San Luis Obispo, a small town on the Central Coast of California, nestled equidistant between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Now a seasoned traveler and Brooklyn-based filmmaker, I look at San Luis Obispo as the small town that could not contain my curiosity and was not prepared to show me the breadth of the world's virtues, especially as a Black youth in the predominantly white city. Still, I love to return to the community and share my global perspective, and San Luis Obispo International Film Festival (SLOFF) is a place where that perspective is welcomed in the spirit of independent filmmaking. My long-standing personal connection to this very special geographic region, as well as my direct experience with the cultural nuances that are embedded in the fabric of the San Luis Obispo community, give me a unique perspective to reviewing the festival. The year 2020 was also the first time that one of my films had been accepted into the festival. My short documentary, *Kut to be the Best: The Last Black Barbershop in San Luis Obispo* features the story of a Black business owner faced with the closure of his barbershop, and the impact that closure had upon the Black community in San Luis Obispo.

San Luis Obispo county, the epicenter of the Central Coast of California, is dotted with world renown wineries to the northeast and epic stretches of Pacific coastline to the southwest. The SLOFF website refers to the city as 'quaint and sophisticated'[1] – the perfect destination for wealthy filmmakers and Los Angelenos. What better way than a prime California coastal experience to attract Hollywood players to a small community film festival on a late

March weekend? San Luis Obispo International Film Festival, which surpassed the quarter century mark with this year's festival, has grown from a small-town festival to now include attendees and entries from around the world. With humble beginnings in the early 1990s the event has always been connected to the history of American cinema. William Randolph Hearst's 'Castle' is only a short drive from the city of San Luis Obispo, and in 2012 the festival made history by screening Orson Welles' classic *Citizen Kane* at the Hearst Castle, bringing this historical marker in cinema history to the site of its original inspiration. The festival's top award, the King Vidor Award, is also rooted in the cinematic history of San Luis Obispo county. The award's namesake, Vidor, once lived in nearby Paso Robles. Known now for its distinct contributions to the California wine market, it is also where King Vidor spent his final days.

Like almost every festival in the world, the history of the festival was again marked by change and evolution in 2020. Scheduled for the week of 16 March, the festival was interrupted by the abrupt paradigm shift amidst the pandemic, as were each of our daily lives, as we all adjusted to the global health crisis. The structure of viewing films has not been immune to the painful stripping away of the extraneous. The theater industry has been badly damaged, adding salt to a long slow wound being imparted by the dominance of streaming services like Netflix and its competitors. The ides of March 2020 will always be remembered through a haze. But some, including festival organizer Skye McLennan, were forced to look into the future with a clairvoyant focus. I spoke with Skye this summer, once we all had some hindsight on this momentous spring. Skye detailed her experience being at the helm of the festival during the day-to-day readjustments as the nation plunged into the unknown depths of the pandemic and ensuing public lockdowns.[2] The primary stakeholders involved in the festival sat on the edge of their seats awaiting the decisions that would be made by Skye and her team as they entered the final week of planning for the opening events.

While the county of San Luis Obispo was one of the last places in California to show signs of the viral outbreak, festival organizers like Skye were forced to assess the feasibility of their event amidst a lack of information and growing public anxiety.[3] This reassessment was focused on whether or not the festival could be held at all. It also drove Skye to examine their purpose, their impact, and their connection to the primary stakeholders, some who have valued the festival for decades. 'Every part of the industry has been a part of the conversation', says Skye, as she explained the process of sharing

her learned experiences with other festival organisers. 'The experience of a festival is much more than showing a film.' [4] How that experience is recreated for audiences is one of the most pressing questions facing organisers of festivals worldwide today.

Days before the event Skye stayed fixed to the minute-by-minute updates being given by the Center for Disease Control on large group gatherings, while the audiences and regular supporters of the festival turned their eyes to national and global news coverage, trying to understand the risk of the impending viral outbreak. We all struggled to gain perspective on the degree of the crisis. As a director of a film that was slated to screen as an official selection of the festival, I also had to weigh my options. I struggled with whether or not to fly to attend the red carpet events for filmmakers and the first screening of my work in my hometown festival. Skye knew that like myself, many filmmakers were slated to travel from outside the area – some outside the country. Furthermore, she knew filmmakers were most eager for information and details, but she also had to prioritise communication with festival pass holders who are major financial contributors to the festival. Skye was emailing filmmakers daily with updates, and ultimately three days before the opening of the festival she and her team made the decision to go virtual.

