

# Cross-Cultural Engagement and Audience Dynamics: A Critical Evaluation of the Alliance Française French Film Festival

Yichen Liu

School of Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

---

**Abstract:** Film festivals provide a platform for films to gain recognition and cultural legitimisation. Through selection, awards, and screenings, film festivals contribute to cultural exchange and the growth of the global film industry. The Alliance Française French Film Festival (AFFFF) is a major cultural event focusing on French cinema, touring across multiple Australian cities. This report will evaluate the AFFFF in the context of local and worldwide film festivals, exploring audience engagement, film programming, and marketing strategy. It will discuss the participant experience and how the event should be improved.

**Keywords:** Cultural Exchange; Audience Engagement; Actor-Network Theory (ANT); Festival Marketing Strategy; Film Festival Circuit.

---

## 1. The Significance and History of AFFFF

The AFFFF is a significant annual event that promotes cross-cultural experiences while maintaining an active global influence. It was founded in 1989, the 35th edition is presented by MSC Cruises, sponsored by the Alliance Française, and supported by the French Embassy (6). The Alliance Française is a global organisation focused on French language education and encouraging cultural exchange with different communities in Australia. The AFFFF is a film festival circuit that travels across multiple Australian cities, but its scope is more modest in comparison to single-city film festivals such as the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF). Stevens describes the MIFF as an 'audience-led' festival, which implies that the programming and operations of MIFF are adapted to the tastes and interests of the local film participants (8). This is similar to the AFFFF, which is primarily driven by the preferences of the local audience rather than focused on industry professionals or international agendas. This event provides opportunities to show French cultural identity, artistic creativity, and national films to audiences. It plays a crucial role in encouraging cultural communication between different groups, separating it from more mainstream and commercial film festivals. Therefore, this event engages with its audiences, such as cinephiles, casual viewers, students, and Francophiles, which means a smaller range of targeted audiences compared to a more diverse film festival.

## 2. Audience Diversity and Engagement Challenges

The AFFFF attracts a lot of participants in Australia every year, and it has grown to become the largest film festival outside of France. This event attempted to attract a diverse range of people, including specialists, amateurs, and local audiences, who got interested in French literature and film art. As McCann observes, French is the third most frequently taught language in Australian high schools (6). In addition, there are 36 public universities in Australia, with 20 offering

French. The Alliance Française works with educational institutions and embassies to provide cultural services. In other words, this film festival targeted a broad general audience who appreciate the cultural elements of French cinema and get familiar with its narratives, ideologies, and cultural identities. According to Latour's actor-network theory (ANT), active cinephiles exert influence on the festival circuit environment (4). This indicates that cinephiles not only experienced the film festival but also could make valuable contributions to its successful operation. Fischer asserts that the operation of Open System Organisations is reliant on the participation of external groups and individuals (2). The audience is crucial for the festival since their participation generates revenue, and feedback is also valuable for the festival organisers and filmmakers to understand Australian audiences' preferences. As a participant, I believe this event should be more engaging and inclusive for those non-French speakers because, as a general festival audience, the programming is less attractive, and there were no audience involvement opportunities, which made me feel less connected. In addition to wine tasting, this event did not include special events such as film discussions or workshops. It is also hard to find audience interaction through social media platforms, such as sharing photos or reviews that are related to the film festival.

### 2.1. Film Programming and Cultural Outreach

The AFFFF screens French cinema to promote understanding and multicultural commitment in Australia. Valck emphasises that the programme is a core activity of festivals, and the selection process reflects outreach targets and theme preferences (10). This festival is mainly focused on French film, with 41 films included this year, exhibiting in major Australian cities from 5 March to 21 April 2024 (11). The Three Musketeers serves as the Opening Night Selection, which is the first French-produced big-screen rendition in almost 30 years (12). Most of the film selections are classic and great films from the past, such as Children of Paradise, which transports audiences back to the 1800s and highlights the significance and heritage of the French filmmaking industry (3). Moreover, the programming of films balances

the needs and expectations of audiences. Czach states that the relationship between programming and audiences is crucial in the context of film festivals (1). The *Intouchables* was chosen by public vote to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the AFFFF in Australia. Programming shapes the audience experience by selecting films that cater to diverse preferences, interests, and cultural backgrounds. I chose to watch *The Edge of the Blade*, which is a special exhibition for Women's Day, and the plot was trying to convey the feminist message. According to the Pesaro model of programming, the festival should engage and challenge audiences by screening varied and thoughtful film selections, as well as having an impact on the film industry and cultural landscape (9). This festival screens four award-winning films from the Cannes Film Festival, as well as a diverse range of film genres and themes, ranging from family ties, ethnicity, and societal issues, catering to a variety of audience interests and reflecting the evolution of French society and filmmaking.

