



FRAMING FILM FESTIVALS

Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After

Edited by
Marijke de Valck · Antoine Damiens

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Framing Film Festivals

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Every day, somewhere in the world a film festival takes place. Most people know about the festival in Cannes, the world's leading film festival, and many will also be familiar with other high profile events, like Venice, the oldest festival; Sundance, America's vibrant independent scene; and Toronto, a premier market place. In the past decade the study of film festivals has blossomed. A growing number of scholars recognize the significance of film festivals for understanding cinema's production, distribution, reception and aesthetics, and their work has amounted to a prolific new field in the study of film culture. The Framing Film Festivals series presents the best of contemporary film festival research. Books in the series are academically rigorous, socially relevant, contain critical discourse on festivals, and are intellectually original. Framing Film Festivals offers a dedicated space for academic knowledge dissemination.

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CHAPTER 1

What Happens When Festivals Can't Happen?

Antoine Damiens and Marijke de Valck

What happens when film festivals can't happen? Until March 2020, this question was not on anyone's mind: festivals have been typically conceived as recurring, cyclical celebrations—as an integral part of the cultural life of towns and communities. Each year or each season, they bring communities together and mark the passing of time.

Since their global proliferation in the second half of the twentieth century, film festivals have played a similar role in the cultural life of cinema: each year, the festival calendar largely influences the release, distribution, and eventual consecration of international films. Indeed, film festivals are firmly ingrained in global systems of production, circulation, and consumption of moving images. Top-tier festivals launch film titles and establish brand names that appeal to global audiences: they serve as a prime

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supply chain for quality programming in cinemas and arthouses. Similarly, a multitude of small- and medium-sized festival events fills the many gaps left by regular distribution: they cater to specific audiences and communities, specialize in certain genres and themes, or focus on particular causes and agendas. Beyond such economic and curatorial values, film festivals service a variety of stakeholder interests, ranging from tourism, regional development, and city marketing to policy goals, political ideals, and soft power.

With the arrival of a pandemic era, this complex machinery came to a grinding halt. The unthinkable became reality: sanitary and containment measures taken to combat the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus¹ had an unprecedented impact on society and on film festivals worldwide. “Normal” activities, such as people gathering collectively in theaters and public spaces to enjoy films, quickly became redefined as a high-risk health hazard. Festivals have been forced to postpone, cancel, switch to online formats, or move outdoors. Each of these formulas brings forth particular practical challenges for both festival participants and the film industry at large (including, but not limited to, the status of world premieres, copyrights online, geoblocking, navigating the politics of digital platforms, revenue loss, the lifecycle of films, and the awards season). To that end, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed in practice what had been noted in theory before; that singular film festivals are connected to global networks in which flows are subjected to temporal and spatial positionings, marked by competition, hierarchization, and (explicit as well as latent) dependencies.

Indeed, the cancelation of major, A-list festivals fundamentally impacted both the geographic organization and the calendar of the film industry. These big, established international festivals play the role of cultural gatekeepers: through their selection and awards, they help define which films are worth seeing and which films will be ignored (de Valck 2007). These choices have major consequences for the circulation of a film in different geographic markets and for its potential run during the awards season. Furthermore, these large, established international festivals often act as

¹In this book we will use the term Covid-19 or simply Covid as shorthand for SARS-CoV-2, the official name of the coronavirus discovered in 2019. At the time of writing and preparing this manuscript both COVID-19 and Covid-19 are common terms. COVID-19 is the abbreviation used by the World Health Organization and in scientific papers. Covid-19 is widely used in public discourse and journalism, where uppercase words are reserved for abbreviations that are written and spoken as a collection of words, such as BBC or IMF (Ribbans 2020).

film markets where professionals buy and sell films, pitch new ideas, and look for potential collaborations. While some festivals pivoted to online formats, these networking activities were difficult to replicate online.

Covid-19 also impacted smaller and medium-sized festivals. These events not only constitute a secondary market (exhibiting films, paying screening fees, and thus financing the film ecosystem) but also create and sustain communities around films. Given that they often rely on volunteer or underpaid labor and have limited access to material resources, some of these festivals are particularly at risk; they may not survive the pandemic.

At minima, this crisis thus both forces us to confront the fundamental role played by festivals in the economy of film and reveals the interconnected, transnational nature of its circuits. Tellingly, even the few festivals that were held in person—for instance, in countries that were not yet impacted by or had successfully contained the spread of Covid-19—experienced the effects of disruptions elsewhere on the festival circuit. This edited collection aims to both document the effects of Covid-19 on film festivals and to further theorize film festivals as they adapt and transform. To some extent, this crisis begs us to consider what happens when festivals can't happen: while films have found new (temporary) channels of distribution (most often in the forms of digital releases), the festival format appears particularly vulnerable in pandemic times. Imperfect measures, such as the move to a digital format, cannot recapture the communal experience at the very core of festivals.

PANDEMIC SCHOLARSHIP: DOCUMENTING AND THINKING THROUGH AN ONGOING CRISIS

The idea for a book on film festivals and their responses to the Covid crisis was hatched early into the pandemic. We quickly understood that the pandemic was multifaceted and that it would heavily impact and/or transform international film festivals. It also became clear that both the pandemic and governments' responses to the health crisis were constantly shifting: as such, it seemed impossible to predict where things would be going or how long the pandemic would be lasting.

We first decided to use the Festival Reviews section of *NECSUS* (which we co-edit) as a space for thinking through the crisis as it unfolded. Indeed, festival reviews constitute a hybrid genre of academic writing set between the slow and rigorous temporality of more traditional forms of scholarship

and the fast-paced rhythms of festival reports. Festival reviews enabled us to both focus on specific case studies and document the crisis: we simultaneously aimed to historicize festival organizers' ever-shifting responses to the pandemic and to propose a preliminary, provisional assessment of the effects of Covid-19 on the cinematic industry. Our special dossier on festivals' responses to the first wave (De Valck and Damiens 2020), published in December 2020, offered documentation of the earliest of the pandemic outbreak. We then edited a second special dossier that examined how festivals continued to adapt to the crisis, which was published in May 2021.

While festival reviews first enabled us to capture festival organizers' early responses to the crisis, it quickly became apparent that we could not keep up with the evolution of the pandemic: festival reviews always seemed to be slightly outdated, no matter how quickly we published them. This disconnect between the temporalities of academic scholarship and the fast-paced, unpredictable evolution of the pandemic is at the core of what Philipp Dominik Keidl and Laliv Melamed call "pandemic scholarship": attempting to "reply to the moment's crisis" and provide "informed reflection [that] necessarily demand distance and time," pandemic scholarship is always both future-oriented and necessarily outdated. It "represent[s] a certain moment of change as much as it is aware of the effects of the crisis on its own operations" (Melamed and Keidl 2020).

We initially conceived of this book as complementary to the fast-paced reviews we published in *NECSUS*—as a more traditional effort to document the crisis and to provide preliminary *theoretical* analyses of pandemic festivals. We naively believed that working over the course of a year (rather than just a couple of months) would enable us to better understand the evolution of Covid-19 and its impact on international festivals. Perhaps we were also hoping that the pandemic would be over by the time we published this book. After all, our governments kept presenting pandemic restrictions as *temporary measures* that *could* be rapidly lifted, promising us a progressive return to "normal." As the crisis unfolded, however, it became clear such hopes were illusory. Covid was not brought under control in one, two, or three waves. Any consistent *global* return to normal failed to materialize. Instead, the world had to deal with the reality of continuous and asynchronous waves in different geographic contexts, rendering any analysis of the pandemic even *more complex*. The contours of this volume have been adapted to our progressive insights in what types of scholarship are expedient and feasible under these circumstances.

Taking on the challenge of analyzing an ongoing crisis, the contributors in this volume approach their respective topics from a set of shared conceptual entry points, which in part stem from having worked within the tradition of film festival studies for a considerable time and for another part feature as manifestations of pandemic scholarship.

First, there is a concordant acknowledgment of the global nature of the festival phenomenon, of local/global dynamics, and of the way festivals' local responses are often imbricated with territorial concerns and other crises. Like scholarship on transnational cinemas, world cinemas, and screen worlds, film festival studies helped advance our understanding of the reconfigurations of local, regional, national, and global relationships in the global film and media industries. Following on from this, the chapters in this book attempt to capture the impact of Covid-19 on festival economies in a wide variety of contexts, paying attention to the snow-ball effects and interconnectedness of festivals while fundamentally underscoring different responses and effects of the crises.

We made a conscious effort to consider a diverse array of festivals—in terms of geographic scope, location, format, curatorial focus, and size. Some contributors focus on A-list festivals, while others prioritize non-Western festivals and other forms of circuits. Our insistence on the geographic and thematic diversity of the festival phenomenon aims to not only illuminate the global reach of the pandemic but also to accentuate different responses to the crisis: as such, the challenges faced by cultural organizers and politicians are often specific to their local histories and economies. There is no one-size-fits-all miracle solution, but rather a myriad of experimentations with the festival format, each speaking to local challenges. For instance, several of our contributors make clear that the organization of online festivals cannot be thought of as a measure that could be implemented uniformly without any consideration of local contexts. As such, the “virtual” and de-territorialized space of the internet is necessarily inflected by very local concerns over access, infrastructures, and cultural habits.

Second, our contributors push against linear understandings of crisis management. Traditionally, scholars think of crises as new, emerging situations that can potentially threaten an organization's existence. In that framework, a crisis reveals a lack of adaptation to a new situation. An organization can potentially address the situation by implementing structural changes (reorganizing its operations) or by innovating (finding a new way to solve a problem). A crisis is thus seen as a test that can either reveal an

organization's shortcomings or create new, oftentimes more efficient, possibilities (Starbuck, Greve, and Hedberg 1978). Our contributors note that this modelization of crises doesn't seem to adequately apply to our present situation. For instance, most innovations on the festival circuit were not a direct consequence of Covid-19. Some of the solutions being implemented—such as the shifts to outdoor screenings or to virtual formats—were already popular *before* the pandemic. Instead of merely seeing the pandemic as a historic rupture, our contributors emphasize the ways in which its handling has been informed by preceding developments. For instance, the popularization of online festivals during the pandemic cannot be understood outside of earlier experiments with online exhibition and virtual platforms. Similarly, our contributors make clear that the solution chosen by organizers oftentimes do not aim to *transform* their organizations in a definitive manner: they are typically conceived as temporary, makeshift measures that simply aim to recreate some form of festival experience *before* an eventual return to “normal.”

Third, as examples of pandemic scholarship, the chapters in this book spring from adaptive approaches. Much like the innovative solutions sought by festivals *in practice* that are bound up with existing expertise, our contributors search for original frames to construe what is happening in the festival world *in abstraction* by connecting to earlier models and tested methods. Moreover, we present scholarly approaches along and in dialogue with practitioners' voices. Our shared methodological toolkit contains interviews, (online) ethnography, (online) fieldwork, and archival research. Contributors work with a broad range of sources and materials, some of which are ephemeral. If managing festivals during Covid was often “messy,” searching for the “right” approaches and frames too was by necessity far less predictable and transparent than our “normal” research designs would have been. In the process of making sense of the ongoing crisis, there was a clear need to be flexible and test out approaches and concepts to find out which worked. A substantial portion of the chapters is co-authored, allowing contributors to deliberate their *modus operandi* for the subject at hand and work across geographical distances. Due to the rapid roll-out of video conferencing, moreover, it was possible to organize fruitful exchanges between (almost) all contributors during a virtual seminar held over Zoom.

RETHINKING FILM FESTIVALS IN THE PANDEMIC ERA AND AFTER

The volume before you unites several aims. It functions as an expeditious response to the crisis, documenting new forms of festival organizing before they become routine or disappear and starting a critical dialogue on contemporary (Covid-proof) festival ramifications. It attempts to expand festival scholarship by taking into consideration geographic areas and phenomena that are traditionally set aside. It is an exercise in assessing the utility of festival studies' core concepts and methods in pandemic times, probing which may have reached their shelf life. And finally, it also aspires to start a future-oriented discussion on film festivals and to take stock of how we use our own scholarly discourse and practice for specific aims, acknowledging our indebtedness to rethinking film festivals in the pandemic era and after. To these ends, the book is divided into three parts.

The first part, "Contaminated Circuits: Covid-19 and the Festival Ecosystem," looks at the impact of the pandemic on the festival circuit. It pays attention to the role played by festivals in organizing the film industry and assesses some of the solutions chosen by festival staff. As the health crisis endured, it became tangible just how interconnected festivals are. With every additional event in the regular chronology of the film festival calendar that was affected, the impact of Covid-19 on the festival ecosystem and film industry deepened. However, soon it *also* became apparent that film festivals had not been brought to a standstill at all. Some festivals settled on writing off what they hoped to be an anomaly year, but many switched gears and continued their work, offering film screenings, competitions, curated programs, film markets, and industry events in adapted or alternative forms. In other words, instead of grinding to a halt, in the weeks and months that followed the pandemic outbreak the film festival machinery evolved, expanded, and was emulated online. This restructuration of festivalization in pandemic times provides contributors in the first part of the book with a unique opportunity to atomize and assess the festival ecosystem.

Skadi Loist zooms in on the cancelation of the 2020 Cannes Film Festival, using this moment of disruption to think through the mechanisms of the festival ecosystem with its hierarchical logic and dependencies on various stakeholders. The canceled festival premieres left filmmakers, producers, and sales agents in limbo, she argues. Shifting perspective between stakeholders, Loist offers an insightful glimpse of power

struggles and survival tactics down the value chain. Echoing her interest in survival mechanisms, Brendan Kredell draws on the recent history of the American newspaper industry—facing its own crisis precipitated by the commercialization of the Internet in the 1990s—to frame the current equilibrium-seeking process of modern film festivals. In particular, he highlights a certain scarcity/ubiquity reversal, showing how the shift toward online exhibition challenges the artificial scarcity that is traditionally created by pre-Covid festivals. Picking up on this, Diane Burgess and Kirsten Stevens observe how old benchmarks linked to territorialization reemerge in new forms. Geoblocking was among the first standards to be adopted by festivals moving online, precisely because it proved very effective in maintaining established media distribution patterns. In addition, Burgess and Stevens consider temporal notions such as buzz, liveness, atmosphere, and presence, which are traditionally seen as crucial for value creation at festivals and ponder if and how these may manifest in virtual environments.

The second half of Part I continues with an examination of the shift to online formats, diving deeper into issues of audience reach, audience participation, and the search for new modes of curatorial address. James Value, Theresa Heath, Lesley-Ann Dickson, and Rebecca Finkel draw on television studies in search of conceptual frames that can account for online festival exhibition. It is the modularity and malleability of the domestic media space, they argue, that poses specific challenges to festivals in finding the right mode of address. In addition, festivals are figuring out how to make time matter online by carving a new temporal space in the everyday routine of the home, which sits somewhere between the immediacy of broadcasting and the asynchronous flexibility of video-on-demand (VOD). Focusing on VOD, Aida Vallejo and Christel Taillibert provide an analysis of existing European festival-platform alliances and their adaptation to the crisis. Their account of how these alliances ran into problems during the pandemic is an illustration of the insistent demand put on technologies to deliver and to meet stakeholders' needs, even if the technological infrastructure already seemed to be in place. María Paz Peirano and Gonzalo Ramírez's chapter is a necessary reminder that Internet access and digital literacy cannot be taken for granted everywhere. Monitoring how the Chilean film festival landscape responded to the pandemic, they observe a paradox regarding online access: while online festival exhibition made more films accessible to potentially larger and more diverse audiences, these films were not necessarily easier to watch for audiences, some

of which were faced with a mix of technological, personal, and cultural barriers. In this respect, Covid-19 reflected and further deepened some of the social challenges emerging from the 2019 social outburst, *Estallido*.

The second part, “Experimenting on the Frontlines: Innovative Responses to the Crisis,” details various practical strategies and innovative modes of exhibition put in place by festival organizers. As these case studies demonstrate, festival organizers seized the opportunity to rethink their mandate, reach out to new audiences, or initiate new forms of programming. Most often, festival organizers attempted to recreate a sense of eventness and of festivalness. For instance, Ylenia Olibet and Alanna Thain analyze how *Vidéo de Femmes dans le Parc* (Women’s Videos in the Park), a summertime open-air screening of independent short videos held annually since 1991 at Park La Fontaine in Montreal, re-invented itself as a virtual event foregrounding the embodied and affective labor of audiences and festival organizers. Similarly, Jonathan Petrychyn compares the strategies of two Toronto-based film festivals—the Toronto Outdoor Picture and the Toronto Queer Film Festival. Petrychyn examines the decision-making processes of each festival and how they responded to major shifts in municipal, provincial, and federal art funding policies. Both festivals capitalized upon these new opportunities and managed to create new ways of bringing their audiences together and to offer material and emotional support to artists, filmmakers, and festival-goers. This section also includes two slightly shorter contributions from practitioners’ perspectives that provide insights in individual experiences of dealing the pandemic crisis on the frontlines. It is such lived experience that is at the beginning of festivals’ future recovery and reform. Looking at this issue from her perspective as a programmer, Farah Clémentine Dramani-Issifou argues for a reconceptualization of the labor of film curators. According to her, it is not enough to program films: festivals should *care* for their films and communities. This need for new, ethical modes of collaboration between filmmakers, festival organizers, and platforms is also at the core of Jenni Olson and Jiz Lee’s discussion of the history of online queer film exhibition and of the challenges faced by queer and feminist adult filmmakers. Their intervention examines various challenges faced by queer organizers, from the 1990s digital film festivals organized by Olson to contemporary online adult film festivals. As they make clear, the shift to a digital format meant that many festivals were confronted with new issues—such as finding a streaming platform that could host adult materials or a payment processor willing to work with adult content. Olson and Lee outline the need to

create community-oriented platforms that can help revitalize the economy of (adult) filmmaking.

The second section of Part II examines under-theorized examples of non-Western festivals, paying close attention to their relationship to the local and global circuits of cinema. Beth Tsai focuses on Taiwan, a country that, at the time of writing, was almost unaffected by Covid-19: most festivals were held in person with minimal disruptions. Tsai argues that this absence of *direct* impact of Covid-19 may have been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the vitality of Taiwanese festivals has led to a global resurgence of Taiwanese cinema. On the other hand, festival organizers may have missed the chance to innovate and to adapt to post-Covid modes of film distribution and exhibition. Tilottama Karlekar focuses on three community-oriented festivals organized in a country particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, India. Resituating these festivals within the context of ongoing social protests, Karlekar analyzes the divergent strategies adopted by festival organizers and how they reflect their positioning vis-à-vis both local and globalized audiences.

In the concluding part, “Never Waste a Good Crisis: (Re)imagining Festivals After the Pandemic,” we turn our perspective explicitly to the future. “Never let a good crisis go to waste” or “never waste a good crisis” is a popular attitude in (crisis) management. It may have been Winston Churchill who spoke words to that effect in relation to the formation of the United Nations, an unprecedented positive turn in international relations after World War II, hatched in the midst of a crisis.² The catchphrase refers to the belief that one can choose to think in terms of possibilities and opportunities and that moments of crisis lend themselves particularly well to out-of-the-box solutions, creation of prospects, and crafting a better future. The lure of the idea is obvious. When the going gets tough, we dream of better days and our suffering is somewhat relieved by imagining scenarios in which today’s misery will be meaningful in retrospect. The combination of hardship and hope during crises fosters a certain collective openness to embrace fundamental transformation. As such, crises yield momentum to deal with structural changes that are needed.

² At the same time, as journalist and activist Naomi Klein cautions in her recent writings on “coronavirus capitalism,” we need to keep in check any unbridled changes attempted, particularly on the political and economic fronts, during the shock of a crisis (Klein 2020).

The three contributions in this final part each addresses key challenges for film festivals' immediate future. Hoping to redefine what festivals will look like in the long term, the contributors seize Covid-19 to actively promote an agenda and offer a rethinking of film festivals. These concluding chapters explicitly encourage us to take seriously *other* crises and to actively engage with various academic and political traditions which have been overlooked by festival scholars.

Lindiwe Dovey and Estrella Sendra call for the acceleration of decolonization in contemporary film cultures. Combining theory with practice, they draw on decolonization theory while engaging in dialogue with the work of 22 filmmakers and curators around the world to project what could and should be done to achieve more inclusive, sustainable, and decolonized film festival worlds. Just as the impact of Covid-19 differs across geographical locations, decolonization can mean different things in different contexts. Therefore, Dovey and Sendra argue, there is no one-size-fits-all solution available to film festivals to remodel themselves. Following on from this, they refer to film festivals *worlds* in the plural, acknowledging the heterogeneous practices of negotiating local, transnational, and global forces.

In the second contribution, Antoine Damiens draws our attention to the looming threat of losing precious sources for future study as the online experiments and endeavors of virtual film festivals are not properly archived. This not only underscores the relevance of documenting the crisis as it unfolds—one of the aims of the volume—but also raises the more general issue of what is archived in the first place. Ephemeral cultural events are notoriously more difficult to preserve, which affects festivals in general, but bigger budget events are less readily overlooked and ignored, Damiens reminds us. For film festival scholars, the problem of incomplete historiographies and misrepresentation lurks as less-wealthy festivals continue with hybrid editions that are not adequately preserved.

To close off the section, Marijke de Valck and Ger Zielinski raise the issue of environmental sustainability. Even if Covid-19 did not bring the festival machinery really to a halt, it did create a near standstill in the flows of people traveling across countries to visit festivals. In the face of a severe climate crisis, they ask if it is warranted to return to “normal” at all. Arguing the time is right to put the “eco” back in the “festival ecosystem,” De Valck and Zielinski promote a holistic approach that addresses the carbon footprint of onsite festival operations, recognizes the impact of

media infrastructures that enable festivals' virtualization, and challenges festivals' systemic dependency on a logic of growth.

Looking ahead at possible festival futures, one aspect so important to festivals' enduring presence in our cultural lives stands out: their impermanence—the idea that everything is always slightly changing. Each year and each season, festivals have ever so subtly adapted to the changing demands of their environments to ensure survival and preserve their essential identities, traditions, and rituals. This is not the first time that festivals were forced to adapt: the history of the film festival phenomenon makes clear that these events constantly evolve to reflect major developments in the film industry and in our cultural zeitgeist. These moments of transformation can be particularly pronounced, triggering systemic changes and marking the transition to a new phase (De Valck 2007). These are the historic junctures noted down in our festival historiographies. Having worked through the pandemic era, the contributors in this volume have taken on the role of active witnesses to film festivals in a state of disequilibrium. Their accounts and reflections give good reasons to believe we are living through a historic moment and that Covid-19 will mark the beginning of a new phase. At the same time, this volume will draw your attention to those essential aspects of festival culture that remain: festivals are in the business of “caring” for cinema; they remain committed to their audiences and participate in the economy of film.

As editors, we hope this book will serve both as a preliminary account of the effects of Covid-19 on film festivals and the cultural industry and as a model for thinking through collaborative scholarship in uncertain times. While the crisis is perhaps far from being over, it became clear that we needed to recreate connections through our work as scholars: to ensure a solid knowledge base that could illuminate our present situation, to learn to work with and alongside practitioners, and to jointly preserve our history amidst continuous processes of changes.

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PART I

Contaminated Circuits: Covid-19 and
the Festival Ecosystem



Stopping the Flow: Film Circulation in the Festival Ecosystem at a Moment of Disruption

Skadi Loist

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the film festival sector to a standstill and forced it to reconsider what a film festival is and how it functions within the larger film cultural ecosystem. After a first shock and taking a moment to rethink and contemplate, festivals have acted as a sort of laboratory for film culture where various stakeholders in the festival sector sought to develop new routes (Filmfest München 2021). Some of these might be temporary adaptations to the pandemic conditions, while others might stay on in post-pandemic film culture. What became clear in the conversations and think tanks held during the time the industry collectively held its breath is that the pandemic acted mostly as a magnifying glass and

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accelerator for existing structures and mechanisms. In particular, the social distancing aspects and the drive toward online communication have accelerated trends that had already started to appear due to the digitalization of industry and entertainment consumption. The temporary disruption of the usual mechanics, however, shed new light on contentious points within the ecosystem. Thus, when looking for ways to adapt to the new conditions, the stakeholders had to consider old players and usual tracks as well as side-stepping into other emerging structures. In the following chapter, I will take a closer look at the various stakeholders impacted by the disruption of the usual festival circulation structures.

My account of the relations between various stakeholders presented here is informed, maybe even biased, by my position as a festival researcher situated in Germany. The last big festival that took place before the pandemic hit on a global scale was that season's first A-list festival, the Berlinale. While the virus SARS-CoV-2 had already been discovered in Wuhan in December 2019 and news of a Covid-19 pandemic, which experts warned might become global, spread in February 2020, the festival in Berlin took place largely uninterrupted from February 20 to March 1, 2020. Toward the end of the festival, the pandemic crept closer. Ski resorts in Austria and Northern Italy had become hot spots and Italian colleagues left a panel early to catch a flight home before borders closed. The last smaller festival to take place was the Berlin Feminist Film Week (March 5–9, 2020), scheduled around International Women's Day. That same week, the Luxembourg City Film Festival (scheduled on March 5–15, 2020) was celebrating its tenth-anniversary edition, until it was cut short on March 12. By mid-March, a complete lockdown had been imposed in most European countries. Only essential shops were open, while schools and social and cultural spaces, like cinema theaters, were closed (Artechock 2020). By the end of March, colleges and universities scrambled to prepare for an ad-hoc online-only semester starting in April.

After a few weeks of shock and standstill, the realization set in that this shutdown of public cultural life would be more than a blip lasting just a couple of weeks and instead marked a “generation-defining” global event (Rotko et al. 2020, 4). Industry professionals started to take stock and to reconsider their options. What was it that their festivals do? What could (and what should) be done online? What could (not) work? Which stakeholders needed to be (and were) considered? Part of these discussions took place in online discussions, at online film festivals, within industry networks like the *AG Filmfestival* (“Working group film festival,” an

association of German film festivals founded in fall 2019 comprising 113 festivals as members as of April 2021),¹ or the *Hauptverband Cinephilie* (HVC) (“Main association cinephilia,” an association that brings together various groups in the film cultural sector including festival organizers, distributors, sales agents, film critics, theater owners, and filmmakers, and which calls for cinephilia and an art-based rather than a commercial understanding of film).² Both associations were started before the pandemic to discuss the future of German film culture, especially in light of the pending renewal of the German film funding law.³ Between spring 2020 and spring 2021, the subgroup of the HVC focusing on film festivals held monthly meetings with colleagues from various parts of the film cultural sector to discuss the role of festivals, both in general and during the pandemic.

Let us take a look at the various stakeholders involved and let me try to scrutinize and untangle this network ecosystem by following a chronological recounting of events.

CONTINUOUS UNCERTAINTY

Once Covid-19 had been acknowledged as a global pandemic that hit people hard on all continents, strict social distancing rules, shelter-in-place orders, and lockdowns were imposed throughout Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia. As early as mid-March 2020, many festivals were forced to stop midway. Others were canceled before they could even start (Wolf 2020a; Winter 2020a). Among the first festivals affected was CPH:Dox, scheduled for March 18–29, 2020, which, in an unprecedented effort, pivoted their festival to an online event within a couple of days to

¹<https://ag-filmfestival.de/>.

²<https://www.hvcinephilie.de/>.

³Both associations are unhappy with the commercial orientation of national film funding, which largely considers the production side only and measures success mainly by box office figures. A few (international) film festivals are acknowledged to be significant for a film’s quality and life cycle: selection for a festival competition and awards are counted as reference points toward future funding bids. In most cases, however, film festivals are not acknowledged as important players by funders: attendance statistics of German films, for instance, don’t count festival attendance and only a handful of “lighthouse” festivals are funded through the German cultural film fund of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM). Festival funding is thus mostly the task of regional and municipal funding bodies. These two organizations call for the integration of film festivals into the larger film funding ecosystem.

much acclaim.⁴ Major US American festival SXSW was less successful in creating an applauded digital version (Hobbins-White and Limov 2020). Dozens of festivals had to consider whether they would be able to turn their festivals, with immense efforts in infrastructures and resources, into online events or whether cancelation would be their better option.

In April 2020 during the first lockdown, when there was no comprehensive information about the long-term projection of the virus, there was still an illusion that this anomaly would only last one year and that everything would soon go back to normal. One thought was to halt everything for a year in order to show films planned for a 2020 release in 2021, which would also solve the problem of the production gap. However, as people were restricted to their own homes, film consumption and streaming rates went up, for streaming services and traditional television alike (Mikos 2021).

Decisions were especially difficult to make: the situation remained uncertain, and it seemed impossible to determine how long strict lockdown and social distancing measures would have to be obeyed. The situation kept changing every week: with Covid-19 cases going up or down exponentially, festivals have had to constantly adapt and to create several plans. Planning for a festival takes time: it requires organizers to make several educated guesses about the evolution of the pandemic and about the potential reopening of theaters. Some early festivals sought refuge in postponing the festival to a later stage.

This uncertainty and reshuffling of the calendar had, and at the time of writing continues to have, a very direct impact: it disrupts the finely attuned mechanisms of the film festival circuit. The festival landscape and calendar stayed dynamic. The reports “Waiting for the Wave” 1–4 in which Reinhard W. Wolf monitored the changing festival calendar for *Shortfilm.de* between March and August 2020 show this very clearly (Wolf 2020a, b, c, d). Festivals in March 2020 might have opted to postpone until they could go back to physical theaters in the fall. However, by June or August, it became clear that the postponed spring festivals threatened to clash with the regular fall festivals. In that context, some festivals changed their minds and opted to remain at their usual time slot and go online, while others went hybrid and created alternate versions, including open-air festival screenings in the summer months (Wolf 2020d).

The International Women’s Film Festival Dortmund|Köln, originally set for late March 2020, opted for a downsized program presented online.

⁴ See Chap. 6 by Aida Vallejo and Christel Taillibert in this collection.

The festival was going digital with pre-recorded film talks, while a short on-site event took place in September 2020, when movie theaters had opened again. The 2021 edition, originally planned for its usual April slot, was again postponed to June 2021 as an online edition when the third Covid wave meant a light lockdown and a continued closure of theaters. When movie theaters were suddenly able to reopen in late May, a last-minute on-site screening component was added.

The festivals mentioned here are just a few select examples of thousands of cancellations, postponements, and pivots to online formats, which are well recorded in a number of trade press articles and industry blogs by affected professionals who continued commenting on the situation and tried to make sense of the changing situation as it unfolded (Wolf 2020a, b, c, d, f; Winter 2020a, b, c, d; Rotko et al. 2020).

This situation of continuous uncertainty will not be lifted in the short and medium term since highly contagious new variants of the virus keep spreading and hospitalizations in various countries worldwide are surging again. In many Western countries, vaccination rates are currently insufficient to halt infections. This continues to have an impact on festival planning locally and internationally. While a number of festivals were once again held as in-person events in summer and fall 2021, news just came out that the Oscars Academy will postpone all in-person events and screenings until spring 2022 (Welk 2021).

Changing measures to contain the pandemic complicates planning since the situation of uncertainty continues. International travel regulations impact the ability to invite and host guests. Locally, shifting regulations impact the capacity of theaters, which affects audiences and festival atmosphere greatly. These factors inform how individual festivals and individual stakeholders make decisions in an attempt to mitigate risk. These individual decisions, then, add up to a knock-on effect on the ecosystem. When festivals and premieres are canceled, this affects other festivals in their decision-making. While a cancellation of usual dates might be imminent, decisions for seeking out new dates would be influenced not only by local circumstances but also by the changing ecosystem.

DISTRIBUTION: CIRCULATION ON THE CIRCUIT

Film circulation depends on film festivals. The main festivals on the calendar are the driving forces for the further circulation of films (Loist 2016, 2020). The festival circuit operates as a seasonal cycle of film festivals that

are hierarchically sequenced on the calendar. They are connected to and influence the awards and release seasons.

The festival calendar, seen from the perspective of major events organized in the West, starts at the beginning of the year. One of the main events in January is Sundance, the long-standing US American film festival for independent and arthouse films. In Europe, the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and the Göteborg Film Festival follow on the calendar. The IFFR specializes in arthouse films with an Asian and artistic flavor. The Göteborg Film Festival focuses on northern and debut films. They offer opportunities for North American critics and professionals to come to Europe before attending the Berlinale. The first A-list festival of the year is the Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, traditionally (since the late 1970s) taking place in late February in conjunction with the first film market of the year, the European Film Market (EFM). The next big stop on the A-list circuit is the Cannes Film Festival in May. The fall season, after the summer break in the Northern hemisphere, starts in September with the third A-list event of the “Big Three,” the Venice Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF)—a festival of festivals and a major launchpad for the North American market. Other relevant festivals throughout the year would be Karlovy Vary in June, the Transylvania festival in Cluj in June, New Horizons in Wroclaw in July, Locarno in August, or San Sebastian in September.

These highly ranked festivals and their temporal and spatial place within the festival network are significant for the festival run of a film because the festival strategy depends on the premiere logic and further staggered exploitation chains. After the first premiere, the travel route of a film depends on its genre, type, and representation.

The circulation of a film in the festival ecosystem can be described as a distribution or exploitation chain, which includes a number of stakeholders, intermediaries, and festivals (see Fig. 2.1). This chain must also take into account a film’s exploitation windows, which correspond to different and sometimes competing license holders striving to exploit the consecutive windows. The chain starts with the filmmaker or producer, who has a film that they want to premiere at a festival. Due to the hierarchical positioning of the festival circuit where top-ranked festivals require a world or international premiere, filmmakers try their luck at A-list festivals with high circulation power (Loist 2020) and then devise a festival strategy that will help them navigate the next level of festivals. If a major (studio-backed) film enters a film festival with a world sales representative and

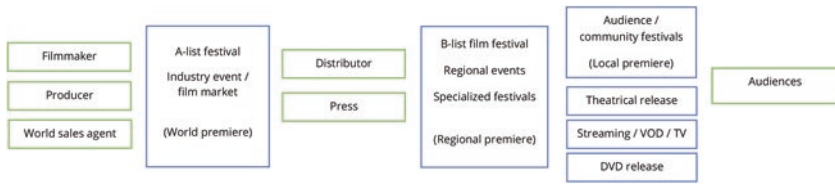


Fig. 2.1 “Festival exploitation chain with stakeholders, intermediaries, and exploitation routes.” (Designed by Skadi Loist)

distributor attached, there will likely already be a festival and release strategy in place. Such a film would use select festivals as launchpads, well-covered by the press, to create buzz for a theatrical release in the same territory as the festival. A film might then be sold at an adjacent film market to other distributors, who use a national or local festival to create press, buzz, and a marketing campaign at that festival which is synched with a local theatrical release.

A small film, without a sales agent attached, would be looking for one at its premiere festival. Once a film is picked up by a distributor, the distributor takes over negotiations for regional and local festival screenings, using the local festival as a launchpad for a theatrical release. In this constellation, festivals function as transition points within the exploitation chain: they serve as testing grounds for (local) theatrical potential.

However, an increasingly large number of films that screen at film festivals never make it to a regular theatrical release (Loist and Samoilova 2019). For these “festival films” (Wong 2011, 100), the festival network represents its own form of circulation and exploitation. Piers Handling, former director of the Toronto International Film Festival, has called the festival network an “alternative distribution network” for this reason (Turan 2002, 7).⁵ Audience-centered festivals are therefore also economically relevant because they represent a new source of income via the paid screening fees. They constitute their own form of exploitation windows.⁶

⁵The distinction between distribution and exhibition could be further differentiated here. While some festivals actually act as distributors and organize the distribution of films at other festivals and in the educational sector with their own distribution arm (e.g., Frameline for LGBTQ cinema), the majority of festivals limit themselves to their function as performance events.

⁶This also applies to many festivals in the specialized parallel circuits that show films in places where they would not otherwise be shown in theaters.

With the first lockdown in March 2020, the whole film festival ecosystem was brought to an abrupt halt. When Cannes, scheduled for May 2020, was first attempting to postpone the event to June, and then finally had to cancel completely, the usual routines were suspended because all stakeholders and intermediaries had to reassess how dependent they were on the old and new routes of operation. For a couple of months, it was unclear how Cannes and other major festival players would proceed. Artistic director, Thierry Frémaux, announced the day before the originally scheduled opening, “Cannes could only have taken place as it usually does, with the stars, the public, the press, the industry. If it is not possible for health reasons, then it is not possible at all. The festival should always be at its best” (Goodfellow 2020). That is, a Cannes without glamor and personal gathering in this people’s business could not be envisioned. Many film professionals, critics, distributors, and talents lament the loss of a festival atmosphere (Winter 2020c; Kohn and Thompson 2021). Besides the loss of this atmosphere, the fear of loss of business leverage played a role, as Cannes continued to position itself as the main antagonist of streaming services and protector of theatrical release windows.

In the following sections, I will highlight the different stakeholder positions and discuss the specific problems that arose from the abrupt disruption for each player in the industry.

CURATORS AND FESTIVAL ORGANIZERS

The disruption and distortion of the festival calendar had a direct impact on festivals in different ways. The spring festivals that fell into the first wave of the pandemic and which had the program set needed to see if they could create a workable online platform solution. Film festivals are used to different technical challenges. They already moved to digital solutions a decade ago when switching from celluloid screenings to DCPs, online pre-selection screenings, and web-based submission systems (Stevens 2012; Fischer 2012, 2018). However, operating completely outside the theater involved a redesign of the event setup. New infrastructures and technical support had to be negotiated.

During the first weeks and months, festivals tried to migrate online while largely keeping their operations unaltered. This is an understandable quest. However, industry professionals were unimpressed by the attempt to simply move the existing model online instead of trying harder to innovate (Winter 2020d). Several film critics emphasized the importance of

event characteristics, the liveness and co-presence that makes up the “festival atmosphere” (Kohn and Thompson 2021),⁷ which cannot sufficiently be simulated. While several business components can be held via video conferencing, such as scheduled meetings and matchmaking conversations, the serendipitous encounters between critics and talents, between fellow filmmakers, or random walk-ins into events where one might encounter new films, topics, and people, cannot (easily) be pre-organized and set up digitally. This also heavily affects conversations about films after the screenings, which are significant in generating discourse around films and topics. For socially oriented documentary films, for instance, it is important to spread the word about a topic. Generally, for indie films, it is essential to generate word-of-mouth in order to reach a larger audience and potentially also create interest for a distributor or buyer (Winter 2020d).

Festivals and theaters traditionally worked together and had a close mutual relationship. The shift to online formats meant that theaters were temporarily left out of the ecosystem. When theaters could reopen after the first lockdown, many festivals tried to help them with acts of solidarity, for example, paying full rent even when they could only operate on limited capacity and the festival therefore only made a fraction of the usual revenue from tickets sold.

While several festivals had their selection and programming set and ready to unspool, for others, the work of months of scouting, selecting, curating, and designing a context for the films was nullified by a pending cancelation. Some curators made this a point of conversation. For example, the Diagonale, a festival of Austrian film in Graz, was forced to cancel a week before the edition was scheduled to take place (March 24–29, 2020). Festival directors Sebastian Höglinger and Peter Sternhuber announced the full program with their festival motto “A Proposal to Project,” which, due to the festival not taking place in its envisioned form, acquired a different meaning than originally intended (Schuster 2020). Later in the following months, Diagonale films were screened in theaters and as a guest section “Diagonale ‘20—The Unfinished” at the Viennale in September 2020.⁸ This marked a moment of solidarity between festivals while keeping intact the original positioning of these festivals in the ecosystem. Both the films and Diagonale could keep their respective premiere

⁷ See also Chap. 4 by Diane Burgess and Kirsten Stevens in this collection.

⁸ <https://www.viennale.at/en/series/cinematography-diagonale-20-collection-unfinished>.

and festival brand label intact, while also offering a physical screening (elsewhere).

The knock-on effects were more complex for the festivals following later in the season. For festival programs that were not yet locked, the question arose of whether films would become available for online editions as well. If a film had a virtual premiere only, meaning the film had the laurels of a festival affixed but had not actually screened in a theater, would a filmmaker seeking a live premiere experience be eligible for another festival later in the calendar? Unlike the abovementioned example suggests, festivals seemed reluctant for a number of reasons. While the festivals might sympathize with filmmakers, their own rank might be diminished for accepting a film into a competition slot as a premiere that in fact already had a spot in a competition program elsewhere. This would also potentially neglect or negate the labor and position of the previous festival that had invested in selecting that film and presenting it to an official jury (Winter and Power 2020).

In addition, some of the larger festivals in the fall season were dealing with more submissions and more selection work, partially because of films whose premiere in a spring festival was canceled, adding more stress to the precarious double workload under pandemic times (Winter and Power 2020). Smaller summer and fall festivals, on the other hand, were potentially dealing with a lack of films to choose from because they would usually invite films after scouting at larger spring festivals and films that had distribution in place. Without the opportunity to see films there, some of the titles might be invisible to smaller audience festivals that are not as well connected in behind-the-scenes industry networks (Winter and Rastegar 2020). Even more significant was the reluctance of filmmakers to agree to online festivals for fear of jeopardizing later distribution deals (Newman 2020; Smits 2021).

Another entanglement between bigger and smaller festivals on the circuit arose when some of the bigger festivals embraced the online options to their fullest extent. Both the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen and the DOK.fest München went fully online in May 2020 and boasted record viewing numbers. As DOK.fest reported, “75,000 spectators [and the] number of actual viewers of the online edition is probably even higher, as it is not possible to determine how many people were sitting in front of the screens at any one time” (DOK.fest München 2020). Oberhausen, on the other hand, focused on the 2500 festival passes sold (for 9.99 EUR) in their reporting and emphasized that viewers from 100 countries had

watched films (Wolf 2021). While these festivals seemed to promote the success of their online version, one needs to nuance their claims: both festivals fell into the first hard lockdown phase when viewers were still eager to try new things online. In addition, they both focus on minor forms of cinema: because of their specialization on shorts and documentaries, they are less dependent on commercial logics of the film economy that focus on theatrical exploitation. Their decision to present their programs without geoblocking garnered many critiques from their colleagues, who feared that they might lose those films for their smaller, more locally oriented festivals as these films had already been available throughout Germany or worldwide. Thus, within the national festival ecosystem, the debate revolved around solidarity within the field and the responsibility that bigger festivals also have for smaller events (cf. Bialas 2020).

