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The Dutch film festival landscape: A walk-through

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Keywords: Dutch, festival, film

Introduction

Festivals are nowadays a cultural, social, and economic force to be reckoned with. This study will offer an overview of the Dutch festival landscape, which has been lacking. There are commercial initiatives that target only a portion of the festival sector, and there are specific branch organisations or cultural funds that only cover the data of their members, for instance the Netherlands Film Fund reports on ten major Dutch film festivals in their annual Film Facts & Figures of the Netherlands. National institutes such as Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) also lack substantial data on Dutch festivals.

In 2015 I started an initiative to make up for this shortcoming, to get better insights into the dynamics of the festival landscape, particularly the role of programming, and to give more context to the work of the research group into festival experience at individual festivals.[1] The first results were published in 2016, as the Festival Atlas 2015 saw the light of day with an overview and analysis of Dutch music festivals.[2] This was followed in June 2017 by the publication of Festival Atlas 2016, a second edition that not only covered music festivals but also film festivals, food festivals, and as a supplement art festivals.[3] Currently, a third edition is in the making, to be published in spring 2019.

In the following article the focus is on film festivals in 2017. Data was gathered on a total of 123 film festivals. Film festivals are one of the smaller sectors in the Dutch festival landscape – only art festivals are fewer in number. In comparison, there are more than 1,100 music festivals in the Netherlands

every year. A wide range of data is presented to give insights into how this film festival landscape looks. After a short account of the methodology, the data is presented in three sections: on the size and characteristics of the film festival landscape; on the programming at film festivals; and a comparison between the data of the 2016 film festival season and the 2017 film festival season, to spot possible shifts and similarities. In the discussion I reflect on the current status of the research and future perspectives.

Collecting data on festivals

For the data collection, we followed a two-step systematic approach. The first phase involved creating a so-called 'dirty' list of as many film festivals as possible. Various sources were used in this process: websites, blogs, festival calendars, (online) festival guides, databases, Wikipedia, newspaper features with overviews of the festival seasons, and interviews with festival-goers. The resulting list was then cleaned up by removing any duplicates and by cross-checking sources to confirm whether a particular festival actually exists (or existed). An additional search was done for festival posters. This resulted in a first list of festivals.

The second phase involved evaluating whether a festival should be included in the analyses for the Festival Atlas. This evaluation was based on the festival characteristics as described thusly: a festival is an organised event, accessible to the public (paid or not) and involves multiple (at least three) 'performances' (film screenings) that take place during a specific period (mostly one-day or weekend-long).[4] This general description was made more specific by applying additional criteria such as no quantitative restrictions regarding the size of the festival, neither in terms of the minimum capacity nor in the actual number of visitors; and no normative criteria were followed in regard to the quality of the festival. In other words, we seek to do justice to the diversity of festivals without bringing in any value judgement on how good they are.

A recurring problem we faced is that many festivals have so-called fringe programming such as readings, workshops, bouncy castles, stand-up comedians, et cetera. It is quite common that music festivals include food trucks and that food festivals bring in DJs. There are also music festivals that screen films and film festivals that are dedicated to food or pay particular attention to food between screenings. However, the clear majority of festivals are quite

easy to classify into music, film, food, or art. Only a few inspired uncertainty and discussion. This discussion on the classification of festivals is not unexpected, since we see festivals as a natural category of phenomena that show family resemblance and have prototypical exemplars and fuzzy borders with other (festival) categories.[5] It is our academic responsibility to explain how we dealt with uncertain cases positioned at the fuzzy border of the festival category.[6]

Two specific considerations in including film festivals in our analysis were the seasonal series and the 'on tour' programs. Many cinemas in the Netherlands organise a diversity of seasonal series throughout the year. These are film screenings that appear regularly (weekly or monthly) on their program and often with their own label. These seasonal series are certainly related to film festivals, since they feature exclusive temporary programming as an extension of regular screenings of premiering films. However, these seasonal series were not counted as film festivals. Not only because they usually involve a single screening per night, but also because they are not presented as being festivals. A second consideration concerns the 'on tour' programmes of film festivals that sometimes act as a stand-alone festival (IFFR in Groningen) and sometimes as a seasonal screening (IFFR Kino). These were evaluated case by case.