Skye labored tirelessly for days to upgrade her tech knowledge and find the right full-service company to make sure the pass holders of the festival still got what they expected. She single-handedly built a new WordPress site to use as a platform for the online festival. She was also tasked with comparing file server systems such as DCP Traffic and Cinesend – companies that themselves were bracing for the increase in workload as they moved from a small presence providing a resource for the online festival community to a necessary commodity for every festival in the world. According to Skye the 'film festival culture was against digital', and now that culture was shifting, as many festivals looked for ways to pivot under new social guidelines. In just under a week Skye and her colleagues were able to offer a virtual screening of almost every title originally slated for the 2020 festival, my film included.

It would be hard to argue that the festival organisers in San Luis Obispo did not successfully set the precedent for the industry's commitment to a virtual presence amidst the pandemic. Skye points out that 'social responsibility' was her motivation for pushing the festival forward in such a short time. She sees her first responsibility to her community, to the audiences and pass holders that have grown to expect a curated experience from the festival; but

she also notes her obligation to the filmmakers, and to the larger community of festival organisers. Still, questions remain. How long will this unprecedented need for innovation last? Will the film festival ever regain its physical strength?

For filmmakers like myself and David Osit (*Mayor*, 2020) the virtual screenings do not quite feel the same. Osit, who expected to show his film at South by Southwest in 2020, reminisced on the experience of screening to a live audience, after having varied experiences with virtual festivals.[5] The purpose of the film festival, for filmmakers, is different than for the audience. Many of the physical benefits of flying across the country for a small festival outside of Los Angeles just do not translate to virtual coffee sessions, meetups, pitch-a-thons, or any other digital substitute for the excitement of a post-screening talkback or the opportunity to sell an idea to a team of producers. Before a festival can completely redesign its screening structure, it has to determine its purpose. Like all things in 2020, even film festivals must become much more self-aware. For Skye and the San Luis Obispo festival organisers, this process of self-assessment has gone through many stages. Now, particularly in America, film festivals are being forced to reassess their purpose and impact within another context in addition to the ongoing pandemic.

The video of the murder of George Floyd can shake any viewer to the core, also reminding us that documentary images have the potential for a larger social impact. In that moment, the contribution of the visual image as a motivation for shifting the festival paradigm and purpose was removed from the hands of filmmakers and festival planners and placed into the raised fists of the People. The ensuing global uprisings became a different call to action. Around the United States of America, and soon around the globe, acts of solidarity for the struggle of Black Americans became widespread and grabbed the focus of the entire world. Seemingly overnight, the already trending catch phrases ‘diversity and inclusion’ became required mentions for every organisation email list in the nation, whether independent or corporate. When asked about the impact the uprisings had on the festival, Skye emphasised her festival was ‘not doing enough’, as leadership was ‘discussing with board members and other organisations, how they could increase capacity for diversity’ in future years.[6] The increased scrutiny into the practices of all organisations has illuminated Hollywood’s already poor track record of equal representation in guilds and other institutions. I am hoping that the increase in dialogue and awareness of the Black American experience will

trickle down to smaller festivals throughout the country in communities like San Luis Obispo.

The Independent Filmmakers Project (IFP) hosted a virtual panel, 'The Future of Festivals: Creating Community Connection & Curation Online' in July 2020, as the protests quieted to a dull drone and the world reeled from the whirlwind of the last four months. Hosted by Jessie Fairbanks of DOC-NYC, Tribeca, and MountainFilm Festivals, the panel members, each representing a small festival, included Nehad Khader of BlackStar Film Festival and Zandashé Brown, Filmmaker and Programming Manager for the New Orleans Film Society. Considering the recent political events, I was specifically interested in what these two women of Colour would have to say about the future of film festivals, as the title of the presentation promised. The filmmakers discussed how their organisations could better serve the stakeholders, including both audiences and filmmakers, as the need for online programming continues. While the framework presented by host Jessie Fairbanks focused on online curation as a response to the pandemic restrictions, the panelists quickly shifted the dialogue toward the ideas of inclusion and diversity, indicating the rapid proliferation of these ideas in the festival community.[7] Zandashé Brown highlighted that her organisation was actively 'interrogating how we engage with filmmakers' and focusing the conversation on 'decentering whiteness'. These discussions are critical to the forward movement and growth of United States festival culture in 2020. However, they seem to be absent from the dialogue in the San Luis Obispo film community.