One notable result of the uncertainty and fluctuating position on the market was a reduction of the size of many festival programs, for both online and hybrid events. The *East West Report* by the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival released in July 2021 at the Cannes film festival shows that the majority of surveyed documentary film festivals had diminished the size of their program, on average by 22% (Ji.hlava 2021b). The report highlights the problem of representation arising from this cut: “The underrepresented regions were even less represented during the Covid year” (Ji.hlava 2021a). The report also shows that some European documentary festivals shifted their focus toward national or regional films, which is explained by a wish to attract local audiences or by possible financial challenges in the pandemic situation (Ji.hlava 2021a, b). To this, I would add the uncertain factor of who would be able to travel to festivals. Local and regional guests were more likely to be able to attend the festivals to present films due to continuing restrictions on international travel.

MARKETS

The top-tier, A-list festivals are essential industry nodes where the film industry meets. At these events, both the cultural and artistic side of film culture and commercial interests are brought together. Top-tier festivals like Cannes and Berlinale have perfected the mutually enforcing ties between the festival events with red carpet, press, and glamor, and their adjacent film markets, the *Marché* and the European Film Market (EFM), respectively. That both sides have different positions within the festival ecosystem is nothing new (De Valck 2007). Yet, the Covid-19 editions of

the Cannes 2020 and Berlinale 2021 festivals highlight the two different aspects and functions of the festivals when we take a look at the very visible split of the market (selling and buying), on the one hand, and exhibition and event (talent and audiences), on the other hand. This is a split that on-site editions usually try to hide.

The Cannes edition that was originally scheduled for May 2020 could not take place because of the global lockdowns. Festival director Frémaux first kept trying to postpone the festival. Eventually, he realized that the festival could not be held in June 2020. Yet, while the festival refused to put on a virtual festival version, it did host a digital version of the *Marché* on June 22–26, 2020.⁹ Similarly, for a long stretch of their festival preparation for the 2021 edition, in fact, until December 2020, the Berlinale held onto the belief that they would be able to put on an in-person festival in February 2021. Only a week from Christmas 2020, they shifted gears and announced that the usual festival edition planned for the end of February would not take place. Instead, the EFM was scheduled to be held as a fully digital event on March 1–5, 2021, and a physical event, labeled the Summer Special, was set for June 9–20, 2021, in the form of a two-week series of open-air screenings with guests and stars.¹⁰

This divorce of the market segment from the event segment of the festival made for a very strange festival experience at the Berlinale 2021. While the EFM/Berlinale part was only accessible for accredited participants, the Berlinale was still running the press machinery as usual. This meant that in March one could hear about the new highlights of the Competition section on the radio without actually being able to go to the movie theater and join the huge event (one could only access streamed films and discussions with an EFM accreditation). What must have felt more frustrating, though, for regular moviegoers, is that they could not stream those films when they heard about them. In a regular pandemic-free year, it would take a few months until the films that premiered at the festival would get a regular release in a theater or would screen online. But given the specific circumstances of 2020–2021 where audiences had been able to watch films online during virtual festivals, it felt like a strange choice to follow the usual protocol of having the press review the films

⁹ <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/infos-communiqués/communiqué/articles/cannes-marche-du-film-2020-online-from-monday-22-to-friday-26-june#>.

¹⁰ https://www.berlinale.de/en/archive-selection/archive-2021/news-2021/news-detail-2021_58376.html.

during the festival (some even in theaters) and create a hype for later, unforeseeable, future screenings. It does highlight, though, how much the industry part of the EFM/festival was weighted.

After almost exactly a year of the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems that, for the Berlinale, it was key to try to get back to a regular industry schedule and to avoid further distortion, postponement, and uncertainty. Halting the industry part until June, to take place in conjunction with the summer special, would have meant further interference with the regular market calendar and specifically with the usual Cannes Marché slot in May. Thus, sticking to the usual time frame also reaffirmed existing hierarchies. The differentiation between markets stayed intact and it gave hope for sales to follow the regular windowing sequence and get films out to theaters once they could reopen in the summer months. Thus, splitting off the summer special served to both keep the glamorous red-carpet elements intact and offer press coverage in time for theatrical releases, which (as was usual pre-Covid, happen a few months after deals had been made at the market) now coincided with the summer screenings.

SALES AGENTS

In the classical understanding of film distribution, the distribution channel of films is the sale of a film to a distributor, who brings the film to theaters in a first release window and then markets it in further release windows (DVD, VOD/streaming, television). In European film funding, these standard release windows that favor and safeguard theatrical release windows are actually (still) fixed into linear release windows prohibiting open release strategies. Within this frame, film festivals often function as a kind of launchpad, where the selection in a festival and the film premiere glamor add symbolic capital to the film (De Valck 2016). Festivals help generate visibility and attention via press and buzz. They serve as marketing aids for commercial film exploitation (Mezias et al. 2011; Burgess 2020).

Sales agents have been in the business as powerful gatekeepers and intermediaries interfacing between festivals, filmmakers, and financiers for over a decade (Peranson 2008). As intermediaries handling the film rights before the distributors, they negotiate international screenings on the global festival circuit. With a fee of 50% of the screening fees made on the circuit and 15–20% on sales, they are in good business. With their intimate knowledge of the festival circuit, they are helpful players for the filmmakers. However, distributors and smaller festivals are not always too fond of

their business model and would rather see their screening fees go directly to the filmmakers.

With the rise of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon in recent years, new players have entered the field of film distribution and exploitation. Within the traditional linear understanding of the windowing scheme as long-tail exploitation, online distribution is considered a downstream window following long after the primary theatrical window. However, markets and film consumption habits have changed, and with them discussion of windowless releasing models. In particular, Netflix has made big advances into the arthouse and independent film segment for its bouquet programming. Since moving from distribution only into production, Netflix has also tried to break into the prestigious festival ecosystem (Burgess and Stevens 2021). For several years, Netflix and Cannes were essentially fighting over windowing rules: Cannes supported the strict French windowing system and obliged distributors who showed their films in the competition section to release their films in theaters first before releasing them online (Mumford 2017; Richford 2018). With the “streaming wars” raging between the big American companies Amazon, Netflix, Apple, Disney+, and HBO Max, a lot of content had been bought on the festival circuit (or produced and launched there). This makes streaming services important buyers for indie filmmakers (Winter 2020d). Therefore, at a time when theaters as an essential space and main ingredient to hold a film festival were closed, streamers have, in a way, become a competition as well as an unwitting (technical or consumption) role model.

The turn to streaming, or rather moving the film festival format online, was one of the main problems affecting film circulation. Essentially, it stopped the flow for several months. Filmmakers and producers, or more so sales agents on their behalf, had to make decisions about how to proceed after their premiere slots at the spring 2020 festivals had been canceled or were to be taken online. An informative example of the uncertainty of how to negotiate online festival screenings, especially in the early phase of the pandemic shift, is SXSW’s attempt to negotiate online rights for their 135 selected films. Only 39 films had accepted the offer and were presented as a film collection on Amazon Prime, out of which only 7 were feature films (5%) and 32 (95%) were shorts (Rotko et al. 2020, 13; Hobbins-White and Limov 2020, 330). Figures for several of the festivals specialized on shorts or documentary filmmaking show that their success in obtaining online screening rights was a lot better, which largely had to

do with distribution models and release strategies which were already changing before the pandemic (Rotko et al. 2020, 12–13).

What wasn't clear yet to sales agents and film representatives of feature films was what the new offers to stream in a festival online (for how long, to what territory, under which conditions) meant for their film going forward within the standard distribution model. The main value that a festival offers to the filmmakers was missing: generating visibility, buzz, and press coverage are a lot harder to achieve online than within a festival event atmosphere. For a small film without a big marketing budget, word-of-mouth is hard to build from scratch. Moreover, deprived of the festival experience, a common festival logic to screen a film during the festival without paying a screening fee (because the festival paid for travel and accommodation) didn't make sense anymore. Hence, at least a screening fee was needed and for smaller films and smaller festivals paying a screening fee was actually a good way to compensate for lack of distribution income. For some festivals, it was also a way to spend their budget on filmmakers even when they could not invite them.

However, screening fees are not the sole issue here. In fact, screening fees have been part of the festival ecosystem for over a decade. The more pressing issue for a film that had its world premiere frozen amidst the pandemic was that an online festival screening might interfere with a later distribution or streaming deal. Many of the increasingly powerful streamers have reportedly kept their market power high by prohibiting filmmakers who were considering a deal with them from having the film screen online elsewhere beforehand (Winter 2020d). This meant that filmmakers had to think very hard about their options: how much income they would estimate on a good run of 50–100 festivals, how many people they would reach, and how quickly they would need to monetize their work—all under the sign of an unpredictable, ongoing pandemic, which made estimates about a theatrical run even harder (Winter 2020c, d; Newman 2020). Or, in the words of Reinhard W. Wolf:

Online reach does not equal distribution, and distribution does not equal exploitation. Even in the hybrid model, significant fees are hardly likely for the filmmakers. Ultimately, the pros and cons of online participation must be weighed on a case-by-case basis. Film by film and festival by festival. Only one thing is for sure: personal encounters, the experience of hospitality and conviviality cannot be replaced by telecommunications and must therefore have a place in the true sense of the word. (Wolf 2021)

Sales agents are in the business to monetize a film and to focus on its financial value for the producer. With the rise of the festival network and the understanding of the festival circuit as an alternative distribution system over a decade ago, sales agents have arrived on the circuit as new and powerful intermediaries, carving out a festival window before the theatrical and long-tail exploitation. Sales agents asked for their share and pushed for screening fees or alternatively a charge for handling costs to provide prints or DCPs. They consider high-ranked festival screenings as part of the promotion strategy to sell a film to local distributors for exploitation through national releases. In this respect, only top-tier festival selections are of interest, which automatically generate further invitations. With the postponement and cancelation of Cannes 2020, this premiere system and its demand effect were severely disrupted. During the pandemic, the consecutive exploitation windows, differentiating a festival window followed by a theatrical release window and further long-tail windows, have been blurred. Thus, some negotiations with festivals have become increasingly tense as (lacking) benefits from festival exposure and the projection of shrinking exploitation windows had to be weighed.

Some festivals have reported that the conditions for negotiating a film had not changed during the pandemic and they were able to show the film to an equal number of viewers as in pre-pandemic times. However, when festival screenings took place in a hybrid form due to limited theater capacity, the added costs to provide dual exhibition infrastructures remained solely with the festival.

DISTRIBUTORS

Distributors have been saying for years that (large) film festivals eat up their arthouse audience. Thus, for a small film with limited release potential, it might be detrimental if a film played at a big festival before. When a festival like the Berlinale screens the film four to six times in its program, it would reach a total of 5000–6000 audience members (for a smaller festival, around 1500 viewers), that is more admissions than a theater might get in a couple of weeks for an independent arthouse release. The film festival has the event advantage on its side: temporal-specific availability and the special festival atmosphere, which might create FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and brings in interested audiences to a packed house. However, the same film is unlikely to attract the same attention at a regular (limited) release, unless it is presented with cast or crew as guests at the

screening. This issue might be further complicated for the distributor of a specific film when the income from these festival screenings has already been taken by the sales agent. This contributes to precarity in finding a distributor for a theatrical release because they don't see how they can really recoup their handling and release costs for prints, DCPs, and marketing.

On the other hand, traveling to the national or regional festivals might help the distributor build word-of-mouth and generate interest for the theatrical release close to the festival date. Here, the travel costs for talent paid by festivals help the distributor to generate press while at the same time providing a good festival experience for the filmmakers. The saved costs can then be used for further screening tours beyond the festival life to help make the film more appealing to audiences.

However, these mechanisms aren't working during Covid as there is no travel, yet still costs for digital production remain. In addition, distributors are concerned about piracy and the low quality of online screenings due to unprofessional handling and file compression.

FILMMAKERS

Filmmakers were stranded without a premiere experience. Even if a film was selected into a prestigious festival competition, the cancelation of the in-person event meant that they were robbed of their glamorous presentation moment and the proverbial red carpet. Filmmakers could not have (much) exchange with an audience and got no direct feedback for their work that represented years of precarious creative labor (Winter 2020d; Hobbins-White and Limov 2020). Several of the filmmakers I spoke to mentioned their dissatisfaction with the presentation of online events. In the worst cases, the streaming quality might be bad when server capacity and file formats are not optimized (Wolf 2020e). This further contrasts with the experience of filmmakers who travel with their films and can control the quality of sound and image projection in theaters on site of the festival.

Filmmakers cherish deep consideration about their films and the presented topics.¹¹ This is what attending a film festival ideally offers. Thus, for filmmakers, meaningful conversations are more important than

¹¹ Helena Wittmann and Theresa George, filmmakers of *Drift*, which premiered at Venice in 2017, mentioned this in their HVC conversations.

screening fees and here they might have a different position than sales agents. However, their film is often presented as one of many, and the moderator of the Q&A might not necessarily be an expert on the subject, which can make for an uninteresting film talk (for the filmmaker). During the Covid festival seasons, few festivals have made an effort to create live conversations between filmmakers and audiences. Some festivals, like the 2020 Berlin Critics Week, Berlinale Talents, and GoEast, have tried hybrid formats where the moderator of the Q&A was present in the theater and conducted a conversation via video conferencing, either alone or with a limited capacity audience.

However, many festivals have opted to pre-produce Q&As that could be found on the festival website or along with the streamed film program. This would minimize the technical failure of a live video setup and allow flexibility in access when films were scheduled to be accessed over a 24- or 48-hour period rather than at an exact time slot. However, this also took away from any actual interaction. One positive side was the offer to remunerate the effort of the filmmaker to participate in a pre-recorded Q&A. However, quality quickly became an issue (Bernstorff 2020). In order to make the pre-recorded film talk worthwhile to all parties involved (filmmaker, festival, and audience), the recording needs to be well made. The interviewer needs to actually know enough about the subject matter to generate interesting questions. The production needs to be of high enough production value to be appealing. Therefore, some festivals have discussed the option to have the producers create their own Q&As, similar to bonus material on a DVD ensuring quality, which the festival books along with the film and that can also be screened at other festivals. While the individuality would be gone, the festivals would not need to take on another critical task that is outside their usual capacity in terms of resources and expertise.

CONCLUSION

Film festivals are network nodes within the larger film culture: they need to negotiate a variety of stakeholder demands. Size, age, structure, and local context of a festival inform how certain stakeholders relate to the festival and to each other within the framework of this event. While an audience festival is concerned about how films are secured and best brought to an audience, an A-list industry festival needs to consider its position on the calendar and to provide the best services to its industry

constituents of talent, sellers, and buyers. These different positions and strategies had been finely calibrated on the festival circuit over the last decades. When the pandemic hit and produced a standstill on the regular circuit, a specific moment appeared in which the previously balanced power relations between stakeholders shifted and became open for renegotiation. By looking at the various stakeholders in this chapter, I highlighted the different perspectives on the disruptions and new strategies in order to shed light on the renegotiations and reinstatement of previous strategies.

The disruption that has taken place during the initial phase of the unforeseen Covid-19 pandemic functioned as an accelerator for structural and cultural shifts. New regulations, like the social distancing aspects and the drive toward online communication, have accelerated trends that had started to appear in the general move to a digitalization of industry and entertainment consumption. For instance, the embrace of online formats brought benefits in terms of accessibility. Wider audiences could be reached: people who might not be able to attend a theater from different locations, far and near. This helped grow festival audiences and interest in film. However, it also brought festivals closer to streaming models.

The focused shift to online screenings has brought a lot more attention to the fact that the pre-pandemic festival model has operated very closely with the traditional value chain model based on distinct exploitation windows. The expansion of the festival circuit in recent decades has created a space for the sales agent as a new intermediary who rose to a powerful position within this ecosystem, trying to maximize the exploitation model. The festival circuit as an alternative exhibition network has even become its own exploitation window. However, during the initial move to online festivals as a reaction to the pandemic, the blurring of these windows has accelerated. Thus, the disruptions have created a moment when power relations between stakeholders seemed to become fragile and open for renegotiations. But over the course of a year living with Covid and experimenting with new festival structures, the circuit has developed strategies to preserve previous mechanisms, like premiere status, exploitation windows, and so on. Industry festivals kept the market business running as much as possible. Similarly, mid-tier festivals have developed online or hybrid structures that follow previous models of scarcity—for instance, selling only as many online tickets as they would on site or using geoblocking technology to keep regional premiere and exploitation patterns.

It remains to be seen how the theatrical circuit will be able to pick up where it stood before the pandemic shift. Considering that streaming companies have recently moved into the cinema logic for prestige (Burgess and Stevens 2021), in the near future it will be interesting to follow how symbolic capital keeps being formed through festivals. This might give an indication of how things could develop in the future. One thing is for certain: festivals will clearly try to go back to being on-site events and thus to maximize the unique elements of festival experience and atmosphere that cannot be sufficiently achieved online.

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CHAPTER 3

Scarcity, Ubiquity, and the Film Festival After Covid

Brendan Kredell

To do so, I begin by considering a pair of distinct yet interrelated pressures confronting film festivals. Festivals must renegotiate the role they play within the broader film industry, I contend, while at the same time navigating a critical moment in the funding of arts and culture organizations. These twin tensions are not without historical precedent, I argue. In the second half of this chapter, I develop a parallel between Covid-era film festivals and newspapers faced with the popularization of the World Wide Web. By tracing some of the impacts of that disruption for daily newspapers, I suggest that we can better understand some of the structural pressures that the festival ecosystem will likely confront in a post-pandemic world. Beginning from the premise that festivals' mass shift to online delivery during the pandemic will ultimately usher in a new normal of hybridity post-Covid, I argue that the skills, competencies, and resources required in order to thrive in such an environment will necessarily cleave the haves from the have-nots to an even greater extent than

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is currently true of film festivals. I conclude the essay with some speculative analysis of the concentration of attention that would attend such a cleaving.

SCARCITY AND UBIQUITY

But I begin with the observation of a fundamental, theoretical conflict at the root of our discussion of what it means to talk about film festivals in a time of pandemic. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1969) was initially published in the same year—1935—that the third edition of the Venice Film Festival ran. That historical coincidence has been significant for the way that festival scholars have sought to unlock a distinct conceptual position for the film festival within the broader media ecosystem through Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay. While films themselves are emblematic of the perfect technological reproducibility of art, the boundedness of festivals—in both time and space—confers a certain authenticity upon the festival screening, a “unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1969, 220) to borrow the famous Benjaminian definition of aura. This boundedness has been a continuity in festival culture; here I follow De Valck (2008) and Odabasi (2016), who employ the term “scarcity,” but others have developed the concept of “event value” to describe a similar idea (Richards 2021). Through the lens of scarcity, we are able to more clearly understand the complex dynamics of the festival ecosystem at work. There is a kind of transmutation at the root of what film festivals do: they take a ubiquitous cultural object (the film itself) and present it in such a way as to manufacture a scarce cultural experience.

The challenges wrought by Covid-19 force us to again reckon with this tension between the scarce and the ubiquitous; the mass shift to digital delivery has called into question the tenability of festivals’ existing model, and we must confront now what comes after.¹ And indeed it is this

¹A word here on my use of the singular “festival model”: there are, no doubt, many “festival models.” (Indeed, perhaps there are as many distinct models for holding a festival as there are festivals to be held.) With that said, in this essay, I work from the assumption that there is something ontologically similar about events we call “film festivals,” from the highest-profile international festivals to the most fleeting and ephemeral of small-scale festivals. By corollary, that assertion implies that there is something that makes these events ontologically distinct from other venues in which we may see the same films, be those repertory cinemas or subscription-based streaming platforms. Consequently, then, I use the singular “festival model” here in its most all-encompassing terms, a description for an event-based mode of film exhibition that is constrained in both time and space.

ubiquity—scarcity’s antipode—that is Benjamin’s point of departure in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He begins with an epigraph from his contemporary Paul Valéry, in an essay entitled “The Conquest of Ubiquity” that was written a few short years prior to “The Work of Art.” In it, Valéry contended that technological change would mean that “works of art will acquire a kind of ubiquity”:

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign. (Valéry 1964, 226)

Valéry’s essay has long circulated via Benjamin’s quotation, but in recent decades scholars have returned to the original because of the uncanny way in which the author seems to imagine today’s internet (White 2003; Friedberg 2004; Vaughan 2019). Elsewhere in it, he observes that the advent of the phonograph and radio broadcasts liberated the audience, who could now listen “when and where we please”:

Formerly we could not enjoy music at our own time, according to our own mood. We were dependent for our enjoyment on an occasion, a place, a date, and a program. How many coincidences were needed! (Valéry 1964, 227)

It is worth pausing to consider that last phrase: what Valéry describes as “coincidences” are, to the film industry, the fundamental preconditions of a viable economic model, the linchpins of a carefully managed system of production, distribution, and exhibition. The process has changed over time, from the run/zone/clearance system of the classical Hollywood era to the twenty-first century model of release windows (Eliashberg 2005). But cinema has always relied on the “coincidence”—quite literally—of time and space in order to control scarcity in the supply chain. It is certainly true that a decades-long succession of post-cinema technological changes—broadcast (and subsequently cable) television, home video, video-on-demand and streaming, and so on—have steadily eroded the primacy of the appointment viewing model of theatrical exhibition. Yet the argument for film festivals has always been premised on the claim to a kind of auratic experience of technologically reproduced artwork that they present. One could do much worse than Valéry’s phrase—“an occasion, a place, a date, and a program”—as a provisional definition for what a film festival is.

Pre-Covid, a central function of the festival was convocation: film festivals serve to gather together a community of cinemagoers in a defined place and time for a specific program of films. The communal experience here is paramount; indeed, we speak of attending *the festival* rather than *the films we see screened there*. Regular festivalgoers will be well acquainted with the notion of “making your own festival,” that two attendees of the same festival may spend a week together in a city without ever sitting in the same theater together. Our time is short, and the typical festival program contains far more films than any individual viewer could hope to screen. The spectatorial mode of the traditional festival is bound up in this tension between scarcity (of time and of place) and plentitude (the overabundance of films on offer).

Well before the pandemic, however, we came to believe that media should now be accessible “on-demand.”² Putting aside the merits, on-demand culture has perhaps reached its apotheosis in the isolation of social distance, and online festivals follow these broader cultural trends. In doing so, they alter the scarcity dynamic I have just discussed by shifting its terms, with significant implications. Like with traditional festivals, our time (or, more precisely, our attention) remains a scarce resource at online festivals. However, it is structured differently. Films are typically released within defined “release windows,” meaning that no two audience members watching the same film are necessarily viewing it in perfect synchrony. The emplacement of the festival, meanwhile, is fundamentally redefined. While time zone and language (and, in some cases, geofencing) impose a loose geographic order on the online festival, the shared sense of place that binds the traditional festival is absent. Toby Lee has observed that what makes the festival experience is “being there” (Lee 2016), but it is no longer so clear where, precisely, the “there” of the festival is.³

²Again, I acknowledge here that it is inherently problematic to discuss the normative “online festival,” insofar as those norms are very much in flux at present. Broadly speaking, I refer here to the model of online festivals in which attendees purchase tickets or passes that allow on-demand access to films during a defined release window. (Shift72 and Eventive have been leading providers of such services.)

³For my purposes here, I am bracketing the various ways by which online film festivals remain bound up in space and time. These merit a separate essay: from decisions about the time zones and language(s) to prioritize for synchronous programming, to the technological restrictions (e.g. geofencing) placed upon that programming, online festivals undertake processes of inclusion and exclusion that echo similar determinations made at traditional festivals. Unpacking the implications of these calculations is outside the scope of what I hope to accomplish here, but it is important to note that so long as their participants are bound in space and time, so too are festivals, whether online or in-person.

Taken together, the spectatorial mode of the online festival is one of ubiquity. The ubiquity of the online festival does not necessarily equate to plentitude; indeed, the programs for such editions are often less packed than their terrestrial antecedents. Rather, ubiquity here signals a way to view films absent the “coincidences” of Valéry’s formulation: within certain brackets, festival participants are now able to watch films at the place (and, to a lesser extent, the time) of their choosing. Festivals are now available to us in ways that they never were before and that prompts a fundamental rethinking of their place within the culture. The question we must confront, then: what does it mean to think of the film festival after the conquest of ubiquity?

CHANGING STRATEGIES OF RISK AVOIDANCE

Framing the question in those terms requires that we reconsider how the basic organizational premises of the film festival embed within it a structural precarity. To do so, I want to focus on two particular tensions we observe in festivals, one internal and one external. Tracing their implications helps to clarify the issues confronting festivals as they face down a post-Covid future. (I should say here that for the purposes of this essay, I focus specifically on the American context, given that certain aspects of its funding model and its relationship to industry are unique. I suspect that some, though not all, of these observations can be generalized.)

The external tension stems from a mismatch between supply and demand in the broader film industry that has been percolating for decades. As I will contend, film festivals proliferated in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s, a time when they also served important functions for the broader industry: as a primary discovery mechanism for new films and new filmmaking talent and as an alternative distribution network for films that did not receive wide releases. Well before Covid-19, that marriage of convenience between festivals and industry had come under some strain, as streaming video services have picked up a lot of the exhibition slack that festivals formerly catered to. As in so many other arenas, we see that in the historical long view, the changes wrought by the pandemic are more properly understood as amplifications or accelerations of long-standing trends.

Put simply, the tension is one of supply and demand. The number of films entering the market has increased—the result, principally, of lower technological and financial barriers to entry—at the same time that distributors and exhibitors have consolidated, with a small number of

blockbuster films earning a greater share of revenues than ever before. A full accounting of these changes is beyond the scope of this essay, but there are several salient points to make here regarding changes to the ways that audiences view films in the two decades leading up to Covid-19.

Looking at American box office revenues over the last twenty years, the size of the theatrical pie has remained roughly the same: theatrical exhibitors took in \$7.3 billion in the US/Canada domestic market in 1999; adjusting for inflation, this amount was unchanged by 2019.⁴ In addition, the size of the slices taken by the large firms and the small ones has been consistent across that time. What has changed is how those slices are in turn divided. The largest firms continue to earn more than 90% of box office revenues each year, despite distributing 40% fewer films than they did two decades ago (Fig. 3.1).⁵

Those numbers paint a stark portrait of consolidation in the movie business more generally: the largest firms were able to capture roughly as much revenue in 2019 as they had in 1999, despite releasing a hundred fewer films. Conversely, smaller firms have increased the number of films they distribute by 150% over the same time period, with little corresponding gain in market share. Of particular note is a structural mismatch between the kinds of films that have dominated Hollywood box office in recent decades—adaptations of existing intellectual property, often taking the form of franchise films and “cinematic universes”—and the kinds of films that predominate in film festival catalogs—which is to say, films produced from original screenplays.⁶

At root, Hollywood studios are in the business of risk mitigation: films are expensive to produce, and not all of them earn back their initial investment.

⁴Several notes here: all figures herein are cited in US dollars. Public sources of box office data vary somewhat, and so for the sake of consistency, I am referring here to data from Nash Information Services (the-numbers.com) unless otherwise mentioned. I have cross-referenced these figures with Box Office Mojo and ComScore (via NATO) to ensure reliability. Finally, in nominal dollars, US domestic box office was reported at \$7.3 billion for 1999 and \$11.3 billion in 2019.

⁵It is common within industry discourse to refer to subdivide these firms in terms of “major studios,” their subsidiary units (or “specialty units”), and “mini-majors,” referring to the largest of the independent distributors. Here I’m adopting a simpler—and arbitrary—dividing line between “large” and “small” firms: a distributor counts as “large” if it earned at least 1% of total theatrical market share in a given year. Over time, the number of large firms has remained consistent at 10–12. Box office data via The Numbers.

⁶For the interested reader, Tino Balio’s study of the consolidation of Hollywood in the twenty-first century provides important analysis here (Balio 2013).

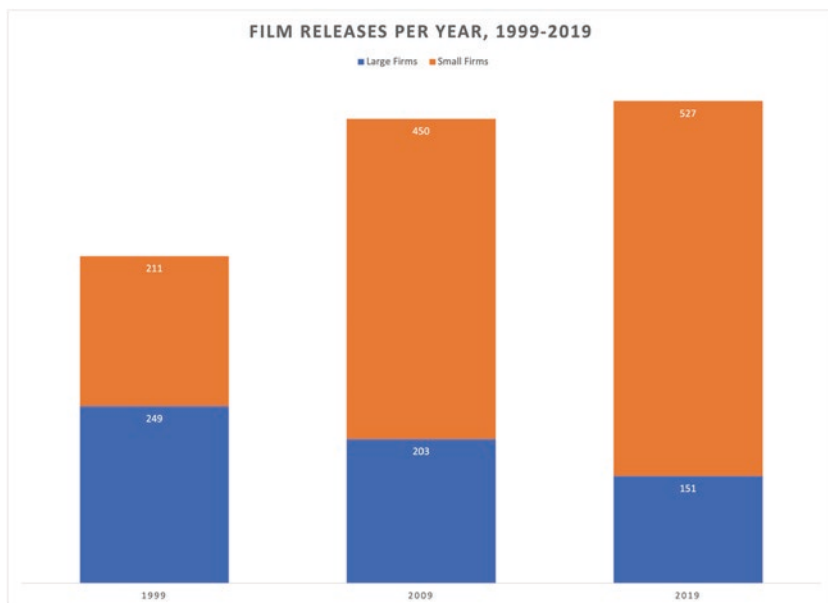


Fig. 3.1 “The largest firms continue dominating the American film market with fewer films.” (Data compiled from Nash Information Services)

Film festivals have historically represented one important strategy of risk avoidance, so much so that Michael Z. Newman refers to the 1990s American independent cinema as the “Sundance-Miramax era” to signal the importance of a small handful of film festivals to the broader operations of the movie business. During a time when Hollywood studios gradually reduced costly, and risky, investments in film production, those festivals emerged to play a critical market-making role. Peter Biskind’s book on this era opens with an anecdote about Steven Soderbergh’s arrival in Utah for the 1989 premiere of *sex, lies, and videotape* at Sundance, with the author arguing that it was that event that established a new paradigm for the Hollywood-film festival nexus (Biskind 2004). The set of festivals that could stake a claim to tangible impact on the industry itself was very small—perhaps less than a half-dozen at any given time. But festivals like Sundance and Toronto, and later SXSW and Tribeca, thrived in no small part because they rest atop a much larger ecosystem of festivals with which they enjoy mutually beneficial relationships. These ties are both direct and indirect. Programmers at regional

festivals often attend high-profile festivals to make decisions about which films to pursue for their own festivals. Filmmakers travel the circuit of regional festivals, hoping to gain attention and exposure while also networking with fellow filmmakers. It may be that Sundance exists, as we know it, because Hollywood needed for it to be so. But its success also helped support a much broader network of festivals around the country.

However, over time we can see the risk-avoidance strategies of studios shifting. The turn to festivals represented a way to vet finished films and assess their commercial viability. But by 2005—fifteen years from the release of *sex, lies*—films produced from original screenplays in the United States represented only 35% of the total box office (Follows 2015). The dawn of the modern franchise era ensured their further long-term erosion; by 2015, original films accounted for less than one-fifth of total receipts. This shift was both qualitative and quantitative; not only did the kinds of movies Hollywood make change, but the scale on which they made them changed to follow. In movies, as with banking, studios shifted to a strategy of producing films that were too big to fail, with production budgets soaring in the 2000s to historically unprecedented levels.⁷ As studios shifted resources into fewer films with larger budgets, their investment in “mid-sized movies” (Scott 2005) waned. All of this places festivals, historically the breeding grounds for prestige cinema, in a precarious position.

At the turn of the millennium, there was a strain of utopianism, perhaps best associated with Chris Anderson’s “long tail” thesis, that technological change would have democratizing, centrifugal impacts on the media industries (Anderson 2006). The data twenty years on seem to suggest just the opposite: while there are two and a half times as many independent films in the theatrical market as there were twenty years earlier, the cumulative revenues earned by those films have barely changed. The same is true of movie theaters themselves—there are 1500 fewer of them in the United States today compared with 1999, but the number of screens inside those theaters has actually increased by 10% over the same time period, enabling exhibitors to screen the latest blockbusters with much greater frequency than in the past. Taken together, the net effect is that

⁷ Moreso even than box office figures, trying to compare production budgets is a notoriously difficult process. Producers have strong incentives to keep these numbers secret, since compensation packages for talent are often tied to film profits. With the acknowledgment that we should take public reporting on budgets with a heaping dose of salt, then, I would point the interested reader to the list of most expensive film productions maintained by Wikipedia. Of the fifty most expensive films (adjusted for inflation), only one was produced before 1995—*Cleopatra* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1963).

Anderson appears to have had it exactly backward when he subtitled his book “Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More.” At least when it comes to watching movies in theaters, the opposite is now true: the largest distributors earn more money from fewer films than ever before.

Among the many consequences for international and American independent cinema have been a long-term trend toward the casualization of exhibition. At the same time that the digital cinema revolution has democratized the production of motion pictures and made the process of getting a film to market cheaper than ever before, the consolidation of theatrical exhibition means that the kinds of films that once played across a national network of independent theaters now find their audiences via video-on-demand and streaming services. The only time these films will play in theaters, increasingly, is via festival distribution. Indeed, this is a presumptive explanation for why the number of independent films released each year continues to grow in seeming defiance of the laws of economic gravity: as a business proposition, theatrical release is a loss leader, a way to position the film for higher revenues in downstream windows like VOD. A recent Sundance Institute report polled industry participants across a range of firms on issues in film distribution, with remarks from executives at Entertainment One representative of the big-picture trends. (eOne is a Canadian firm, though it distributes films in the US market through its Momentum Pictures subsidiary.)

Obviously much of the conversation nowadays is focused on new forms of distribution and consumer viewing habits. Looking for material that can have life on digital, VOD, SVOD, AVOD is very important to us because it’s harder to capture an audience’s attention than ever. (Manashil and Green 2019)

Given this change in emphasis, we should not be surprised to find that film festivals have expanded to fill the breach left by theatrical exhibition over the last two decades. In the United States today, the scope of the festival sector is staggering: as of this writing, FilmFreeway lists more than 4800 active festivals. In other words, there are approximately as many film festivals in the United States today as there are film theaters.⁸ As the bottleneck of traditional theatrical exhibition has increasingly been closed off to most independent and international cinema in the United States, film festivals have taken on an ever more important role within American film culture.

⁸FilmFreeway is the leading platform for managing the festival submission process and thus a kind of de facto clearinghouse of information on festivals.

LOOKING TO THE PAST (OF NEWSPAPERS) TO SEE THE FUTURE (OF FESTIVALS)

In the previous section I focused on the ways that external pressures from the broader film industry have affected festivals in the run-up to Covid. But as I suggested at the outset, festivals confront internal tensions as well, which are also amplified by and underscore the depth of the challenge posed by the Covid-19 crisis. Selling badges or tickets to filmgoers (“earned revenue”) is rarely the sole or even the predominant source of funding for festivals. Instead, festivals typically draw a majority of their funding from what arts administrators call “contributed revenue”—donations, grants, foundation support, and other sources of funding. Arts and culture organizations in the United States typically draw half of their revenues from contributed revenue. At 60% of total budgets, arthouse movie theaters are even more reliant on contributed revenue, but film festivals exceed even that. According to an analysis performed for the trade group Arthouse Convergence, the average film festival counts on contributed revenue for 63% of its total budget (SMU DataArts 2019). Relying on contributed revenue to such a large extent means negotiating the interests of a complex network of stakeholders, each with differing interests in promoting the ongoing operations of the festival. In his recent book on queer festivals, Stuart James Richards seizes on this when describing festivals as “social enterprises,” caught in the “double bind” of programming for “both the community and potential stakeholders” (Richards 2016, 100).

Festivals seek and receive output-oriented funding precisely because much of their value to the culture at large can only be measured in externalities. The admissions office at my university sponsors a festival my students program each year, in large part because they believe it serves as an effective recruitment tool for potential new students to the university. Local and state government agencies provide funding to multiple festivals in my city each year, with an eye toward the benefits, tangible and intangible, that the city realizes from having more and larger festivals happening here each year. The value proposition of festivals for these and other stakeholders is very much bound up in both space and time. Each attendee at a film festival represents another diner in the city’s restaurants, another guest in the city’s hotels, another shopper in the city’s stores.⁹ At a more abstract level, the festival is also an opportunity to build the cultural capital

⁹In the most recent report from Americans for the Arts (2016), the average direct expenditure for each audience member at \$31.47, exclusive of the price paid for admission.

of the city. The economic benefits that this cultural capital generates aren't directly realized by the festival; indeed, these positive externalities are a large part of the reason why governments, foundations, individual donors, and corporate sponsors fund the ongoing operations of festivals. But the Covid crisis forces us to consider how this model of economic sponsorship is tied to the spatio-temporality of festivals—and what fate awaits festivals in the event that this disruption to the established order proves longer lasting.

Festivals in the wake of Covid face a two-headed problem, then. On the one hand, the indirect economic model I have just described depends on a carefully managed production of scarcity: the event value of the festival depends on its ephemerality. On the other, as detailed in the previous section, the system of American independent cinema historically has relied upon festivals as a kind of circulatory network: not only for the films themselves, but also for the filmmakers who make them, the firms that finance them, the media that cover them, and the audiences who view them. Covid has thrown festivals into a liminal state of hybridity: at a moment's notice, organizers were forced to imagine what their festivals would look like in a mostly or completely online environment.

But as we contemplate a future in which hybridity becomes the norm and not the exception, we should pause to recognize that such a system is not particularly well situated to endure in the event of severe stress. Consider, by way of analogy, the crisis that newspapers found themselves in with the rise of the Internet. Like festivals, newspapers are immensely important actors, with disproportionate impact within their cultural ecosystems, and yet they too have historically been caught in a “double bind”: direct revenue from readers has historically paid for only a small fraction of the cultural work of the paper (reporting the news), with money generated through other means—most notably, by selling advertisements—funding ongoing operations.

The existential crisis for newspapers was the advent of the World Wide Web, which fundamentally challenged the spatio-temporal boundaries of the newspaper and unsettled the order of an industry in profound ways. At the outset of the 1990s, the major metropolitan dailies of the United States were lucrative ventures. Decades of market consolidation meant that most cities had become one-newspaper towns, and the papers that survived this consolidation were able to exert monopoly control over local advertising. Swelling advertising revenue was not only good for the papers' bottom lines, but it enabled a major expansion of domestic and

international newsgathering efforts (Franklin 2008; Pew Research Center 2021). However, the rise of the web precipitated a two-fold crisis for local newspapers. The first was an abrupt economic change: low-cost competitors arose for scarce advertising dollars, shrinking the total amount of ad revenues each newspaper could bring in. In the United States, we might call this the “Craigslist effect,” after the eponymous web-based classified advertising service started by Craig Newmark in 1996. Its low-to-no cost advertisements helped it grow quickly to market dominance, in an early example of web-based “disruption” of existing business models.¹⁰

At the same time, a long-term demand shift began, as readers began to become unbound from their local paper. The papers that have thrived in this era—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and so on—have expanded their readership dramatically, doubling or tripling their peak print circulation. This has come at the expense of local and regional papers, many of which have literally disappeared in the ensuing years. Penelope Abernathy describes this phenomenon as “the expanding news desert” (Abernathy 2020): according to her research, 2100 newspapers have closed in the United States in the past fifteen years, leaving large swaths of the country with no local source of news. Consequently, fewer than half as many people are employed in newsrooms today as were twenty years ago. Summing up the state of affairs in American journalism earlier this year, Emily Bell wrote that “winners taking it all are a feature, not a bug, of the current technocracy” (Bell 2020).

THE POST-COVID OUTLOOK

A shock to the established order of things—in this case, the rise of a new technology—has in a relatively short period of time upended the entire system of newspapers in the United States. This shock has prompted a redistribution of the existing newspaper readership, one that has skewed heavily toward a few national news organizations at the expense of smaller papers around the country. With audiences consolidating in the hands of a few major players, the consequences have knock-on effects through the community in ways that are both obvious and not.

I don’t think we have to squint too hard to see a future in which we look back at Covid-19 as a closing of the chapter of a certain era in film

¹⁰Newmark, for his part, reinvested some of the profits he earned from Craigslist into supporting local journalism (Harris 2006).

festival history, one that could be described in roughly parallel terms by the historians of the future. Just as the advent of the web forced the newspaper industry to seek out a new equilibrium in order to continue operations, so too for the future of film festivals.

I mentioned before the staggering breadth of the festival landscape in America today, but of course, not all film festivals are created equal. Beyond the small upper echelon of industry-focused festivals that stand out in boldface each year is a massive and well-traveled circuit of smaller but significant festivals: the kinds of festivals where emerging filmmakers gather each year to show their work off and where important connections are made that help careers progress, in cities like New Orleans and Santa Fe and Indianapolis and Wilmington, North Carolina. These are festivals without much in the way of a Hollywood presence and ones that do not often attract attention in the scholarly literature. But they have earned audience- and filmmaker-friendly reputations after years of putting on successful programs, and those festivals have proved crucial in the development of the ecosystem of American independent cinema.