Based on this two-step process a list of film festivals were gathered that was presented in the Festival Atlas 2016. For the 2017 data collection the 2016 list was used as the basis – but not as a limitation. A further search for additional and new film festivals was undertaken in a broad range of sources. This resulted in some additional data for 2016, as well as new film festivals for 2017. The same strategy is currently being followed for the 2018 data collection.

A bird's-eye view

In 2017, a total of 123 film festivals took place in the Netherlands. These 123 film festivals provided 151 film festival editions, since 13 of these film festivals had multiple editions over the same year. Many of the festivals return annually (84%), some film festivals are one-offs (3%), 11% of the film festivals have had multiple editions in 2017, and a small percentage (2%) are two-yearly festivals that had an edition in 2017. Almost half (46%) of the 123 film festivals have not existed longer than five years; 32% have not even existed longer than

three years. Only about a third (30%) of the film festivals in 2017 have existed longer than 10 years.

The film festival editions have a typical seasonal pattern (Figure 1): there is a peak in the spring (April) and in the autumn (October). More than a third (37%) of the film festivals take place in these two months. The summer months are relatively the quietest, especially July. Film festivals also have a geographical pattern (Figure 2). The two provinces with the most film festivals are Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland, together accounting for 62% of all film festival editions. Amsterdam (located in Noord-Holland) and Rotterdam (located in Zuid-Holland) are the cities where the most festival editions take place, covering 46% of the total number of festival editions. Some film festivals highlight their geographic position, such as Noordelijk Film Festival (Friesland), Film by the Sea (Zeeland), and Cinefest (Limburg).

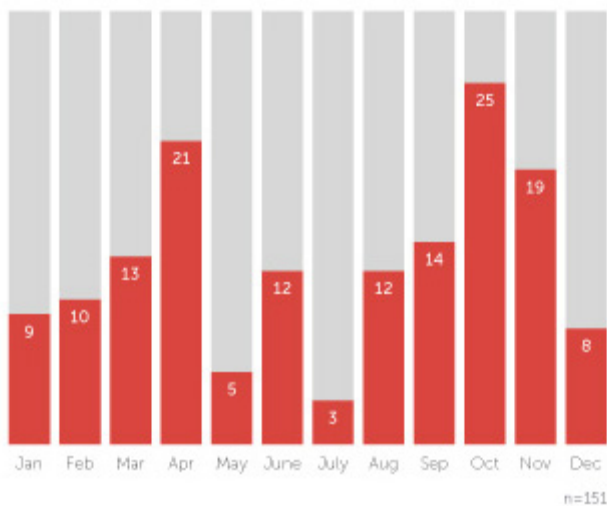


Fig. 1: Number of film festival editions in 2017 by month.

Free entry is rare with film festivals; only 8% of the festival editions offered free entrance. These were mostly open-air film festivals in the summer, such as Film op de Brink (Deventer) and Pluk de Nacht (Utrecht, Amsterdam). The proportion of indoor and outdoor film festivals shows a large similarity with free and paid entrance: only 9% of the film festival editions take place outdoors, and these almost always take place during the summer months. Hence, the standard film festival seems to be paid and indoor. The duration of film

festivals (one-day or multi-day festivals) shows another pattern. A large majority (74%) of the 2017 film festival editions were multi-day festivals, and a quarter (26%) were one-day festivals. With these, no clear seasonal pattern exists: both ‘peak’ months and quieter months throughout the year have one-day and multi-day film festivals. Also, across provinces there is great diversity: some provinces have very few one-day film festivals (Limburg, Utrecht), while others have an above-average number of one-day film festivals (Noord-Holland, Overijssel).

