

ABSTRACT

DARYA LEVCHENKO. Secret Screenings and New Discoveries: The Role of Fantastic Fest in Foreign Genre Film Distribution in the U.S.

International genre film festivals offer a unique site for cultural diversity, audience engagement, a local media economy, and global media literacy. This research focuses on audience engagement and festival programming in regards to international genre film festivals in the U.S. and the ways in which the demand for diverse media product evolves and changes depending on the film festival's image and the local cultural context.

The image and brand development history of Fantastic Fest—the largest, oldest, and arguably the most influential out of over ninety genre film festivals in the U.S.—and a quantitative analysis of foreign film representation in its programming provide an argument for the importance of exhibition events akin to Fantastic Fest. Comparative analysis of the exhibited foreign titles, as well as an examination of the Audience Award and Secret Screenings, helps to identify the main trends in the festival's programming: fostering the exclusivity of American fandom and increasing the importance of Fantastic Fest as a site for foreign film discovery. The two trends' influence on the genre canon and the cultural elements surrounding it signals a change in genre film expectations in the US, moving towards inclusivity, gender diversity, and global cultural variety.

Another conclusion of the survey is that the festival, and the distribution circuit it triggers, form aesthetic curiosity in the genre festival attendees and bring novel foreign films to audiences across the country. If the current trends in their growth, responsiveness to cultural

context, and openness to programming experimental content persist, genre film festivals (and Fantastic Fest as their flagbearer) might not only be one of the last import avenues for non-mainstream foreign film in the U.S, they might also become one of the largest systems for global media literacy distribution through film.