Michael Forstein's invaluable Film Festival Database (Forstein 2021) aspires to bring some order to this chaotic landscape for independent filmmakers; at present, his database highlights approximately 1000 festivals—primarily, though not exclusively, American—for special recognition. Inclusion on these lists is critical to the success of smaller festivals in the United States; it is not uncommon to hear festival organizers tout such recognition or to hear filmmakers plotting their festival strategy by consulting Forstein's database. With small budgets to pay entry fees and high opportunity costs—filmmakers cannot afford to travel to support their films at many festivals—it is especially important to independent filmmakers that they maximize efficiency and return on investment by seeking out festivals that will confer prestige and offer ample opportunity for networking with other filmmakers. Likewise, for a festival that depends on the revenue brought in by entry fees to help pay for its costs, the implicit seal of approval that Forstein's database, or *MovieMaker Magazine*, confers goes a long way toward ensuring filmmakers will submit to future editions of their festival. Each one of the festivals in this database has its own unique constellation of audiences, films, missions, and circumstances, but all share one thing in common: they must balance their books at the end of the fiscal year. The cacophonous ecosystem of film festivals that we know today is a function of a decentralized system in which local stakeholders have vested interests in ensuring the continued survival of each individual

festival. As I detailed above, most American film festivals are largely dependent on contributions and donations to make their annual budgets. By providing critical financial support, local stakeholders have supported the development of a system of literally thousands of small- and mid-sized festivals across the United States.

However, Covid-19 has amplified existing forces acting upon that festival system and in some cases mobilized new ones. Many festivals pivoted to online and hybrid modes of delivery as a survival tactic in 2020, but it is increasingly common to hear sentiments such as those expressed by Tiina Lökk, festival director of the Tallinn Black Nights Festival in Estonia:

We're hybrid for good. It's been a long-standing plan to be more online and reach beyond our previous borders, expanding our footprint beyond mainly one city in November. Going online in 2020 was an opportunity to build for the future, designing infrastructure for the years ahead. (Blaney 2021)

The sentiment here is an admirable one, and the argument that festivals should develop new initiatives to serve audiences beyond their immediate geographic footprint is a powerful one. But the example of the newspaper industry cited above is a cautionary tale. Hybridity, I fear, is the instigation for a technological arms race, in which only the most clever—or well-resourced—festivals can survive. “Designing infrastructure” is a costly undertaking and one that will require competencies and capital that are in scarce supply and hot demand. Raising the technological—and financial—barriers to entry for festivals will likely result in an outcome familiar to journalism onlookers: just as many newspapers failed to effectively make a transition into a world of online newsgathering and publication, so too should we expect the same of film festivals.

Compounding matters are the broader distribution trends referenced earlier in this chapter, wherein the kinds of films playing at festivals increasingly find their audiences on streaming services. What role do film festivals play in the film culture post-Covid? And to put that question more pointedly, *which* festivals will still have a role? For the highest-profile festivals, an uneasy kind of truce has developed with streamers: as the distribution slates of traditional studios get smaller with each passing year, Netflix, Amazon, and their competitors have stepped into the breach to acquire the rights to the kinds of festival films that used to define the “Sundance-Miramax era.” Twenty years ago, Piers Handling of the Toronto International Film Festival described the festival ecosystem writ large as an “alternative distribution network” (Turan 2002, 8). But today, streaming

services have increasingly taken on that role, with the major festivals serving as nodal points on that network by virtue of their markets and their ability to focus attention on the films they showcase. The role that smaller and mid-sized festivals play within this evolving network is more difficult to ascertain.

In the newspaper world, we watched as the switch from paper to digital left large swaths of an industry behind. The introduction of new technology precipitated changes in consumption habits that have been permanent and profound. Looking out at the world of festivals, I cannot help but fear that we're looking at a replay of the same phenomenon. A series of tenuous balancing acts have propped up the festival ecosystem as we know it: emerging filmmakers benefit from the reflected star power of established talent at A-list festivals, as the attention drawn to their films instigates a powerful discovery mechanism for critics and industry participants alike. Programmers of smaller festivals attend those same large festivals so that they can preview films and make decisions about which to invite; the screening fees their festivals pay represent an important revenue stream for emerging filmmakers whose films haven't received theatrical distribution. Funders underwrite the costs of those smaller festivals when audiences alone cannot cover the costs. All of these counterbalancing forces are dependent on the existing spatial and temporal order that structures the world of festivals. Once that foundation has been disturbed, though, the carefully balanced culture built atop it is at risk of tumbling.

The largest festivals will still succeed in a post-Covid world—indeed, I suspect they'll be even better off. Just as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have poured resources into digital technology, widening the gulf between themselves and their former competitors, we can imagine a world in which festivals like TIFF and SXSW can build sustainable digital footprints for themselves that in turn lock in ever larger audiences. Until now these festivals have been constrained by space and time—their audience can only be as big as the number of seats they have in theaters across the duration of the festival. But in a post-pandemic world, we can now imagine what would previously have seemed a contradiction in terms: the ubiquitous festival. The turn to hybridity represents the first step toward an opportunity for the world's largest festivals to transcend their spatio-temporal boundaries and re-imagine what a film festival of the twenty-first century could be.

Doing so, however, would risk the long-term viability of mid-sized festivals, whose role within the broader film culture is at once difficult to describe and yet impossible to ignore. The cost to our film culture of

losing large numbers of mid-sized festivals will be incalculable and irrevocable, as the window closes on the next generation of emerging filmmakers. Our film culture is built around our festivals, and now more than ever, we need them.

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Locating Buzz and Liveness: The Role of Geoblocking and Co-presence in Virtual Film Festivals

Diane Burgess and Kirsten Stevens

The importance of material presence in the development of film festivals is by now well understood. For audiences, “being there” has been an essential ingredient in “taking part” in festivals. Discourses of embodied participation drive understandings of how atmosphere is created within such events and shape understandings of how festivals are experienced. From Lindiwe Dovey’s (2015) conceptualization of “(dis)sensus communis” at African festivals to Janet Harbord’s (2016) theorization of the “contingencies” of festival time, material presence has been a core assumption of festival studies. Marijke de Valck (2012) notes the potential of shifts

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toward digital consumption in her discussion of online festivals (e.g. *Media That Matters*; CON-CAN Movie Festival) but ultimately reinforces the primacy of festival space as a necessary ingredient in “festive atmosphere,” ritual, and ceremony associated with festivals’ role in the media economy (123–125). Even in recent work that challenges notions of “liveness” or “live togetherness,” such as Stevens’ (2018) examination of digital engagement and Burgess’ (2020) discussion of the dispersive qualities of festival buzz, participation and value creation are not completely untethered from territoriality. However, in 2020, the sudden and near-complete move of film festivals to online platforms has further complicated our understanding of the “there” and “then” involved in festival participation. Experiencing festivals in lockdown (often from domestic spaces) had the potential to dramatically expand access points for virtual events, an approach embraced by the globally accessible and relatively unstructured *We Are One* festival. However, for the vast majority of single-festival-run online events, access to content has been shaped by different forms of restrictions aimed at reinstating and delimiting festival boundaries.

This chapter examines the function of geoblocking content and the residual importance of material presence in hybrid virtual/real-world film festivals. It poses the question: what are the benefits for festivals in enforcing territoriality and place-boundedness in the de-territorialized world of online media? The shifting of screenings and events to online platforms carries the potential of increased access, bypassing travel-related costs and overcoming some issues associated with inaccessible venues or inconvenient schedules, thus lowering potential barriers associated with attendance. Yet, this shift simultaneously threatens the discursive power of exclusivity that is a key driver of festival buzz—after all, part of the lure of major festivals involves being amongst the first viewers at a premiere screening. This perspective on embodied festival participation stresses privileged access, as well as the discernment of taste, as a factor of selection and its visibility (i.e. being seen at the scene). When the festival’s networking publics transform to networked publics, untethered from the physical venues, it is imperative to reconsider the performative aspects of both the festival experience and value creation and how they might manifest online.

Before a discussion of virtual festivals, a note on terminology is necessary. There is an important distinction to be made between Covid-era hybrid virtual/real-world film festivals and online film festivals, which have existed in varying forms for over 20 years, dating back to the early years of Web 2.0 (Bakker 2015). Unlike online festivals, which sought to

engage the freedoms and affordances of online technology to share audiovisual works with dispersed online audiences, the virtual events of 2020 have approached the use of online technologies from a need to adapt to existing technology rather than crafting technology specifically for a festival setting. In this chapter, we will be referring to Covid-era events offered wholly or in part online as virtual film festivals. We use this term as distinct to online film festivals to describe festivals that began as physically located events rather than as events that were conceived from their beginning as fully web-based offerings. In this sense, our use of virtual locates these events as part of real-actual-virtual systems rather than more binary online/offline presentations (Grimshaw-Aagaard 2014), where their “virtuality” is framed in relation to a recalled “real” that is absent in wholly online events. This distinction between a conception of online and virtual is important in the context of understanding the cultural geography of the Covid-era internet-enabled festival experience. As we explore in the following sections, the virtuality of these events provides both expressions of continuity as well as important points of disruption to how we understand film festivals and their operation in an increasingly complex technology-enabled and socially-distanced moment.

GEOBLOCKING AND LOCATING FILM FESTIVAL SPACE

On April 27, 2020, Tribeca Enterprises along with YouTube announced that 21 international film festivals were combining to present *We Are One: A Global Film Festival* (Tribeca Enterprises 2020). Bringing together such geographically dispersed events as the Berlin, Cannes, Tribeca, Karlovy Vary, Sundance, and Sydney international film festivals, the event ran for ten days from 29 May to 7 June and was available worldwide to internet users with access to YouTube’s platform. *We Are One* was not the first virtual event to result from the rapid shutdown of mass gatherings and in-person entertainments due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, its approach to collaborative programming and global delivery marked it as a significant example of what moving online could mean for the future of film festivals. This was an event that seemingly exemplified the idealized notion of an open, borderless internet experience based on global connectivity (Lobato 2016, 14). As a free event that took advantage of YouTube’s near-global reach, *We Are One* promised a festival where all that was needed to unlock access to the types of content and cultural experience previously restricted by barriers of wealth, location, and reserves of

professional and cultural capital was an internet connection and compatible device.

Despite the utopian visions of connectivity that surrounded *We Are One* (McIntosh 2020), the festival did not usher in a new wave of open access film festivals. In contrast, for the vast majority of film festivals that moved all or part of their event online in 2020, their delivery was marked by levels of restriction that worked to condition and limit where, when, and by whom their programs could be accessed. While SXSW partnered with Amazon Prime to screen sections of its program following the festival's cancellation in March, these films were available for ten days to Prime subscribers located in the United States (Roberts 2020, Hobbins-White and Limov 2020). CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, one of the first festivals to pivot entirely online in partnership with Shift72 and FestivalScope, likewise restricted the geographical reach of their film screenings to Denmark, while also implementing other restrictions, such as caps on tickets (1000 tickets per film), a 5-day rental period, and a 30-hour watch window (CPH:DOX n.d.). This delimiting of festival reach and durations has now become standard, with some of these restrictions required as part of digital rights agreements. However, this is not the only factor driving their use, with festivals choosing to impose these limits as part of their event design and in advance of rights negotiations (Fitzgerald et al. 2020). It is worth examining, then, what appeal these types of restrictions might hold for festivals beyond considerations of distributor obligations and Digital Rights Management (DRM). Among the different types of restrictions that have come to condition pandemic-era virtual film festivals, the use of geoblocking is particularly noteworthy in exposing the underlying logics that shape how festivals function as *sites* of experience and value creation, even as they transition to virtual environments.

Geoblocking describes the process of restricting access to digital content and services based on a user's geographic location. More specifically, this term is activated in relation to a set of geolocation technologies—geographic self-reporting, Internet Protocol (IP) address detection, hardware with Global Positioning System (GPS) capabilities—that are used to determine whether an internet user's perceived location grants them access to territorially restricted content (Kra-Oz 2017, 388–9). Ramon Lobato (2016, 10) has identified the use of IP addresses to detect the location of devices (if not specifically their users) as the primary mechanism employed by video streaming services to control the flow of media content within and across established international media territories. The use of

geoblocking by major video platforms, Lobato (2016, 10) argues, enables a filter to be applied to international audiences that allows distributors to discriminate across territories in relation to pricing, release dates, and customized product versions and delivery (such as subtitled or dubbed versions), as well as offering “an automated mechanism to enforce territorial licensing arrangements with rights-holders.” In this sense, as Evan Elkins (2019) notes, geoblocking is not a novel concept within the realm of media control. Rather, it is simply the most recent manifestation of regional lock-out measures that work to maintain established media distribution patterns across geographically segmented markets (Elkins 2019, 4).

From an experiential perspective, the application of geoblocking technologies works to frustrate expectations of global access that accompany thinking of the internet as a placeless, singular, and instantaneous cyberspace (Wagman and Urquhart 2014, 125). The experience of “blockage” that accompanies a denial-of-service notification—the by now familiar “this video is not available in your location”—offers not only an impediment to accessing content, but functions, as Ira Wagman and Peter Urquhart argue, to remind internet users “of the power of place” (2014, 125). It imposes, on one level, an awareness of what Edward J. Malecki identifies as *cyberplace*—the material infrastructures of the internet—on the navigation of more dynamic, fluid, and open cyberspace, with the effect of reminding users that “the internet is grounded by supporting infrastructure with distinct geographical biases” (2017, 4). In the case of geoblocking, this manifests as an awareness that where in the world you are matters in terms of the version of the internet you access—a device in Canada is distinct from one located in Australia or the United States based on which websites can be accessed and in what form. On another level, this reminder of the internet’s physicality also works to reinforce degrees of cultural distinction that are both socially and geographically inscribed. As Wagman and Urquhart note in their discussion of the Canadian experience of geoblocking, the technology’s application has important implications for the flow and experience of material culture (2014, 126). Geoblocking enables the flow of cultural content to be stopped, delayed, and altered so that its experience and articulation may appear manifestly different depending on one’s place in the world.

In his work on regional lock-out technologies, Elkins employs the concept of geocultural capital to articulate the power that geographically based media inaccessibility holds for reminding internet users “about where they sit within global hierarchies of media access and cultural

status” (2019, 11). For Elkins, the geocultural capital of a territory—be it nation, region, or city—is reflected “through both the accessibility of media within their borders as well as their ability to shape what kinds of media resources are made available within their borders and around the world.” Capital, in this sense, accrues to those places with both the highest levels of access as well as the most desirable media resources—such as the desirability and domestic pride associated with BBC iPlayer due to its geoblocked national exclusivity (Elkins 2019, 84–90). Through this lens, Elkins offers a view of geoblocking that both aligns with dominant themes of media and cyber-legal scholarship, which focus on tensions between the implementation of geoblocking as modern DRM and its circumvention by savvy media users (see Burnett 2012; Lobato and Meese 2016; Kra-Oz 2017; Lobato 2019), but also acknowledges, as Wagman and Urquhart (2014, 126) argue, that geoblocking can be deployed “in the name of other causes beyond intellectual property or copyright.” For both Elkins and Wagman and Urquhart, the cultural function of geoblocking works not only to block internet users’ access to online content through exclusionary practices, but it also holds a powerful role in articulating an experience of place within cyberspace—albeit often as an experience of cultural deficit. Indeed, it is this activation of geoblocking as linked to cultural status and a sense of cultural locatedness that offers the greatest insight into how the technology fits within pandemic-era virtual film festivals.

Two pledges initiated and signed by a variety of film festivals across Europe and North America in 2020 highlight the importance that geographic space and its negotiation hold for festivals as they move online. In March 2020, film crowdfunding platform Seed&*Spark asked festivals and distributors to “take action to support the independent film ecosystem in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic” by signing the “Film Festival Survival Pledge.” The pledge listed a range of commitments that were seen as necessary for the ongoing viability of film festivals in the Covid era. Significantly, the pledge called for festivals to embrace a “geoblocking waiver” that would allow for region-specific premiere status to stand despite potential screening overlaps occurring “when granular geoblocking technology, smaller than at the country level, is unavailable.” The call recognized that while the online availability of festival programs enabled geographically dispersed audiences to engage with more remote events than might usually be accessed, the cultural geography of the festival circuit nevertheless relied on a greater distinction of place than provided by national borders. The Survival Pledge therefore sought to maintain the

cultural status of regional premieres, even as the exclusivity of their experience became indistinct within the virtual realm.

Echoing the Survival Pledge's concerns over the cultural status of film premieres, a second call for festivals to commit to rules around geoblocking emerged in August 2020. Initiated by Thessaloniki International Film Festival (n.d.) the call took form as a "festival pact to support and protect the audiovisual ecosystem in a digital environment." The pact called for festivals hosting virtual screenings to undertake to "geo-block for the audience the online diffusion of national and international premieres," while also relaxing requirements around acknowledging international premieres where films had already debuted online (Thessaloniki n.d.). As with the Survival Pledge, the Thessaloniki pact identified the potential for virtual festivals to dissolve regional distinctiveness and negate the accumulation of geocultural capital linked to territorial premieres as the greatest threat to the festival ecosystem. The question of how far a festival's geographic zone of influence can claim to reach, and where that zone of influence ends, lies at the heart of this negotiation. For both Seed&*Spark and Thessaloniki, geographic place is central to the formation of power relationships within the global festival ecosystem. In this regard, Thessaloniki (n.d.) invokes the "written and unwritten rules," developed organically over time through negotiations of individual events within regional and international circuits and by associations such as FIAPF as evidence of the pact's necessity, as well as a basis on which a new negotiation of place within a virtual setting might be handled.

As these pledges suggest, geography holds importance for film festivals that exists beyond traditional concerns of media markets and territorial releasing. Place and the linking of festival programs to located festival environments matter in situating festivals in relation to one another and within broader networks of influence and prestige. The activation of geoblocking in this regard works less as a function of blocking outsiders from getting into festivals and is rather a mechanism for articulating festival space within the more ambiguous realm of the internet. Far from a disruptive ejection from a global flow of media, the function of geoblocking within the festival environment is then focused on locating and defining the "there" involved in the "where" festival films screen and who they screen for.

In recognition of this, it is worth noting the tendency within the North American festival context to use the term "geofencing"—often interchangeably with geoblocking—to describe the use of geolocation

technologies in shaping festival delivery. The term geofence was often raised in examinations of high levels of VPN use in Canada to access the US Netflix catalogue (“Sony, TV Producers” 2015),¹ with questions raised about the legal implications of jumping the geofence. Noting the use of tunnel metaphors by some VPN services (including the aptly named TunnelBear), Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (2016) highlights the significance of spatial metaphors for “think[ing] through the practices that circumvent ‘geofences’” (32). In the context of virtual film festivals, providing geofenced access alludes to the possibility of forging an imagined community of networked festival-goers. From the more inclusive perspective of access (i.e. who is inside the geofence), the spatial boundaries of Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) expand outward from brick-and-mortar venues to encompass the entire province of British Columbia. The notion of community-building inside the geofence further connects the festival experience to recollections of material presence. As is taken up in the next section, the geographies of participation and the links these hold to experiences of space and time hold an important role in how festivals operate and can be seen particularly clearly in the value creation that accompanies the spatial and temporal dimensions of film festival buzz.

NETWORKED CO-PRESENCE: GEOFENCING AND VALUE CREATION

Reflecting on pandemic-era film festivals, Ger Zielinski (2020) has noted the connection between disease transmission and mass gatherings. His work cites Philippe Gautret and Robert Steffen’s 2016 meta-analysis, which found that the temporal and spatial concentration of people at large-scale events, such as open-air festivals, had been linked to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases as well as to their international spread. During Covid, the potential for indoor crowding caused even seemingly mundane interstitial activities like “queuing for tickets and screenings” and “waiting between events” to be considered “highly dangerous to participants and their social circles” (Zielinski 2020). Yet, these transient moments of potential social interaction between festival-goers also have been connected to the viral spread of buzz. Both Dovey’s (2015) concept of (dis)sensus communis and Harbord’s (2016) analysis of contingent occurrences rely on “live togetherness as a pre-requisite” (Burgess 2020)

¹A 2014 poll estimated the figure at 35% of anglophone Netflix users (“U.S. Netflix” 2014).

for the festive excitement that fuels ephemeral value creation. Indeed, if social distancing measures eliminate live togetherness to halt the spread of Covid-19, will they also disrupt the viral transmission of film festival buzz?

Exploring the construct of buzz in film festival research, Burgess (2020) distinguishes between presence—in relation to “the energy generated in festival space(s)”—and place or the situatedness of program delivery. Yet, with the festival as the site of community formation, or networked co-presence, the two appear to be inextricably linked, as though festive energy requires some sort of anchoring to a physical location or embodied gathering (even as the networking itself has expanded onto virtual platforms). Some of the anxiety about the fate of pandemic-era virtual film festivals seems to involve nostalgia for place. In November 2020, federal funding agency Telefilm Canada tweeted a short video from Executive Director, Christa Dickenson, to thank Canadian film festivals for their “resilience, creativity & tenacity.” Although Dickenson praises the “reimagination of these festivals” that actually created broader national access to “seeing Canadian stories,” she spends more than half of the video reminiscing about attending back-to-back screenings and feeling inspired while “looking at who was in the audience” (Telefilm Canada 2020). With a memory that foregrounds the festive experience of shared viewing as live togetherness, the theatrical screening venue looms large. Similarly, in *We Are One* festival promotion, attention was “inevitably drawn not to the stories that festivals share but the lived experiences and encounters they support” (Stevens 2020). Voiced over a montage of red-carpet moments, star-gazing fans, and exotic screening venues, Tribeca Film Festival Co-Founder Robert DeNiro explains that “filmmakers and film fans gather together...to be nourished by our community” but that “sadly this year we can’t bring you into our spaces” (*We Are One* 2020). In both instances, the palpable nostalgia for physical festivals seems to overshadow the potential of online platforms to connect the world through film.

Although the impossibility of live togetherness evokes the social isolation and general sense of loss associated with pandemic restrictions, the nostalgia for festival sites also carries the anxiety that these re-imagined events would somehow miss the mark. From the perspective of buzz, if the mechanisms of value creation are disrupted, will the film festival experience still be seen as valuable? The decision by Netflix to skip a 2020 festival launch for their original films appears to lend credence to this anxiety. In an August *IndieWire* interview, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos pointed to being able to relax post-production deadlines but also noted: “The idea

of getting folks together to go to the mountains [clearly referencing Telluride] to watch movies in small dark rooms didn't seem all that appealing to a lot of people" (Kohn and Thompson 2020). In addition, in a May interview for *Screen Daily*, General Delegate of the Cannes Film Festival Thierry Frémaux indicated that a new film from Jury President Spike Lee, *Da 5 Bloods*, "should have marked the return of Netflix to the red carpet, Out of Competition of course" (Goodfellow 2020). The potential end to the two-year standoff between Netflix and Cannes over straight-to-subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) releasing, along with the landmark selection of Lee as the first Black President of the Jury, suggests that there was more at stake: the one thing that a socially distanced Covid-era festival cannot offer is a spectacular media event, at least not the kind of spectacle that relies on crowds.

With the cancelation of the 2020 Cannes Film Festival announced in mid-March, it is important to note that Netflix's decision also involved opting not to launch Oscar contenders in the uncertain (and rapidly evolving) context of virtual film festivals. There would be no red carpet fringed by throngs of media, no screaming fans, and definitely no standing ovation in a sold-out 2300-seat theater. In his study of Hollywood in Cannes, Christian Jungen (2015) explores the festival's capacity to generate hype as a launch pad for global mass releases, with media coverage helping to catalyze shared attention. Netflix's decision to skip participation speaks to their "clear engagement with the logics of the film industry" (Burgess and Stevens 2021), specifically a desire for their original productions to be celebrated, and indeed launched as films.² In terms of value addition, it could be argued that a streamed world premiere carries the risk of disrupting the brand image the SVOD service has sought to secure on the international festival stage, by not being sufficiently distinct from everyday Netflix viewing behaviors. Without media events, a significant question arises about what press coverage looks like during a virtual film festival.

²The 2021 Berlin Film Festival included *A Cop Movie* (*Una película de policías*, Alonso Ruizpalacios), marking the third year in a row with a Netflix film in Competition (Lang 2021). Although the Berlinale made a late stage pivot to a virtual format due to "rising Covid-19 infections in Germany" (Kessler and Barraclough 2020)—suggesting an initial commitment to return Netflix Originals to in-person international festivals—Ruizpalacios' film arguably stood to benefit more from critical attention (Lang's 2021 *Variety* review places the film among "the best auteur cinema that Mexico has to offer") than it would have from a glitzy media event.

At a 2008 Cannes press conference, then head of DreamWorks Animation Jeffrey Katzenberg lauded the festival's "carnival" atmosphere, noting "Cannes is a wonderful place to do publicity stunts" (Jungen 2015, 296). These moments of spectacle capture press attention and column inches, ensuring that films are mentioned while conveniently bypassing embargos on full reviews, which are generally held for the commercial release. In some instances, filmmakers have suggested that the relative absence of "big films" and celebrities, along with pared down program slots, could shift the spotlight onto newer voices and national cinema—"possibly provid[ing] a bigger chance for Canadian projects to stand out" (Ahearn 2020). Often, media coverage turned toward the festivals themselves and how they were coping with pandemic restrictions or focused on the spectacle of the pandemic with features like *Us Weekly's* photo spread showing how "Stars are slaying the fashionable face mask game at the 2020 Venice Film Festival" (Petrarca 2020).

Returning to *We Are One's* promotional video, visual references to red-carpet glamor and exotic locales need to be considered in the context of spectacle and the spectacular gaze. When the "community" gathers, it is a visible presence that is framed by the gaze of fans, and it is also witnessed by photojournalists as ubiquitous flashes punctuate clips of celebrities like Lady Gaga as she pauses to blow a kiss (*We Are One* 2020). The spectacular media event mobilizes the global gaze of film fans in the spread of festival buzz. Consistent with Jungen's (2015) focus on media hype, de Valck (2007) stresses the transformative potential of "media value" that drives the convertibility of "festival value" into economic capital. In describing the combusive dispersion associated with value creation, she designates "film festivals [as] nodal points, where the concentration of material and media inevitably implodes into festival buzz, which, in its turn, may explode into global media attention" (128). The dispersed spectacular gaze, which stretches the geographical reach of value creation, points to the elasticity and potential porousness of the festival's spatial boundaries, such that embodied co-presence is not necessarily a precursor to participation. In addition, increased digital engagement has already demonstrated that the networked co-presence of digitally connected audiences can extend a festival's community. However, as part of her discussion of liveness and physical co-presence (i.e. asking whether "you had to be there"), Stevens (2018) wonders about the extent to which the festival's spatial and temporal boundaries can be stretched in the interests of expanded connectivity and access before reaching a point of rupture.

Citing the archival angle of digital preservation that enables a “return to the livestreams from past Sundance festivals,” she speculates that the festival’s event status may be undermined as access to the experience becomes “perpetual rather than temporary” (25).

Similar anxieties arose about the temporal destruction of liveness that occurred during Comic-Con@Home, a virtual fan convention that replaced San Diego Comic-Con in July, 2020. With the majority of panels pre-recorded, and YouTube comments sections turned off, opportunities for fan interaction were limited and Twitter engagement plunged over 90% (Vary 2020). In *Variety* coverage, the event was deemed “the starkest example yet of what we lose when we lose the live experience” (Vary 2020). For the virtual edition of the Sydney Film Festival in June 2020, festival trailers included the reminder to “Please switch off your mobile (Even while at home).” Although possibly intended to encourage an immersive viewing experience, this type of prompt is generally associated with theater-audience etiquette and the courtesy of not disturbing other patrons. At home, switching off mobile devices has the added impact of further isolating viewers from the possibility of networked co-presence or the shared experience as a digitally connected audience. As geofencing expands the possibilities for access to film festival content, it also requires a rethinking of the temporal dimensions of festival participation. For the dispersed attendees of virtual festivals, there is the convenience of the asynchronous viewing of on-demand screenings as well as the ability to time shift by catching up on recorded panels. But, unlike the scenario presented in Stevens’ (2018) reference to archived livestreams, many virtual film festival panels are pre-recorded, which means that there was never a live audience. Pre-recording limits the possibility of the contingent occurrences that Harbord (2016) has highlighted as integral to the unfolding of festival time. From the perspective of buzz, is there as much incentive to view recordings when there is no “catching up” involved? Although synchronous co-presence may not be required to fuel festive excitement, it seems likely that some concentration of attention—inherent in the value of liveness—is required for the initial spark.

The allure of liveness is only one element that needs to be considered in the conceptualization of virtual festival time. For festival participants faced with a slate of asynchronous programming, there is a burden of choice that comes with deciding both what and when to watch. Research on SVOD audiences has drawn attention to “paralysis among consumers grappling with too much choice”—“with 21% saying they simply give up

watching if they are not able to make up their minds” (Hayes 2019). Nielsen’s Senior Vice President of Audience Insights Peter Katsingris refers to this phenomenon as “being stuck in decision purgatory” (Nielsen 2019, 2). Meanwhile, happiness guru Gretchin Rubin (2014) sums up the problem of unstructured time with the aphorism that “something that can happen at *any* time often happens at *no* time.” Taken together, these insights highlight the problems of task initiation that can arise with asynchronous festival attendance.

One interesting, and potentially useful, parallel emerges from congruences with the conceptual toolkit for Covid-era remote teaching, where task initiation has been flagged as a barrier to asynchronous learning. The community of inquiry (COI) framework, with its focus on collaborative processes of knowledge construction, could offer a suitable analogy for understanding the networked nature of value creation at film festivals. As with festivals, the pandemic forced an abrupt pivot from embodied co-presence in classrooms to online platforms. In an online course, social presence relies on the creation of a usable learning environment that fosters positive rapport, belonging, and a sense of purpose (Parker and Herrington 2015). Researchers have found that the external facilitation of “meaningful interaction” (through instructional design) boosts the positive indicators of social presence that are most strongly associated with higher grades (Joksimović et al. 2015). Thus, teaching presence, which includes both content curation and facilitation (Cormier and Siemens 2010), moderates the relationship between social presence and academic performance (Joksimović et al. 2015). Exploring how virtual film festivals foster communities of value creation could add nuance to previous formulations of ephemeral value creation that appear to take for granted the primary significance of co-presence—assumed to be embodied (situated) or, at minimum, synchronous (liveness).

Drawing a parallel to the role of teaching presence in COI models, festival presence or the festival’s role in creating a usable environment for networked value creation involves more than curation or questions about digital content delivery platforms. Instead, drawing from the offline festival, it is important to also consider the structuring of festival time and how attendee experience is shaped by screening schedules, daily program updates, and even the architecture of festival venues (where attendees gather, queue, and converse). Specifically, how might virtual festivals facilitate a sense of belonging or a sense of purpose that supports asynchronous engagement? A noteworthy example of how this might work

occurred with *Nomadland*'s (Chloé Zhao, 2020) TIFF premiere, which serendipitously coincided with the Venice Film Festival's announcement of its Golden Lion award.

TIFF's regular daily release time—with several features premiering each night at 6 pm EDT—set a rhythm for festival engagement. This approach focused audience anticipation, while providing pacing for the release of media coverage and loosely delimiting social media conversations. Converging on Twitter under the hashtag #TIFF20 were @TIFF_NET's announcement of the day's premieres (TIFF 2020a), media hype from international and local film critics (New York Times 2020; NOW Magazine 2020), and anticipatory tweets from ticket holders, many of whom were re-tweeting mentions of the Golden Lion (e.g. Baldwin 2020). TIFF's screening of *Nomadland* subsequently sold out by mid-afternoon.³ All of these elements create a context for the concentration of shared attention that can spark buzz. In a similar effort to build on audience interest, the Whistler Film Festival (2020) tweeted their “Box Office Top 10,” which, in the absence of visible queues, draws attention to popular films. In Vancouver, VIFF continued their use of color-coded signals (from green to red) to advise ticket-buyers of availability. While this approach can create a sense of urgency about possibly missing out, it requires potential attendees to already be visiting the VIFF website. In contrast, tweeted interrogatives like “Planning your weekend at #WFF20?” (Whistler Film Fest 2020) or TIFF's (2020b) “Trying to do the math?” streaming explainers point to festival presence and the external facilitation of meaningful festival engagement.

While creating a sense of belonging and marshaling shared attention underpin the virtual festival's community of value creation, exclusivity persists as another key feature of buzz. However, notions of exclusivity—from gala premieres to reserved passholder seating to exotic or distant festival locales—tend to invoke the spatial dimensions of festive excitement, and these access points have been re-configured by geofencing. For TIFF, access to screenings on their Digital TIFF Bell Lightbox platform was available across Canada. Meanwhile, other major festivals on Canada's fall circuit were geofenced regionally. As part of a panel discussion about virtual film festivals, VIFF programmer Curtis Woloschuk noted a spirit of

³It is important to note the ambiguity that surrounds sold out screenings in the virtual festival context. Without a bricks-and-mortar venue as a reference point, the actual size of a specific film's audience is not readily apparent (nor is the number of available tickets).

cooperation among regional events that included regular meetings of some of the organizers of Canada’s fall festivals. The reference to a “much more collaborative and open conversation” between events that have overlapping or proximal schedules included setting aside much of the competitive maneuvering associated with the premiere status of films (Profiles Project 2020). Woloschuk explained the decision to limit VIFF to British Columbia as “multifold”—allowing filmmakers and distributors to manage “territorial exclusivity,” embracing the “gentleperson’s agreement” among individual festivals, and solving the logistical challenges of robust customer support for their streaming app, VIFF Connect (Profiles Project 2020).

In a report on indie exhibition in the Covid era, Calgary International Film Festival artistic director Brian Owens noted a similar commitment to collaboration in the decision to geofence that festival. For Owens, the decision reflected an interest in preserving pre-pandemic audience dynamics, while not encroaching on the zones of influence of other national festivals: “We geo-blocked films to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba (as there were no major film festivals in the other two prairie provinces to ‘steal audience’ from)” (Owens qtd Fitzgerald et al. 2020, 16). Taking a different approach in December, the Whistler Film Festival provided cross-Canada access, with some geofencing at the Quebec border for French-language productions, while the 2021 Kingston Canadian Film Festival had a combination of national and regional geofences in place for different films in their program. What stands out about these variable approaches to geofencing is how they are effectively virtualizing the spatial relationships (and circuit hierarchies) that sustain the festival sector and overall global festival ecosystem. In other words, there is an implicit recognition of networked value creation rooted in festival circuits that are tied to geographically situated stakeholder groups.

RETHINKING FESTIVAL (STUDIES) FUTURES

Writing for *The Guardian* in late April 2020, Peter Bradshaw designated the We Are One festival “a loss leader for all the big festivals” faced with cancellations thanks to Covid. Its function, he reasons, lay in maintaining public awareness of the participating festivals: “They want to keep their various brand identities alive” (Bradshaw 2020). Framed as an early reaction to the threat of a year absent of film festivals, We Are One showcases festival anxieties about their relevance in a virtual world. When there is no

red carpet to draw the media's gaze, when the spectacle of the "event" is missing and only the films remain, will film festivals still matter? Will they still spark buzz? A similar telling anxiety is apparent in the formalized geoblocking pledges,⁴ as well as in the level of informal cooperation demonstrated within the Canadian fall festival circuit. The geography of festival operation and its negotiation through inter-festival dialogue points to a broader self-reflection that has emerged as the disruption of physical space has thrown geographically distanced events into proximity. The anxiety here is revealed through efforts to spatially frame and maintain brand and power relations even as notions of "place" become increasingly fluid.

Yet, even as these anxieties continue to play out moving into 2021, there is a growing recognition that many of the changes wrought by Covid are not temporary. Reflecting on interview responses sought in 2021 for a report examining the impact of Covid on Canadian film festivals, the Whistler Film Festival acknowledged unanimous agreement that the hybrid model is "here to stay" (2021, 21). Questions then remain about whether the anxieties that have shaped the development of events in 2020 will continue to influence the future of virtual film festivals, or if nostalgia for a recalled "real" festival experience will pass as affordances of new festival models are more fully embraced.

If the Covid moment is forcing film festivals to re-evaluate their place within wider film and cultural eco-systems, the same applies to film festival researchers. We began this chapter by noting the centrality that notions of material presence and the spatial dimensions of festivals hold in relation to how film festivals have been conceptualized by researchers, including this chapter's authors. Yet the rapid adaptation to new modes of presentation and the success of festivals in supporting networked co-presence and value creation in the absence of embodied participation challenges earlier assumptions about what elements are central to the festival experience. The collaboration of festivals in navigating new geographies within the virtual space also throws into sharp relief previously obscured lines of power, influence, and cooperation. In this sense, the Covid moment offers a unique opportunity for both festivals and festival researchers to reconsider assumptions about what makes festivals work and what future exists for these events beyond their physical spaces.

⁴At writing, over 250 organizations had signed the Seed&*Spark Pledge, while over 50 festivals had signed Thessaloniki's geoblocking pact.

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Film Festivals on the Small Screen: Audiences, Domestic Space, and Everyday Media

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Since March 2020 in the UK, the coronavirus pandemic has vastly reduced opportunities for people to gather together in proximity. Film festivals have moved to a variety of broadcast, video-on-demand (VOD), and VOD-like forms of film exhibition. The space of the festival has been reconfigured from a consolidated material space of co-presence to the distributed spaces of audiences' homes. Film viewing takes place on home television sets, laptops, and mobile devices and, due to the often flexible form of film scheduling, the film festival comes to sit within and against the rhythms of everyday media use. In this new context, direct contact with other audience members is drastically reduced and contingent on the specific execution of individual festivals, albeit taking place exclusively

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across digital media. Overall, attendance at an online film festival has come to hold much in common with the domestic consumption of video in the post-broadcast era of television.

This chapter offers a conceptual framework to theorize film festival audiences as festivals have shifted to digital forms of exhibition. We argue that any account of online film festival audiences should take into consideration the relationship between film festival viewing and other media practices. From mediascapes (Alasuutari 1999) and media ecologies (Fuller 2005) to media convergence (Jenkins 2006) and transmedia studies (Guynes and Hassler-Forest 2018), a whole host of researchers have argued that media practices are best understood at the intersection *between* a constellation of technologies, platforms, and devices rather than in isolation. Accordingly, we suggest that existing film festival research on audiences can be enriched by perspectives from television studies and research on other domestic and everyday media. This body of research understands the audience as an active participant in the production of meaning that is deeply contextualized within the social and embodied (domestic) space of the viewer while remaining geographically distant from one another and from the source of the transmitted content. By placing this account of the audience in dialogue with existing film festival literature, we propose a relational approach that locates film festival audiences at the intersection of multiple media practices within the texture of everyday life. This also builds on the work of Jancovich et al. (2003) and Klinger (2006), who examine the relationship between different forms of film exhibition and different modes of televisual viewing. Here, we are particularly interested in how distinctions between media practices work to “frame” (Couldry 2004, 25) the online film festival as a media event. Ultimately, we argue that it is in the connections and the distinctions between different media practices that this framing of the online film festival is performed, negotiated, and, in some cases, felt to be lost by audience members.

The connections and distinctions between different media practices can be observed in three different sites: “space, time, and social relations,” as Selberg (1998, 106–107) states. These sites are significant because spatial and temporal distinctions, as well as the social interactions between audience members, are central to the experience of attending an in-person film festival. As many film festival researchers have noted, particular configurations of space and time, as well as specific interactions between audience members, are key to the performance of “liveness” and festivity—the making of the film festival as an event distinct from ordinary theatrical

exhibition (Dickson 2015; Harbord 2016). In an early piece of film festival scholarship, Bazin ([1955] 2009) describes the spatially and temporally predicated rituals of the Cannes Film Festival, likening the experience to that of attending a religious order. De Valck et al. (2016, 9) similarly emphasize the centrality of the conjunction between (material) festival space and time, stating that the “festival takes place in the here and now. They [festivals] invite people to engage with cinema in ways that are uniquely tied in with the space and time of the festival event.” Yet, as Dayan (2000) notes, space and time is also the product of multiple performances, scripts, and improvised interactions from audience members and festival organizers. In Loist’s words (2014, 40), “the festival is a performance, in the anthropological sense of a ritual; or an act of performance in the theatrical sense of the term with a focus on the transient, ephemeral, live event, which hinges on bodily presence of various actors.” Accordingly, the concept of liveness as a performance, and its associations with unpredictability and contingency, has thus come to form a central node in understandings of the film festival event. To point to the performativity of the film festival as a live event is to note its historical, spatial, and technological contingency and, subsequently, its potential to be otherwise under different conditions. By examining the online film festival through the lens of television studies, it is therefore possible to cast a new light on this concept of performativity and to open up a conceptual space in which liveness and festivity can be understood even as the film festival has been radically reconfigured.

As such, we recognize both the contraction and expansion inherent to film festival audiences during the pandemic, the relationship between these phenomena, and the contradictions this may engender in terms of audience experience. For example, while many have experienced lockdown as a shrinking of social life and participation, others have never felt more connected. As Brunow (2020, 339) notes, for previously excluded audiences, “hybrid or online formats can offer new ways of participation, providing the festivals are reflecting on their access strategies.” Such an approach allows for a re-imagining of audiences and community in the context of the film festival that is not necessarily contingent on the material co-presence of bodies or established notions of film festival time and liveness as they have previously been conceived. This is particularly important as these emerging forms of audienceship will shape festivals as they move increasingly toward hybrid and blended forms of film exhibition in the future.