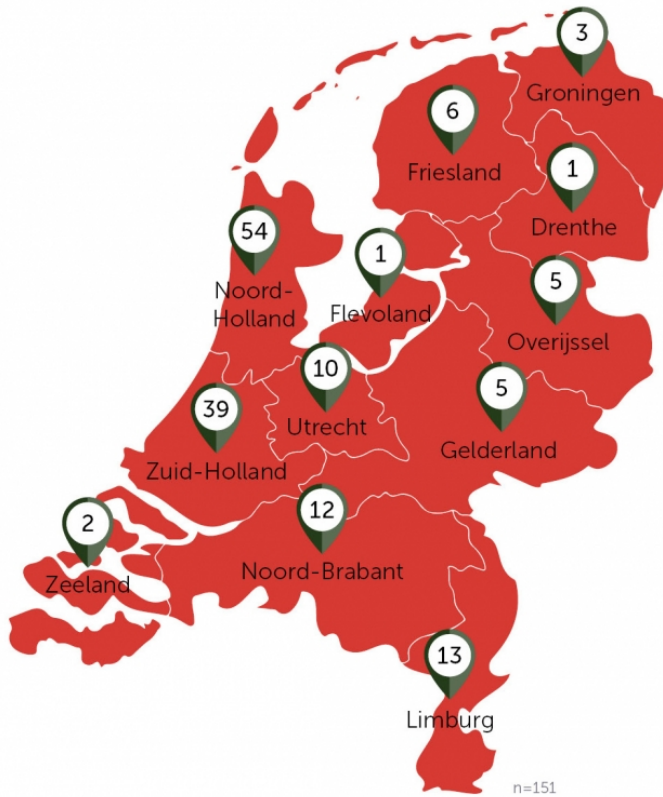


Fig. 2: Number of film festival editions in 2017 by province.

There were ten new film festivals in 2017, accounting for 8% of the total offerings. New film festivals included Ammehoela Film Festival, Fashionclash

Fashion Film Festival, and New Renaissance Film Festival. These ten film festivals organised twelve festival editions, with only the new festival Cinefest having more than one edition in 2017. Most new festivals follow the film season ‘peaks’ of spring and autumn, with only two new festivals in June. The proportion between indoor-outdoor (100%-0%) and paid-free (90%-10%) does not differ significantly between the new film festivals and the existing film festivals; the new film festivals are also largely indoors and with a paid entry fee. The relationship between one-day and multi-day though does differ with the new film festivals (8%-92%), with relatively more multi-day festivals than existing film festivals.

What is there to see and do?

Countries or geographical regions are one way for film festivals to position and promote their event. In 2017 such examples included Arab Film Festival, Belgisch Film Festival, and Amsterdam Spanish Film Festival. Of the 123 film festivals, 30 had such a geographical theme in 2017. Europe, the Middle East, and Asia were particularly well represented, while North and South America barely and Africa not at all.

There are also other ways to break down film festivals into themes, as used by the film festivals themselves in promoting their festival. If we look at content themes, 55% of the film festival editions have general programming. Specific film festival themes that appear regularly are: sports (eighteen film festival editions, including Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour and Sportfilm Festival Rotterdam), human rights and minorities (eight film festival editions, including As eEquals Film Festival and TranScreen Film Festival), culture (six film festival editions, including Cinedans and Architectuur Filmfestival Rotterdam), and kids & youth films (six film festival editions, including Cinekid and International Jeugd Film Festival Rotterdam). Another way to differentiate between film festivals is through ‘forms’, such as feature-length films, short films, documentaries, animation, et cetera (Figure 3). Feature-length films were screened at 78% of the film festival editions. Short films were shown at 71% of the film festival editions, including those festivals that focus specifically on short films, such as GoShort. Documentaries were shown at 48% of the film festival editions, including those film festivals that specifically focus on documentaries such as IDFA and DOCfeed.

Most film festivals (61%) only use one screen for showing their films, 20% use two to three screens, and only a small percentage (2%) use more than ten screens during the festival. With regard to the number of films screened during the film festivals, about a third (35%) shows ten films or less, almost half of the film festivals (49%) show between eleven to 50 films, and a small group (16%) shows more than 50 films at their festival. Regarding fringe programming, the most common activities at film festivals in 2017 were discussions, panels, and Q&As, which were present at a third of the film festival editions. Other regular organised activities at film festivals were: music (30%), master-classes and workshops (26%), lectures (23%), and food (22%).

Of the 123 film festivals, 60 film festivals (49%) offered prizes. In 2018, a total of 408 film prizes were handed out at these 60 film festivals. Of the 408 film prizes, 72 (18%) were audience awards. The remaining awards were given by a jury, professional or composed of peers, or children, and were divided across 89 different categories.

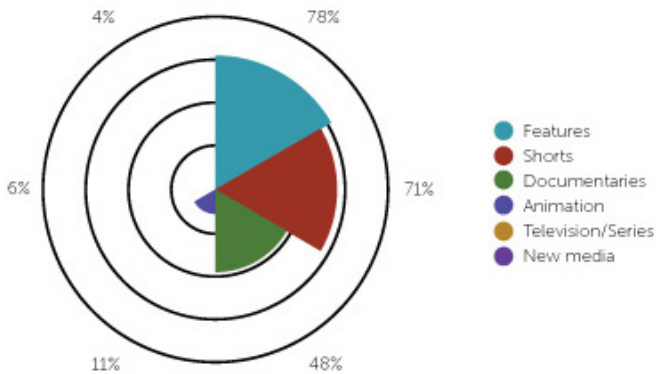


Fig. 3: Percentage of film festival editions screening film forms.

