



BLACKBIRD FILM FESTIVAL

The Programming Selection Hierarchy & Submission Tips

With so much competition out there, what can a filmmaker do to ensure their film gets noticed? As filmmakers ourselves, we wish we knew... But the reality is that all festivals have a very limited resource working against them: **TIME**

At Blackbird, programmers will curate as many films as possible each season while maintaining the high level of quality and thematic motifs our audience has come to expect. However, we can only screen so many films in a weekend and so, inevitably, many amazingly fantastic films don't make the final cut... So the question becomes, how do Blackbird programmers determine official selections during the final stage of the judging process and why might they choose one film over another?

Firstly, it's important to know that programmers have no influence over the first and second stages of the judging process. Judges work independently to rank and review films based on their own preferences. However, if a film is recommended forward by both first and second stage judges, it enters the final programming stage. Once in this final stage, our programmers have the power to select any film for any reason. It's at this stage of the process that filmmakers may have some influence over the programmer's decision. During the programming stage, the number of submissions still in consideration has been drastically reduced to approximately 300 very high-quality films and therefore, programmers are actively looking for reasons to include one film over another. So, what are programmers typically looking for?

#1 – THEMATIC FIT

- First and foremost, programmers actively seek out groups of films with strong thematic connections so that we can curate a 60-70 minute screening block. For instance, in 2019 there was a themed block around "Motherhood" because programmers found six films in the final selection pool that explored various stages of becoming a mother. While it's impossible to know what the different block themes each season will be, we tend to always include blocks themed around "Love & Heartache", "Life, Death & Family" as well as "Futuristic Universes" and "Dramatic Action".

#2 – QUALITY

- Next in the hierarchy is quality – not only in terms of "technical production" but, more importantly, the quality of the narrative. While technical perfection should always be a filmmaker's goal, it is often overlooked if the narrative story and message of the film is strong. Many high-budget films with expert cinematography and sound design are rejected each year simply because the story lacks heart / direction. However, this does not mean that high quality image and sound are not important. Accepted films must meet a certain technical standard to be considered. In truth, films that have serious technical issues, especially around sound design, do not advance to the final programming stage. Filmmakers are strongly encouraged to ensure their project links are working.

#3 – INCLUSION

- During the final selection stage, programmers will also consider a filmmaker's background when making official selection decisions. Since 2018, Blackbird has committed to ensuring that at least 50% of our annual lineup of films are made by women. We also try to include films made by underrepresented filmmakers as often as possible so that we can showcase a diversity of voices at the festival. Filmmakers who take issue with this need not submit their films for consideration.

#4 – LENGTH

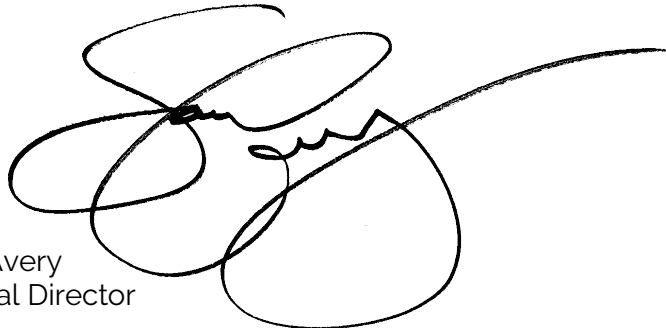
- As mentioned above, time is a very limited resource for film festivals. Therefore, programmers must consider the length of a film during this stage of the selection process. Typically, the average length of a selection is approximately 10 minutes. We have found that screening blocks are most successful with approximately 6 to 7 short films. With that said, we do include a variety of 40+ minute films each season but the competition for those timeslots tends to be very high. In short, films under 15 minutes have a much higher chance of being selected.

#5 – ENGAGEMENT

- Lastly, a filmmaker's willingness to engage and participate in the Blackbird Film Festival may, at times, play a factor. While items 1-4 are not typically negotiable, item #5 (Engagement) is where a filmmaker can make themselves known to programmers by contacting Blackbird (late December / early January) and sharing a bit about themselves and their film. We can't guarantee that this will have an impact over the final selection decision but at least it will draw more attention to you and your film during an important stage of the process. With that said, one thing is certain - a film festival is not a film festival if filmmakers don't engage and participate. Letting us know that you are willing to engage with Blackbird (either in person or remotely) goes a long way in the final selection process. Therefore, it is important to respond to festival emails promptly and complete any questionnaires we send your way. Often, we more closely consider filmmakers who promptly reply to our emails. Not only does this show us that a filmmaker is still interested in Blackbird, but also that festival organizers will not be forced to track you down if your film is selected. Unfortunately, there are always those filmmakers we cannot reach each season... This is extremely frustrating for the Blackbird staff and typically disqualifies these filmmakers from award nominations. So, please be sure to UPDATE your contact information on Filmfreeway as soon as possible so that our team can reach you if your film is selected.

In conclusion, festival programming is quite a tedious process and many fantastic films will inevitably slip through the cracks. However, by outlining our "Programming Selection Hierarchy" we hope that filmmakers might better understand our process and determine whether submitting to the Blackbird Film Festival is right for you and your film. Please feel free to contact Blackbird (info@blackbirdfilmfestival.com) at any time if you have questions or concerns.

Thank you for considering Blackbird,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Avery', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sam Avery
Festival Director

*P.S. – The fact that you read this entire letter shows that you are truly interested in Blackbird and therefore we'd like to offer you a discount via Filmfreeway – use code **SUBTIPS** for 50% off our submission fees.*