MEDIA AND DOMESTIC SPACE IN THE POST-BROADCAST ERA

Spatial distinctions are at the center of the film festival as an event and as a (potential) political platform. In a 2015 study of audiences at Glasgow Film Festival, Dickson (2015, 703) finds that festival attendees characterize their experiences “primarily in spatial and corporeal terms,” emphasizing the centrality of embodied practices to festival audiences. Brunow (2020) similarly acknowledges the significance of co-presence, material space, embodiment, and affect, particularly at LGBT+ film festivals, which provide vital opportunities for cruising, community building, romance, and friendship. Loist (2014, 39) supports this perspective, stating, “unlike artefacts or texts, performances are events and, thus, transient and ephemeral. An important aspect of the materiality lies in the embodiment through the participants, which affect body, voice, and spatiality of the event.” Similarly, Wong (2011, 159) notes how the co-mingling of festival bodies “constitute the crowd and the buzz of festivals, the local and wider imagined global community of cinephilia.” In studies of queer film festivals, Schoonover and Galt (2016) and Heath (2018) likewise emphasize the centrality of unique spatial configurations and festival bodies at film festivals and their connection to liveness and the affective experience of attending the event. Schoonover and Galt (2016) note how exhibitions and art installations at MIX NYC, for example, often act as corollary to the events unfolding in diegetic space, while Heath (2018) argues that the type of “spatio-textual curation” identified by Dickson (2015) may form the foundation of a queer politics of space reclamation. Put simply, co-present space has been central to the performance of film festivals and their publics as social, political, and cinematic bodies.

During the pandemic, creating this space of co-presence has not been possible for most film festivals in the UK. Instead, the online film festival unfolds within the experiential space of audiences’ homes while simultaneously establishing a networked digital space of film exhibition and consumption. Over the past year, the home has become the primary space of everyday life as well as the site of work, leisure, socialization, and care. While the pandemic has vastly reduced the spaces of everyday life, it has also greatly increased the presence of digital media within everyday experiences, most notably in connection to work but also the social. However, the home is not experienced equally by all. It is a space of tension, conflict, and inequality; the home is a political and gendered space, and these inequalities affect the distribution of various activities that take place

within the home, particularly the relationship between gender, work, and care. In turn, these relationships shape individuals' use of media and their experience of place.

Theorizing film festivals in the context of audiences' homes necessitates a sensitivity to the ways in which multiple media are part of the place-making and contestation of the home by different groups (Morley 2000). Home, as a place, can be understood as the product of multiple overlapping practices, rhythms, and flows (Massey 2005). Media are constitutive of these practices, and they both work to shape the space of home as well as provide a resource for the performance of home as a space of security and refuge (Silverstone 1994; Pink and Mackley 2013). People "make and experience place with media technologies by helping to create environments that 'feel right' in creative, diverse and innovative ways" (Pink and Mackley 2013, 689) and arguably this role of media has been intensified since the pandemic. Furthermore, media are responsible not only for the making of home, but also the drawing of the boundaries between the private and the public and the routes between the two (Lloyd 2020). In doing so, media produce what Scannell (2000) describes as the "double-ness of place." That is, media within the home function as a way of participating in public. In the context of film festivals, they work to connect the space of the home to the space of other audience members and to the space of the festival. Accordingly, this section and the following section deal with the "double-ness" of film festival space, examining the relationships between different visual and broadcast media within the home before connecting the home to the public space of the festival by examining the relationships between different forms of public address.

While the relationships between different media within everyday life have always been important, this is particularly significant now as television has become radically distributed across digital media (Sanson and Steirer 2019). With the rise in popularity of VOD services for film and television, we are currently living in a post-broadcast and post-network era of television (Lotz 2007). This era of television is characterized by media convergence, flexible watching schedules and individualized continuous flows of content, algorithmically curated individualized recommendations, and fragmented transnational audiences (Jenner 2018). The television screen has become the site of media convergence through which terrestrial TV, "catch-up" VOD, video streaming platforms, video games, music, and radio are all consumed. At the same time, audiences traverse multiple devices, platforms, and digital spaces in search of content (Jenkins 2006).

The routinized schedules of terrestrial TV described by Silverstone (1994) and Scannell (1996) have been supplemented by new flexible modes of watching, extending the choice of cable TV and the “time-shift” capacity of the VCR (Jenner 2018). As a result, the living room television for many households no longer sits as the privileged domestic site of visual media consumption, the “hearth of modernity” around which the family gathers (Turner and Tay 2009, 3); rather, it becomes one site among many for multiple rituals and routines. In the post-broadcast era of television, the living room as a media space has, for many households, been remade around the ideals of “portability, modularity, [and] malleability” (Sterne 2003, 239). This is not to suggest that the television does not still play a major role in many households, but that it is no longer the sole way in which television is consumed or enters the home; instead, the post-broadcast era of television is characterized as much by individual watching and portable screens as it is by co-present modes of viewership.

Within these proliferating spaces of viewing, there has been a rapid multiplication and overlapping of “body-technology-place relations” (Richardson and Wilken 2012, 182), the modes through which particular bodily routines and media practices constitute experiences of place. Particularly, the modularity and malleability of post-broadcast domestic media space allows media to serve ever more as a resource for individuals within the home. This is most explicitly observable in the use of media in the “background.” As Tacchi (2009) notes, broadcast media are often used to produce an affective texture to housework, care, and study that enables people to feel like they’re performing a social or quasi-social part of themselves while doing activities that may be otherwise isolating. This role of broadcast media within the home is intensified by the mobility and temporal flexibility of mobile streaming video media (Steiner and Xu 2020, 92). Dibben and Haake (2013) similarly show that, in the case of work-place media use, media can be used to reassert a sense of control over one’s sensory environment and one’s identity in spaces that threaten to undermine it. Research conducted during the first lockdown has shown that in times of personal stress, many individuals move away from information and news-based media and increase their use of streaming-based video media (Pahayahay and Khalili-Mahani 2020). In the context of the home during the pandemic, media can be used to manage anxiety-inducing intrusions from the public into the private (Silverstone 1994) as well as help to draw the boundaries between different activities that take place within the same space.

The online film festival necessarily participates in the production of this malleable and mediated domestic space. The film festival may be used both to re-establish the living room as a space of co-present household leisure and to remove audiences from an environment that may be overwhelming and claustrophobic. It may be part of the performance of spatial and affective distinctions within the house, or it may become largely integrated into existing televisual and broadcast experiences of domestic media space. What is important to note is that, while audiences' existing mediated home space will be structured along lines of gender and age, audiences maintain an active role in the performance and contestation of domestic space. This, in turn, will affect how the event of the film festival is experienced as part of, or framed as separate from, everyday life. Thinking of the film festival as both a structuring condition and a resource within the media space of the home has implications for how we understand the relationship of the home to the public (digital) space of the festival. In order to connect these two spaces, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the spaces of viewing and the modes of public address used by film festivals.

ADDRESSING THE HOME: RECONFIGURING THE PUBLIC IN PRIVATE SPACES

As noted above, film festival publics have been (understandably) located predominantly within public space and in terms of the co-presence of bodies. Indeed, Wong (2011, 163), drawing on Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere, argues that it is "the physicality of many festivals as they take over public venues and spill over into lobbies, streets, and coffeehouses [that] evokes the vivid spatialities of Habermas' first examples of the bourgeois public sphere itself." Wong (2011) further draws upon scholarship by Warner (2005), who emphasizes the centrality of modes of address to the constitution of both the public and the counterpublic. However, while Wong (2011) cites the physical co-presence of bodies as underpinning the relationship between film festivals and the public sphere and, by extension, specific publics, Warner (2005, 66) argues that publics may equally "come into being only in relation to texts and their circulation." A public may, then, be constituted within co-present material public space, but it may also occur in a distributed and imaginary discursive space (Warner 2005, 87). Reframing festival space in terms of discursive space in

which forms of address are mobilized allows us to shift emphasis from physical to digital forms of co-presence, and from public to domestic space, in order to theorize the digital spectator as not necessarily any less a member of a unique festival public than those participating in a non-digital event. Moreover, collapsing distinctions between domestic space and public space is not new in film festival practice; as Barlow (2003) highlights, the 1975 New York Women's Video Festival created a dimly lit Pillow Room complete with sofas, pillows, and blankets in an attempt to map the comfort of domestic space on to the public sphere. This strategy has more recently been adopted by activist film festivals such as Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF), Leeds Queer Film Festival, and Wotever DIY Film Festival, seeking to work within queer feminist frameworks and improve disabled access.

Nonetheless, the possibilities of geographically diffuse yet relational publics are dramatically expanded when we turn to the standard modes of address, and approaches to these modes of address, which have characterized domestic broadcast technology and its field of study. As Scannell (1996, 2000) and Marriot (2007) argue, the mode of live address typically observable in broadcast radio and television emerged in the middle of the twentieth century in Europe and the US as one of intimacy and individual address, what Cardiff (1980, 31) calls the "domestication of public utterance." Scannell (2000, 12) describes this as a "for-anyone-as-someone" mode of address that creates in principle "the possibilities of, and in practice express, a public, shared and sociable world-in-common between members of an audience." It is directed toward a broad public (for-anyone) but is sonically characterized by a mode of directness and intimacy that has become coterminous with the domestic sphere of media consumption (as-someone). As Morley (2000) has rightly demonstrated, this world-in-common is in reality defined along national lines and tacitly along lines of class, race, and gender. Nonetheless, it has become the predominant way of addressing distributed broadcast publics, and many podcasts incorporate this form of intimacy, enabling audience members to feel a sense of proximity to the podcast creator as well as to each other (Swiatek 2018). Crucially, Marriot (2007) argues that this mode of address is performative and historically contingent. The mode of publicly directed intimacy is far from the only way of being addressed. It interpellates individuals into a public that was considered compatible with middle-class, nuclear forms of domesticity based around the primacy of the home as a site of refuge and safety. It is the product of a number of bodily and technological

techniques that come to make particular types of images, sounds, and symbols seem natural and domesticable.

With the broad transition to VOD and streaming platforms, this anyone-as-someone mode of address has changed to the plural “YOU [sic.]” of digital platforms and algorithmically generated taste recommendations (Chun 2016, 19–21). The “YOU” becomes a datafied and quantified you of “you-as-user” (Bratton 2015, 260). It is a “YOU” produced by the audience’s practices of viewership and the cycles of feedback produced by the platform. It is also, as Jenner (2018, 127) states, a “you” that coalesces around genre, format, and tone as platform algorithms are particularly sensitive to these parameters. This individualized form of address has become dominant across social media platforms as well and is arguably the main form of user address within the digital platform ecology.

Traditionally, modes of address at the film festival event have consisted of live, direct address to audiences in auditoriums at opening galas and welcome events, at the commencement of screenings, after screenings as part of a Q&A session with filmmakers, or at side bar and social events. Attendees are further interpellated into the wider festival community through paratextual material, namely, the printed or digitally accessed program or brochure and, more recently, as a result of following film festival accounts on social media. As festivals have moved to digital platforms, modes of address have become more diffuse and unpredictable; while some festivals have attempted to maintain a sense of liveness by running live screening events complete with real-time welcome speeches, others have opted to pre-record introductions and welcome speeches, which are then made accessible to audiences for a period of several hours along with the related film program, or for the duration of the festival. Similarly, paratextual material is, for the most part, accessed digitally and at the attendee’s leisure. Yet, while the mode of address of online film festivals is often pre-recorded and asynchronous, there are still strong distinctions between the mode of address of film festivals and the mode of other domestic media.

The “YOU” as individualized and quantified user is certainly absent, as is the intimate “anyone” of Scannell’s (2000) phenomenology of broadcasting (or podcasting). Instead, the film festival shares a mode of address not dissimilar from MUBI or BFI Player, highly curated VOD platforms that address the audience as part of a distributed online community characterized by “the new cinephilia” (Hessler 2018); MUBI’s tagline “Your Online Cinema, Anytime, Anywhere” resonates with the increasingly transnational, or at least translocal, public of online film festivals. This is a

curatorial mode of address, shaped as much by programming decisions and the issues and identity categories that they attempt to interpellate. This is particularly important when one considers, once again, the distributed geography of audiences in their homes. Although we do not have the space here to deal extensively with the issue of disabled and other forms of access, it is vital to note that the flexibility and spatial relocation of the online film festival to the home makes the content more accessible to people who are, for many reasons, less able to attend an in-person screening (Brunow 2020).

Within this context, the dual role of media as both structuring the space of the home and providing a resource for negotiating this space have significance for the modes of address and belonging described above. Audiences may choose to be addressed as a member of a curatorial or social public to inflect their home space with a particular affective structure that is not otherwise a part of their daily life or to recognize their household as part of a larger festival audience. In other cases, modes of address and audience desires may not line up, and televisual or broadcast forms of address may interfere with experiences of the festival as a particular event or of their relationship to a festival public. Either way, the “doubleness” of place creates a network of spatial relationships and distinctions that can be mobilized and negotiated by audiences in the daily making and remaking of their home lives.

RECONFIGURING THE TIME OF THE AUDIENCE

Much like space, particular forms of temporality have long been part of the in-person film festival. The film festival is often understood as a unique yet cyclical event, encompassing and collapsing both synchronous and diachronous modes of time (Harbord 2016), and which thrives on contingency and the possibility of failure, shock, or surprise for its unique “buzz” or dynamic energy (Burgess 2020). “There is a movement from continuous time into the instant of the live event that in some way misfires” (Harbord 2016, 70). The order of temporal complexity at film festivals increases in magnitude when we consider the diegetic space of the films shown and programming schedules. Thus, to the convergence of the cyclical time of the annual event and the contingency of the “here and now” can be added the screening and/or events schedule and run times in addition to the periods of time covered in the multiple diegeses of the films shown (Mennel 2019). To this highly complex temporal matrix, we might

further add the unique temporalities of festival bodies, each of which operates according to external schedules and pressures, and internal rhythms and bodily requirements.

Since the pandemic, viewing practices are now situated within, and are far more inflected by, the rhythms and temporality of the domestic and everyday. In order to understand the temporality of film festival audiences as they move online, we therefore need to understand the existing temporal structure of everyday media practice. This will, naturally, differ from household to household enormously, but it is possible to isolate a number of key differences. Broadcast media, in particular, play an important role in the constitution of everyday temporality and the routines and rhythms of the home. As such, they contribute to what Scannell (1996, 161) calls “dailiness,” where broadcast media disclose “the public world in its eventfulness” within the routines of everyday life. Broadcast scheduling has historically been tied to the industrial rhythms of domestic life, as well as the gendered distinctions that mark out the spaces and times of home (Andrews 2012). As continuous schedules, they produce what Williams (1974) refers to as “flow.” This continuous flow of content produces a very particular type of “now,” one that takes place within a sequence of planned media events and routines. Continuous broadcast media are part of what makes everyday time feel particular yet organized and, most of all, ordinary. It is a synchronic yet highly structured time.

The flow of broadcast media differs from what Jenner (2018, 125) refers to as the insulated flow of streaming video such as Netflix. The forms of circulation colloquially referred to as “binge-watching” or “bingeable content” remediate the DVD box-set approach to television in which the series takes on the organizational role for content rather than the individual episode. By removing the intro credits and automatically sequencing material following an episode (from the same series or material tagged as similar in genre or tone), these platforms operate around an asynchronous, *continuous* form of flow that is structured more around the narrative time of the series or film than the industrial and gendered rhythms of everyday life. In this way, they take on a semi-event structure. Jenner (2018, 157) details the ways in which prolonged periods of binge-watching may become a social event imbued with interpersonal significance. Supplemented by the proliferation of fan paratexts, this asynchronous form of media consumption still generates the “buzz” characteristic of major broadcast televisual events and can still take on huge social significance within the everyday lives of viewers.

Simultaneously, as has been outlined above, post-broadcast television can be made to cohere with the rhythms and routines of everyday life as background television. Just as media can be used to remake the space of the domestic sphere, media are used as a resource to maintain and delineate the boundaries between work, leisure, socializing, and care. Streaming television can be understood as exhibiting a flexible, asynchronous, and continuous temporality that can be *both* a social, quasi-event and a resource within the making of the ordinariness of everyday life. This duality arises from a dialectic of attention and inattention (Pilipets 2019) that lies at the heart of the changing forms of production and distribution of television content and their different approaches to scheduling and continuity; both commercial broadcast and streaming video media rely on this attention economy in which different forms of flow attempt to routinize and habituate forms of media consumption (Chun 2016). In the case of VOD, these services hope to fold users into “scripted interactivity” (Chamberlain 2011) with the platform, folding multiple forms of attention and inattention into the data-driven recommendation algorithms. On the other hand, film festivals often present an opposition to forms of continuous viewing. While they may take on a live broadcast or VOD relationship to time, they attempt to capture a different type of attention based around discrete viewings. As Harbord (2016) suggests, film festivals and audience practices attempt to “make time matter.”

Suddenly propelled into the rhythms and structures of everyday life, the film festival is both a familiar and an unfamiliar guest. Just as the introduction of VHS in the 1970s fully brought film consumption and cinema into domestic space (Herbert 2011), so too has the proliferation of digital platforms and necessities of lockdown caused the public film event to be integrated into the home and domestic sphere. Nonetheless, as with television programs to which viewers live tweet along on social media, film festivals, particularly those encouraging audience interaction and participation, cannot be said to be fully domesticated; as we have demonstrated, they are both part of the private sphere *and* connected to (and constitutive of) a potentially global digital public. In this sense, film festivals share the temporal rhythms and “eventness” of television programs that have a strong digital component or following. Yet, film festivals consumed in domestic space are not “ordinary” occurrences and, despite sharing something of the eventfulness of the box set binge, they are not usually available on demand for long periods of time. This sets

digital film festivals apart from many VOD services which can still be streamed at a later date.

Consequently, while the digital film festival shares many similarities with contemporary forms of domestic media consumption, it remains resistant to the ubiquitous provision of on-demand content in its insistence on discrete watching experiences, instilling a pre-digital sense of exclusivity and a more clearly and rigidly delimited time-frame. Unlike VOD services that take on an unstable yet archival dimension as precarious stockpiles of content (Roy 2015), online film festivals operate as far more ephemeral temporal events. While their programs, including the digital versions of programs, certainly take on an archival dimension (Damiens 2020) as inscriptions of cinematic and cultural history, the platforms that are used for film exhibition do not. The online film festival is thus a discrete event that sits somewhere between the immediacy of broadcasting and the asynchronous flexibility of VOD. Once again, there is a curious similarity between the temporality of MUBI after it moved to the current form of a highly curated 30-day window for each film (Smits and Nikdel 2018). Both encourage a particular type of curatorially inflected discrete viewing and both employ short rental windows to encourage engagement. The distinction, or framing, is in the time window of the rental window.

The phenomenological experience of attending a digital film festival is therefore heavily contingent on the strategies pursued by individual organizations; some will recreate a sense of urgency in that one must sit down at a particular time to catch the film. *Africa In Motion*, for example, specifically invites viewers to attend a screening at an initial time. Others provoke the excitement of directly and personally engaging with a film's director after the screening. In contrast, the experience of attending other forms of festival may be more akin to the box set binge, where the viewer sets aside time in their own schedule to watch films back-to-back. Consequently, when considering forms of audiences at digital film festivals, and their relationship to other forms of media and broadcast technology, it is necessary to take into account the multiple ways in which film festivals have broached and negotiated the digital sphere. Once again, it is in the distinctions and connections between these different media temporalities that the audience's experience of the online film festival is reperformed, reconfigured, or potentially blurred with other media forms.

REMIEDIATING AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

The event of the in-person film festival is characterized by certain scripts and bodily performances (Dayan 2000; Loist 2014). This is true both in events such as Q&As and discussion panels in which particular discursive structures of audience-programmer interaction are performed, adapted, and contested as well as in film screenings where audience reactions become part of the performance of liveness. These may be sounds and actions of affirmation or expressions of dissent. As Fischer-Lichte (2008) notes in performance studies, the interaction and co-presence between actors and performers brings about a unique, discrete event which is contingent on this relationship. Loist (2014), drawing on Fischer-Lichte (2008), subsequently argues that film festivals can equally be understood within such a performance framework; even though the films themselves will not change, the screening is a unique event produced through the interaction of various festival actors, namely, the film, organizers, audience, and any filmmakers who may be present.

On the other hand, television studies and fan studies have a long history of understanding how audiences who are *not* physically co-present participate in the meaning of texts. D'Acci (1994) demonstrates how audiences reworked the images portrayed of women in the 1980s television show *Cagney & Lacey* in the context of their everyday lives and social interactions. Fiske (1992) also points to the textual production of fans who remake and contest the diegetic meanings of popular television shows through the circulation of various fan paratexts. Recently, with the rise of certain social media platforms, these fan practices have moved from the fringes to more widespread everyday practices (Jenner 2018), particularly around a number of long-running, high-budget television shows such as *Breaking Bad*, *House of Cards*, and *Game of Thrones*. Forcier (2017) points to the ways in which fans operate across multiple media to interpret, contest, and often extend the narrative texts of television shows. This takes place both during episode premieres and shortly afterward. These fan paratexts—from instant responses on Twitter to fully-fledged character “wiki” encyclopedia entries—are an important part of the context of the consumption of certain texts as taking on a special significance. Crucially, they occur across multiple media, and within multiple temporal frameworks, as relates to the temporal nature of the original text. These multiple forms of audience interaction create what Couldry (2004, 360) describes

as “rival forms of liveness,” different temporalities of continuous connection that compete with the primary text’s temporality.

As the film festival has moved online, reconfigured somewhere between a live broadcast medium and a VOD service, the forms of audience participation possible are both limited and expanded in unexpected ways. As above, modes of film festival audience participation vary from festival to festival and between different events. Some festivals, such as SQIFF, have promoted the use of the chat function for audiences to chat among themselves before, during, and after screenings and also to interact with filmmakers who may be present. As such, the festival attendee plays a live, active role in the unfolding of the screening as performance. However, other festivals, such as Edinburgh International Film Festival, opted for a more VOD-like experience due to lack of time to pivot (although the festival will in 2021 operate a blended, hybrid event). Of course, social media and film-specific platforms such as Letterboxd as well as online journalism can still serve as a platform to discuss festival events and create the sense of “buzz” that surrounds the event of the festival, here acknowledging the ephemerality of festival “buzz” as a source of festivals’ experiential and cultural capital value (Burgess 2020).

What is different is that live screenings and festival events that use video conferencing platforms such as Zoom also incorporate novel spaces of audience participation. In addition to participating in Q&As and discussions, viewers are able to type in the chat and discuss as films are playing. This can take several forms; for example, at Africa in Motion and SQIFF online events, it is common for audience members to remediate the expression of “applause” through congratulatory sentiments at the end of the film. Furthermore, audience members often share affirmative and celebratory proclamations, particularly during emotionally intense beats in the film. These forms of communication may be considered inappropriate during an in-person screening in which audiences are encouraged to keep quiet during the main screening. In this way, digital film festivals enable new performances of liveness, characterized more by Couldry’s (2004) “continuous connectedness” or Moores’s (2012) understanding of simultaneity than spatial proximity. Paratextual spaces become key places in which audience members are able to perform “presencing,” forms of mediated interaction that are concerned with signaling one’s presence to another (Richardson and Wilken 2012); that is, while intense discussion and debate can still take place, conversation in the Zoom chat often takes the form of often-phatic or emotional communication that are more

concerned with making the presence of oneself known to others than with the exchange of novel ideas. In this way, the simultaneity of digital media constitutes a form of intimacy at a distance. Again, the distinctions and connections between different modes of audience interaction can blur the experience of online film festivals and other media but they can also work to carve a novel space, framing it as distinct from other forms of media consumption.

CONCLUSION: REFRAMING THE FILM FESTIVAL AUDIENCE

We have argued that in order to understand film festival audiences in the digital, online context, a relational approach to media and audience practice is needed. Audienceship has been understood as a temporally structured ensemble of practices and performances that constitute complex place-body-technology relationships. Online film festival audiences exist as a series of connections and distinctions that sit at the intersection between the remaking of post-broadcast domestic space, modes of public address, rhythms and routines of consumption, and forms of audience participation and inactivity. If media events stand apart from the everyday by virtue of their framing (Couldry 2004)—understood here to be a product of audience practices, programming decisions, and media structures—it is in these different sites that the frame of the film festival is performed and negotiated. We have also shown that these different sites for the performance of liveness vary enormously between festivals and between different audience demographics. In some cases, online film festival audienceship very much elides with both broadcast and post-broadcast televisual modes of watching. In other cases, it takes on a new space and temporality, of a multi-temporal event that offers viewers the possibility to participate and to remake their domestic space—however temporarily—in the process.

These distinctions create a web of audience agency and festival structure within which audiences participate in the performance of film festivity by making certain choices within the nexus of their existing media practices, rhythms, and rituals. While film festivals set the terms within which temporalities of audienceship and the forms of participation may take place, audiences play an active role in the realization of festival temporality, space, and online audience presence. These multiple forms of audienceship, from those that are closer to televisual modes of watching to those that carve out a new space of festival interaction and community, are variously characterized by experiences of loss of community and physical

sociality, as well as excitement and new connections. Understanding the diversity of online film festival audiences is particularly important because, as festivals move forward and many take on hybrid forms of film exhibition (employing online and in-person film exhibition), the connections and distinctions outlined in this chapter will play a role in how audiences navigate hybrid programs and in which context they choose to view content. Film festivals, going forward, have the option to cater to emerging forms of audienceship and digitally constituted publics, post-broadcast televisual types of audiences, or to revert to trying to foster traditional in-person forms of festivity. Or to adopt a blended approach which spans and draws from both everyday media and the liveness of the in-person cinematic experience.

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Finding Allies in Pandemic Times: Documentary Film Festivals and Streaming Platforms

Aida Vallejo and Christel Taillibert

This chapter explores the convergence of exhibition and distribution practices in the contemporary festival landscape, focusing on the documentary festival circuit. With the Covid-19 crisis, film festivals had to reinvent themselves, which included starting collaborations with video-on-demand (VOD) platforms as an alternative to theater screenings. While in previous years the circuit of major festivals such as Cannes, Venice, or San Sebastián displayed a reluctant attitude toward new players in film distribution like streaming platforms (especially Netflix), the documentary festival circuit developed an alternative approach. This is due to the different economic role played by specialized festival circuits, such as the documentary festival circuit, whose relationship with distributors and commercial movie

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theaters has not been as close (and dependent) as that of festivals focusing on fiction features. In this context, and with the aim of filling the gap of commercial distribution beyond the festival realm, some documentary festivals had already embarked on online distribution initiatives, including the creation of their own specialized VOD platforms (see Vallejo 2014, 2020).

In this chapter, we focus on two pioneering streaming platforms for documentary distribution that were created by (or in close collaboration with) film festivals. The first, DAFilms, originated out of an alliance of seven European documentary festivals. The second, Tënk, is an initiative by the French festival États généraux du film documentaire. By contrasting the discourses put forth by the representatives of these platforms with those of the festivals with which they collaborated before and during the pandemic, we identify key factors that contributed to the success or failure of their alliances. We pay particular attention to the processes by which curatorial practices either complement or clash with technical limitations and organizational patterns on both sides of the partnerships.

Our study of collaborative practices employs two concepts, the first one developed within anthropology and the other in management studies. The first, the anthropological concept of “reciprocity” (Mauss 1923; Graeber 2001), allows us to evaluate the social dimensions and dynamics of cooperation. The second, “strategic alliance” (Dussauge and Garrette 1995; Doz and Hamel 1998; Aliouat and Taghzouti 2009; Philippart 2001), is derived from management studies and is used to assess the implications and results of alliances forged between partners. Our method combines in-depth interviews with content analysis. First, we conducted in-depth structured and semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the platforms and festivals. These encounters took place by telephone or videoconference between January and March of 2021, as detailed in the end of the reference section. Second, we analyzed the structure and content of the DAFilms and Tënk websites, as well as the websites of the festivals with whom they collaborated (including previous versions of the websites).¹ In order to track changes and analyze how these platforms and festivals adapted their activities to respond to the pandemic, we did additional close readings of their social media posts (in particular, posts by their Twitter and Facebook accounts) and newsletters, as well as materials appearing in trade publications (interviews and festival reviews).

¹These were accessed through The Internet Archive (wayback machine).

In what follows, we examine two examples of platform-festival collaboration during the pandemic. In our first case study, DAFilms, we analyze why a VOD platform born out of an alliance of festivals was not necessarily the preferred streaming option for all its partners during the pandemic. We pay particular attention to organizational aspects, focusing on technological issues and geo-cultural positioning. Moreover, we stress the importance of social connections to understanding the collaboration between partners in a rapidly changing environment. In our second case study, Těnk, we focus on curatorial strategies, examining how the shift to a new collaborative model between festivals and this platform during the pandemic failed to work in the long term. Here the analysis revolves around issues of distinction and symbolic value, as well as examining the controversies surrounding issues of quantity versus quality brought about by the surplus of festival-provided films on this online platform that had previously distinguished itself through its editorial identity.

CASE STUDY I: DAFILMS

DAFilms is a VOD streaming platform managed by Doc Alliance (DA), a creative partnership of several European documentary festivals that was formed in 2008. DA originally included the founding members Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in the Czech Republic, Visions du Réel in Switzerland, Dok Leipzig in Germany, and Millennium Docs Against Gravity in Poland. The alliance was later joined by CPH:DOX in Denmark (in 2009), FIDMarseille in France (in 2012), and DocLisboa in Portugal (in 2013). Since its inception, DA has been funded by the European Union and by Czech public institutions. The most important activities managed by the alliance are the “Doc Alliance Selection” and the “dafilms.com” VOD platform.

In 2005, the Jihlava IDFF created the Doc-air.cz portal for downloading documentaries. In 2009, it reconverted to an international VOD platform: dafilms.com. Originally, it offered free or pay-per-view options only, but today it also offers a subscription option. Its catalogue, which has steadily grown from 600 films in 2011 to more than 2500 in 2021, is made up of creative documentaries and experimental films. It includes a selection of films screened at partner festivals, plus “creative films with strong auteur perspectives from other festivals (e.g. IFF Rotterdam, Locarno), and [...] retrospectives of renowned directors” (Tabakov in Slováková 2020, 203). The platform also includes films submitted directly by filmmakers, with about one out of every twelve submissions being accepted (idem).

DOC ALLIANCE, DAFILMS, AND FILM FESTIVALS: COLLABORATION AND RECIPROCITY

The most common form of collaboration between the platform and its affiliated festivals before the pandemic was the presentation of curated programs of six to seven films selected from the festivals on the DAFilms platform. Some examples include the presentation of films developed within the industry program DOX:LAB by CPH:DOX in 2013, a selection of award-winning films from FIDMarseille in 2014, a special program of animation and documentary by DOK Leipzig in 2017, and a retrospective of Portuguese filmmakers at the “Echoes of DocLisboa” in 2018, among many others. From the start, the platform has always offered complementary video materials, such as masterclasses recorded at film festivals (presented, for example, by Millennium Docs Against Gravity² in 2010). In addition, the platform has curated similar programs in collaboration with festivals that were not members of the alliance, principally from Eastern Europe, but also from America and Asia (Fig. 6.1).³

Most of these curated programs were available for a limited period of time (from two to seven days) and were strategically presented just before or after the festival dates, therefore contributing to the festivals’ publicity and furthering the impact of the films’ circulation. The most common practice consisted of presenting films from previous editions of the festivals. This responded to release-window policies prevailing before the pandemic, when rights holders signed online distribution deals only after traveling the festival circuit and/or attaining theatrical release. Nevertheless, the fact remains that DAFilms had already offered simultaneous screenings onsite and online during festival dates before the pandemic.

These partnerships were based on reciprocity, whereby both parties profited from free publicity among diverse audiences while working toward the common goal of increasing documentary films’ exposure and

² At that time the festival was named the Planet Doc Film Festival.

³ Festivals that collaborated with DAFilms presenting a curated program include International Film Festival Cinematik, and Febiofest IFCF! (Slovakia), Zagrebdox (Croatia), Sarajevo Film Festival (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Beldocs (Serbia), One World Romania and Astra Film Festival (Romania), Verzio Film Festival (Hungary), Cronograf IDFF (Moldova), and CinéDOC-Tbilisi (Georgia), in Eastern Europe; Visegrad Film Festival (Ireland), Open City documentary festival (UK), and Trieste (Italy), in Western Europe; RIDM: Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal (Canada), in North America; and É Tudo Verdade/It’s All True (Brasil), in South America.

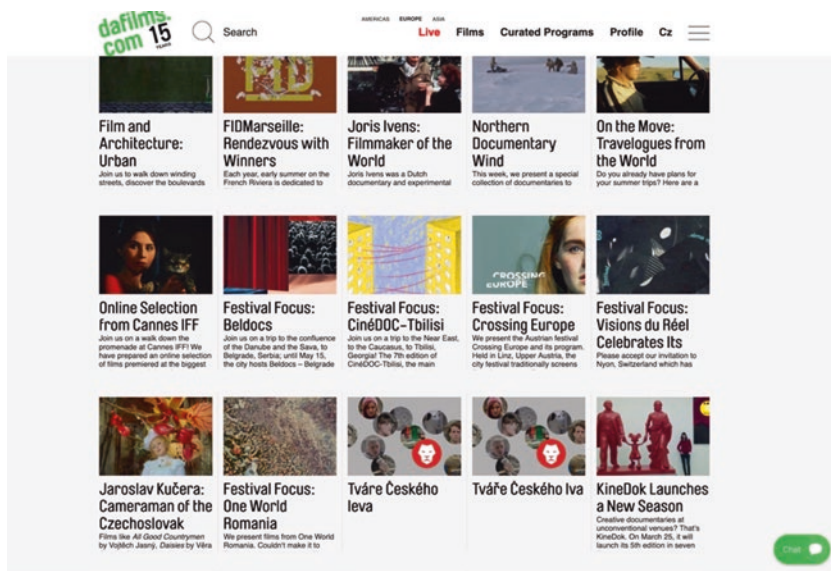


Fig. 6.1 “A selection of curated programs selected from festivals as presented on the DAFilms platform in 2019.” (Courtesy DAFilms)

circulation. The organizational logic of these partnerships was based on ad hoc bilateral agreements that changed from year to year, as opposed to stricter and more continuous partnerships like the annual “Doc Alliance Selection” and award.⁴ Understanding this logic allows us to better understand how collaboration was mobilized during the pandemic. In the absence of a regular or official agreement, some DA festivals did not necessarily consider DAFilms to be a preferred streaming partner. Moreover, negotiations to curate films online necessarily involved a third party: the rights holders (sales agents and/or producers), who were the ones that signed the distribution contracts with the streaming platforms in the first

⁴The “Doc Alliance Selection” is a regular annual activity held by DA festival partners. It consists of the selection of one documentary produced in each of the alliance members’ countries and then the presentation of an award to one of them. The award is presented at a festival of bigger impact, such as Locarno or Cannes. This initiative has provided continuity and, more importantly, a logic of participation in which all festival partners affirm their commitment to the project and share a sense of belonging to the alliance. As we see below, this did not necessarily happen with the DAFilms VOD platform.

place. In what follows, we analyze how the pandemic affected these modes of collaboration, first from the point of view of the festivals and then from the point of view of DAFilms.

SEARCHING FOR PARTNERS DURING THE PANDEMIC: THE 2020 CALENDAR

When the first measures against the Covid-19 pandemic were implemented in Europe starting in the spring of 2020, DAFilms offered a pre-existing infrastructure for moving festivals' programming online. Yet the platform was not necessarily the first choice of all members of the alliance.

As we see in Fig. 6.2, all DA festivals collaborated with streaming platforms during the pandemic. These alliances took different shapes, depending on the restrictions imposed in each country and the period of time each festival took place (from total lockdown, to cinemas' closure, to the limitation of collective gatherings under specific measures). Among the VOD services chosen by DA festivals, we must draw distinctions between (1) platforms that already existed and had a defined curatorial line (including DAFilms); (2) new, specialized platforms created by the festivals themselves (VOD.MDAG.PL); and (3) new, hybrid platforms created explicitly to put festival programs online (Festival Scope+Shift 72).

CPH:DOX (Copenhagen, Denmark) was one of the first festivals to take place once the lockdown was announced and was the first to make the decision to become an online event. Their first-choice VOD partner was Paris-based Festival Scope, which specializes in festival films. The platform had built an international reputation among festival professionals, distributors, and sales agents (not only those specialized in documentaries) and had two branches: Festival Scope Pro (for professionals only, operating since 2010) and Festival Scope (created in 2015 to reach cinephile audiences) (Taillibert and Vinuela 2021). Nevertheless, the platform could not handle the amount of user traffic created by the festival audience on the opening night, and CPH:DOX had to change strategy. As Niklas Engström, head of programming, recalls, they mobilized contacts with former festival participants who could help find a better solution. Sten Saluveer,⁵ a former speaker at the CPH:DOX conference, recommended

⁵Specializing in audiovisual media innovation, technology, and policy strategy. See <https://www.tlu.ec/en/sten-kristian-saluveer>.

	Festival Dates 2019	Festival Dates 2020	Festival Dates 2021	Associate Platforms 2020	Sections
CPH:DOX (Copenhagen, Denmark)	20-31/03	18-29/03 – extended through April. Online only	21/04-12/05	Festival Scope	Whole Festival (didn't work)
				Shift72	Whole Festival
Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland)	5-13/04	24/04-02/05 Changed to: 17/04-2/05 Online only	15–25/4	Festival Scope+Shift72	Whole Festival
				PlayRTS (Swiss TV)	Swiss Competition
				DAFilms	Competition: Grand Angle + 2 Retrospectives
				Tënk	2 Competitions
				Visions du Réel at School (own VOD platform)	Fest. Selection by Didactic Themes
Millennium Docs Against Gravity (Warsaw and other cities, Poland)	10-26/05	8-18/05 (Replaced by pre-festival screenings) [1] Festival postponed to 4-13/09 Hybrid (Online + Cinemas)	14-23/05	Ninateka	Online Event
				VOD.pl	Online Event
				Virtual Pod Baranami Cinema Theatre.	Docs Against Isolation
				Own Platform	Live festival – Fest Dates
				VOD.MDAG.PL	Festival Films after the Festival
Fid Marseille (France)	9-15/07	07-13/07 Delayed to 22-26/07 (In Cinemas)	22-26/07	Tënk	Usual Collaboration
				MUBI	Usual Collaboration
				Festival Scope	Usual Collaboration
				DAFilms	Selections from Previous Year
Doc Lisboa (Portugal)	17-27/10	22/10-1/11 + 5 “Moments” (5-11 Nov/Dec/Feb/Mar)[3] (Online + Cinemas)	21-31/10	DAFilms (2020)	International Program + Curated Programs: Labor, Georgian Docs, Student Films.
				Festival Scope+Shift72 (2021)	Full Sections of 3 of the “Moments”
Jihlava (Czech Republic)	24-29/10	27/10 – 8/11/2020 Same (+ Extended Screenings = “Echoes”) (Online Only)	26-31/10	DAFilms	Whole Festival
				Own Website (DAFilms embedded)	Whole Festival
Dok Leipzig (Germany)	28/10-3/11	26/10-3/11 Online + Cinemas	25-31/10	Own Website	Whole Festival

Fig. 6.2 “DA festivals and their online partners during the pandemic.” (Compiled by Aida Vallejo)

that they contact Shift72, a company based in New Zealand that provides digital infrastructure for online screenings (Int. Engstrøm 2021). This new player, which was not a curated platform, but rather a streaming infrastructure that would allow the festival to show its program on a dedicated website, ended up succeeding in making the festival content available online within one day.

This first experience of collaboration highlights the two main problems that festivals would face in their pursuit of becoming online events: technological limitations and, more importantly, platforms' reputations. In the ensuing months, filmmakers would struggle with the decision to jump the classic distribution chain, bypassing exhibition windows such as movie theaters or television and directly going online. Trust was therefore a key issue, and Shift72 was unknown within the industry. This brought about a new partnership: Festival Scope+Shift72, which was tested for the first time in late April 2020, during the second festival of the Doc Alliance to be held during the lockdown: *Visions du Réel* (Nyon, Switzerland). This alliance of streaming platforms monetized the trust of the "community," leading them to become the leaders of the market.

According to Martine Chalverat, administrative director and head of the production and communication departments of *Visions du Réel*, the festival was still waiting for governmental guidelines when it decided to go online five weeks before the opening date. Their main concern was how to provide an easy-to-navigate platform for the audience and a trustworthy environment for filmmakers (Int. Chalverat 2021). This brought about negotiations with Festival Scope and Shift72, who signed a contract to create a partnership that would offer streaming services to festivals in subsequent months: Festival Scope would provide their reputation as a trustworthy platform, while Shift72 would provide the needed technical infrastructure. Additionally, *Visions du Réel* opted for a multi-platform strategy targeted at different audiences, allocating sections of the program to pre-existing curated platforms. Their VOD partners included the online services PlayRTS (Swiss TV) (for the national competition), Tënk (for non-competitive feature-length documentaries), and DAFilms (for retrospectives). Additionally, the festival created its own platform "Visions du Réel at School," launched in November 2020 and intended for secondary

school students, following the success of the online use of documentaries for educational purposes during the online festival.⁶

FIDMarseille (Marseille, France) was the first festival of the alliance to take place onsite after the lockdown, with a masked audience present in theaters. The program was presented onsite to the local audience, increasing the number of screening venues to satisfy social distancing safety measures. The collaboration with DAFilms remained the same as in previous years, consisting of the presentation of a curated program with seven films from the previous year (Int. Tabakov 2021). Furthermore, like in previous editions, the festival continued to collaborate with other platforms, such as MUBI and Tënk for the French audience and Festival Scope Pro for international professionals. The only section that took place exclusively online was the international co-production section FIDLab, an industry meeting presenting the works-in-progress of filmmakers from different countries who could not travel to France.