Comparing 2017 to 2016: Shifts and similarities

In 2016, 131 film festivals took place with 187 editions. In 2017, there were 123 film festivals with a total of 151 editions. This is a 6% drop in number of festi-

vals, and almost a 20% drop in the number of festival editions, which is a substantial drop. Although the seasonal pattern is not the variant between the two years, there is a very noticeable drop of film festival editions in the months of April and especially May in 2017 (Figure 4). This drop indicates that there are some dynamics at work in the ecosystem of film festivals in the Netherlands. For instance, there were sixteen film festivals in 2017 that had no appearance in 2016: ten of these were new festivals, four festivals were two yearly festivals with no edition in 2016, and two festivals had no edition in 2016 for unclear reasons. The other way around: there were 24 film festivals in 2016 that had no appearance in 2017. This is due to for instance one-off festivals, two-yearly festivals with no edition in 2017, festivals that had their last edition in 2016 (e.g. Breaking Ground, Indian Film Festival The Hague), and festivals that 'skipped' a year, like for instance Heritage in Motion, which in 2017 was held outside of the Netherlands. Still, of more than ten festivals it was not traceable why they did not have an edition in 2017. Further research is necessary, for instance the relation with funding practices of film festivals and municipal policies.

The data on the division of film festival editions over the provinces makes clear that the drop in festival editions is a nationwide trend: there were less, or in best cases the same amount of, film festival editions in 2017 in each province, with the notable exception of Limburg that had thirteen film festival editions in 2017 as compared to twelve in 2016. Still, the top five of provinces with most festival editions remains almost the same, with Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland as the main stages for film festivals; only Gelderland has dropped out of the top five, replaced by Limburg. The top three busiest cities remained the same in 2017, with Amsterdam still the absolute leader, followed by Rotterdam and Utrecht. The combination of the drop in festival editions in the month of May and the province of Gelderland points towards certain film festivals as an explanation for this drop, like Cinema al Giro, which had ten editions in this province in May 2016 and was a one-off festival related to the start of the Giro d'Italia that year in the Netherlands.

The film festival season of 2017 resembles 2016 in several ways. The clear majority of film festivals remain returning festivals that are held annually. The ratio between paid/free is pretty much the same, and the same goes for the ratio between indoor and outdoor festivals, which is exactly the same for both years. The ratio for one-day versus multi-day festivals differs, with 2017 seeing less one-day festivals: 26%-74% in comparison with 35%-65% in 2016.



Fig. 4: Number of film festival editions in 2016 and 2017 by month.

Discussion

The Dutch film festival landscape can be mapped as shown above. We have gathered a view on the size and some characteristics of the film festival landscape in the Netherlands, as well as some programming features, social media usage (not presented here), and some insights into possible dynamics over time. But this is only the beginning. We can mention three additional questions. For one, the definition of concepts plays a key role in including or excluding instances as film festivals, and this not only refers to ‘festival’ as a concept but also concepts like ‘edition’. In an earlier project on ‘public entertainment’ (theatre, film, fairs, circus, et cetera) these kinds of discussions were tackled by forming an ontology of concepts,[7] which is a demanding task but indispensable, especially when linking data from different sources. Second, linking data from other sources is certainly necessary to get an even more detailed picture of the festival landscape. For instance, linking the current data to databases with actual programming information (something we already do for music festivals) makes it possible to compare regular programming with festival programming, especially premieres and their effect on for instance visitor numbers. Third, the dynamics of the film sector cannot be fully understood without considering policies on a national level but also on a municipal level, and not only regarding funding strategies but also the view taken on film as a cultural expression having value for communities. These

undiscovered areas are becoming within reach and offer the prospect of a rich and detailed overview of the film festival landscape, which will be helpful to answer questions from policy-makers, festival professionals, and researchers.

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Notes

- [1] van Vliet 2012.
- [2] van Vliet 2016.
- [3] van Vliet 2017.
- [4] van Vliet 2012.
- [5] See van Vliet 2012.
- [6] See van Vliet 2017 for such an extensive account.
- [7] Brussee & van Vliet & Wartena 2008.