## 2.2. Marketing Strategies and Festival Image

The AFFFF attracts audiences and promotes the event by building and improving its festival image. Stringer claims that festival image is a marketing strategy used by cities that host film festivals to create a unique and recognisable identity for the event (7). The AFFFF presents itself as a cultural ambassador, encouraging French cinema and cultural identity to Australian audiences. This event has both national and international sponsors. It is supported by four Melbourne sponsors, mostly from educational organisations. In addition, the festival also benefits from the contributions of sponsors in the tourism and cuisine industries, which could be an efficient way to encourage visitors to experience French culture.

Furthermore, the AFFFF promotes itself in the media using a variety of outlets and strategies to attract audiences. Harbord explains that festival journalism serves as a delayed experience, contributing to marketing the festival by increasing interest from audiences and creating engagement in the media platform (5). This event held competitions with prizes on the official website to foster participation, and it also worked with media partners to promote itself. To be more specific, the AFFFF outreach to diverse audiences both locally and internationally. Providing services like subtitling films in different languages, organising various events to cater to audiences, and programming films from different genres, themes, and historical periods. It can represent the variety of French culture and society, fostering a sense of community and engagement for those who are interested in French culture.

## 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Alliance Française French Film Festival (AFFFF) serves as a significant cultural platform, promoting French cinema and fostering cross-cultural exchange in Australia. As an established festival, it has successfully introduced French cultural identity and artistic creativity to Australian audiences. However, there are still areas for improvement to enhance its influence and engagement.

Firstly, the festival could benefit from incorporating more interactive activities, such as film workshops, panel discussions, and filmmaker Q&A sessions. These activities not only enrich the audience's experience but also create opportunities for direct communication between filmmakers and viewers, making the festival more inclusive and participatory.

Secondly, the festival's digital presence needs to be strengthened to attract younger audiences and expand its influence. Through social media platforms for interactive campaigns, such as photo contests, audience reviews, and virtual screenings, the AFFFF can reach a broader demographic and foster long-term audience engagement. Virtual events also offer accessibility for those who cannot attend in person, ensuring inclusivity and wider participation.

Lastly, deeper collaboration with universities, cultural organisations, and local communities could help diversify the audience base. Offering multilingual subtitles, showcasing films with universal themes, and organising outreach programs for non-French speakers would attract a more diverse group of participants, enhancing the festival's cultural impact.

By addressing these aspects, the AFFFF can strengthen its role as a bridge for cultural exchange, ensuring sustainable growth and adapting to the evolving demands of global audiences. It has the potential to maintain its cultural essence while innovating in ways that resonate with modern audiences, ensuring its continued relevance and success in the global film festival landscape.

## Acknowledgments

Natural Science Foundation.

## References

- [1] Czach, L. Film festivals, programming, and the building of a national cinema. *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (SPRING 2004), p. 76–88.
- [2] Fischer, A. *Open for Business: The System Behind Film Festival Operation*. Sustainable projections: Concepts in Film Festival Management. (St. Andrews, UK 2013, p. 11–37).
- [3] Gray, P. (2024, March 5). The Alliance Française French Film Festival launches for its 35th Edition. *The AU Review*. <https://www.theaureview.com/watch/french-film-festival/>.
- [4] Hagener, M. and Valck, M. D. Drowning in Popcorn at the International Film Festival Rotterdam? The Festival as a Multiplex of Cinephilia. In Valck, M. D. (Ed.), *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam University Press, USA 2005, p. 97-109).
- [5] Harbord, J. *Film Festivals, Time, Event*. The Festival Circuit. (St. Andrews Film Studies, Scotland 2009, p. 40-46).
- [6] McCann, B. Special dossier: French film studies in Australia. *French Screen Studies*, Vol. 1 (2023), p. 46–51.
- [7] Stringer, J. *Global Cities and the International Film Festival Economy*. Cinema and the City (Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 2001, p. 134–144).
- [8] Stevens, K. From Film Week to Festivals: Australia's Film Festival boom in the 1980s. *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2016), p. 250–263.
- [9] Valck, M. D. Finding audiences for films: Festival programming in historical perspectives. *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film festivals* (University of St. Andrews, 2012, p. 25–40).
- [10] Valck, M. D., Kredell, B. and Loist, S. What is a film festival? How to study festivals and why you should. In Valck, M. D. (Ed.), *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (1st ed.) (London 2016, p. 1–12).
- [11] Vann-Wall, S. (2024, February 7). Alliance Française French Film Festival: top ten picks. *Screen Hub*.

[12] <https://www.screenhub.com.au/news/features/alliance-francaise-french-film-festival-top-ten-picks-of-the-program-2634220/>.

[13] Ward, S. (2024, February 7). Alliance Française French Film Festival Is Bringing a Stacked 41-Movie Program to Australian

Cinemas in 2024. Concrete Playground.  
<https://concreteplayground.com/perth/arts-entertainment/alliance-francaise-french-film-festival-2024-program>.