According to the yearly festival calendar, Millennium Docs Against Gravity (Warsaw and other cities, Poland) should have taken place in May, but it was postponed to September due to the pandemic.⁷ They presented a hybrid onsite and online version of the festival, offering their program at several theaters as well as on online platforms. As noted by festival director Artur Liebhart, their strategy during the pandemic was from the very beginning focused on the Polish audience. To that end, they collaborated with several Polish platforms, including Ninateka (the online multimedia library of the National Audiovisual Institute), VOD.pl (a commercial Polish VOD platform), and the virtual cinema of Pod Baranami (the online branch of an arthouse theater in Krakow). In addition, they hired local IT freelancers to develop their own VOD platform, hosted on the new website of the festival (Int. Liebhart 2021). Once the festival was over, in December 2020, they launched VOD.MDAG.PL, a year-round streaming platform showcasing documentaries, as well as some fiction films.

Autumn is usually a busy season for DA festivals, as DocLisboa (Portugal), Jihlava IDFF (Czech Republic), and Dok Leipzig (Germany) take place in October. In order to provide the opportunity for industry professionals to attend all three of them, they usually coordinate their

⁶ See the website <https://www.visionsdureel.ch/en/cultural-participation/vdr-at-school/>.

⁷ Nevertheless, during the lockdown, they presented an online version of the festival with a short selection of films from the previous festival edition called “Docs Against Isolation.”

dates to prevent overlap. In 2020, the pandemic prevented international guests from visiting festivals (with a few exceptions), and therefore, the overlapping of dates was no longer a problem. In this context, DocLisboa, Jihlava IDFF, and Dok Leipzig took place nearly simultaneously, and DAFilms users could see some of their sections sharing virtual space. Yet, both their onsite and online programming strategies differed widely.

DocLisboa (Lisbon, Portugal) adopted a long-term hybrid strategy of online and onsite screenings that allowed the festival to adapt to changing governmental restrictions. As festival directors Joana Sousa and Miguel Ribeiro assert, their priority was to maintain onsite screenings. Thus, they decided to extend the festival dates six months beyond the festival's official dates. They created new thematic sections, canceled competitions, and declined to demand international premieres, instead only demanding Portuguese (Int. Sousa and Ribeiro 2021). This involved a change in the program structure, which now featured six "festival moments" that each focused on a different topic. Although the festival prioritized onsite screenings, it also developed a hybrid strategy, developing its own online platform created in collaboration with Festival Scope+Shift72.⁸ Due to safety measures, three of these "moments" had to be presented online on this platform from February to March 2021.⁹ The industry section *Nebulae* took place totally online. DocLisboa's collaboration with DAFilms had been more active than other DA festivals in previous years, and in 2020, DAFilms offered the festival's international program and three curated programs, including a special retrospective on Georgian documentaries.

Dok Leipzig (Leipzig, Germany) also adopted a hybrid strategy, combining onsite¹⁰ and online screenings. Similar to other festivals, they adapted their program by reducing the number of films and sections and by reorganizing and renaming the sections. Although the festival had six months to develop its online strategy, finding the right platform was no easy task. This was in part due to the organizers wanting to make the

⁸ See the website <https://online.doclisboa.org/>.

⁹ The sections presented online included "Ficaram Tantas Histórias por Contar," "Arquivos do Presente," and "Origens – Práticas e Tradições no Cinema."

¹⁰ By the end of October, the contagion curve was just beginning to rise in Germany. As Christoph Terhechte recalls, "the cinemas were limited to a 50% occupation rate, but we finally had a 10 to 35% rate of occupation, as people were terrified (and some who had already bought tickets didn't attend)" (int Terhechte 2021). Cinemas in Germany were closed entirely starting right after the closing night of the festival.

onsite and online experiences as similar and connected as possible (in terms of schedule, premieres, attendance of live events, access according to type of accreditation, and so on). In the initial phase of planning, Dok Leipzig contacted Festival Scope+Shift72, but, as Christoph Terhechte (artistic and managing director) notes, they were “not flexible enough to provide what we needed”¹¹ (Int. Terhechte 2021). They subsequently hired an IT company based in Berlin,¹² but they too were unable to fulfill all the requirements they had agreed to with the festival. Therefore, there was very little time for testing the platform and many technical problems during the festival (idem).¹³ Looking back, Terhechte acknowledged that they should “have lowered their expectations” and that for the next edition they would separate the physical festival from the online festival.

Finally, the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (JIDFF, Jihlava, Czech Republic) had to be organized entirely online, as the Czech government announced the closure of cinemas just before the festival started.¹⁴ In this context, JIDFF chose DAFilms as the exclusive platform to screen the whole festival program. Users could access the films on DAFilms or on the festival website through an embedded player that connected to the VOD platform,¹⁵ and these films were available for seven days and, in most cases, without limits on viewership. The international audience also had access to a selection of 80 films through DAFilms through pay-per-view options. The industry section was organized by the festival through different platforms like YouTube or Zoom. In addition, the festival created the “Echoes of Jihlava” program in 2021, offering Czech audiences the opportunity to watch films from the 2020 edition. This was extended to Belgium (March 11–17), France (March 18–25), and New York (March 19–25), through the application of geo-blocking.

¹¹These included access to different content depending on the type of accreditation, that the films would be available right after the premiere or when the film could be watched, management and use of tickets for watching films, and so on.

¹²The company had previously collaborated with Dok Leipzig to sponsor Wi-Fi for the festival.

¹³These included that, for example, in a session including several short films, only the first film would run or that the subtitles were not properly scaled (because they wanted to have different subtitles available in different languages), as they were not burnt onto the films.

¹⁴For a study of the adaptation of some Eastern European Film Festivals (including Jihlava IDFF) to online streaming during the pandemic, see Hanzlík and Mazierska (2021).

¹⁵The festival accreditation pass had to be bought through the professional festival-management platform Cinando.

For the 2021 edition, all DA festivals presented at least part of their programs online, either through their own platforms or in collaboration with others, such as DAFilms. Thinking of future editions without pandemic-related restrictions, many have already stated that they will continue to employ hybrid formats, which would include both online and onsite activities.

MODES OF COLLABORATION WITH DAFILMS: PARTNERSHIPS, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING

Among the types of collaboration developed between DA festivals and the DAFilms VOD platform during the pandemic, we have identified four main levels (as seen in Fig. 6.2):

1. An exclusive collaboration, putting the whole program on DAFilms (Jihlava IDF)
2. The partial inclusion of a specific program section on the platform (Visions du Réel or DocLisboa)
3. A curated program with films from previous editions of the festival (FIDMarseille)
4. An absence of collaboration (CPH:DOX, Dok Leipzig and Millennium Docs Against Gravity)

From the point of view of DAFilms, there are several factors that explain how alliance members reacted to the sudden necessity to put their programs online. As Diana Tabakov (executive director and head of acquisitions at DAFilms) notes, changes in festival staff through the years have made it difficult to develop stable strategies of collaboration, as some new festival staff members displayed little knowledge about the VOD platform (Int. Tabakov 2021). This was, for example, the case of Dok Leipzig. Christoph Terhechte, who had been newly appointed as the director of the festival just before the pandemic, acknowledged to us that he possessed little knowledge about DAFilms (Int. Terhechte 2021).

A second aspect affecting this collaboration was the different perceptions of what it meant to belong to DAFilms on the part of festival partners. For example, because its organizational structure centered on an office located in Prague, the platform was perceived by many as a “far away” activity (Int. Tabakov 2021). As Tabakov notes, “we [DA

members] are not in one office. Fluctuation of people at film festivals is so big that not everyone is aware that we are their VOD platform” (idem). Nevertheless, new strategies could help overcome these limitations. Just before the pandemic spread, Doc Alliance was granted new funding by Creative Europe¹⁶ to increase collaboration between festivals. This would allow for festival staff to create working groups, meet on a regular basis, and fund joint actions. The impact of increasing social contact and collaborative patterns within the alliance and, more specifically, with DAFilms is therefore still under development (idem).

Third, despite the ideal of the internet as a global community without borders, the organization of festivals online brought about a reinforcement of the nation-state framework as a reference to delimit festivals’ target audiences. Transposing the logic of premiere policies to online streaming required geo-blocking, and platforms themselves worked within national (and at times linguistic) frames, as is the case with Tënk or MUBI, who are widely known in the French-speaking context. As Tabakov notes, international curated programs without geo-blocking performed better for DAFilms in terms of audience, both before and during the pandemic. She explains that in the case of Visions du Réel, they had to redirect some of their users from their festival platform to the DAFilms section of their program, which was geo-blocked to Switzerland during the festival. Despite the fact that DAFilms made a French translation for Visions du Réel, it did not work as well as the local platform (Int. Tabakov 2021). The limited knowledge of DAFilms among their national audiences was also noted by some DA festival representatives, such as Engstrøm from CPH:DOX, who declared that it was their intention to build their own Danish platform (Int. 2021), or Terhechte from Dok Leipzig, who noted that “it would have been great if we had something like Tënk for Germany” (int. 2021).

The tension between the international versus national scope of the platform has affected the strategic policies of DAFilms from its inception. Initially, the DAFilms portal was offered in the seven languages of the partner festivals (including French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Czech, Slovak, and Polish). According to Tabakov, the existence of versions in several languages in different domains created problems in the positioning

¹⁶Doc Alliance has been one of the four film festival networks recipients of the Action 2 of the new Film Festivals scheme that supports European Networks of Festivals (call number EACEA/26/2019). <https://www.creativeuropeuk.eu/news/four-film-festival-networks-supported-media>.

of the website on internet search-engines like Google (Int. 2021). These and other constraints led to a limitation of the number of branches of the platform. Today, it can be accessed through three local domains (dafilms.cz for the Czech Republic, dafilms.sk for Slovakia, and dafilms.pl for Poland) or an international domain (dafilms.com). The international domain displays three different interfaces, each devoted to one continent: the Americas, Europe, and Asia. They are available in English and require a separate subscription. The Slovak and Polish domains, launched in 2020, have a dedicated team to acquire films for these territories, and they are managed by two people working from a Bratislava office and a Polish worker working from the Prague office, respectively.

The fact that the Polish branch of DAFilms was launched just before the Polish festival Millennium Docs Against Gravity created its own VOD platform explains the absence of collaboration in that instance, as well as demonstrating how interests may clash between DAFilms and DA members. In the case of Millennium Docs Against Gravity, the institutional nature of the festival as the main activity of the distribution company Against Gravity may explain its differing strategy compared to other DA festival members, as it is mostly focused on exhibition. While the festival remains a member of the alliance, it lacks the need (or obligation) to collaborate with DAFilms. This may also be the case with other festivals that develop their own platforms (such as CPH:DOX), but in this case, the absence of a Danish branch of DAFilms undercuts the possibility of a national competition, which seems to be the framework in which streaming platforms are performing best.

The success (or failure) of DAFilms' role during the pandemic and its collaboration with DA festival partners helps us understand how film festivals adapted (or may adapt in the future) to the business of online streaming. By looking at their decisions, we find three factors that help explain why the platform worked for some festivals but not for others. The first is practical, as the technological limitations of DAFilms disallowed them from providing some services that were vital for festivals to have at that point, such as providing up-to-date information about users and statistics or imitating the live festival experience.¹⁷ The second factor is ontological,

¹⁷As Tabakov notes, “funding for the technical development of the platform from European Union is no longer available, and we have to monitor the changes in audience behavior every day and we don't have algorithms, so we have to make it ourselves” (Int. 2021).

as the shared identity between the platform profile and the festival profile is a key issue when transposing a festival program online. In this case, the international scope of DAFilms played against the platform, as its presence and image varied considerably in each of the DA members' countries. This was one of the reasons why it was the perfect partner for Jihlava IDF, but not necessarily for other festivals, like *Visions du Réel* or *CPH:DOX*. The third factor relates to the social and organizational aspect of partnerships, which is of particular importance in the cultural realm. Long-term relationships and mutual trust form the core of film festival operations, and reciprocity is the key for mutual sustainability. This can explain why underlying most of the practical and strategic decisions described above, there had been a previous onsite physical contact between two potential allies that had taken place at a film festival. These include new allies contacted during the pandemic, such as those who developed dedicated festival platforms like Shift72 or the IT company that developed Dok Leipzig's platform. Moreover, these dynamics also underline the importance of continuity in festival staff for maintaining the relationships established through the years that allow for more stable practices of collaboration in the long term.

CASE STUDY 2: TËNK

Tënk is an interesting case for thinking about the relationship between platforms and film festivals, as it was born as a feature of the festival "États Généraux du Film Documentaire." Originally conceived as the "Cinéma de pays et région" in 1978 in Lussas (France, Ardèche; 1100 inhabitants), today the festival focuses on "activist and unformatted documentary cinema" (Tënk 2018a). After adopting its current name in 1989, the festival quickly became an important site for documentary professionals. It turned the village of Lussas into a documentary ecosystem by progressively extending its activities into film production, distribution, education, and archiving/documentation.

In 2016, this ecosystem allowed for the creation of a subscriber-based VOD platform dedicated to documentary filmmaking: Tënk. For six euros a month, the subscribers have access to 70 films available for two months, with a system of "rotating selection" (Taillibert 2020). This plan includes, since 2020, a slate of 700 films on a fee-for-service basis available to subscribers (Tënk 2020b). Despite this evolution, Tënk was explicitly built as a curated platform. The bi-monthly program of 70 films is arranged in

“thematic tracks” managed by two dedicated programmers. An expanded team of 20 professionals discuss the whole program once a semester. These meetings, conceived as “thinking laboratories” (Tënk 2018b), illustrate the importance of curation to the platform’s identity.

TËNK AND FILM FESTIVALS, A CONSTITUTIVE LINK

Festivals have nourished Tënk’s program since it began. The slogan “Tënk, a Permanent Festival” has accompanied the development of the platform, as noted by its general director Pierre Mathéus (Int. 2021). The Lussas ecosystem largely explains this tendency: since it was founded, Tënk has echoed the annual festival programming. Other partnerships were created with festivals such as Cinéma du Réel (Paris), Visions du Réel (Nyon), or Les Rencontres du Film Documentaire de Mellionnec (Côtes-d’Armor), and many other smaller festivals. Today, this partnership network “is part of the identity of the platform” (Mathéus, Int. 2021).

The collaboration between the platform and film festivals can be understood as a win-win situation in the context of a strategic alliance that binds both parties. Following Pierre Dussauge and Bernard Garrette (1995), we define strategic alliances as “partnerships between several competing—or potentially competing—companies, that choose to run a project or a specific activity by coordinating the necessary competences, means and resources, instead of compete on the activity in question, merge with each other or decide to divest or acquire some activities.” Thus, strategic alliances characterize the cooperative models between actors who are a priori competing within the market segment that brings them together, because they “insure allied companies to maintain their independence and to preserve their own interests, apart from the common interests which justify the alliance” (Dussauge and Garrette 1995: 25). This is particularly the case with the associations we analyze here, because both parties retain their independence beyond the partnership terms that temporarily connect them. These partnerships do not rule out the existence of some (potential) competition between the two parties (Detrie 2005: 333-334). Indeed, film festivals perform their activities in a non-commercial framework, while the VOD platforms are engaged in a commercial activity—even if it is influenced by deep cinephilia and a mission motivated by a common goal. More than a financial problem, competition is therefore linked to questions of access to the works, plus the corporate identity issues explored below.

For Tënk, the advantage of this alliance is twofold. First, as most of its programming is dedicated to heritage films, film festivals allow it to renew its catalogue, “providing news about contemporary creative works” (Mathéus, Int. 2021). Second, documentary film festivals are attended by audiences who might be interested in what Tënk has to offer. With the aim of building a critical mass of subscribers, the platform has developed operations of targeted communication at these events, what Mathéus calls “back-scratching” (Int. 2021).

Film festivals that collaborate with Tënk see this alliance as an extension of their own activities, one that allows them to work with a renowned player who shares the same artistic and political positioning as they do. In that respect, Pierre Bachman (director of Cinémathèque du Documentaire) describes Tënk as a “natural partner” for film festivals (Int. 2021). Being on Tënk offers visibility to festivals, extending the reach of the event beyond their local or regional audience, with no threat of audience migration. Indeed, the content offered on Tënk for film festivals does not constitute an online alternative to the festivals, however incomplete. Rather, the idea is to “bring news” of the festival, to offer an “echo” (Mathéus, Int. 2021), which entails selecting a limited number of films (usually four or five films, seven at most). These films are often chosen from the program of previous editions of the festival, not from the current one. This avoids creating redundancy with the festival programming, as well as limiting the possibilities of further distribution due to online exposure of the films. Requests from festivals have been numerous even before the pandemic, but Tënk’s leaders nonetheless only engage with events one at a time so as to preserve their editorial identity.

In order to highlight this kind of partnership, the “stopover” platform Cinémathèque du Documentaire also displays films from various festivals. This public-benefit corporation proposes 10 or 11 programs a year on Tënk on different themes, conceived both autonomously and with film festivals. In the latter case, the programming is a collaboration between the Tënk team and a programmer within the festival team. The work accomplished in this framework is totally voluntary; the writing of the texts is the only work for which a remuneration is paid. This reinforces the idea that film festivals are primarily motivated by corporate image issues when they accept these types of partnerships.

Tënk also collaborates with festivals by awarding films. A “Tënk Award” is given at the Festival dei Popoli (Florence) and at Visions du Réel (Nyon) on a regular basis. Again, this initiative is meant to be a win-win

proposition. Film festivals are good partners in this endeavor because their work becomes doubly valued: in a symbolic way thanks to the prestige of Tënk and in material terms because Tënk offers services in kind for its award. Moreover, the platform shows its interest in young creators and reinforces the “Tënk brand” (Mathéus, Int. 2021) in the documentary world. These factors reinforce the idea that film festivals accept these types of partnerships primarily due to a desire to augment their corporate images (Fig. 6.3).

Thus, since its creation, Tënk’s relationships with film festivals have been part of its identity as a platform. Tënk collaborates in the creation of each program on a voluntary basis stemming from those partnerships: editorial control is coupled with a proactive approach when dealing with festival films, which ensures the strict compliance of the programming with its own editorial criteria. As for the alliance’s governance model, Tënk’s team retains complete control over the process for the entire duration of the partnership. The co-construction of curated programs is carried out under its supervision at all levels: in terms of themes, the number of films,

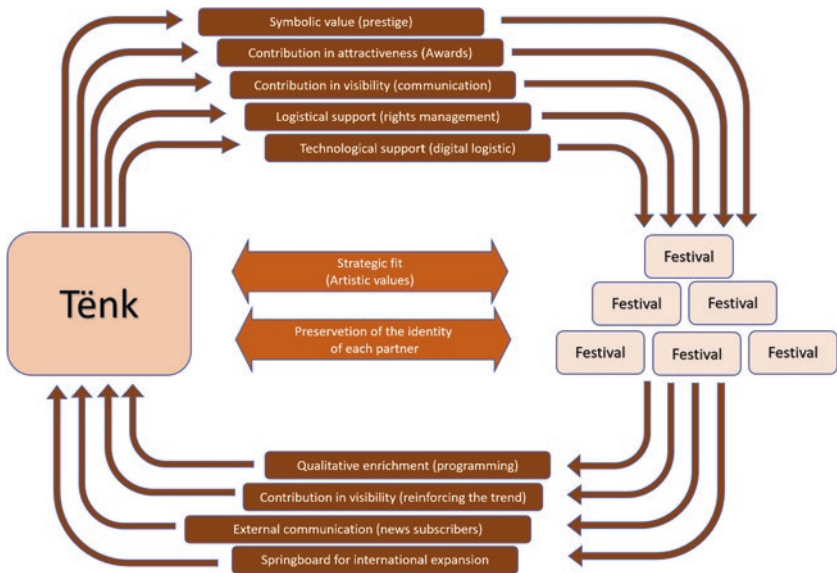


Fig. 6.3 “Diagram of the strategic alliance between Tënk and film festivals.” (Designed by Christel Taillibert)

the choice of the films, exhibition dates, the duration of the online releases, and so on. This imbalance in the control of the alliance, rather than being an obstacle to its implementation, explains its success, preserving the identity and the interests of both partners.

2020, THE COVID YEAR: REVISITING THE ALLIANCE

Starting in March 2020, the French government's restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic limited the circulation and gathering of people. This led to the cancelation of several cultural events and, by default, they moved their programs online. In this context, the strategies by which the alliance of streaming platforms and festivals created value became even more important. As Yves L. Doz and Gary Hamel explain, these strategies include (1) gaining competitive capabilities through co-option, (2) leveraging co-specialized resources, and (3) gaining competence through internalized learning. Immediate responses to the pandemic seemed to increase the benefits that these strategies already offered to Tënk and its partner festivals. For example, the number of partnerships increased, the technological infrastructure of the platform was leveraged to move festivals online, and experiences of success and failure occurred within a rapidly changing environment.

Film festivals, along with most public events, were canceled during 2020, though some succeeded in maintaining a physical edition that respected social distancing during the period between the two lockdowns. These cancelations caused a lot of distress for film festival professionals, and many of them considered the possibility of exhibiting films online. In some cases, this decision had to be made very quickly. For instance, Cinéma du Réel (Paris) was canceled in March 2020 even though the inauguration of the festival had already occurred. The "Friends of Cinéma du Réel" association immediately thought of ways to bring the event live, and they contacted Tënk. The Tënk team shared their distress in the face of the unfolding situation, and solidarity seemed to be the only possible response (Int. Mathéus 2021). They agreed to open the platform to the event. One week later, four programs from Cinéma du Réel were online on Tënk: French feature films and international short films during the first week, and international feature films and French short films during the second one.

Since this first experiment, two rules were adopted by Tënk that were later renewed for all partnerships of this kind. First, the duration of the

online release was reduced to respect “the ephemeral nature of a film festival” (AFC 2020). Second, “as the number of seats is limited in a theatre” (AFC 2020), the number of views was limited to match the number of spectators who could have seen the film during the festival. For example, for *Cinéma du Réel*, only 800 views were possible for each film. This decision responded to distributors’ concerns, since they were less than thrilled about the idea of showing their films online.

Other film festivals experienced the same nightmare. Some of them were welcomed in the same way on Tënk: documentaries from *Cinématino* (Toulouse, March 20–29, 2020) and *Visions du Réel* (April 24–May 2, 2020) were presented on the platform. The way Astrid Da Silva, programmer for *Visions du Réel*, tells us how the decisions were made reflects the process observed during numerous other events as well:

During the early days of the pandemic, we had no idea what the impact of the pandemic on our activities would be. It seemed impossible to show the films online because they are worldwide premieres. In the following weeks, we realized that the situation was going to persist long-term, that it was not a few weeks’ problem... We talked about the films online because we thought it was the only potential alternative in this situation which will be for months, and we had to find a way to bring these films alive, to give them visibility. (Int. Da Silva 2021)

The *Visions du Réel* festival team decided to organize an online event with different platforms that were already partners (Festival Scope, Tënk, and DAFilms). But this time the collaboration was different because, as Da Silva notes, they did not propose only “an extension of the festival, IT WAS the festival!” (Int. 2021). Two sections of the festival were welcomed on Tënk: a retrospective on the work of Claire Denis and a section called “Latitudes,” which included very recent documentary films. The very complex rights management was renegotiated case-by-case by the Tënk and Nyon teams. Once again, the number of views was limited (500 for each film) and the duration of the program was set at twice a week. A single interface was created on the festival’s site to redirect the users to the requested movies, and this simplified access to the online programming that was distributed among several platforms. At the same time, a hotline was created to answer the questions of users who had technical problems or did not understand how to access the films. This plan was a success: according to Tënk, all 500 “online tickets” were sold for the 130 films of

the program. For film festivals, these traumatic experiences had upsides, too. For example, many people who could not travel to Nyon were pleased to be able to discover the films: “At the end, this experience has been quite positive. This comforted us, because we were very sad not to experience the festival, not to meet all the film teams. But we received calls from people who were very happy to see these films” (Int. Da Silva 2021).

Despite these positive aspects, the outcome of these experiments overall remains mixed. Festival directors, even if they were relieved to present their work to an audience, were not fully satisfied by the online format. Stating an obvious fact, the Cinéma du Réel team writes: “The success of online programming has been particularly satisfying. But the 42nd edition of the festival did not take place. A festival is this alchemy between movies, film directors, a team and an audience” (Cinémathèque du Documentaire 2020). Elsa Charbit, director of the Entrevues festival (Belfort, France), echoes this view: “The scope of a festival is not, in any way, to add up to the long list of online proposals. A film festival is a gathering place, one cannot replace the other” (Int. 2021). Documentary filmmakers whose films were shown online were not more satisfied, because, as Anne Pomonti, director of the Cinémathèque du Documentaire, recalls, “for them, it’s important to have a direct contact with the public, a discussion before or after the film. They insisted a lot on that” (Int. 2021).

Tënk, as with most online cultural actors, benefited from the enthusiasm generated by moving festivals online: the number of subscribers rose by 30%, from 8000 to 11,000 subscribers at the end of 2020, while institutional subscriptions (schools, universities, media libraries, etc.) rose from around 50 to 70 in the same period (Int. Mathéus 2021). These new subscribers were also retained during the following months, the churn rate remaining stable. This expansion was noteworthy because of its impact on the future of the platform, since, as its president, Jean-Marie Barbe points out, this helped Tënk reach financial equilibrium (Cauhapé 2020). Nevertheless, Mathéus, the Tënk director, sees the balance-sheet as still quite bleak: “We realized with the first attempts that if we did that, we weren’t Tënk anymore, we didn’t have the control of our editorial line anymore” (Int. Mathéus 2021). Indeed, because the platform has constructed its identity based on strong editorialization, when it loses the control of which films end up hosted on it, this represents a conflict with its core purpose. The sheer abundance of films also represented a problem, as it undercuts the platform’s original concept. Pierre Mathéus (Int. 2021) recalls that hosting Cinéma du Réel involved the arrival of 70 films onto

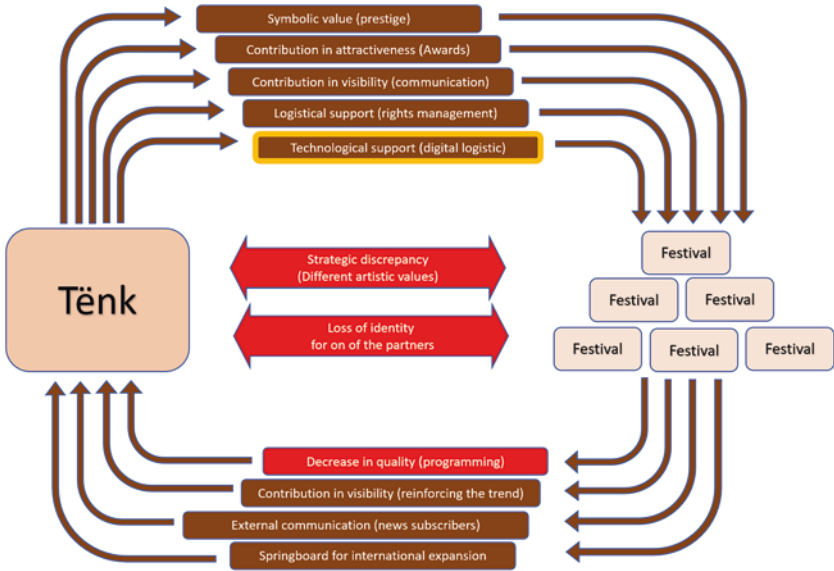


Fig. 6.4 “Unbalance within the strategic alliance between Tënk and its partner festivals.” (Designed by Christel Taillibert)

the platform, rendering its overall editorial identity illegible. Further, each film was seen fewer times and thus suffered in this way from the situation. On the consumer side, the dilution of the editorial identity of the film offerings was not appreciated by Tënk’s subscribers, who were generally not very excited about these festivals’ programming. As explained by Pierre Mathéus, “Our overall impression is that they [the festivals] didn’t attract more viewers. Rather, when they were not in our editorial line, they could confuse our subscribers who didn’t understand” (Int. 2021). Thus, from this point of view, the online hosting experiment failed to provide unique value to either partner in the collaboration, and the profound unease felt by the Tënk director fueled fears about future alliances between the platform and film festivals (Fig. 6.4).

RETURN TO THE ORIGINAL EQUILIBRIUM OF THE ALLIANCE

This unease felt by the Tënk director indicates why they so quickly returned to the terms of the alliance as they existed before the pandemic. Hence, the platform had to decline (not without some soul-searching) the

numerous calls for help—numbering four or five per month—they received from canceled film festivals. The Tënk team returned to their original model for partnering with film festivals, and this included the canceled ones. For example, the collaboration with the Locarno Film Festival resulted in programming six films from the competition, along with one other film that had won an award in Locarno in 2013 (Tënk 2020a). The number of films (seven) and the approach (an echo of, rather than a substitute for, the live event) were in accordance with the partnership model employed previous to the pandemic.

The collaboration between Tënk and the Entrevues festival (Belfort) provides an illustrative case of this kind of partnership with a canceled film festival. Originally, the Entrevues team decided to present two sections online (on Festival Scope Pro), the international competition and the “Films en cours,” and to postpone the rest of the festival. But while discussing this decision, Eva Tourrent, head of the artistic department of Tënk, contacted them. As the festival’s artistic director recalls: “She explained to us that the Tënk team likes the editorial line of Belfort a lot. She said she would like to construct an *Escale de la Cinémathèque du Documentaire* with us” (Int. Charbit 2021). Thus, they decided to curate a program based on one of Belfort festival’s canceled retrospectives, entitled “Net Found Footage.” The process developed through a series of discussions and debates until they agreed on a program of eight films (down from the 20 or so included in the original retrospective). The “Escale” was then added to the platform’s offerings for three months (November 2020–January 2021), complemented by a live round-table discussion on YouTube.

Hence, after a tumultuous period during the first lockdown, Tënk has subsequently offered its subscribers programs created in conjunction with festival teams (F.A.M.E., *Les Etoiles du Documentaire*, FIPA Doc, etc.) that remain faithful to their original collaboration and editorial model.

Coming back to the variables to measure the performance of an alliance as proposed by Philappart (2001, 26-28), we see that in this case in particular, the dominant position of Tënk was decisive because this dominance allowed the platform to regain full control of the situation. All the stakeholders accepted the decision because trust, respect, and artistic interests were aligned among the partners, who ended up fully satisfied by the clear and precise structuring of the alliance. This positive result legitimized the model imposed by the platform. The lack of equality in control was therefore balanced by consensus among the partners’ profiles and the clarity of the level of their strategic fit in the alliance.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have analyzed the collaborative practices between the streaming platforms DAFilms and Tënk with film festivals during the pandemic. These alliances were already in place when the platforms originated (2005 and 2016, respectively), as they were created partly in response to documentary festivals' need to create an infrastructure for film distribution once the event was over. These collaborations increased in number and were accelerated by the sudden necessity to move film festival programs online. In this context, the pandemic served to identify the point at which win-win situations turn into lose-lose ones. From the point of view of the festivals, this point occurs due to losing their identity within the platform, failing to reach their intended audience, and struggling to maintain a sense of liveness online; from the point of view of the platforms, factors such as keeping curatorial identity (in the case of Tënk) and reaching new audiences and positioning themselves in various national contexts (in the case of DAFilms) determined the success or failure of these experiments in collaboration. Positive aspects included an increase in subscriptions and in the number of films added to the platforms' catalogues, as well as the ability to reach new festival audiences (including younger audiences and rural populations) and explore new forms of utilization (such as in educational settings). A close look at these processes contributes to a better understanding of festivals' and platforms' operational logics, their positioning within the production-distribution chain, and their own perceived self-definition and future goals.

When we look at how these alliances were mobilized, reciprocity is key for understanding not only why both partners were willing to collaborate, but also which partner would be contacted in the first place. This also explains why working with platforms that already had a reputation within the industry and among the public was critical for festivals (and the filmmakers they represented). Furthermore, we can see why some festivals committed to putting their programs on platforms with whom they shared a professional trajectory and history of collaboration (such as Jihlava and DAFilms, or Tënk and the États Généraux du Film Documentaire), while others did not feel this sort of need or obligation.

Finally, the pandemic has forced the development of some practices, infrastructures, and professional alliances that will remain once all restrictions are over. In the documentary realm, many festival directors have declared that they will keep hybrid practices for their festivals. Moreover,

many festivals are developing their own VOD platforms. These will profit from the festival brand to create new commercial distribution channels within the audiovisual market, especially in national contexts like Denmark or Poland in which there are no established platforms specializing in documentary film.

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Chilean Film Festivals and Local Audiences: Going Online?

María Paz Peirano and Gonzalo Ramírez

Over the past ten years, the number and diversity of Chilean film festivals have considerably increased, from relatively informal showcases for local cinephiles and hangouts for filmmakers to professionalized industrial hubs for project development, education, and audience creation. Not without struggles, the festival landscape was flourishing up to 2019 with the increasing professionalization of these events and the creation of networks and alliances both within Chile and with other Ibero-American film festivals. For example, the *RED, Red de Festivales y Muestras de Cine de Chile y los Pueblos Originarios* (Network of Chilean and Indigenous

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Film Festivals) was created in 2018.¹ In 2019, we finished a first comprehensive mapping of Chilean film festivals (Peirano 2020)² and found a total of 101 active events, 40 with a long-term trajectory (with more than six editions).

As stated elsewhere (Peirano 2021), this expansion of the festival landscape went hand in hand with the development of national cinema during the same period and its ongoing aspirations to professionalization, internationalization, and the enhancement of local audiences. In this context, festivals became key hubs for professional networking and the reconfiguration of the local field, as well as important nodes of film circulation with a focus on audience creation. Despite this growth, Chilean festivals continue to be rather small events that exist under precarious conditions, facing various economic and cultural challenges that hinder their stability. Local festivals are (exceptions apart) highly dependent on state support. They are created by private initiatives of enthusiastic filmmakers and/or cultural managers who apply to state and regional government funds. Securing this funding is a difficult task, since they need to apply every one to two years for short-term support, and chances are that some events will not take place regularly as a result. Moreover, even if most of them have free admission, they often struggle with audience attendance and seek to increase it beyond their niche audiences, aiming to enhance their impact and further legitimize their position (which presumably would also justify their funding).

This relatively unstable festival landscape was further exacerbated in 2019 with the so-called Chilean *Estallido* (“social outburst”), a series of massive demonstrations and riots that originated in the capital city of Santiago and spread to the rest of the country. The protests started on October 18, 2019, in response to a raise in Santiago’s *Metro* (subway) fares and, later on, to social inequality, the increasing costs of living, and privatization policies. On October 25, 2019, over 1.2 million people took to the streets of Santiago also demanding President Piñera’s resignation in what came to be known as “the biggest march in Chile” (González and Le Foulon 2020). Protests were followed by confrontations with the police and military forces, leading to the exacerbation of social conflict and to a number of human rights violations against protesters, including eye mutilation, torture, sexual abuse, and sexual assault (Amnesty International 2020). The increasing levels of violence went hand in hand with President

¹<https://redfestivalesdecine.cl/>.

²See also some of this research’s results on www.festivalesdecine.cl.

Piñera's declaration of a "state of emergency" in the country, which led to restrictions on freedom of movement and a prolonged curfew.

In the case of film festivals, this socio-political crisis not only affected festival programming strategies (which shifted to more politically oriented standpoints) but also their mere existence: coincidentally, October and November are the busiest months in the local festival calendar, as 39% of them take place during this period. Not only is spring often considered the best time of the year for cultural events, but it also matches the time frames imposed by state funding, which pushes festival organizers to spend their funds, finish their projects, and report back their expenditures by the end of the year (December–January). By the end of 2019, however, a considerable number of events were either canceled or limited due to the political conditions. They had to be restructured accordingly, changing their dates and/or venues, reducing the number of screenings, and adapting their timetables to the national curfew (which in 2019 ran from 7.00 pm to 7.00 am for about a week after the social unrest and then was set from 9.00 pm to 5.00 am every day, forcing to shut down all public activities during the evening).

When the health crisis started in Chile in March 2020, most festivals were still trying to recover from the consequences of the *Estallido* or planning their postponed edition. The *Frontera Sur, Festival Internacional de Cine de No Ficción* (Southern Frontier, Non-Fiction Film Festival) in Concepción, for example, was initially going to take place in November 2019, and after getting canceled, it was supposed to be held in April 2020. It was then canceled for a second time due to lockdown restrictions and finally took place in September 2020. In this third attempt, the festival was transformed into a fully online event and maintained a similar program, although workshops, Q&As sessions, and masterclasses with international guests were moved to Zoom meetings and streamed via Facebook Live.

In this chapter, we will examine how the Covid-19 crisis has further affected Chilean film festivals and posed new challenges for them. As Marijke de Valck and Antoine Damiens have pointed out in their co-edited dossier on film festivals and the first wave of Covid-19 (2020), the extent of the epidemiological crisis can only be tackled if we consider other social, economic, and political crises that impact contemporary festivals, often precipitating and accentuating previous trends affecting film circulation and exhibition. Thus, we should understand this crisis within a particular

historical context that has been pressuring onsite exhibitions and collective viewing since earlier, and festivals' responses as adaptive strategies that might surpass the current public health conditions.

This chapter provides an overview of how Covid-19 has affected film festivals' position in Chile and their strategies of survival. We mapped and tracked festivals' activities throughout 2020 and 2021 and used online ethnographic methods to observe some cases more closely (Postill and Pink 2012) by analyzing festivals' websites and social media, conducting participant observation of online activities, and interviewing festival organizers. We looked at some of the mechanisms through which festival practitioners adapted to the challenges they were facing, particularly how they temporarily became online events and began to change their organization and practices. We address some of the new ways in which film festivals have developed to engage with their audiences while moving to online platforms in 2020, which poses some questions on the future developments of these events.

CHILEAN FESTIVALS UNDER COVID-19

Only 59 of the previous 101 Chilean film festivals took place in 2020. There were 60 festival events (this account includes the Santiago Mountain Film Festival that was held twice in 2020, onsite and online), most of them (51) in a digital format. Nine of them took place normally before the Covid-19 outbreak, among them traditional summer festivals such as the *CINELEBU*, *Festival Internacional de Cine de Lebu* (Lebu International Film Festival), and the *FECICH*, *Festival de Cine Chileno* (Chilean Film Festival), in addition to newer ones such as the *Festival Internacional de Cine de Puerto Montt* (Puerto Montt International Film Festival). However, most of them had to be canceled or postponed.

The first festival to be canceled in 2020 was the *FEMCINE*, *Festival de Cine de Mujeres* (Women's Film Festival). *FEMCINE* was going to take place on March 17th–22nd, but the pandemic was officially declared in Chile through a sanitary alert on February 8th (Minister of Health 2020a), and on March 18th, the country was declared under state of emergency (Minister of Interior and Public Security 2020). From March 25th on, starting with the capital city, different cities and regions began their lockdown and increased restrictions on people's gatherings (Minister of Health 2020b). After this cancellation, the Chilean festival circuit halted for about two months.

It was not until June that established festivals began to re-emerge in online formats, for instance, the *Festival de Cine Europeo* (European Film Festival) and the indigenous children's film festival *Festival Pichikeche*. Festivals that typically take place during the first semester had to move their schedule, most of them to the second semester, concentrating on the months of October (6), November (14), and December (13). For example, the *Festival Internacional de Animación Chilemonos* (Animation International Film Festival Chilemonos) was moved from May to October. Most festivals that are usually held in the second semester (June to December) kept their annual slots. For example, the *FECILS, Festival Internacional de Cine de La Serena* (La Serena International Film Festival) and the *FICValdivia, Festival Internacional de Cine de Valdivia* (Valdivia International Film Festival) kept their October slot, while the *Festival de Películas Nativas Arica Nativa* (Arica Native Film Festival), the *ANTOFACINE, Festival Internacional de Cine de Antofagasta* (Antofagasta International Film Festival), and the *FICIQQ Festival Internacional de Cine de Iquique* (Iquique International Film Festival) kept their slots in November.

Some festivals only slightly changed their calendar, such as the *FICVIÑA, Festival Internacional de Cine de Viña del Mar* (Viña del Mar International Film Festival), and the *ArqFilmFest, Arquitectura Film Festival* (Architecture Film Festival), which were moved to November (just a few weeks after their original slot in September and October). Only a few moved their calendar forward: the *Festival Internacional de Cine de No Ficción, Frontera Sur* (Nonfiction international Film Festival, Southern Frontier) (November to September), the *Santiago Horror Film Festival* (October to September), and the *FESCIES, Festival Nacional de Cine de Estudiantes Secundarios* (National High School Film Festival) (December to October) (see Table 7.1).

Festivals needed to adapt to the current situation by reshaping their program and their activities, reorganizing their team, reconfiguring their alliances, and redirecting the remaining funds from 2019 to different expenditures in 2020 (e.g., instead of using funds for paying international guests' plane tickets and accommodations, festivals paid streaming platforms). The main decision was whether to hold live events, at least in hybrid format, or move fully online. Both strategies involved restructuring their normal practices, as well as different challenges and opportunities.