These collisions of race, global health, police brutality, and the viral outbreak are polarising moments that catalyse global unity while edifying our institutions, our creators, and ourselves. While San Luis Obispo Film Festival was initially forced to innovate under the state guidelines necessary to reduce the deadly impact of the pandemic, Skye and the entire festival community are now being forced to examine themselves wholly in light of the global questions of race and equality in America – and they are not alone. Each small niche festival must now explore how their unique community relates to a nationwide conversation about diversity and inclusion that is hinged upon the back of social media call-out culture. Nobody can stay hidden. The predominantly white population of San Luis Obispo has been liberated by centering its whiteness for decades. The film festival has consistently played to that audience, even rejecting some of my more radical films before accepting my work this year. So when I was approached to schedule a screening

of my film as continued programming after the uprisings I could not help but wonder if that was because I was one of the only representations of racial diversity in their festival lineup.

San Luis Obispo made national headlines in August 2020 when activist Tianna Arata was arrested and charged with a series of misdemeanor charges that could result in an extended detainment for the twenty-year-old activist.[8] Tianna is a hero, a powerful youth voice who has been critical to organising peaceful rallies in the city of San Luis Obispo since shortly after Floyd's public murder. Yet Arata is another victim in a series of injustices targeting Black Lives Matter activists with overblown charges in the wake of the George Floyd Protests and efforts to defund police departments nationwide. The relationship between the San Luis Obispo Film Festival and Tianna's case is not self-evident. Rather, Tianna Arata reflects a growing need for programming in small communities that supports the voice of Black and Brown people throughout the country. Tianna's voice, and the opinions, ideas, and voices of those like her, have been silenced in small communities like San Luis Obispo for generations. The quaint city, once deemed 'the happiest place in America',[9] is being challenged during this year of great clarity. The response from the festival has been small, with a few emails that track with Skye's expressed goal of 'doing more for diversity'. This also reflects her admission that 'they aren't doing enough'. We never scheduled another screening or any programming around the content of my film, and I am not convinced that the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement in San Luis Obispo and Arata's experience have resonated with the organisers of the festival in the same way I had hoped.

While film festivals throughout the country may turn to the San Luis Obispo International Film Festival and the recently learned wisdom of festival director Skye McLennan for their programming concerns, there is a deeper lesson to be learned from the sleepy coastal town. We are on the precipice of great global change as filmmakers, audiences, and agents of the institutions that uphold this industry. While the City of San Luis Obispo struggles to liberate their imprisoned hero in Tianna Arata, the wider filmmaking community must fight for a culture of festival programming that aptly reflects the changes in our shifting world. That may be as concrete as a hybrid festival with both virtual and in-person events, as San Luis Obispo International Film Festival has scheduled for March 2021; or it may be something reflected more abstractly, and as the result of thorough in-depth self-analysis in the wake of such events as the death of George Floyd or the arrest of

Tianna Arata. Either way the social responsibility does not only lie with Skye and other festival programmers. The social impact begins with us, the creators, the filmmakers, and the audiences – to tell stories, to listen to Black and Brown voices, to come together collectively in the face of global crises, and to emerge from 2020 with more clarity about our shared futures.

Justice A. Whitaker (Filmmaker)

Notes

- [1] www.slofilmfest.org/about (accessed on 15 October 2020).
- [2] Skye McLennan, personal interview, May 2020.
- [3] @SLOPublicHealth Twitter Account, 13 August 2020.
- [4] Skye McLennan, personal interview, May 2020.
- [5] <https://www.documentary.org/feature/virtual-festival-circuit-filmmakers-reflect-covid-months> (accessed on 15 October 2020). See also in this dossier Limov and Hobbins-White's contribution on SXSW.
- [6] Skye McLennan, personal interview, May 2020.
- [7] 'The Future of Festivals: Creating Community Connection & Curation Online', July 2020: www.IFP.org.
- [8] <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/politics/a33564588/how-to-help-tianna-arata-black-lives-matter-petitions-donate/> (accessed on 15 October 2020).
- [9] www.bluezones.com/2017/10/happiest-cities-america/ (accessed on 15 October 2020).