Table 7.1 “Chilean film festivals after Covid-19 (2020)”

<i>Festival</i>	<i>Date 2019</i>	<i>Date 2020</i>	<i>Format</i>
Amor Festival Internacional de Cine LGBT+	June	July	Online
Arquitectura Film Festival—ArqFilmFest	October	November	Online
CineZ en Talcaóveres Festival Internacional Cine	November	December	Online
Terror y Fantástico Talca			
Cortos En Grande	November	November	Online
CUTÚN el Festival Internacional de Cine de Terror y Fantasía de LA SERENA	NA	September	Online
Festival Cine UC	May	September	Online
Festival de Animación Emergente	October	October	Online
Festival de Animación Nochedemonos	November	November	Online
Festival de Cine de Montaña Lo Valdés	April	November	On site
Festival de Cine de Mujeres—FEMCINE	March	August	Online
Festival de Cine de Terror de Valdivia	May	July	Online
Festival de Cine en Red—RED	NA	September	Online
Festival de Cine Europeo	May	June	Online
Festival de Cine Nacional e Internacional FELINA	October	December	Online
Festival de Cine Online de Chile—UDLAFestoc	December	December	Online
Festival de Cine Social y Antisocial—FECISO	August	November	On site
Festival en cuarentena	NA	April	Online
Festival Inclusivo de Arte	NA	October	Online
Festival Internacional Biobío Cine	April	June	Online
Festival Internacional Cine de Terror Valparaíso	December	December	Online
Festival Internacional de Animación Chilemonos	May	October	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine Arica Nativa	November	November	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de Iquique—FICIQQ	November	November	Online
Festival internacional de Cine de La Serena—FECILS	October	October	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de No Ficción, Frontera Sur	November	September	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de Quillota	May	December	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de Rengo—FECIR	September	December	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de Surf	December	December	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de Terror de Atacama	October	December	Online
Festival Internacional de Cine de Valdivia—FICValdivia	October	October	Online
Festival	September	November	Online
Internacional de Cine de Viña del Mar—FICVIÑA			
Festival Internacional de Cine Documental DocsValparaíso	September	September	Online
Festival	November	November	Online
Internacional de Cine en Antofagasta—ANTOFACINE			
Festival Internacional de Cine para Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Ojo de Pescado	August	August	Online

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

<i>Festival</i>	<i>Date 2019</i>	<i>Date 2020</i>	<i>Format</i>
Festival Internacional de Cine Recobrado	December	November	Hybrid
Festival Internacional de Cine y Documental Musical—IN-EDIT Chile	April	December	Hybrid
Festival Internacional de Cortometrajes Vitacura	NA	December	Online
Festival	December	November	Hybrid
Internacional de Documentales de Santiago—FIDOCS			
Festival Itinerante de Cortometrajes La Ventana	November	December	Online
Festival Nacional de Cine de Estudiantes	December	October	Online
Secundarios—FECIES			
Festival Pichikeche	June	June	Online
Festival Proceso de Error	September	December	Online
Festival The CortOZ	November	November	Online
Final Girls Chile Festival de Cine Fantástico	NA	November	Online
Muestra Cine+Video Indígena	June	August	Online
Resistencia Film Fest	October	December	Online
Santiago Festival Internacional de Cine—SANFIC	August	August	Online
Santiago Horror Film Festival	October	September	Online
Santiago Mountain Film Festival	January	November	Online
Santiago Wild Film Festival	NA	March	Online
Todos somos diferentes. Concurso Internacional de Cortometrajes de Inclusión	April	July	Online

Data compiled from original research by the authors. Festivals appear in alphabetical order

LIVE EVENTS AND HYBRID STRATEGIES

After the pandemic hit, only two festivals were held entirely as live events, remaining consistent with their curatorial line and political stance: the *Festival de Cine de Montaña Lo Valdés* (Lo Valdés Mountain Film Festival) and the *FECISO, Festival de Cine Social y Antisocial* (Social and Antisocial Film Festival). The Mountain Film Festival was held fully onsite in order to respect its focus on nature and a healthy lifestyle. This outdoor festival took place in Lo Valdés, Cajón del Maipo (a canyon near Santiago), on two dates, November 21st–22nd and 27th–29th, with heavy restrictions and protocols. *FECISO* was held open-air on November 28th in Santiago's outskirts. *FECISO* is an openly contracultural and politically oriented festival that normally holds open-air activities in impoverished neighborhoods in the city's periphery; therefore, this gesture was in line with its organization while also reinforcing the social movement's idea of claiming the streets for the common people and standing against political repression.

Only three other festivals included some live events in their program, although they mainly took place online: the *Festival Internacional de Documentales de Santiago—FIDOCS* (Santiago International Documentary Film Festival), the *Festival Internacional de Cine y Documental Musical—IN-EDIT* (International Film and Musical Documentary Festival), and the archival film festival *Festival Internacional de Cine Recobrado de Valparaíso* (Valparaíso Recovered Cinema Film Festival). *FIDOCS* had a special screening of Patricio Guzmán’s *La Cordillera de los Sueños* (2020) outside the theaters at the Ramón Cruz Park (Villa Frei, Santiago); *IN-EDIT* held its opening night and some screenings at their usual spot, the Nescafé de las Artes Theater, with heavy audience restrictions.

The case of *Cine Recobrado* deserves more attention, since it held a larger number of live activities, with some films being exhibited online and a parallel conference via Zoom. Other screenings of the festival took place on site in Valparaíso (open-air and drive-in exhibitions) during November and December when there were fewer sanitary restrictions.³ *Cine Recobrado* scheduled two open-air sidebars: “Cine en Tu Ventana” (Cinema at Your Window), with 16-mm film projections in different neighborhoods of the city of Valparaíso, and an “Autocinema” that emulated a 1950s drive-in cinema and showed classic B-movies and musicals. For the Autocinema, *Cine Recobrado* made an alliance with the Valparaíso Cultural Park, offering very limited tickets and a full nostalgic experience with popcorn and vintage movies, which proved to be a huge success: for the first time, this quite niche festival had a waiting list to get a spot at the festival’s screenings, and it was fully booked every night. Both live activities aimed to recover not only classical cinema (the focus of the festival) but also more traditional cinema-going practices. We can see that, although exceptional, these live festival events incorporated some new opportunities that might be the way to go for this festival in the future.

FESTIVALS MOVING ONLINE

The rest of the Chilean festivals mostly relied on external online platforms (especially Festhome, used by 12 Festivals, but also Festival Scope [3] and Facebook [5]). Only 13 of them created their own screening

³FIDOCS from November 25 to December 1, In-Edit from December 2 to 8, and Cine Recobrado from November 28 to December 11.

platforms. In general, curating practices for these festivals proved to be more difficult than in previous years. Many films dropped because of the delay in the festival calendar, which clashed with the commercial premiere of the films. In the case of *FEMCINE*, for example, the decision to make it an online festival resulted in changing its date to August 4th–9th, 2020, and adapting its program and parallel activities to the new formats. In August, they showed 51 of the 68 films originally programmed. The major change was the cancelation of the opening film, the premiere of the Chilean film *Lina de Lima* (María Paz González, 2020), which was substituted by the American documentary *Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché* (Pamela B. Green, 2018). Most festivals had to concentrate on fewer film premieres than in other years and to renegotiate with distributors in order to make some popular films available. Programming was also challenging for small regional festivals that would not normally have premiers in their programs but aimed to reach local audiences with limited access to theaters. Now they had to rethink their target outside their city of origin and face the opportunity to create a program that could be watched by the entire country while also losing their closeness with their local community.

On the other hand, going online also meant unexpected opportunities. Festivals experiencing economic issues could take place in an online form, such as the *Festival Internacional de Cine Documental DocsValparaíso* (DocsValparaíso International Documentary Festival), which re-emerged in 2020 after having been previously canceled due to lack of funds. RED, the association of 26 Chilean festivals, also managed to get some extra direct funding from the Chilean government to create an online festival with the collaboration of all the festivals in the association, called *Festival de Cine en Red—RED* (Network Film Festival), which showed films with a multicultural focus on local communities. While it is not clear whether the festival will have some continuity, RED helped festival workers and practitioners who had been quite affected by the economic crisis due to the pandemic, providing them with some income in 2020 and therefore covering for the lack of emergency plans and state policies for the cultural sector during the pandemic.

In addition, a few festivals like *FEMCINE*, *FECICH*, and *FIDOCS* extended the screening time of their films for a couple of weeks (even when they stopped interacting with their audiences after the official dates of the festivals were over). Most festivals also expanded the event by adding more online activities, such as filmmakers' seminars, talks by special

guests, and other educational activities. Moreover, festivals that would not normally be able to get many renowned guests to participate took the opportunity to invite international names that otherwise would not have been able to attend the event. *Arica Nativa* had an online conversation with German director Werner Herzog, and *FICVIÑA* with the Argentinian actor Ricardo Darín and the Uruguayan director Mario Handler.

Two festivals saw an opportunity to seize the online experience as an immediate response to the pandemic, though it is unsure whether they will continue using these online components. The first version of the *Festival de Cine de Vida Salvaje y Medio Ambiente Santiago Wild* (Santiago Wild Animal Life and Environmental Film Festival), originally scheduled as an onsite event in December 2019, was moved to March due to the *Estallido*, when it was canceled again because of the pandemic. It rapidly went online through a national streaming platform of the Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage, called *Ondamedia* (which was used for festival screenings for the first time), releasing its films on the platform for free. Another new festival was the Festival en Cuarentena Chile (Quarantine in Chile Film Festival) which aimed specifically at very short films (*nanofilms*) created during the pandemic.

Despite these unexpected opportunities, changing to an “online event” was a difficult task for organizers. The virtualization of festivals meant transforming, to a certain extent, the very nature of each event, or at least the nature organizers were used to. Practitioners had to change their ways of working, their know-how, and some of their professional alliances. They were pushed to learn new ways of producing, organizing, and communicating around their events and to create new expertise that challenged their previous professional experience. This affected their relationship with filmmakers, distributors, and other actors in the field, and it also altered their relationship with the audience, which had become more “invisible” and unpredictable than before.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND GATEKEEPING PRACTICES

Increasing their audiences has been one of the main challenges for Chilean festivals in recent years. It has also been one of the main issues to be resolved under Covid-19 restrictions. Would their regular audiences be able to “attend” the online version of the festival? Would they want to watch festival films from home? What could the festival provide that was

different from the growing digital audiovisual offer people could find online? And would people be interested in watching even more screen time during the prolonged lockdown and teleworking periods?

Most festivals assumed that their main goal was making films accessible to their regular audiences. In the beginning, several festivals experienced technical problems and kept getting complaints on social media. Thus, they invested their efforts in the quality of the streaming platforms, aiming to ensure their usability. Earlier concerns were getting an online platform for free and making enough films from their original program available to their audiences. Organizers later learned they also needed to improve online accessibility by making platforms understandable and that they could not assume the audiences' literacy about streaming. Audiences could get impatient and frustrated, and abandon their viewing quite quickly, so festivals stopped uploading information to their main webpage and reinforced their use of social media, where they provided daily information about the program and upcoming online events. They also reassured the audiences by explaining certain procedures and giving away viewing instructions through both their websites and social media (e.g., on whether it was necessary to sign up and how to create an account).

This shows that film festival audiences are not necessarily used to online viewing and that even when they are used to watching VOD platforms such as Netflix or Amazon Prime, this knowledge is not immediately transferable to other platforms, especially those that are less user-friendly. The aforementioned *Frontera Sur*, for instance, created a YouTube video with an explanation on "How to watch our films" that was embedded in its website and promoted through Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, despite the fact that it is mostly a cinephile-oriented festival whose audiences are normally highly educated filmmakers, film students, scholars, and film critics, whom one would expect to be familiarized with online viewing practices. The festival made an effort to "educate" their audiences in these new practices, explaining different ways to attend the event in order to provide a smooth experience and replicate their attendance and normal consumption patterns.

In addition to the re-education of their audiences, guiding the viewing experience also aimed to communicate the festivals' program and its sections more clearly in order to stand out among the overwhelming audiovisual offer that became available online. *Frontera Sur* helped audiences to navigate through its website by also explaining its categories and curatorial criteria, which aimed to facilitate decision-making on which films to watch.

In previous years, its catalog was less detailed than in 2020, when it also increased its parallel activities, organizing more talks with its audience and expanding the use of social media to recommend and explain its movies. We can see that the festival assumed its position as a cinephiles' guide more clearly, retaining its status of gatekeeper in the local field, which previously relied solely on its program and face-to-face interactions during the event (and therefore in more informal and spontaneous ways).

Practices like the ones described above allowed audiences to trust the festival's programmers and relax throughout the selection process, which is arguably one of the advantages festivals will keep in the future. While it is true that audiences can have access to more films and information and they do not depend on a particular festival to watch the films they want, festivals could still have a role to play as cultural mediators of audiovisual consumption. Amid the increasing VODs and online audiovisual offers, festivals can still filter and provide significant recommendations for spectators, helping them to find their way in this new virtual context. Interactions with film critics and wider audiences via social media (particularly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) or even by phone helped to mediate with the audience and communicate the festival's stance, reassuring viewers about the reliability of its particular viewpoint.

THE PARADOX OF ONLINE ACCESS

Chilean festivals learned this type of practice by observing each other. As put by a practitioner, "At that stage [August–October 2021], all festivals were observing, viewing each other's films, and checking what was happening, what was working for them."⁴ Thus, 2020 can be understood as a year of trial and error, with learning outcomes that would probably impact the festivals' future versions, particularly those related to online viewing. That is the case of *FEMCINE*, the first one to cancel its live event. In its 2020 online version, films could only be watched for a limited time, something that sparked some tension among audiences who wanted unlimited access. It also meant that several "tickets" (number of viewings for a film that the festival had already bought from its distributors) were lost because audiences did not manage to watch it within its time frame. As a result, in the new online version of March 2021, *FEMCINE* decided to negotiate

⁴Personal communication, female practitioner, February 2021. In Spanish in the original, translated by the authors.

with distributors in order to grant full access to the movies any day of the festival until the total number of tickets ran out. The festival realized that it could not organize films by day slots the same way they did onsite, since spectators simply did not have the time to watch many films, even if theoretically they could do it from the comfort of their homes.

One of the paradoxes that emerged from online viewing is that even though films are more accessible, they are not necessarily easier to watch. While it is true that festivals increase the films' general access, there are other barriers that the live festival experience used to ease. On the one hand, online festivals are more accessible, as there are not as many geographical limitations to get into festival venues and there is more flexibility regarding the films' starting time. Also, Chilean festivals were mostly free to watch if one signed up to their website (even festivals for which one would have paid onsite, such as *FICValdivia*). However, on the other hand, home viewing has other limitations, such as stable and reliable Internet access, access to a screen, and time to connect during the day.

The pandemic has revealed the extent to which social inequalities prevent adequate access to online entertainment. We need to consider that even when 87.4% of Chilean homes have Internet access, only 56% have home Internet service, and even then its quality is not always adequate (SUBTEL 2017). This particularly affects impoverished, rural, and semi-rural communities.⁵ Moreover, gender inequalities have also impacted online viewing, as women have consistently reported a decrease in their free time during the pandemic as a result of looking after their children and/or the elderly and doing household chores.⁶ In this sense, online festivals by themselves could not increase accessibility to film viewing, and they might even reproduce structural inequalities. Additionally, the political and economic crisis in Chile put more stress on households' socioeconomic conditions, including those of professionals in an educational and cultural sector (an important target for film festivals) that had already been particularly affected by cancellations and curfews since the *Estallido*.

Amid these conditions, festivals could not provide a space for relaxation, social connection, and communal access to movies as they used to.

⁵Data considering family income is quite revealing: while 75% of higher-income homes have broadband, only 46% of mid-income and 24% of low-income homes access broadband (SUBTEL 2020).

⁶A study revealed that 38% of men spent zero hours in household chores and 71% spent zero hours looking after their children (Alonso 2020).

As the time-space delimitations of the event were lost, the “festival space” was no longer protected from the outside world anymore. Particularly for women, festivals were juxtaposed with everyday life and multiple online and offline chores. Going online ended both the material and symbolic boundaries of the festival space, and thus, the possibility of disconnecting from everyday duties and constant stress. Its rhythm was blurred with everyday life, breaking the temporal exceptionality created by the festival and leaving cinema-going unprotected from the mundane. One of the charms of attending a festival is its intensity, structured on the experience lived by the participants (Harbord 2016) and often achieved through the ritual separation from normal life, living an exceptional routine that disrupts the quotidian. Being at home, interrupted by families, homeschooling, work meetings, noisy neighbors, and food delivery both impeded and deromanticized the festival experience, limiting audiences’ participation. We see that since online activities are constantly entwined with offline events, we cannot assume that virtualization by itself will increase the films’ accessibility. Although sometimes they seem to be separated spheres, online and offline experiences are related to each other, as part of the same social continuum and as an integral part of everyday life (Miller and Slater 2000; Coleman 2010). Therefore, mediated social spaces should be understood as rooted in people’s offline routines.

In addition, going online limited communal viewing in public exhibition spaces, which affected local festivals in different ways. For festivals that heavily rely on both cinephilia and social networking, this overlapping offline and online experience is more difficult to overcome. For cinephile-oriented festivals, the ritual separation from the quotidian is rooted in the festivals’ identity and is an important condition for the participation of audiences who, as Bazin famously suggested (1955), are more devoted to this new “religious order” of communal cinema-going and social gatherings around films. In the case of the *FICValdivia—Festival Internacional de Cine de Valdivia* (Valdivia International Film Festival), arguably the most important festival for Chilean cinephiles, the organizers’ expectations seemed to clash with the harsh realities of online watching. From the very beginning, *FICValdivia* was reluctant to cancel live activities, until they officially announced the festival would be fully online just a month before it was due, in October (FICValdivia 2020).

This is a key event in the local calendar (González Itier 2020), with film professionals, critics, academics, and students traveling from different parts of the country every year to meet in the southern city of Valdivia.

Breaking this tradition was as difficult for the organizers as it was for the audiences, and there were quite some expectations about what would happen—in fact, in several interviews and talks, the festival’s director Raúl Camargo had to reassure that *FICValdivia* would take place in some form or another. The reluctance to change the essence of the festival rite reflected on the original idea that online films had to be organized at certain times, replicating the programming grid and therefore the pleasure of organizing oneself to watch several films a day and being prepared to be immersed in the festival experience. The circumstances at home, however, made this quite difficult, and very soon after the beginning of the festival, *FICValdivia* had to explain to its audiences (via email, as well as on its website and its social media) that they could actually watch the films at different times until tickets were sold out. This recognition made evident that the full-time cinephile festival experience was no longer possible under online circumstances.

In the case of smaller regional festivals that were not so focused on expert cinemagoers and film professionals but heavily based on the relationship with local cinemagoers, the replacement of the live event was also problematic. These festivals could no longer offer something otherwise unreachable for their audience (access to different films), and their audiences were not always easy to engage online, either because they lacked a good Internet connection or because they were not used to it. In the case of the *FECICH Festival de Cine Chileno* (Chilean Film Festival), which is based in the small towns of Quilpué and Villa Alemana, going online in January 2021 was quite a challenge. An important part of its audience consists of older people who either do not have proper Internet access or are not familiar with social media or streaming platforms. These audiences would normally get closer to the event because of its physical presence downtown, in Quilpué’s *Teatro Juan Bustos Ramírez* and Villa Alemana’s *Teatro Pompeya*, local theaters with which they have a close relationship. Curfews, lockdowns, and other health restrictions made it very difficult to publicize the festival in the streets and make door-to-door invitations, as *FECICH* organizers would normally do. The festival needed to reinvent its ways to reach its audiences and educate them on the use of online devices.

TACTICS FOR ENGAGING AUDIENCES ONLINE

Despite these difficulties, several festivals report that online attendance (meaning the total number of film viewings) was similar to that offline, although it is still difficult to jump to conclusions, as platforms cannot accurately report on viewing conditions and the actual number of people watching full films. Some online activities also managed to bring interesting surprises. For example, in the case of *FECICH*, the festival moved its “Escuela de espectadores” (School of Spectators) to Zoom, an audience development activity consisting of classes about Chilean cinema taught by a film critic. Although fewer people attended every session in comparison to previous years, these classes increased the age diversity of their participants, stimulating social interaction and an intergenerational dialogue among the festival’s captive audiences. *FECICH* also created a new series of seminars with the elderly via Zoom in alliance with an organization for senior citizens. These sessions activated dialogue and a sense of community among these *FECICH* cinemagoers, despite their age and distance. And while the festival was very concerned with the virtualization of its screenings, the older audiences reacted much more positively than organizers expected. The festival’s director Sebastián Cartajena comments:

It came up in conversations [with the audience] that the elderly actually felt, if not ‘safer’, at least engaged with the digital format (I imagine it was the case for those that have Internet access at home)... because platforms are easier to use if you send them a link with the movie: they just need to click... and that made access so much easier for older people! Many of them suggested we keep a digital film program in the future because they managed to watch many more things. They overcome their problems with mobility, their economic issues, their problems with catching public transport, safety issues ... so I think this is a specific group to work with by combining two strategies, online and offline, in the future. (Personal interview, our translation)

The festivals’ new tactics for engaging with their audiences involved a continuous learning process and reflection on film festivals. To keep some sense of community and their role in audience creation—which is also a

requirement for obtaining government funds⁷—most festivals tried to adapt their previous sidebar sections to the online format, with relative success. *FEMCINE*, for example, was the first festival to organize talks in Zoom and stream them via its Facebook account, surprisingly getting a similar or higher attendance than the one they used to get in the live event. These sidebars became a space for live interactions with audiences even outside the Zoom meeting, who would “reappear” through their comments and reactions (likes and hearts) in real time via Facebook, including their questions to the participants. This gave a sense of presence that mere “likes” on social media do not manage to fulfill. As Facebook shows how many people are watching at the same time and the chat is changing along with the streaming, it recreates some sense of communal viewing through specific “socialites” or qualities of social relationships. Even with its obvious limitations, this helped to feel some of the social connection missing from the online festival experience, expanding an isolated relationship with the event, and therefore, the festival experience.

For *FEMCINE* in particular, one of the benefits of being the first festival to try this format was also the novelty of this practice, which was received with enthusiasm in the midst of the long 2020 lockdown. The subsequent festivals, however, were not so lucky. As online talks proliferated and spectators became more and more used to the format, enthusiasm declined and not all of them were as successful unless they managed to clearly differentiate the events from others. For example, *Cine Recobrado* organized an academic symposium on Terence Fisher via Zoom on a different date from the live event while also targeting different audiences. This attracted a steady niche audience and even worked better than in previous years, as the festival could congregate scholars and students from different parts of South America that would normally not have the money to travel to Chile for the event. In addition, other film festivals continued to develop some techniques to engage the audiences more effectively, such as using the much more visually appealing StreamYard instead of Zoom for their parallel activities.

Chilean film festivals are still lacking strategies for further congregating their audiences and sharing their viewing experiences. We have not

⁷In recent years, the Chilean State has stressed the importance of audience creation and development. Thus, as of 2018, funds for the organization of film festivals started to include “audience creation” as part of their requirements for financing. For further details on this issue, see Peirano (2021).

observed activities in which audiences can interact with each other more freely and where the conversation is not mediated by festival organizers. For example, they do not use platforms that recreate communal viewing along the lines of *Watch2Gether* (a platform that allows for two or more people to watch the same content at the same time over the Internet) or *Mymovies.it* used by Bologna and Pordenone film festivals in Italy, a database for national films that turned into a platform for watching cinema on demand where audiences could make live commentaries on each movie.

All in all, replacing live interactions and expanding the festival experience has been one of the main issues for local festivals going online. Since the biggest concern was film programming and smooth streaming, festivals could often forget to keep their close relationship with their audiences alive. The Chilean festivals that managed to overcome the first year of Covid-19 were those that recognized that they were much more than yet another online viewing platform with an interesting curating viewpoint. First and foremost, festivals are social events that foster communities among cinephiles or local cinemagoers, and they tried to recreate an online community as much as they could. As Hobbins-White and Limov (2020) suggest, staging an event online and preserving the “energy” of onsite interaction is very difficult. And even with the technology that enables both approximating real-time and live engagement for geographically dispersed audiences, it requires a major investment and commitment from festival practitioners.

CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE OF GOING ONLINE

Given the recent global transformations due to Covid-19 and the impact of the economic and political crisis on Chilean festivals since the *Estallido*, it is difficult to see how they are going to go back to “normal” any time soon. Considering the precarious conditions of the Chilean film festival landscape due to the unstable health context and the pressing economic conditions, which push them to maintain a cheaper virtual format, chances are that Chilean film festivals will continue to be held partially online. In 2021, the conditions remain similar, with cycles of restrictions on people’s mobility in lockdowns, curfew times, limitations for opening movie theaters, and capacity controls. *FICValdivia* announced another online version in June 2021, informing their audiences that only if the health

conditions improve, they might also exhibit its program onsite (FICValdivia 2021).

Based on the Chilean festivals' experiences analyzed in this chapter, we can speculate that in the future, these festivals will probably opt for some hybrid form, retaining a few public screenings mixed with several online activities. On the one hand, the pandemic made the possibilities for incorporating online technologies to festival life, reducing geographical boundaries, and increasing films' accessibility for certain groups evident. Talks and seminars via Zoom and/or other apps are also likely here to stay, as they considerably reduce the costs of bringing directors, juries, and other film professionals to local festivals while maintaining their international outlook. As films' international accessibility and circulation also keep accelerating, the internationalization of local festivals seems more affordable than ever.

On the other hand, face-to-face interactions continue to be vital for film festivals, particularly for key events in the local industry and those more cinephile-orientated, in which social networking is important. Live events are also more relevant to festivals that work closely with local communities and grassroots organizations, which have a direct impact on their territories. Even if one would expect festivals with lower budgets to prefer to go online for good, that is not the case for festivals that take place in places without a reliable Internet connection or with audiences that are still not used to an online viewing platform. And while it is true that both audiences and organizers are quickly learning about these new forms of festival-going, the festival live experience has not been successfully replaced yet, and it might never be. Not only do festivals need to implement new strategies to re-engage with their audiences more actively, but there is also exhaustion from online overconnectivity, an overwhelming offer of audio-visual content at home, and no time or no ideal conditions for "attending" a festival at home.

The latter opens the question of future places for interaction with the audiences and ways of expanding the sense of community with festivals, including whether it is possible to foster online festival communities and the extent to which they can create similar patterns to onsite events. It also poses the question about the nature and configuration of those audiences. Are they the same ones that engage with the live event? How are the audiences segmented, and how are they relating to the festival? Apart from some modest quantitative research, until now, festival organizers in Chile have mostly relied on direct observation to build some knowledge about their audiences. Without seeing their faces, it becomes more difficult to

grasp who these audiences are and to get a sense of their relationship with the event. More than ever, this is a moment for festivals to rethink their identities and understand their reach better, as well as rethink the type of audiences they have and those they are aiming for. Thus, it is a moment to look deeper into their audiences' diversity and design specific ways to interact with them online and onsite. This is also a challenge for scholars and researchers because no matter how much quantitative data can be easily compiled online, it is not possible to actually "see" the audience, except through the traces they leave on social media comments and Zoom gatherings. There is a need to develop new tools that help understand the festivals' relationship with their audiences in the future, both online and offline.

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PART II

Experimenting on the Frontlines:
Innovative Responses to the Crisis



Vidéo de Femmes Dans le Parc: Feminist Rhythms and Festival Times Under Covid

Ylenia Olibet and Alanna Thain

Vidéo de Femmes dans le Parc (VFP) (Women’s Videos in the Park) is a summertime open-air screening of independent short videos, held annually since 1991 at Parc La Fontaine in Montreal, Canada, by Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV), an independent feminist/queer distribution center “dedicated to the promotion of videos created by women (in its most inclusive definition) by distributing and presenting them” (GIV).¹ Each year, VFP is hotly anticipated by Montreal’s feminist and queer communities for its program showcasing the latest trends in video-art

¹GIV’s mandate to promote work by women invites artists in their catalogue who have transitioned or who no longer exclusively identify as women the autonomous choice to remain within their representation. The essay reflects this inclusion, using “women” in keeping with GIV’s current self-description.

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from Quebec and Canada, in a convivial environment where the wider public encounters experimental work outside rigid models of spectatorship: sitting on the grass, eating, drinking, and spontaneously reacting out loud to the works. For GIV, VFP integrates feminist and queer art into Montreal's urban context, in line with its mandate to disseminate independent videos promoting community organizing and social change. This work builds on the important legacy of the alternative video collectives and artist-run centers since the 1970s in Canada that aimed to create a counter public sphere through accessible media and direct, democratic forms of organization, production, and dissemination.² In this essay, we consider VFP 2020 under Covid. While VFP falls outside of many normative festival typologies, we adapt Antoine Damiens' (2020) notion of "ephemeral festivals" to account for VFP's punctual impact in dialogue with GIV's sustained history as a feminist artist-run center. We explore VFP's historical use of public space and its reimagination under Covid's urgent sanitary crisis and chronic social inequities. We rethink the scale of festival analysis through the impact of a one-night festival synthesizing distributed affects and actions particular to feminist organizing. After situating VFP within GIV's wider mandate, we analyze VFP's "visual architecture" under Covid, assessing its cinema publics both online and off and conclude with questions of embodied labor and affect. GIV's creative decision to move VFP online during the Covid crisis belongs to a longer history of alternative media's unconventional exhibition modes that address social inequalities.

Since 1991, VFP has been *the* summer rendezvous for lovers of video art. This free, public outdoor screening is always followed by a more intimate after-party back at GIV's headquarters. A program of recent short

²GIV was part of a wave of alternative video collectives that exploded within the 1970s Canadian media ecology: grassroots production and distribution centers aiming to create a counter public sphere within a McLuhanesque cultural climate that saw electronic media as catalyst for social change. The artist-run center model prioritizes decision making by artists for artists, who were involved at every aspect of the organization from accounting to programming to community building. In Quebec, Robert Forget, a producer at the National Film Board, founded Vidéographe in 1971 to provide community groups with free access to video production and distribution, active today as an artist-run center that promotes experimental video art. Moreover, paralleling the rise of the Women's Movement, feminist media collectives were born, including Vidéo Femmes (1973–2015) and Groupe Intervention Vidéo (1975–) in Quebec (Bociurkiw 2016; MacKenzie 2004).

independent media artworks solicited each year from Canada-based artists through an open call with no entry fee, VFP reflects contemporary concerns emerging from the artworks and grounds them in the convivial ethos of one of Canada's oldest artist-run centers. Nik Forrest, whose work has screened multiple times at VFP, describes VFP as GIV's "family" event (Forrest 2021). This characterization should be understood within GIV's intersectional queer and feminist frame: family is not established kinship relations, but a labor of love, the product of care work thanks to which a 'chosen family' of programmers, Montreal-based artists, and audiences can mingle in community-based cultural events. VFP helps to sustain and reproduce the soft spaces of arts labor, in a field (experimental video) sorely lacking sustainable remuneration. Conviviality is a cultivated resource, as critical to the work of production as access to technical equipment or means of dissemination. In this respect, VFP is not simply a screening of video-art, but a catalyst for social relations within Montreal's feminist and queer communities.

For thirty years, VFP has rewritten public space as feminist, vibrant, and experimental. Co-artistic director of GIV Anne Golden remarks that "we used to call (VFP) our flagship event when we wanted to make each other laugh, because we're so not corporate," and the annual event, a pioneer in building Montreal's now thriving outdoor cinema scene, has influentially spread its community-focused ethos. Montreal's outdoor cinema scene largely remains within a framework of free, open access screenings oriented toward community and permeable boundaries, rather than commercial, for-profit screenings. The Covid pandemic raised the question of how social distancing would intersect with the summer culture of intensive gathering that was a critical part of VFP's longevity and success.

Quebec has Canada's highest Covid death rate; to date (May 2021) it remains under multiple restrictions on movement and gathering, including a curfew. Montreal's social distancing measures took effect on March 13, 2020, and kept indoor cinemas mostly shuttered, forbade indoor assembly outside of work or school, and constantly changed guidelines on outdoor assemblies in public space beyond household bubbles. Large collective gatherings were banned or faced complicated requirements beyond the capacities of small organizations. One example of the fraught desires artists and local government sought to negotiate is a summer 2020 call by the Conseil des Arts de Montreal, "Art Out in the Open/Quand l'art prend l'air" for socially distanced outdoor art interventions, which forbade public advertising of funded events and required "non-traditional

locations”: that is, no existing outdoor arts infrastructures including parks (“Conseil”).³ The forms of radical relationality undergirding VFP were challenged by Covid restrictions, concerning both the one-off of pandemic programming and practices that contest and critique the often-invisible restrictions and durable inequities of what counts as “public space” and “public interest” that feminist sociability, creativity, and rapport seek to redress.

INSISTENT EPHEMERALITY: VFP AS FEMINIST FESTIVAL PRACTICE

Founded in 1975 by a group of independent videomakers during Quebec’s alternative media movement of the 1960s and 1970s amidst a wave of new organizations that were artist centered, non-commercial, and focused on documentary and contemporary art, GIV is exceptional both for its longevity and its mandate. As Sedano Alvarez, communications and special projects coordinator, puts it, “we put all our efforts in giving visibility to independent video artists that identify as women, supporting and giving visibility to voices that otherwise wouldn’t be heard or wouldn’t find space” (Golden and Sedano Alvarez 2021). GIV is both highly professionalized and still characterized by a format where, as Golden says, “everybody does everything”; while funding from three levels of government (municipal, provincial, and federal) has supported consistency and structure in their paid organizational roles, a feminist DIY ethic still pervades their non-hierarchical, horizontal method of working (ibid.).

In “La vidéo comme médium féministe et social : partage d’expérience du Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV),” GIV artistic co-director and VFP programmer Annaëlle Winand describes how GIV’s mandate has shifted historically through and alongside the pragmatic and philosophical concerns of their practices ([Forthcoming](#)). At the beginning of the 1980s, GIV, through the efforts of Albanie Morin, Diane Poitras, Nicole Hubert, and Nancy Marcotte, officially reorganized its mandate around the production and dissemination of work by women, in close dialogue with the social and cultural concerns of the day, feminist community organizing, and the particular affordances and accessibility of video art (ibid.). Then, GIV began to distribute experimental videos by women, adding to its

³The call specified that artists could organize events in “outdoor urban space that do not require a municipal occupancy permit”; public parks require permits and were thus off limits.

catalogue works in English and collaborating with artist-run centers in Canada and Latin America (Olibet [Forthcoming](#)). “It was post-October crisis, the era of Marxist-Feminist cells’, said Anne (Golden). [...] Petunia (Alves) [adds], ‘the group took up its calling as a tool of social change’” (Lehmann 2010).⁴ GIV has maintained an activist approach to video distribution, fostering participatory modes of exhibition outside theatrical circuits and privileging instead local-scale spaces (from unions to church basements) to catalyze community involvement.

In her history of Canadian feminist video art collectives, Marusya Bociurkiw qualifies this transitional era as that of “big affect” and embodied feelings; for GIV, this period marks an expansion from socially engaged documentary work to a wider palette of artistic and creative responses to women’s lives (2016). GIV’s creation of VFP in 1991 aligns with the center’s interest in inventive dissemination of video art. GIV’s curatorial practices both showcase the artists they distribute, granting them visibility and remuneration, and re-interpret works in its collection, fostering the circulation of women’s video work and their histories. Throughout the years, the accumulated works have made GIV an accidental archive of women’s video-art. GIV actively assumes this archival role through curated programs such as “The Vault,” dedicated to revisiting their archives, and the “Carte Blanche” series of invited curators, exhibited in its headquarters and online. Rosanna Maule ([Forthcoming](#)) sees GIV as an important actor within networks of feminist film and video collectives proposing “non-linear approaches to film historiography” and to the memory of feminist and queer moving image culture.

VFP is considered a signature event among GIV’s activities. It represents a crucial turning point in GIV’s attempts to broaden engagement with local communities in the city. Golden notes that

one of the strengths of GIV is really our curatorial practices, whether that’s in-house or collaborations with other curators and artists. It’s something that we’ve developed really intensively, especially in the past 15 years. And ... when government or funding structures asked us about outreach and things like that, we’ve been doing that for decades, you know, taking videos out on the road, going literally going to church basements, I kid you not, in rural Quebec and all around Canada. So I just think of the number of people we

⁴“C’était le post-Crise d’octobre, l’époque des cellules marxistes-féministes”, dit Anne. [...] groupe a pris sa vocation d’outil de changement social” (our translation).

reach in a year, which, for independent video is pretty impressive. (Golden and Sedano Alvarez 2021)

Golden continues “I feel very strongly that as much as I love festivals, the shelf life of a work is about two years, if you’re lucky. And so the idea with our in-house activities is to look at all decades of video production and all durations too beyond five minutes or seven minutes or 10 minutes, you know, the more unwieldy things.” VFP is thus an outlier in GIV’s in-house programming, in that it replicates this “festival” time frame for submissions, soliciting work from the last two years and, currently, under eight minutes. VFP’s uniqueness brings together GIV’s longevity with the currency of the festival “now.” Though GIV presented multiple programs online under Covid, VFP both came with and presented unique affordances in its relation to online eventness.⁵

The 2020 edition of VFP exceptionally took place well after summer’s end, from September 24–27, 2020. This desynchronization relative to the event’s usual schedule indexes Covid’s disruption of normal festival rhythms and also signals persistent survival notwithstanding the unfolding conditions of pandemic precarity. In one way, film festivals participate in producing chrononormativity, which queer theory defines as the normative organization of time embedded in our bodies by institutional forces (Freeman 2010). Festivals recurrently punctuate the arc of the annual, curving and bending time with anticipation, preparation, and desire. At the same time, they create a suspension of the regular and habitual, carving out eventness from the everyday. Covid has interfered with the usual temporality of festivals, presenting major challenges for smaller art organizations compelled to find alternative solutions to provoke the eventness that is a critical part of festival feelings. So, how *does* an online festival screening differentiate itself from the all-encompassing global window that our computer screens became during the pandemic?

⁵Prior to Covid, GIV employed online distribution via streaming platforms Vimeo and Vucavu.com (a VOD service for eight Canadian film and video distributors), part of the organization’s historical endorsement of media technology to address social and political issues and adaptation to the continuous format shifts that video entails (even before the digital turn) (Olibet [Forthcoming](#)). Savvy about the relation between women and technology, GIV exploits these streaming platforms to foster its curatorial practices in a global digital media ecology.

VFP @ 29: CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ONLINE EXHIBITION

By the time GIV decided that VFP 2020 would be held online through Vimeo Pro, we film scholars were used to replacing our usual movie-going with online group watching sessions and Zoom Q&As with filmmakers, while grappling with the effects of social distancing on our personal relations and mourning missed opportunities to assemble in Montreal's queer spaces. We imagined ourselves emotionally prepared to renounce our in-person rendezvous with VFP and to instead click a link to an hour of experimental works on our laptops. When VFP launched on September 24th, we were surprised to see on our screens the GIV team introducing and welcoming virtual spectators to the 29th VFP, as they used to do in-person.

At outdoor screenings, start times come with the slow set of the sun, bringing a lazy energy to the schedule. At VFP, the event begins when programmers take their place before the screen, signaling the infrastructure—human and otherwise—making such encounters possible. Recently, the outdoor theater where VFP normally happens has closed for renovations, and VFP has instead employed a pop-up inflatable screen in the middle of the park. Co-programmer Winand notes that “the most joyful moment of the summer is when this giant inflatable screen just pops up from nowhere” (Winand 2021). Winand says that in planning the online edition, they hesitated between prerecording a welcome or doing a live intro on Facebook “to keep that link with the people watching”: “I was already seeing myself seated on my chair and being like ‘hello everybody, welcome’ ... very static, kind of robotic and boring ... And I don’t remember who had the idea, but ‘let’s go to the park! Let’s be there!’” (ibid.).

Visual architecture is Damiens’ term for those elements—trailers, accreditations, posters, iconography, and so on—that demarcate the unique identity and space-time of festivals as events, assembling affective and actual environments (2020, 159). In rethinking the thresholding practice of introduction, like the transformative magic of an inflating screen as a lure for curiosity, GIV found a timely way to mark a shift into festivity from the flat landscape of Covid media: an introductory video to the program that is itself a work of art, grounded in their particular history, testifying to the embodied and affective labor that makes VFP possible. When the idea of going to the park hit, Winand recalls:

the good thing is we had Manon (Labrecque) with us, an excellent video artist/ filmmaker. So she brought to life that video ... it's almost like a piece of stand-up comedy ... and it's through her artist lens that we got that beautiful piece that actually opens ... the entire program. But the idea was really to keep this introduction: the moment where we can say we're proud of our work, we're proud of our community, we're happy to be with people and we are excited to show what artists have created. (2021)

In this video, even the credits are leaky, capturing that thresholding effect, as GIV's logo crossfades into a bright blue sky through leafy green tree branches. This porosity works differently than simple branding and underlines how GIV's mission understands dissemination within the network of production and distribution. The video begins with a short pixilated sequence showing the organizers arriving at Park La Fontaine and then a very funny high-speed blooper reel of failed attempts to speak seriously in front of the camera. In lieu of birdsong, we hear a lighthearted soundtrack of robotic beeps and bops, and panning down, five women—the GIV team—move through the park in stop motion, as the shadows and colors of the video image morph around them. Labrecque, herself a mainstay of GIV screenings, is also a dancer, and she masterfully uses the affordances of video to create a new movement vocabulary of the glitched image. Already we are crossing a threshold, rejecting the illusion of normative human liveness for a novel liveliness of video's technoembodiments. Thus, this intro playfully incorporates the glitchiness of our everyday reality of assembling under Covid, a ludic testimony to this “new normal.” We cut to the women seated together, holding small purple catalogues with the VFP logo, and immediately they burst into manic laughter, as an accelerated image races through the high pitch of their delirious hilarity. There is no pretense of business as usual—everything is scrambled and out of order, and emotional and even hysterical responses are given their needed space. Visible over their shoulders is the Théâtre de Verdure, the usual scene of VFP screenings. For *habituées*, we are thus in familiar territory that never stops being strange. VFP's visual architecture is reworked under the sign of aberrant movement to better share Covid's odd feelings.

Working off outtakes and recomposing performance through manipulating speed, Labrecque makes the edges of eventness—welcoming, labeling, situatedness—all part of the artful reworking of the mediatic visual architecture. The demands on art organizations to simply move online during Covid has often hidden the extravagant costs of extra time and

lived labor that falls out of the bean counting of festival and funding metrics. Here, processed and reprocessed by video art, these organizers are essential and not tangential to what is onscreen. The online screening thus retains a critical affordance of outdoor cinemas: the radical permeability of “what will count as part of the show” (Thain 2019, 251). An artful collective joy interrupts the introduction, folding it into the program; the question remains of whether Labrecque’s uncredited video will make its way into GIV’s vault as an artwork of its own. After a series of false starts and dissolves into laughter, the intro restarts—seriously this time! The programmers—Golden, Winand, and Verónica Sedano Alvarez—take turns bilingually introducing the program, welcoming viewers to the 29th edition, happening “not under the stars” but online. Petunia Alves and Liliana Nunez, the remaining core team of GIV, wish the spectators “bon visionnement” from the back row as VFP’s logo, a scribbled tree, fills the screen (Fig. 8.1). But the show doesn’t begin. We cut back to a sequence of interstitial moments of the silent and seated team, in the moments around speaking and before action, through a series of jump cuts that string together awkward pauses and uncertain transitions—another



Fig. 8.1 “GIV’s staff members” Screenshot by authors. From left to right: Anne Golden, Liliana Nunez, Annaëlle Winand, Petunia Alves, and Verónica Sedano Alvarez in the trailer (dir. Manon Labrecque, 2020) introducing the 2020 online edition of VFP

familiar artifact from Covid's media ecology. As a microcommentary on laboring under Covid and a way to give a festival feeling to audiences to reenchant the computer screen, this short video of speeds and waiting, all the off-times that fringe the normal, and all that has gone unsaid as we try to survive, is a little masterpiece born out of almost three decades of playing in the park.

This intro has three functions: it reworks a familiar visual architecture of VFP for a new setting; it inscribes the body of GIV's staff members within the video program to transmit their presence despite physical distancing; and it thematizes the labor of adaptation during Covid. Indeed, if the pandemic presented challenges for major film festivals, it has further disrupted the functioning of alternative circuits of exhibition, especially feminist and queer community-based screenings in which the affective dimension of sharing a precarious and improvised space is as important as the artwork shown. While the online event allowed the show to go on, this question of community remains unresolved. As Golden notes, in person "you experience a program and you have all kind of affective things happening, and you turn to somebody next to you and go "fuck!" ... This dimension is completely missing ... let's put it online is great, but it only goes so far. And we haven't really thought through this audience" (Golden 2020). The strategic adaptation of VFP invites a reflection on the affective labor required in adapting digital technologies to reinvent nontheatrical modes of community-based screening events.

VFP 2020 drew on past experiments with non-traditional screening venues to underline the differences and continuities involved in moving online. Labrecque's video bookends a program that aims to stay leaky and to blur the boundaries of work and play—a familiar festival feeling for those who love independent media arts. A video where organizers have playfully inserted their own bodies bends the mediating structure of Vimeo to GIV's care work, creating a welcoming atmosphere for its "family." Exploiting digital technology's sensuous capacities, most videos in the 2020 program likewise mirror care work's concerns: feelings of proximity and touch that foregrounding the materiality of and contact with the body in different ways. Echoing this, the program found a "natural" end in the final video, Elaine Frigon's *Clap, Claque & Cheers* (Clap, smack, and cheers): two hands clapping against a white wall, replicated through multiple overlays into a crowd of clapping hands before resolving back into the single pair. It captures the fraught intimacy of social distancing under Covid, the brutal tenderness of inadequate ways to assemble, and



Fig. 8.2 “Clap, Claque & Cheers” (Elaine Frigon, 2020), part of the VFP 2020 program. (Screenshot by the authors)

acknowledging the hollowness of the after-zoom as blank void. In less than one minute it creates loops back to the program’s start, reminding spectators of the exceptional conditions of attending VFP online. Indeed, reproducing the idea of a cheerful audience reacting to the program, the passage from singularity to multitude proposed by Frigon’s work embodies applause’s contagious affect in live encounters, from one person quickly propagating to the whole audience. The video’s transmission of affect reminds spectators that we are not supposed to clap alone in front of our screens, shortcircuiting back to the awkward pauses of Labreque’s opener. This circularity brings together the actual bodies of GIV’s programmers and organizers and, by synecdoche, the body of the audience, engraving in the program itself GIV’s grassroots ethos of creating community (Fig. 8.2).

OUTDOOR CINEMA AND SOCIABILITY IN MONTREAL

Outdoor cinema screenings are ubiquitous in Montreal’s summer landscape, marked by the festivalization of the city (Diamanti 2014) and a particular confluence of domestic and cultural spaces. In Montreal’s densely populated urban center, where for many years housing remained affordable and socioeconomically diverse, parks function as an extension of people’s living spaces. The importance of a feminist intervention via public outdoor screening thus acquires a particular sense.

Covid's impact is inseparable from VFP's longer history within the media ecology of Montreal, feminist art practices and organizing, and the volatility of public space. While the relatively limited risk of transmission outdoors might have made VFP's usual format possible, GIV's existing expertise in outdoor cinema events and feminist organizing raised other concerns. In fact, under sanitary restrictions during summer 2020, no Montreal outdoor cinemas held their regular programming. Many festivals and screenings were canceled, while some moved online via streaming services. A small handful of one-off events took place live, under highly restricted conditions. An evening of experimental film (*À l'ombre des astres*) projected against the huge wall of the National Archives in Montreal by the collective La Semaphore in September used portable radios to encourage social distancing.⁶

Covid saw the widespread "privatization" of outdoor space enforced by sanitary regulations in the new language of "security" bubbles, rooted in presumptions of normative family structures, access to adequate private housing, and a homogenized view of art practices as easily transferable across mediums. Globally, drive-in cinemas saw a resurgent popularity, with a scramble to re-open abandoned infrastructures and market them as ideal sites of social distancing replicating the safety of the home (Brandon 2020; Rothkopf 2021). In an era where "staying home" has become an "active" endeavor, the drive-in built on its pandemic legacy in North America: in the 1950s during the flu and polio epidemics, drive-ins explicitly marketed themselves as secure alternatives to risky mingle of indoor theatrical spaces (Cohen 1994, 482). Indeed, the most significant innovation for outdoor screening under Covid in Montreal was the return of drive-in cinemas. A suburb on the West Island paid \$15,000 for a 160-person, two-night pop-up drive-in in the parking lot of a mall (Kastler-D'Amours 2020). Montreal's Festival du Nouveau Cinema (October) planned a series of drive-in events for their 49th edition, programming real and sci-fi dystopias at the Montreal airport's parking lot. This creative repurposing of the airport as found dystopia, when flying felt impossible and dangerous, was a bold response to the demands of festival

⁶<https://zoom-out.ca/view/a-lombre-des-astres>.

socialization.⁷ The Royalmount, described as “Canada’s 1st Drive-in Event Theatre” opened on the site of a controversial new development, programming mainstream feature films.⁸ While the Royalmount was available for rental and could have hosted alternative screening events, the costs were prohibitive: \$12,000 per night for non-profit organizations. This re-privatization of “open-air” screenings runs counter to the accessible culture of Montreal’s outdoor cinemas’ largely free screenings in spaces explicitly coded as public, mostly parks. The initial brilliance of VFP was to take advantage of the powerful desire to be outdoors as much as possible in the summer and to create a festival combining the minor form of video art with a popular public culture of social joy. Golden recalls how, as a recently appointed co-director of GIV in 1991, she came up with the idea for VFP, taking feminist video art outdoors to an open-air theater in the heart of Park La Fontaine in Montreal’s Plateau Mont Royal neighborhood, and remarks that:

there were no public screenings in Montreal. Film festivals had not yet moved outdoors ... [T]he plateau back in 1989 was [...] more a working class neighborhood ... more left wing. And that’s transformed completely, as we all know. So I think that VFP was conceived as ... something for the

⁷ Most FNCxYUL screenings were canceled due to unfavorable weather, during a period where Montreal’s “red zone restrictions” (effective Sept. 28, 2020) were extended, reshuttering multiple art spaces including GIV to the public. <https://nouveau cinema.ca/en/fnc-x-yul-drive-in>.

⁸ The Royalmount cinema, now concluded, is archived on their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/driveinmtl/>. The Royalmount itself is a mixed use development from Carbonleo planned for a large section of the Town of Mont Royal in Montreal, at the intersection of two major highways. The initial plan, including housing, commercial spaces, and an “open air agora,” attracted significant criticism; specifically that it encouraged car culture by devoting large areas to parking in a congested neighborhood, and for not including social housing when Montreal is undergoing a major housing crisis (1.5% vacancy rate in 2019, 2.7% in 2020 with rising costs) (CMHC 2021; Olsen 2020). The developers claimed that predicted revenue from taxes and shopping would allow the city to “build social housing elsewhere,” even as they branded itself as creating “public space” (ibid). The “one-time” summer drive-in also hosted promotional presentations of the revamped design and replicated the “privatized” public model built on car culture and costly threshold for admission that has led to the project being delayed and re-imagined multiple times. Currently it is slated to open in 2023. The drive-in producers have pivoted to opening “Les Jardins Royalmount,” an “event garden” and drive-in entertainment venue (movie nights, but also private events such as weddings) where “the presentation starts from the moment you come through our laser-cut gates” (“The Suburban”).

larger public, but we weren't programming in terms of trying to win over a new audience. ... VFP transformed a lot of things. And what I liked about it is [...] that it inspired tons of other screenings outside, all these kooky, great ways of trying to reframe the kind of screening venues. (2021)

The history of VFP is one of opportunism, adaptation, and itinerance, even before Covid forced a move online. In 1991, VFP began screening at the Théâtre de Verdure (TDV), an open-air theater established in La Fontaine Park in 1956. For more than 50 years that theater served as a site for public performance (music, dance, theater, and more) showcasing local and international artists. It holds up to 2500 people in an amphitheater format. Most events were free and formed a critical part of Montreal's summer rhythms. Since 2014, the theater has been closed for renovations with an anticipated reopening in 2022.

Without missing a beat, GIV pivoted to a proximate screening space and a contingent solution: a pop-up inflatable screen and a more casual encounter with the public. In 2015, they moved VFP to Old Montreal outside the Darling Foundry art gallery. The following year VFP returned to La Fontaine, squatting a green space adjacent to the shuttered theater amidst an array of picnickers, buskers, kids running around, joggers, and dogs: creating an arts space out of thin air and conviviality, but without the enclosure of the open-air theater. In 23 years of screenings, TDV may have attracted a new crowd to VFP and to GIV through encounters with the habituées of that more formal theater space. There, independent media art by women might be preceded by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens or followed the next evening by a classical music concert. TDV brands its contents as a pre-approved part of Montreal's showcase of culture, and VFP may have attracted audiences who arrived on faith that the venue equaled "legitimate" art. The move to the adjacent, informal screening space shifted the quality of the encounter, restoring a greater openness to the accidental audience who may happen upon VFP without knowing what to expect. Yet, in both situations, in a theater or loose on the terrain of Park La Fontaine, VFP retains a transformational force. As Winand insists:

This is the one we always do. Even when there's a pandemic, we had to stop doing other things, we had to rethink some other ways. But VFP stays ... because it's like a *carte de visite*. We reached not just the community from the indie art world or the video artist world or whatever. We reach also

people that are outside of the world ... You can just say to your friends, come have a drink in the park with me and we'll watch videos. And then maybe the people who would never go to festivals or things like that come with you and watch it. (Winand 2021)

VFP also runs on the energy of the artists involved with GIV to attract spectators from Park La Fontaine's bordering Centre-Sud neighborhood, historically a poorer area that includes the Gay Village, students, sex workers, and more. Golden described the "guerrilla tactics" used to target audiences there through "blueprinted posters" and "flyers" distributed by local artist: "So, yeah, we totally took advantage of the kindness of artists that we distributed or exhibited to kind of get the word out. That was a very cost-effective way when we didn't have money at all for advertising" (Golden and Alvarez 2021).

These informal strategies are integral to VFP's community building through public spaces in the city, involving and activating their existing audience. Yet, the loose nature of VFP also stimulates what Golden terms VFP's "grab bag" of an audience:

part of the fun and the joy of VFP is ... an audience by chance, or passers by; so [we have] a core audience, but also ... people [that] are going to walk in. They're probably going to see only two or three maybe works. They're going to go 'weird' and they're going to go. But we got them for a little while, at least. And that's the fun of VFP. It always has been that attempt to create a different type of audience that wouldn't go to a screening at GIV or to a museum or an art gallery or so forth. (ibid.)

While VFP's informality could hardly be reproduced on Vimeo Pro's regulated space, the online edition was actually quite successful. GIV recorded 250 views on Vimeo, about the size of the audience for the park screenings outside of the TDV. Yet, these numbers say little about the dilemmas that VFP's organizers had in moving online. In particular, Sedano Alvarez notes the limits of the presumed "accessibility" of internet screenings:

We have also very specific audiences and I have also an unscientific feeling that when we go online, we are also missing part of that audience, even if it's a small segment, because Internet and online platforms just reinforce social inequalities. (ibid.)

Such absences were of a piece with GIV's restricted ability to work with vulnerable groups during Covid in the wider community. Although the implicit promise of going online is that new audiences will access the festival, this overlooks GIV's labor of audience cultivation and activation subtending VFP's longevity. According to Golden, VFP's afterparty archives this impact:

VFP is ... the family event of the year where lots of people will come. But the ones who remain will be ones that have long standing associations, usually with GIV. And that's always so, so great to see. A lot of that has to do with the fact that ... Petunia and I, but not just us, other people who worked at GIV, we always tried to think about how we would like to be treated if we went to an event. So what do you do? You give people something to eat and you give them a drink ticket and you make the space nice and interesting. So those are things that aren't about curating, but they're sort of about how do you do community? ... those are things that we don't talk about, because they're not quantifiable and finite. Granting agencies don't care about stuff like that. They care about numbers, but they don't want to hear me spout my theories about what makes a good party. (ibid.)

That casual convivial element of VFP is an integral feature that makes this event a special festival. If funding agencies don't care about these festive aspects, it is partly because they don't know how to think about the forms of social reproduction that an event such as VFP entails. And yet nothing would be sustainable without exactly this labor. The everydayness of social reproduction subtends the festival quality of VFP. If an ephemeral festival is one defined by Damians in his work on queer film festivals as a festival that failed or only happened once, underlining the critical importance and legitimacy of ephemerality in queer methods and lives (2020, 40), GIV's queer feminism adds an insistence on social reproduction as an invisibilized aspect of the labor of becoming visible. VFP's one night only annual micro-festival, about to hold its 30th edition, operates at an iceberg's scale—small in eventness but with a wealth of hidden support.

As such, the successes and failures of VFP require different metrics, attentive to questions of labor and care that are feminist values integral to GIV's mission. While the decision to go online reflected the pragmatic constraints and the limited support they had to do such work, it was also a question of risk. Golden notes that the decision:

comes from all of us having associations and relationships where we care for people, and thinking, well, are we going to ask our audience members to do that as well? So, yeah, I think we could (screen outdoors) this year technically, if there were twenty-five of us outside and everybody had masks on and we put orange cones down and said ‘this is your spot, this is your spot’ it could work, but that’s a lot of responsibility too. And that’s a lot of policing of people. (ibid.)

Sedano Alvarez echoes this reflection: “in terms of the overload of work that that may imply for us ... at some point it’s not feasible. It’s like burning ourselves out and it’s still too risky” (ibid.).

This care for preserving their audience’s wellbeing is mirrored by a working ethics that ensures adequate remuneration for the artists. GIV co-director Petunia Alves had to stretch and juggle budgets to ensure artists were fairly paid. The move online changed the normal pay scale; instead of one screening, the works were streamed for four days, increasing the artist fees. With the shorter submissions of eight minutes, down from the usual ten, more works were screened, which meant more expenses for GIV. While emergency Covid government funding was available, this often took the form of funding for “more events” and rarely had sophisticated metrics to account for the additional labor of programmers (i.e., no overtime) or the cost difference between live versus streamed events.

All these aspects of the organizers’ affective labor (audiences wellbeing, artist remuneration, and self-care) merge with the curatorial dimension of VFP as a responsive event. It evokes festival feelings because of the active way it composes novelty and familiarity. The program’s open call, sent out in April or May, attracted over 100 submissions in 2020. The expanded programming team of Golden, Sedano Alvarez, and Winand for the online version watched separately and then met together to assemble the final program. They don’t impose a theme on the open call. However, Winand points out that often, a thematic emerges from submissions in dialogue with what is in the air. In 2020, such concerns were clearly evident in the politic turn of many works, responsive to social inequity and global movements around racialized violence and discrimination, as well as the questions of care, sociability, and isolation sparked by Covid. In the final program, works such as Lamathildhe’s *Chants d’amour* (Lovesongs), which tenderly animated global slurs for queer folks into colorful title cards and a sustaining rhythm, kimura byol-nathalie lemoine’s *Youdoyou* succinct commentary on Asian visibility and vulnerability via masks as

protection and self-care, or Katherine Nequado's *Wamin/La Pomme* (Apple) which plays out the violence of colonization and racial categories on the tender surface of the skin, all spoke to how Covid's reduced contacts have amplified our unequally distributed affective vulnerabilities.

While we can only speculate on spectators' solitary reactions to the 2020 edition, the programmers know that by moving online they are missing the audience's impromptu reactions that constitute a critical way of assessing the program's success. Despite the impossibility of recuperating that extemporaneous and affective dimension of the event, GIV nonetheless demonstrates resilience in creating a sustainable event for its community that accounts for the different aspects of this festival's brevity and intensity.

CONCLUSIONS

VFP's festival temporality and traits entail affective organizational labor intensified by the shift to online exhibition. Looking ahead to the 2021 edition, GIV has already decided, from within Covid's third wave in Montreal, to hold the event online, with the hope of a live screening at GIV later in the fall. Golden speculates that they may receive submissions that are "more glitchy or have things built into them that are telling us, oh, my wi-fi is not working" and she hopes for a better technological interface: "a more sustainable platform for us, something that was driven by us, perhaps with a few other artist-run centres." GIV's collaborative artist-centered ethos informs this vision of moving out of Covid's long tail into an uncertain future. VFP provides a snapshot of how its festival eventness helps chart the complexity of what counts as community and the sustainable practices of minoritarian art. In the absence of the chance for informal exchange, VFP has nonetheless sought to animate the intangible effects of eventness. In documenting this work, we have sought methodologies not just to pin down the intangible, but also to bear witness to it.

Winand writes: "We are often asked another question, since the 1980s: why an artist-run centre for women? We think this rather pointed question otherwise. Because our feminist concerns are community-based: they are situated in the services we give to artists, in the communities with whom we interact, and in the programs that we develop. These aspects are the driving force of our activities. They are the result of a constant reflection which renews itself across our interventions" ([Forthcoming](#)). Part of GIV's mandate of dissemination of video-art through a queer feminist

ethos, VFP has become a critical part of Montreal's summer infrastructure. Approaching GIV's fiftieth anniversary, Winand notes that we still see the same concerns around being a woman in society reflected in the work that GIV produces, distributes, and disseminates. The importance of VFP's open airing of such voices cannot be underestimated. Though a one-off event, it is part of a rhythm of occupying public space that is insistent and necessary. Outdoor cinemas not only screen representations of "other" worlds: they can be what the Design School for Social Intervention calls "productive fictions" (Thain 2020, 26), "an interactive chance to experience the world in a new way by creating a micro-space where that world already existed" (*DS4SI (Design Studio for Social Intervention, Lori Lobenstine, Kenneth Bailey and Ayako Maruyama)* 2020, 143). Glitching the move to online, the work of mounting VFP testifies to the value and embodied knowledge of GIV's queer and feminist practices: the ephemeral festival as a productive fiction. At the time of this writing, the call for participation in the 2021 edition of VFP has just gone out. The regulation of public space and the intense chrononormativity of the Quebec government's response to Covid, including one of the only curfews in the global response currently in place, have effectively annulled the possibility of open-air screenings that rely on the darkened night. Quebec is also living through a hideously regular wave of femicides: 13 so far since the beginning of 2021. Finding ways to amplify women's voices is part of a larger sociability that cares for and makes space for women in the world.

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Curating Our Own Space: A Conversation on Online Queer Film Exhibition and Adult Queer Cinema

Jenni Olson and Jiz Lee

In this conversation, Jenni Olson and Jiz Lee discuss various forms of experimentation with online film exhibition: touching on examples as varied as the early online queer film festivals organized by Jenni Olson in the mid-1990s to the platforms used by porn film festivals in times of Covid-19, this interview provides a unique perspective on the challenges and advantages of online film exhibition.

Jenni Olson is an independent writer and non-fiction filmmaker based in Berkeley, California. She holds a BA in Film Studies from the University of Minnesota and is currently an independent consultant in marketing and digital film distribution. Jenni's career encompasses virtually every branch

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of the queer film festival ecosystem. Her two feature-length essay films—*The Joy of Life* (2005) and *The Royal Road* (2015)—premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and, like her many short films, have screened internationally to awards and acclaim. Her film criticism has appeared in numerous publications including *Filmmaker Magazine*, *The Advocate*, and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* and she is currently a film columnist for Logo TV's NewNowNext. Jenni also served for more than a decade as director of marketing at Wolfe Video and she is currently co-director of The Bressan Project, devoted to restoring and re-releasing the films of pioneering gay filmmaker Arthur J. Bressan, Jr. Jenni is a former co-director of the San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival, the oldest and largest queer film festival on the planet. She co-founded the legendary Queer Brunch at Sundance, and she co-created the pioneering LGBT online platform, PlanetOut.com—which hosted the first online queer film festivals.

Over the past decade, the award-winning, non-binary, porn performer Jiz Lee (pronouns: they/them) has appeared in more than 200 adult film projects shot in six countries, in genres ranging from independent erotic films to hardcore gonzo pornography. Lee's experiences navigating their personal life as an out sex worker inspired them to create the 2015 anthology *Coming Out Like a Porn Star*, a collection of essays by adult film industry workers on the social stigma of sex work. Lee has spoken at Princeton University, Stanford, the American Studies Association Conference, and Wonderlust Helsinki (awarded by the Finnish Association for Sexology). They were featured on MSNBC, Fox News, the BBC, G4TV, and, proudly, Lifehacker. When not in front of the camera, Lee works behind the scenes as marketing director at Pink & White Productions, the San Francisco-based production company behind the award-winning CrashPadSeries.com and PinkLabel.TV—an online platform where audiences around the world can experience a different type of adult cinema, as well as the types of bodies and desires that aren't often depicted on conventional adult websites. In 2020, they helped to organize, through PinkLabel.TV and Pink and White Productions, the San Francisco PornFilmFestival—a festival that was forced to pivot to an online format.

Jenni Olson: Thank you so much for doing this! The idea behind this interview is to capture a brief overview of the history of queer online film exhibition, including queer *adult* online film exhibition—to draw a trajectory from my early work up to your pioneering work. The framework I was given was this idea of technological utopia or dystopia: how do these

online festivals speak to various historical moments? And I feel that in some ways, online festivals are utopian, in other ways dystopian.

One of the most exciting things to me was the opportunity to talk about my early history: it's incredible to think we, me and my little team of colleagues, launched the PopcornQ Online Film Festival in 1997! Before the festival, we did what we called PQ Online Cinema in 1996. We scanned some items from my personal queer film collection: old queer movie trailers, as well as random short things such as the footage of Anita Bryant getting the pie in the face or the Charles Nelson Reilly Jell-O commercial.¹ These are just some of the things I own on 16 mm and 35 mm film that were telecined to video and then we digitized them to put them online. This was long before YouTube.

At the time, we were using RealVideo and RealMedia. I don't know if it even exists anymore, but I remember that it almost felt like a silent film because the frame rate was very choppy and the image was the size of a tiny little square. The quality was not great: we were using dial-up modems at the time. In any case, it was incredibly exciting that people from all over the world could see these films.

I wanted to create a film festival. I decided to partner with MIX, the New York Experimental Queer Film Festival, as opposed to a more mainstream kind of queer film festival.² We showed experimental works, which I think is just really cool. In preparation for today, I used the Wayback Machine to look back at the page of the first online queer digital film festival organized by PopcornQ. A couple of things jumped out at me. For instance, the fact that we used the word *queer*, in 1996. One of the great things about PlanetOut.com was that, from its very beginnings in 1995, we advertised ourselves as "LGBT." Back then, there was a lot of "lesbian and gay" content. It was a big deal to affirm ourselves not as "lesbian and gay" but as "LGBT." So, we were first LGBT, and then quickly we became queer.

¹Anita Bryant is a former Miss Oklahoma, singer, and orange saleswoman. In 1977, she became an outspoken opponent of gay rights through her "Save our children" campaign. On October 14, 1977, a gay activist threw a pie in her face at a press conference in Des Moines, Iowa. This famous footage (and important moment in the history of gay activism) can be accessed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=5tHGmSh7f-0>. Although he wasn't officially out of the closet in the 1970s, actor Charles Reilly did several commercials riddled with queer-themed double entendres. His "fruity" Jell-o commercial can be accessed here: https://www.oddballfilms.com/clip/90002_7511_17.

²MIX NYC, a queer film festival started in 1988 by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, is known for its cutting-edge, experimental programming. See <https://www.mixnyc.org>.

I was also struck by this sentence on our website: “Thanks to the unique capabilities of the Internet, you can offer feedback to the filmmakers and the curators by simply emailing us here at PopcornQ.” We didn’t have a feedback form: you could email us, and we would get your comments to the filmmakers. The same applied to filmmakers who wanted to submit a film: they were supposed to mail us their VHS tapes so they could be curated.

Jiz Lee: VHS was the format you were accepting?

Jenni Olson: Yes. At the time, it was typical for festivals to ask for submissions to be done on VHS. This was before the days of DVD. The exhibition would then be done on higher level tapes, such as 3/4in or beta tapes. For the PopcornQ online festival, we had to digitize the tapes that were accepted, which was not a common thing at the time.

The response we got was amazing: there was this sense that people were watching all over the world. Obviously, only to a certain degree was that the case: it was a very small-scale operation. After all, not everyone had the Internet or the capacity and interest to watch things online. We have come a long way!

Jiz Lee: In terms of the format of this festival: did you do a form of broadcast streaming or were the films just available on the site? Did everyone watch the films at the same time?

Jenni Olson: It was just on the site. We had a launch event. We did a big announcement, and the content was up on the website for a while. The first festival was very modest: it was four shorts, and they were short shorts, less than 10 minutes. The shorter, the better: at the time, we thought three minutes was ideal because the files seemed gigantic and the technological limitations were really substantial. It wasn’t possible to do a live thing. But it was exciting and so drastically different from what we can do today.

We did this annual festival for a few years. We launched PlanetOut in 1996, and we organized the First Online Queer Digital Film Festival in 1997. We had festivals in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000. After that, we shifted to a different format: the PlanetOut Short Movie Awards. It was similar, but we structured it in a different way: we would get submissions and do a top five in certain categories. There was a competition, with a jury process. It was very exciting. The films were really, really good. That was in the heyday of the first dot-com boom when money was floating around: all these sites were spending millions of dollars, thinking that they would, somehow, magically be profitable someday. They were just throwing millions of dollars at things and we were like “OK, throw a million at us.” One of these companies that don’t exist anymore—it was either Atom

Films or iFilm—gave us a quarter-million dollars to sponsor the PlanetOut Short Movie Awards. The structure was such that the filmmakers got compensated. This was important for me: as a filmmaker, I was constantly asking myself: “Is this good for the filmmakers? Are they being exploited? What about their other rights and other territories: what happens if they want to have their film on HBO or some other venue?” It was about contracts, about anticipating all those things. This was not easy: it was the Wild West. There wasn’t an established framework for online exhibition: was it considered as home video or as broadcast? This framework was restrictive.

The Planet Out Short Movie Awards went on through the mid-2000s, until PlanetOut.Com bit the dust. The entire thing fell apart and disappeared. It’s really sad. Right after Planet Out, I moved to Wolfe Video. One of the most exciting things I did there was to create and launch WolfeOnDemand.com, which was the first, dedicated global LGBT film streaming platform.³ It’s still up and running. Now, there are all kinds of streaming services specializing in queer cinema (e.g., Dekkoo and Revry). When we launched the PopcornQ Online Cinema, it was hard to imagine that we would get to this point.

Jiz Lee: It sounds like it was a formative period. It was not just validating filmmakers and inspiring or pushing the craft in a new direction, but also laying the groundwork for the festivals that would later come—in terms of curation and structure. I’m thinking, among other things, about your experience working with Frameline.⁴

Jenni Olson: I’m trying to think of other online festivals in the period. Sundance did it for a minute, in 2000 or 2001. It was called the first Sundance Online Film Festival. It was very exciting. I had a film in it, which was cool—my one-minute queer short, *Meep, Meep!*. And then they stopped: they probably found it to be too complicated and daunting. Queer festivals didn’t really do a lot of online exhibition over the years. Now, of course, we are in a pandemic, twenty or twenty-five years later. Outfest now has a streaming platform: they do year-round programming.⁵

³Wolfe Video is one of the oldest North American LGBTQ film distributors. It launched its streaming service, WolfeOnDemand, in June 2012.

⁴Frameline is the organization that operates the San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival, which was started in 1977 and which is the oldest and largest LGBT film festival in the world.

⁵Outfest is a Los Angeles-based LGBTQ film festival created in 1982. Its streaming platform, Outfest Now (<https://outfest.org/outfestnow/>) was launched in 2020.

And of course, all of the festivals did actual online festivals this past year: ten days presentations, with live exhibition or a combination of live Q & A and pre-recorded content.

Jiz Lee: One thing that's interesting to me is that some of these larger festivals used to not accept films that already had an online premiere or that were already available online. Now, these festivals are doing an online version because they have no choice if they want to keep going, and the rules around whether a film can be available online prior to a festival screening are starting to change

Jenni Olson: Yes, festivals had to loosen their rules, especially in relation to one another. Festivals are ideally trying to keep some degree of exclusivity, using some form of geo-blocking when they can. But even then, there is now a sense of "you just have to get films out there"

Jiz Lee: In the adult world, there have been questions from new filmmakers as to whether or not having a film online before it had the chance to premiere in various cities would hurt them and impact a film's circulation on the festival circuit. As far as I understand it, the reason why these directors want to focus on having a premiere at specific festivals is that they are looking at distribution and at attracting agents. Basically, they are shopping around to find an interested buyer who will then take the film and offer the filmmakers money, a contract, licensing, and all of that stuff. This was more of an issue before Covid-19, but I always thought it was a little strange because, in the adult film world, we don't have that option: the financial scale is just not there. So, it doesn't make any sense to limit a film's distribution, since that whole component has been taken out of the equation.

Jenni Olson: That's interesting. I come from the more traditional world, where there is an order that you do things in. When I made a deal with PinkLabel.TV around the films of Arthur J. Bressan JR, my assumption was that it was really important to have one exclusive online place where you could see them.⁶ I wanted that place to be PinkLabel.TV. In other words, I was thinking that it was valuable to you as a platform and to us to not just have these films showing all over the place but to have a single exclusive platform. Our original plan was to premiere these restored films, *Passing*

⁶ Arthur J. Bressan, Jr. was a pioneering gay filmmaker in the 1970s and 1980s. Known for the 1985 film *Buddies*, Bressan worked in various cinematic genres (documentary, short, narrative, and adult filmmaking). He died of AIDS in 1987. His films were largely unavailable. In 2018, his sister and Jenni Olson launched The Bressan Project. This initiative led to the restoration and digitization of several of Bressan's films. Two of Bressan's adult films, *Passing Strangers* (1974) and *Forbidden Letters* (1979), are now available on PinkLabel.TV. For more information on The Bressan Project, see <https://bressanproject.wixsite.com/website>.

Strangers (1974) and *Forbidden Letters* (1979), at PinkLabel.TV's San Francisco PornFilmFestival, which was last summer or rather was supposed to be last summer. Obviously, that didn't happen. We were also in the middle of arranging for a physical premiere at the Anthology Film Archives in New York City. I had made some other arrangements for physical screenings: we were selected at the Oslo LGBT film festival, which ended up being virtual. Everything got messed up, but then it was amazing that we were able to make these arrangements and that both of those films have now been available worldwide through PinkLabel.TV. This gave us a ton of press exposure. From a filmmaker standpoint, or rather as the representative of the late filmmaker, it has been an amazing experience to have these films on your platform (see Fig. 9.1).

Jiz Lee: It has been really exciting to be able to offer them. I know that people appreciate them. I loved watching these films and then being able to catch the interview you did with Robert Adams.⁷ It's truly a piece of history or a time capsule: these films are very historical and relevant.



Fig. 9.1 “The Bressan Project on PinkLabel.TV.” PinkLabel.TV. February 9, 2021. <https://pinklabel.tv/on-demand/studio/the-bressan-project/>

⁷As part of its digitization efforts, The Bressan Project and PinkLabel.TV released a video-recording of a conversation between Jenni Olson and Robert Adams, one of the stars of Bressan's films. The video is available at <https://pinklabel.tv/on-demand/jenni-olson-robert-adams-bressan/>.

Jenni Olson: You were able to offer the best experience ... We got to do this Zoom interview with Robert and to offer that as an extra. It's great that people can just watch this interview without seeing the films. Then hopefully, they get intrigued and want to watch the films. That being said, I'm a little bit curious technologically and philosophically: I would love to hear you talk a little bit about your history and the importance of queer adult film exhibition in general, and in particular of PinkLabel.TV.

Jiz Lee: This is a bit of a full-circle story, coming back to festivals! Shine Louise Houston⁸ was inspired to create PinkLabel.TV after attending the PornFilmFestival Berlin. She had been making films and attending festivals and went to Germany to attend the Berlin Porn Film Festival sometime around 2008. She was astounded at the breadth of adult films that were presented at the festival and that she was able to watch in the theater. There were shorts, there were remastered special presentations, there were animation films, there were films that one might not have necessarily considered as porn had they not been presented in that context (films that had nudity or dealt with eroticism and sexuality in some creative way). She was inspired by the diversity, craft, and creativity she saw in Berlin—by this way of looking at porn as a medium and as an indie film genre. The festival seemed to be asking: “what is it possible to do with this craft, this art form?” She wanted other people to see what she saw.

She immediately thought: “Well, I have this porn site, CrashPadSeries.com. Could I do another site and post a couple of the films I saw in Berlin?”⁹ We launched PinkLabel.TV around 2012: it was conceived as a Video-on-Demand platform where we would be able to host fellow filmmakers and studios (the kind that she had seen in festivals). We wanted to create a viable, sustainable, financially beneficial business model that could sustain filmmakers, give audiences a chance to see the films that she appreciated, and hopefully encourage more filmmakers to make films.

⁸ Shine Louise Houston is a filmmaker and the founding director and producer of Pink and White Productions, an independent production company creating queer adult films in San Francisco. She is also the founder of PinkLabel.TV and the San Francisco Porn Film Festival.

⁹ Shine Louise Houston's 2005 film *The Crash Pad* (which features Jiz Lee) won several awards, including the “Best Dyke Sex Scene” at the 2006 Feminist Porn Awards. The film focused on a San Francisco apartment used by a wide variety of queer people as a site for intercourse. The film was praised for its realistic depiction of sex and of queer sexualities. In 2008, Houston launched, through her distribution company Pink and White, the *Crash Pad Series*, one of the first queer adult platforms featuring queer porn. See <https://crashpad-series.com>.

It's sometimes hard to describe what type of porn is on the site because people often have preconceived ideas of what porn can be. The way people define porn varies greatly depending on whom you are speaking to. Most people think of porn in a very specific, maybe mainstream, way: their porn is often heterosexual, or at least very cisgender (including cisgender lesbian or gay). It's often limited to specific body types and kinds of sex. This limited idea of porn is not necessarily a bad thing, but we are interested in questioning what porn can look like and how porn as a genre can be expanded. It's about opening the box: there is a whole bunch of different types of porn. On PinkLabel.TV, we have everything: it's a bit of a who's who of making work. If it crosses Shine's path and if she's curious about it, it might end up on the site. I like to say that there's almost something for everyone. We have both vintage and contemporary porn.

Our goal was to be able to have these films available on the site, organized similarly to the porn film festivals we attended. In other words, it's not going to be: "here are films with this type of body." It's more of a mixture: programming one of your documentaries alongside docu porn, sex ed. porn, porn that are funny ... It's very important to be able to categorize and curate them ourselves: we want to contextualize how the films are viewed and to guide interpretations of what the spectators are watching. This differs from most contemporary porn sites, where people just come to watch porn. Earlier you mentioned utopias and dystopias. To some extent, this is a binary. Utopias and dystopias, it's a fantasy—an optimistic fantasy or a pessimistic one. Neither of these two terms is true or even attainable; they are just ideas and concepts. But talking about trying to create spaces or to build utopias: one of the goals of the site is to create our own space, and that's a super queer thing to do. The question we are asking is: what do we want porn to look like? So, that's the space we are building.

Jenni Olson: I love PinkLabel.TV so much: it has a utopian quality to it. Its ethos feels very queer, but also very Bay Area to me. It is sexy, but it is also political, smart, and engaged with culture and ideas. It also represents various kinds of diversity. And you have an anti-violence element ...

Jiz Lee: We have content notes. It's similar to a title card that gives a warning, for example, of flashing images. We are used to watching television and media where a title card will display: "This [program] has nudity and explicit language." We try to do something similar to this when we feel that it might be appreciated by the people watching our films, or if we can anticipate that a question or an issue may come up during a screening.

We specifically decided to not use the phrase “trigger warnings” because sometimes it can be an issue to even define something as a “trigger.” I’m being vague, but one example is kink: one person’s kink might be someone else’s trigger. To otherize that kink and stigmatize it isn’t helpful. We use content notes as a more neutral term.

Jenni Olson: The other utopian aspect is the idea that there is a business model—that the site itself survives, but more importantly that it compensates filmmakers for their work and actually pays people. I’m blown away because I have one little, tiny short film on your platform, my quirky 2003 archival lesbian porn short *Matzo Maidels*, and I regularly receive small royalty checks from you guys. I have been in the general business for thirty years. I have worked in the adult world here and there for a long time (we did some adult stuff when I was at PlanetOut). In the adult and the indie film worlds, there are many examples of filmmakers who are just not being compensated at all (or supposedly will be, but they never receive anything). It’s just mind-blowing to me that you have a business model that works and that genuinely pays people.

Jiz Lee: Thank you for saying so. One of our missions is to support filmmakers. We are filmmakers ourselves! It behooves us to be ethical and conscious about paying people. When we distribute our own films on other sites, we sometimes have to chase down money from a company and email them again and again. We have been on this side of the business and it’s awful. It feels good to know that our filmmakers won’t have to worry about whether or not we are going to pay them, whether or not we are trustworthy. Shine would like PinkLabel.TV to be known as the Criterion Collection of adult movies!

Jenni Olson: Can you just talk a little bit about this moment, in terms of the pandemic? The San Francisco Porn Film Festival you organized ended up as an online experience. How did it work, practically? What was the response? Did you reach people? Did it seem utopian?

Jiz Lee: Wow, what a time to talk about utopias and apocalypses. We joked that we were organizing this festival in the middle of a fiery pandemic. This is not even an exaggeration: wildfires in California were out of control, the air was toxic, and we were in the middle of a global pandemic. We had planned to launch the San Francisco Porn Film Festival in August [2020], at the Brava Theater for the Arts. We were already thinking about including some kind of online element, but it was going to be on a smaller scale. When it became clear that Covid-19 was a big deal, we decided to pivot ... We decided that we should just take it all online. The Brava Theater agreed to

keep our deposit for next year's edition. We hope to do an in-person festival at the Brava Theater in the future and to multicast at the same time, which would enable us to offer an online experience of the theater itself.

When we decided that we were going to do the festival online, we had to shift our operation and refocus our efforts. Our web developer Kriss Lowrance is highly resourceful: they were able to build a platform that would enable us to broadcast the films. We also did a fundraiser. We received a lot of community support, which enabled us to guarantee artist pay—we ended up doubling our initial promise of what the artist fee would be by the end of the campaign. This community support also allowed us to be able to focus on what matters: thanks to our developer and these resources, we were able to work on the site and to spend time on the curation of the festival. The festival was three days long. It included over 90 films.

We wanted to be able to use the platform we built not just for ourselves, but also for other festivals: we were guinea pigs, testing it out and making sure that our platform could sustain an online festival. Then, we were able to offer it to other festivals impacted by Covid-19 (festivals that were planning on using a theater but had to pivot because theaters were closing and the situation in their country was still really bad in terms of Covid-19 deaths and hospitalizations). We essentially offered the service for free to other festivals. This allowed them to continue their operation and their curation planning for the year. It's important: sometimes, when a small festival skips a year, it doesn't come back. A lot of small festivals are run by volunteers. There is momentum behind them and a legacy. If they miss out on a year, a whole year goes by, and sometimes, the festival just doesn't come back. So, we wanted to support them.

We are also seeing, on an international scale, that these indie porn film festivals are encouraging more works to be made. We have appreciated being part of them: helping these festivals keep going helped us keep going. Another way of looking at it is that, since we can't attend these festivals, we want these festivals to come to us. Shine would go to festivals. If she liked a film, it would likely end up on PinkLabel.TV. Because we hosted some of these festivals, they are sending us their curation: we can look at the films and find new filmmakers that we like, who may be interested in joining our site. Sometimes, it's as simple as having the contact information of curators and filmmakers, as being able to correspond with filmmakers directly to get introduced to works that we didn't know about. Last year, we added 230 films to the site, which was the most we ever

added in one year. So, hosting these festivals benefited us in that way. It made us familiar. On a personal level, I was able to focus my energy on something that I had control over, which was rewarding. It felt like I was doing something with my time. It was nice to be able to make things happen, despite everything else going on, despite productions being paused.

Jenni Olson: In this odd way, and it is true of the pandemic in general, there have been these gifts out of it, around community and the importance of connection. The phrase “we keep us safe,” that concept, is what you are describing. There is a similar quality in the LGBT film festival circuit and the LGBT indie film world. It encompasses the festivals, the distributors, the publicists, the filmmakers, and various institutions around it: I like to say that it is an ecosystem. Frameline San Francisco tends to be the hub of this ecosystem. PinkLabel.TV seems to have a similar role in terms of its leadership. You hosted some of the biggest players. The Berlin Porn Film Festival and CineKink were hosted on your platform.¹⁰

Jiz Lee: We asked the Berlin Porn Film Festival, before deciding that we were doing the festival online, for their blessing to use their namesake so that we would continue as the San Francisco Porn Film Festival. There was already a London Porn Film Festival, a Porn Film Festival Vienna. We wanted to be the San Francisco Porn Film Festival. We asked them for permission, and they told us to run with it. So, we were already in contact with them, before we started hosting festivals on our platform. They have been very helpful in terms of giving us information about festival curation and advice on festival organization. Sharing is important. With CineKink, we shared documents such as submission guidelines. Everyone has been collaborating; festivals helping other festivals.

When we saw that our online festival was a success (given the challenges we faced and that it was our first festival, we impressed ourselves. It went very smoothly!), we opened the platform to other festivals. First, we hosted the Seattle Erotica Cinema Society (SECS) Festival. Then, we hosted the Berlin Porn Film Festival. We also hosted the Athens Porn Film Festival—it was their first edition too! And we hosted CineKink. In the spirit of collaborating with other festivals, our festival also had a showcase that was curated by the London Porn Film Festival and a Latin American shorts program that we had seen at Berlin (Berlin gave us the contact of

¹⁰The PornFilmFestival Berlin (created in 2006 by producer Jürgen Brüning) and CineKink (New York, created in 2003) are arguably the two oldest and most important porn film festivals.

the curator and we were able to offer that as a guest curation). Uncensored Fest, which we also hosted, included a curation from Vienna Porn Film Festival.¹¹

Hosting these festivals was a learning experience: we offered our platform for free, but we used this opportunity to learn and evolve. While there might have been a few technical hiccups, it was a helpful learning experience that enabled us to grow and add features, improving things as we went. For instance, we offered a chat feed: the viewers could use it to chat during the screenings. This feed was also very helpful in terms of immediate tech feedback when someone was having issues with streaming. It was also a good way to add content notes: we could add these content notes in the chat so that viewers would see them in real time and would be warned (we could, for instance, give them runtimes). The viewers could know that the next feature had something that some people might find difficult to watch. We could tell them: “You have five minutes to take a bathroom break, come back later!”

We were a little bit hesitant at first with the chat: we didn’t know if people would be respectful, especially given the conflation of anonymity and sexuality. After all, we had a lot of different kinds of sexuality and desires depicted on screen! We were afraid that people would not be able to be positive about it—that they would not come to chat in a respectful way. Surprisingly, everyone was really, really nice and supportive. We didn’t have to kick anybody out. I was relieved because it’s really hard to be a moderator. It’s also hard as a creator to see disparaging comments about your work. I was glad that people were really kind.

Jenni Olson: This is quite moving. Particularly in this incredibly dystopic moment around the connective capabilities of social media—given that social media has in so many ways lately been an absolute toxic nightmare. I logged onto the SF Porn Film Festival for the premiere of Shine Louise Houston’s latest film, *Chemistry Eases the Pain*. And there was a live conversation after the screening.

Jiz Lee: *Chemistry* was our very first test on the broadcasting system. It was our first live Q & A. You got to witness the very beginning of it.

Jenni Olson: There were some slight technical issues, but it was amazing. It was beautiful: the chat and the questions showed a sense of respect for the cast. It was all just so nice and so respectful. I have seen many live

¹¹The Uncensored Festival is based in London, UK. It is not to be confused with the London Porn Film Festival.

Q & As on services such as YouTube and often some people say such horrible stupid things ... In a lot of ways, you have created and you participate in a culture that is about a respectful, thoughtful engagement with sexuality. The people who are showing up to watch the films want to engage in meaningful ways. They are not being stupid and obnoxious or rude. This is weirdly utopian in our present context.

Jiz Lee: Our numbers may not be high, but people who are interested in a site such as PinkLabel.TV are the type of people who don't have a problem with watching a mixture of different types of bodies, sex, and sexual representation. It's the type of people that are beyond what a marketing person would identify as "the type of person who watches porn." For such a marketing agent, a person watching porn is a guy, between this and this age, he is cisgender, he is straight, he is white, he is looking for a woman, and he has a very limited and patriarchal view of sex—of what sex looks like, who gets to have it, and who gets to be sexy. In some ways, our site rejects that idea. First of all, because we are not that guy. The question becomes: what do we want to see? This helped to cultivate audiences that appreciate our definition of porn. Being part of that community is important: the people who attend porn film festivals are the filmmakers themselves. Because they are among the audience, you don't get disparaging, rude comments. It's a different viewership mentality.

Jenni Olson: Do you have a sense of the percentages of queer ... How queer is your festival? And obviously it's a bit more complex—it's not a binary, queer vs straight. But if you had to characterize in some way the queerness of PinkLabel.TV and of the porn film festival world ...

Jiz Lee: The question "does it look queer" is funny because people know of Pink and White [Shine Louise Houston's production company] is a queer company, so they assume that PinkLabel.TV is queer too. We have a lot of heterosexual content (or at least of cis male–cis female pairings). We are heteroflexible. In that way, we are very friendly to the straight porn world: we have always had a lot of female directors who are straight-identified, such as Anna Span out of the United Kingdom, who are making porn *for* women. The films they make are considered "straight porn." Because a lot of people know us as a queer company, and because we are going to festivals and are presenting in the same programs as other queer filmmakers, we tend to get more exposure to queer filmmakers. So, I think queer filmmakers happen to know about us more than straight-identified filmmakers. And for the sake of this argument, we are assuming that queer filmmakers are making queer porn and that straight people are making

straight porn, even though we know that it is not necessarily the case and that this line is not cut and dry. We also need to keep in mind that a film that pairs a cis man with a cis woman doesn't necessarily mean that the actors are heterosexual identified.

Our website seems queer friendly. There's no "enter page" forcing visitors to choose between straight or gay content. It's not like that. What was interesting about hosting film festivals was that we saw more straight content. If we are just using perception, it seemed like it was straighter, particularly in the case of the festivals we hosted (since we didn't have any curation over them).

Jenni Olson: All the film festivals in this past year have had to pivot to different kinds of technological solutions. Pivot has been one of the most popular words of the year! It will be interesting to see what the future looks like. A lot of these experimentations with online formats will be integrated into our future experiences of film festivals: we can do online programming and reach people who would otherwise not be getting out to the festivals. I was talking to a friend earlier about Sundance. She is in a wheelchair. She told me that when she goes to Park City, it is terrible: Park City is one of the worst places you could imagine. The ice and the snow and the little, tiny old town. It's really exciting to be able to do something online that is more accessible. It's also interesting to see how abled people are benefiting from these more accessible screenings: for instance, captioning technology is helpful for everyone. The level of consciousness raising around the world has been a compelling thing about this moment.

Jiz Lee: I can talk about using A.I. to do subtitling, but this may be a bigger conversation. Accessibility is something we are trying to work on, but it is frustrating, and it is still a challenge. We are using an A.I. closed-captioning system, but it only knows how to translate from one language at a time. If we set the language to English, it takes any film that is not in English and tries to create phonetic English. We ended up with oddball nonsensical translations for any film that wasn't originally in English. Also, the A.I. is not nuanced: it doesn't know the difference between dialogue and song lyrics. If someone had a song in their piece, the A.I. was trying to transcribe the lyrics from the song. So, the tech is not there yet.

I also wanted to briefly talk about censorship. Earlier, you mentioned new streaming platforms for LGBTQ cinema. All the available ones don't allow adult media. We don't have that same platform option. That's why we had to make it ourselves. We have the same issue with ticketing agents: a lot of them are not porn friendly. We were lucky with the

recommendation from the HUMP! film festival to a ticket agent that would partner with us. Options are very limited options when it comes to adult films.

Jenni Olson: I love that the ethos of PinkLabel.TV as an institution is to create that sense of community. Any final words?

Jiz Lee: I guess my final words would be that adult film has relevance and worthiness within the broader scheme of not only LGBT media but also all film and media. There is a lot of history that is lost through the idea of respectability politics, of not allowing stories that are explicit in their content because of fear around how people respond to shame around sexuality. There is a structuralized censorship of adult media for the sake of children viewing—it's always about children being exposed to sexuality. But thank you for including adult media in the context of this discussion on technology and utopias. We are so often left out, in so many different ways. It feels really important to be included in that history and in the imagining of futures.

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Cinephilia, Publics, Cinegoraphilia: Surveying the Short-Term Effects of Covid-19 on Community-Based Festivals in Toronto

Jonathan Petrychyn

Beginning in March 2020, nearly every film festival worldwide, regardless of its size and influence, canceled, postponed, or adapted their programming to meet the public health recommendations to slow the spread of Covid-19. Tracking the myriad responses festivals have had to the virus—especially in a country like Canada where arts sector funding and public health are distributed across three levels of government—requires a reconfiguration of our methodological and conceptual tools for studying film festivals during a pandemic (de Valck 2020). As Zielinski (2020) notes, “these new heightened online activities pose significant challenges to method, particularly regarding learning more about the largely anonymous and unreachable audience, depth of engagement, among other data.” Further complicating matters is the unevenness with which public health restrictions have been implemented across Canada. As health care is under provincial, as opposed to federal, jurisdiction in Canada, each individual province had its own set of public health guidelines to manage the pandemic. The province of

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Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, implemented incredibly robust restrictions for a short period of time whenever there was a new Covid outbreak and as a result has only had approximately 1100 total cases of Covid as of May 2021, or less than 0.25% of their population. Meanwhile, Ontario opted for a series of half-measures that saw some industries and public spaces closed for much longer, and as a result has had nearly 500,000 total cases of Covid as of May 2021, or approximately 3.5% of their population. These vastly different Covid numbers and approaches to public health restrictions impacted each province's film, media, and cultural sectors in vastly different ways: as de Valck and Damiens (2020) note, "the crisis does not necessarily impact every festival at the same time or on the same level." To understand the effects of Covid-19 on the film festival circuit—and indeed, on the film, media, and cultural sectors as a whole—we have to attend to the local contexts and individual responses.

Such documentation is well underway, as this book and the numerous special issues on Covid-19's effects on various aspects of arts, culture, and leisure attest (Ironstone and Bird 2020; de Valck and Damiens 2020; Lashua et al. 2020). This chapter aims to contribute to this growing body of literature by surveying some of the changes to arts and festival funding in the province of Ontario, with a specific focus on its effects on two community-based festivals in Toronto: Toronto Outdoor Picture Show (TOPS), which organizes outdoor film festivals in parks across the city, and the Toronto Queer Film Festival (TQFF), a radical queer film festival that centers accessibility and supporting racialized, poor, disabled, and undocumented queer and trans artists and communities. This chapter traces how changes to the grant ecosystem, as well as constantly shifting public health advice, caused the festivals to reimagine their programming in ways that distilled their individual mandates. In the case of TQFF, they canceled their festival and reimaged their programming as a form of mutual aid with an eye toward financially and materially supporting filmmakers and audiences during the crisis. Meanwhile, TOPS offered a socially distant outdoor cinema that captured their community-minded ethos. In both cases, TOPS and TQFF aimed to capture what I term *cinegoraphilia*, or the love of watching movies *together*, during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodologically, I draw largely from my own experience as an organizer with both festivals. I was a member of the TOPS board of directors from 2018 to 2021 and have volunteered with TQFF as a collective member since 2019. The stories I narrate here about changes to arts funding,

and the responses of both TOPS and TQFF, are drawn from email exchanges I have had as an insider to both organizations, conversations I have had with festival leadership and staff over the last year, and my own personal experience contributing to the planning and execution of each festival's programming during the pandemic. When both organizations began shifting operations to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic I did not imagine that I would be writing an article documenting these shifts; as a result, I have no thick autoethnographic notes from the last year to draw upon. I have email threads that pick-up conversations held over Zoom, meeting minutes that capture high-level discussions and decisions made, and memories of conversations held both formally and informally over the year. As Damiens notes in his contribution to this collection, there is a necessity to begin documenting festival responses to Covid, lest we lose much of digital infrastructures of these responses to the ephemerality of internet archiving. To this I would also add we are at risk of losing the material and affective dimensions of community festival organizing during this time: community festivals organized during Covid are festivals organized under duress. Festivals pivoted to digital and physically distanced programming because that is what they needed to do to retain funding, retain their staff, and retain their audiences. Festivals organized under Covid highlight the extent to which festivals are simply more than just the sum of their films; festivals are gathering spaces where people share in the love of cinema *together*. This chapter is my attempt to document how two community-based festivals sought to retain that spirit of togetherness from my dual position as both festival scholar and organizer.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first part, I provide a brief overview of Canada and Ontario's responses to Covid and how public health restrictions affected the operations of arts organizations and festivals in the province. I then turn my attention to how the arts funding ecosystem in Canada responded to the pandemic and trace how various levels of government and other funders adapted and distributed funding during the first six months of the pandemic. These shifts in public health and funding provide the backdrop for my theorizing in the third part, wherein I turn my attention to how TOPS and TQFF adapted their programming in the first year of the pandemic. Here I theorize their pandemic-era offerings as capturing *cinemoraphilia*, or the love of watching cinema together, and narrate how each festival responded to both the public health restrictions and funding changes in order to organize their festivals and offer programming in 2020.

COVID IN ONTARIO: A TIMELINE

In Canada, health care is constitutionally the jurisdiction of the provinces. As a result, though the federal government announced on March 16, 2020 that they would bar foreign nationals from entering Canada effective March 18—one week after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic—it was up to individual provinces to manage their own stay-at-home orders and public health restrictions. The Government of Ontario declared a state of emergency on March 17, 2020, and issued a stay-at-home order (Rodrigues 2020). Shortly thereafter, Hot Docs International Documentary Film Festival and Images Festival postponed their festivals (slated for late April 2020) and moved their programming online. Likewise, Inside Out LGBTQ Film Festival postponed their May festival to October in hopes that they would be able to offer programming in-person by that time. After the initial wave began to abate in Ontario, the provincial government announced a three-stage re-opening plan in which provincial regions would be able to gradually open up and folks would gradually be able to gather once a number of key targets were met. On May 19, 2020, the entirety of the province entered Stage 1 re-opening, which largely meant that some outdoor recreational facilities like marinas, golf courses, and tennis courts were allowed to open—outdoor facilities used largely by the sorts of wealthy suburban elite that make up the provincial Progressive Conservative government’s voter base (Neilsen 2020). Stages 2 and 3 of the re-opening plan were entered piecemeal by region, with Toronto one of the last regions to be allowed to re-open in each of the three stages in large part because it is the country’s largest city and as such it took the city longer to meet the provincial thresholds.

When Toronto entered Stage 2 on June 24, 2020, outdoor gatherings were increased from 10 people to 50 people, drive-in movie theaters were allowed to operate, film production was allowed to resume, and outdoor dining and bar service opened (“City of Toronto Enters Stage 2 of the Province’s Reopening” 2020). But it was not until Toronto entered Stage 3 on July 31, 2020 that indoor movie theaters and indoor dining was allowed to begin operating again, outdoor gatherings were increased to 100 people, and outdoor festivals were allowed to operate (“City of Toronto Now in Stage 3 Reopening” 2020). As a result, much of Toronto’s film festival culture had to remain online until August 2020. It should also be noted that the provincial government did not at any point issue a province-wide mask mandate and instead left that up to individual

municipalities. As a result, masks did not become mandatory in indoor spaces in Toronto until city council passed a bylaw effective July 7, 2020 (“City of Toronto Makes Masks or Face Coverings Mandatory in Enclosed Public Spaces” 2020).

Because the province took a regional approach to re-opening, Toronto’s festivals could predict with some certainty when they would likely be allowed to return to some form of in-person screening again. There was also a general sense in the province that by fall case counts would likely increase, and the province would have to return to some form of lockdown—which would turn out to be true as the province and the City of Toronto began slowly adding more restrictions to outdoor activities starting September 25, 2020. This meant that film festivals had a two-month window in which they could stage some form of an in-person event in Toronto before cool fall temperatures began to push people back inside, though only a few festivals, like the Italian Contemporary Film Festival (ICFF), Toronto Outdoor Picture Show (TOPS), and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), were nimble enough to offer some form of in-person gatherings. ICFF was one of the first out of the gate with a drive-in film festival in late July 2020, followed by TOPS with its outdoor walk-in screenings in late August, and TIFF with some combination of drive-in, walk-in, and indoor screenings in early September. Festivals usually held in the fall, like imagineNATIVE, Rendezvous with Madness, and Reel Asian, held their fall dates and moved their programming online. By November 20, 2020, the City of Toronto was placed in a new lockdown by the province, though by that point cold weather had already moved all festival programming back online.

CANADA’S ARTS FUNDING ECOSYSTEM

While festivals and arts organizations were attempting to keep track of the constantly shifting public health guidelines, they also had to contend with changes being made to arts council and other public funding. Most arts organizations depend on project funding and only a small number of arts organizations qualify for organizational funding through the arts councils each year. An even smaller number of festivals have a sizeable enough corporate donor base that they would be able to operate with significant public funding reductions (and even then, the economic impact of Covid restrictions meant that corporate sponsorship also significantly declined during this period, though at this stage it is difficult to say by how much).

In either case funding comes with deliverables: festivals must offer programming. In short, canceled programming could lead to declined grants and spell the end of the organization.

This possibility was something arts councils largely recognized, and both the Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts provided an advance to organizations who received core operational funding from each of them. Project grant deadlines, however, were almost uniformly postponed by the Canada Council, which left the numerous small arts organizations not eligible for core operational funding without a significant source of funding in the first half of 2020. In particular, the postponement of the Public Outreach grant program, which provides up to \$100,000 to support activities that “contribute to the public appreciation and enjoyment of the arts” in the form of live events and publications, from March 2020 to September 2020 affected numerous festivals and arts organizations in Ontario (“Public Outreach” [n.d.](#)).

The postponement of the Public Outreach grant and the rapid dissemination of operating funding by the arts councils was supplemented with other significant funding shifts federally, provincially, and municipally. At the federal level, the government offered a number of key financial supports to arts organizations affected by Covid. The Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) initially covered up to 25% of an organization’s employment costs, but was soon increased to 75% after criticism and slow uptake from businesses and non-profit organizations. Festivals and arts organizations also had access to the Canadian Emergency Business Account (CEBA), which provided eligible small businesses and non-profit organizations with an interest-free loan of up to \$40,000, of which 25% would be forgivable if the loan was repaid by the end of 2022. Though both CEWS and CEBA were distributed to a minority of arts organizations (with 41% and 17% of arts organizations, respectively, indicating they intended to apply for each), both became a crucial part of the arts funding ecosystem during the first part of 2020 (“National Survey on Federal Emergency Aid Measures and the Arts Sector in Canada” [2020](#), 16). Indeed, though these two federal programs may not have been taken advantage of by the majority of arts organizations, 61% of respondents still noted that these and other federal measures would be of benefit to them and to the wider sector (“National Survey on Federal Emergency Aid Measures and the Arts Sector in Canada” [2020](#), 42).

At the provincial level, in Ontario, arts organizations anticipated a 16% decrease in revenue between March and June 2020 (“Early Covid-19

Impacts on OAC-Funded Arts Organizations” 2020). In response to this anticipated loss in revue, numerous new funding streams targeting festivals were created by provincial and municipal funders. The Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism, and Culture Industries reallocated funding from its Celebrate Ontario program, which provided funding to arts and culture festivals across the province, into a new granting stream called the Reconnect Festival and Event Program. This new program was designed specifically for organizations who had to adapt their programming to meet the Covid public health guidelines and provided funding to online and in-person events that “encourage people to travel locally and rediscover the beauty and diversity of their community” (Ontario 2021). The program invested \$7 million to 87 events in 2020 (Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries 2021). The City of Toronto offered the Cultural Festivals Recovery Program, which offered funding up of to \$25,000 to festivals that had to be canceled due to Covid, and provided a total of \$500,000 in funding to 60 organizations, including TOPS and TQFF (“Covid-19: Business & Sector Resources” 2020). That both the provincial and municipal governments offered new funding programs designed specifically to support festivals should not be undersold. Both the Reconnect Festival and Event Program and the Cultural Festival Recovery Programs recognized the centrality of the festival sector to the city and provincial economy.

At all three levels of government, then, there was a sizeable influx of cash into the arts and cultural sector to ensure that it would be able to weather the pandemic. However, it is important to note this survey is not exhaustive, nor is this all necessarily new funding; some of this, like the Reconnect Festival and Event Program, was simply a reorganization of already existing funds into new programs. At this stage, it is difficult to say if the change in programs was enough to ensure the longevity of the arts and cultural sector in Toronto through to the end of the pandemic and beyond.

CINEGORAPHILIA AND TORONTO FESTIVALS

Festivals had to adapt their programming to continue to access the public funds they depended on. Some project grants, like the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism, and Culture Industries Reconnect Festival and Event Program fund, and Canada Council’s Public Outreach grant, required that their programs adapt to meet the new public health orders

in order to access the funding. Other forms of grants, in particular core operational grants, required no changes to programming from organizations initially. However, for a festival to access public funding they have to offer programming. Festivals changed because they had to in order to keep accessing funding. No arts council was going to provide funding to festivals that planned to stay in an indefinite holding pattern.

Moreover, the constantly shifting and increasingly strict public health measures enacted in Ontario meant that as the pandemic wore on, there was an increased desire to be able to gather to watch cinema *together*. Public health restrictions not only forced festivals to reimagine their programming, but also to reimagine how to reach their audiences. As case studies in festivals thriving in this new environment, I turn to two Toronto-based festivals that I have been working with throughout the pandemic: the Toronto Outdoor Picture Show (TOPS) and the Toronto Queer Film Festival (TQFF). Like many community-based festivals, these two festivals share a core mandate to program film for their communities. In the case of TOPS, these are the local neighborhoods in which it screens its outdoor festivals. In the case of TQFF, it is the more marginalized segments of the broader queer and trans community—queer and trans folk with disabilities, low-income, and racialized queer and trans folk—segments of the community that were hardest hit by Covid. TOPS’s decision to organize a physically distanced and highly regulated version of their outdoor festival and TQFF’s decision to move their festival online and to offer micro-grants and other forms of non-festival programming support can largely be traced back to how each festival reimaged their mandates during the pandemic. In both cases, TOPS and TQFF reimaged and distilled their mandates to capture what I term *cinegoraphilia*.

Cinegoraphilia is neologism that aims to capture the specific desire to not simply watch movies, but to *gather to watch movies with others*. The term brings together *cinophilia*, or the love of watching movies, with the ancient Greek *agora*, which was an open public space in which people would gather. Scholarship on both cinophilia and publics has been attentive to how power imbalances and inequities can be produced by both frameworks. De Valck and Hagener (2005) describe cinophilia as “Janus-faced” since it can equally describe both a utopian love of cinema and an elitist view of loving cinema associated with the *Cahiers du Cinema*. Likewise, work in queer theory and feminist geographies has noted how publics and public gathering spaces are policed and designed only for the dominant (often cisgender white male) public, leaving marginalized

groups to produce counterpublics and guerilla public spaces in which to gather (Warner 2002; Caudwell and Browne 2011).

While cinegoraphilia can certainly capture such Janus-faced inequality, I use it here in its utopian framing to describe how gathering to watch cinema may meet the emotional and psychological needs of people living under Covid restrictions and to imagine what cinemagoing may look like “after Covid.” The changes to festival organizing and cinemagoing that are happening now will not completely disappear and remnants of Covid-era organizing will linger long after this is “over.” To evoke Munoz’s (2009) theorizing of utopia: cinegoraphilia describes both the “here and now” of cinemagoing and a “horizon” always just out of reach. Gathering to watch movies now and in the future is not and will not be the same as it once was. Cinegoraphilia aims to capture this temporal flux.

Cinegoraphilia also draws heavily from how Dean Spade describes the goals of mutual aid projects during the pandemic. For Spade mutual aid has two goals: “meeting people’s needs and mobilizing them for resistance” (Spade 2020, 12). Mutual aid fills in the gaps left by capitalist and imperialist systems that have little interest in meeting the basic needs of people. Mutual aid provides people with what the need for survival and mobilizes those needs toward present and future political action. “At its best,” Spade writes, “mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being” (Spade 2020, 11).

As that which meets our present emotional and psychological needs to gather with others, and as that which tries to imagine alternative futures for cinemagoing, cinegoraphilia evokes the structure of mutual aid. It is not interested in reproducing inequitable regimes of taste between art cinema and popular cinema, between high art and low art. Cinegoraphilia imagines a utopian space where we can gather to watch movies—any and all movies—together.

This is fundamentally what I argue many community-based festivals have been attempting to provide before and during the ongoing pandemic. Cinegoraphilia is the fundamental driver of community-based festivals who have little interest in premieres, red carpets, markets, and those other markers of A-list “business festivals” (Peranson 2009). The pandemic did not produce cinegoraphilia; it simply brought it into sharper focus. TOPS and TQFF’s pandemic programming illustrate this: neither festival changed their mandate; they simply re-focused their efforts on delivering programming that would bring their audiences together.

TORONTO OUTDOOR PICTURE SHOW

In a socially distanced world, how can a festival whose key draw is community stay afloat? Unlike A-list festivals, or even other community-based festivals in Toronto, Toronto Outdoor Picture Show's main draw is not premieres and new films. Rather, Toronto Outdoor Picture Show's main draw has always been the desire to watch classic and contemporary films outdoors with your neighbors in community.

Toronto Outdoor Picture Show began in 2011 as the two-night Christie Pits Film Festival, held in Christie Pits Park in Toronto's west end, organized by programmer and cultural curator Emily Reid. Reid came up with the idea while completing her MA in Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto in 2009. She lived across the street from the park and "mused about seeing outdoor films there" to her MA supervisor, who told her the event would be impossible to mount (Melton 2019). After graduation, the underemployed Reid decided to try to make the event happen anyway and organized a two-night screening to a modest crowd of around 100 patrons. Over the next five years the Christie Pits Film Festival grew, providing more weekly screenings each year until their audience size averaged 1000 per night. In 2015 Reid incorporated the festival as the Toronto Outdoor Picture Show and began expanding its offerings beyond Christie Pits Park, and held screenings in Corktown Common Park, Fort York National Historic Site, Bell Manor Park, Parkway Forest Park and others across Toronto. Each new park aimed to recreate the original founding ethos: to provide high-quality accessible film programming that would appeal to the local community.

The year 2020 would mark the tenth festival held in Christie Pits Park, and TOPS wanted to mark the occasion in a big way: with a retrospective of its nine most popular, important, or influential screenings and the premiere of nine new short films commissioned by TOPS to commemorate the occasion. TOPS sought out funding for this special anniversary season from arts funders, the private sector, and other public funders. To bring the project across the finish line, and to generate buzz and community buy in, the organization launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise the final \$30,000 for the project. The crowdfunding campaign was officially launched on Tuesday, March 10, 2020. The World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 pandemic the following day. Needless to say, this put a wrench in TOPS's fundraising plans and caused the organization to reconsider the optics and communications of the crowdfunding campaign.

TOPS had scheduled a board meeting for Monday, March 16, and as a board we exchanged numerous emails over the weekend about the safety and ethics of holding an in-person board meeting and quickly decided to move the meeting online. The meeting was initially supposed to focus on programming for the 2020 season and to continue to strategize around promoting the crowdfunding plan. The meeting instead focused on ways to completely re-write key messaging for the campaign, since asking for donations in a moment when the arts, culture, and creative industries in Toronto were completely shutting down and many people were likely to lose their jobs was not a position the board was eager to take. Moreover, many of the film productions the campaign was supposed to support were likely to be canceled or postponed indefinitely due to the stay-at-home order and gathering restrictions.

The bulk of the meeting focused on how the festival would be able to operate if stay-at-home measures continued to persist well into the summer. At this point no one in the arts and culture industries had any idea how long the stay-at-home order would persist or for how long they would have to adapt their operations. TOPS, as an outdoor festival, knew that it had more flexibility and Reid proposed a number of contingency plans, each more unappealing than the next, as a way to keep the organization nimble as various levels of government continued to announce new restrictions. Depending on the length of the restrictions, TOPS would do anything from either delaying the announcement of the season, reducing the number of events, or canceling the festival entirely.

Each contingency plan not only had effects on the capacity of the organization and the quality of programming it could offer; it also potentially could affect the organization's eligibility to apply for new grants and accept already submitted grants. TOPS received organizational funding from the Ontario Arts Council and project funding from the Toronto Arts Council, and the organization was relatively certain in March that these funding streams would be safe. However, project funding is tied to specific projects and specific deliverables, and TOPS had submitted a number of applications in the previous months for projects that at this point they were no longer sure if they would be able to deliver because of Covid.

Once public health guidelines in Canada shifted and began to allow for gathering outdoors—since the science supported that risk of Covid transmission outdoors was extremely low, especially when combined with physical distancing and mask use—TOPS knew that it was in a unique position as an outdoor festival to offer some version of its original programming. However,

given that public health guidelines were constantly shifting, and the provincial government could not outline a long-term schedule as to when restrictions may be lifted enough for outdoor gatherings, TOPS had to remain nimble and flexible in their programming in order to be able to organize their festival within what would be the small two-month window in which gatherings were allowed. Further, the fate of TOPS's 10th Anniversary short film project was in jeopardy, as public health restrictions effectively shut down film production in the province. Two of the nine funded productions had luckily completed shooting before the stay-at-home order was issued and were able to complete their films in time for August.

Ultimately, TOPS was able to organize their festival over ten back-to-back evenings at the end of August and was able to fund it in large part due to the ways the arts ecosystem was reorganized during the pandemic. This was the first outdoor festival to happen in the city since Covid restrictions were in place (excluding drive-in festivals), followed shortly thereafter by the Toronto International Film Festival in September. However, because outdoor gathering restrictions limited capacity to 100 people, they opted to hold the festival at Fort York National Historic Site, which was gated and could provide some control over the number of people who entered. Further, in order to limit the possibility of folks crowding outside hoping for a chance to get in, TOPS required every attendee to reserve a free ticket in advance.

Once inside the venue, patrons were asked to self-assess for Covid symptoms and were asked to seat themselves in the open field at least 6 feet from each other. This TOPS knew would not be difficult to enforce. At a regular outdoor screening before the pandemic at their flagship festival in Christie Pits Park, patrons at their events would naturally sit as far from each other, with gaps between patrons only beginning to fill as crossed the 1000 attendee threshold. Attendance at their Fort York screenings in previous years rarely exceeded 400, though the space could easily support four or five times that amount without physical distancing. With a strict attendance cap of 100 people and physical distancing put in place in a space with capacity for thousands, they knew that there would be little chance of crowding. Staff wore masks and worked physically distanced where possible and strict limitations were placed on the indoor washroom. As a result, no case of Covid transmission was ever linked to the festival.

The festival featured the two completed new short films and a roster of favorite short and feature films screened in previous years. This captured the spirit of their original 10th Anniversary program—in which nine short

films would be specifically commissioned to be paired with a favorite feature film from the last nine years of TOPS programs—without replicating it entirely. This nostalgia-hued program took on new meaning in the midst of the pandemic, capturing the cinegoraphilia of public cinemagoing in transition. By celebrating ten years of outdoor movie magic—ten years of being able to watch cinema together without physical distancing and constantly shifting public health guidelines—TOPS’s 2020 Fort York festival reminded us of what cinemagoing once was and provided a glimpse of what it might be in the future.

TORONTO QUEER FILM FESTIVAL

Like TOPS, TQFF knew that the Covid pandemic would require the organization to reimagine how they were going to offer their festival. TQFF’s Artistic and Development Director Kami Chisholm had been following the news of Covid since it broke in January 2020 and was largely unsurprised by the federal government’s stay at home order in March 2020. In an email to the collective on March 17, 2020, Chisholm outlined both a plan of action for the festival and a path toward supporting the wider queer and trans community:

“So, I’ve actually been expecting something like this for a long time, and the good news is that all the planning and building we have done over the last years has in part been to prepare for this. I’m getting messages from the councils that funding will still be flowing. In fact in the short term it looks like possibly more funding may come. So at the moment I am not expecting a huge hit to our budget and I am exploring all funding options [...] For now I’m still expecting that all the jobs we’ve been discussing and budgeting for will happen. [...]

“I’m not going to get into details here [...] but this is not going to be over in a few weeks. And this is hitting our community hard. One of the main reasons I wanted to start TQFF was to be a site for community care and support when this eventually happened. So I’ve been thinking a lot about what we can do.

“Most queer people I know have lost their jobs or all their contract work for the next few months. What do we think about starting a fund? We could use the money to commission found footage/works that can be done from home, host online screening events that pay artists fees, give people grants to host online training webinars. Other ideas? The point is to give people work and to also be a site for the sharing of this work now”. (Chisholm 2020)

I quote this email at length because it accurately predicts the longevity of the pandemic, the short-term response of the arts councils, and outlines how TQFF's eventual pandemic programming is situated within its larger mandate. Chisholm started TQFF in 2016 after noticing that the city's major queer film festival, Inside Out, rarely screened the sorts of experimental and politically challenging films they made—indeed, part of TQFF's impetus was to create a space in Toronto where Chisholm's 2016 documentary *Pride Denied* could be screened, which had been rejected from Inside Out the previous year.

Central to TQFF's mandate from the beginning was building, as Chisholm wrote in this email, a “site for community care and support.” In practice, this meant that TQFF prioritized providing wages and artist fees above the minimum rates recommended by the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA)—a Canadian non-profit organization representing over 100 media arts organizations that sets a recommended fee schedule to ensure media artists are compensated fairly for the exhibition of their work—and operates equally from a disability justice and accessibility perspective as it does from a queer and trans perspective. TQFF was an early adopter of providing subtitles and ASL at their screenings. Ticket prices are pay what you can, with no one ever turned away for lack of funds. The festival is usually held at OCAD University in wheelchair-accessible rooms and is an alcohol-free festival in order to create a space safe for people who struggle with substance abuse.

This history of centering disability justice and accessibility meant that TQFF made the decision early on to move its scheduled November 2020 festival online. However, the postponement of Canada Council's Public Outreach fund to a date at that point was unknown (eventually it would be reinstated for September 2020) put the festival's plans to finance the festival in jeopardy. Faced with the possibility of organizing a festival and not having it funded, and thus not having a way to pay its staff, TQFF planned to postpone their 2020 iteration of the festival to March 2021. This bought the festival time to get a sense of funding streams that would be available to the festival.

The festival did, however, have enough funding in the bank that they opted to redirect some of it toward artists in the form of micro-grants. The festival issued a call for submissions for short films made in a Covid-safe manner under the theme “Queer Emergencies.” Successful applicants would receive minimum \$500 in unrestricted funds to artists. Because the festival wanted the funds to move as quickly as possible, as well as to

generate some press for the festival to further fundraise, films were made within the span of two weeks and were screened publicly on the TQFF website. Queer Emergencies acted as a mutual aid project designed to get funds out to artists *now*, while governments continued to fumble about developing new programs and new deadlines. To be clear: while the government *eventually* developed new supports for artists, they did not do so nearly fast enough. This is where Queer Emergencies was situated.

Queer Emergencies was the first of three separate support programs TQFF offered in response to the shortcomings of government response to the Covid pandemic. The second program was a Covid DIY Documentary workshop facilitated by documentary filmmaker Chanda Chevannes, which operated similarly to the Queer Emergencies program but over a longer period of time guided by Chevannes as a mentor to emerging filmmakers. The third program was their Food Knows No Borders food box program. With the financial support of the Canadian Red Cross, TQFF provided administrative support to Vivimos Juntxs, Comemos Juntxs (VJCJ), a migrant-led group that advocates for migrants to access to support and services, to distribute food and personal protective equipment to nearly 100 queer, trans, migrant, racialized, and undocumented households across the Greater Toronto Area.

To cinephiles and festival scholars, the fact that a queer film festival would support a program that is decidedly uncinematic is clearly unique. TQFF's Food Knows No Borders program (along with their two filmmaking programs, Queer Emergencies and Covid DIY) highlights both the ways festivals have had to shift their programming and activities over the pandemic *and* offers an alternative model for other community-led festivals to follow to generate cinegoraphilia as we enter the second year of the pandemic. The desire to watch movies together can be mobilized toward alternative programs that offer material support artists and filmmakers and not simply just representational space in a film program. It is one thing for festivals to save themselves and to survive the economic effects of the Covid pandemic; it is another thing entirely if there's no artists left to show their work at the festivals.

CONCLUSION: TOPS AND TQFF IN 2021 AND BEYOND

The year 2020 proved to be a year that TOPS, TQFF, and indeed the broader festival network in Toronto experimented and adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of their audiences and the shifting public health

guidelines. As large-scale vaccination efforts get underway in Canada with an optimistic goal of returning to some sense of “normal” by fall 2021, it is possible that these festivals may begin to return to some form of their pre-2020 operations by 2022.

The arts funding ecosystem in Toronto has seemingly stabilized for the moment, no longer plagued with persistent questions of shifting grant deadlines or delayed funding. Indeed, despite the months of uncertainty around funding, both TOPS and TQFF managed to not only survive but thrive during the first year of the pandemic. While major A-list festivals had identity crises and were the hardest hit by the shutdown of the film industry and movie theaters, community-led festivals were flexible and adaptable enough to survive and thrive.

It is difficult to say with any certainty if this flexibility will be enough to allow these festivals to continue to thrive. As various levels of government begin to roll back the support programs they implemented in 2020, many festivals may end up shuttering in 2021 and beyond despite best efforts to save the sector. In Canada the arts sector is behind only airlines as the hardest hit sector during the pandemic (Taylor 2021). While the sector may be holding together for now, it is doing so due to the tireless labor of underpaid and overworked arts administrators, who have been able to capture audience cinegraphophilia over the last year despite the numerous uncertainties the last year and a half have brought.

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Film Festivals in Taiwan: Lurking on the Periphery

Beth Tsai

Amid the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, film festivals around the world were either canceled, postponed, downsized, or pivoted to online or hybrid delivery. However, the 22nd Taipei Film Festival, in 2020, was the first in-person event to be held worldwide after the outbreak. Festival goers in Taiwan were able to attend the annual Taipei Film Festival as usual from June 25th to July 11th in the historical building of Zhongshan Hall in Taipei City. It was fortunate that all film screenings, side events, and the awards ceremony took place as scheduled; this was in large part due to the country's success in containing the fast-spreading Covid-19 and the geopolitical implications of its success.

As Julian Stringer (2016) points out, issues relating to film festivals' time (history) and space (geography) are vital to understanding power relations in the international film festival circuit: "it is necessary ... [to] consider where film festivals have (or have not) been set up and where they have (or have not) flourished" (34). Many scholars have written about the

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rapid advancement of film festivals in the Asia region, and between the rivalry and mutual imitation of port-city festivals (Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, and Busan), these festivals come across as not just major players in the region, but as a one-stop destination for film markets, especially trade events on the global stage (Jordanova 2011, 1–33; Davis and Yeh 2008; Lee and Stringer 2012, 239–61). Outside of the Sinophone community, little attention has been given to festivals in Taiwan. Part of the reason was that these festivals were either too specialized (including only catering to the local community) or simply not comparable in regard to “programming, publications, and screenings”¹ (Davis and Yeh 2008, 145)—namely, they lack extensive production-oriented events that purposely service film professionals, from buyers and distributors to producers, programmers, and more.

In light of this, this chapter investigates an ongoing geopolitical shift concerning the status of festivals in Taiwan—exemplified by the Taipei Film Festival and the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards—and their future challenges instigated by the global pandemic. I consider film festivals in Taiwan to be lurking on the “periphery” and argue they should not be prescribed as secondary and unnoticed (in terms of prestige and influences). Instead, we need to identify the center (Western Europe and wealthy North America) versus the periphery paradigm in which the global festival circuit continued to reinforce power relations where mid- or lower-ranking film festivals had to wrestle with the hierarchy of status. This chapter begins by tracing how the pandemic preparedness in Taiwan allowed most Taiwanese film festivals to conduct business as usual. Yet this local advantage—abetted by the country’s history and political dissension with the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—is impeded by the collateral implications from disrupted festivals worldwide. It is further impeded by the powerhouse status of A-list festivals, which remain unshaken. I argue that, while film festivals in Taiwan may not have been able to take on a more dominant role in the international circuit, they benefit indirectly from a revived interest in Taiwan cinema, both domestically and internationally.

¹ Publicization seems to be a more fitting word in the context of their writing.

PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS IN TAIWAN

Writing in early 2021, while many countries worldwide are experiencing a fresh spike in Covid-19 cases intensified by the second wave, Taiwan has so far been able to avoid large-scale lockdown measures that are stalling the film industries in so many places. Seen as a global leader for its effective response to the coronavirus, Taiwan, an island-nation of 23 million, has had a total of fewer than 1100 confirmed cases, 10 deaths, and a record of more than 250 days without a locally transmitted case throughout 2020. Safe to say, the pandemic had minimal impact on Taiwan's film festival circuit. Much of the efforts to contain the situation include closing borders early and travel regulations. Other measures include a central response command center, rigorous contact tracing, enforcing quarantine and GPS tracking for all travelers, and a strict mandatory mask-wearing policy. Further, Taiwan's experience with SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) 17 years ago resulted in a chain of actions and infrastructural overhaul, thereby helping the country's pandemic preparedness, including governmental reorganization, the medical care system, and increased public engagement—the latter especially swayed public compliance with the mask-wearing policy.

Standing at the margins of international socio-political exclusion, Taiwan's conflict with China played a pivotal role in the island's assessment and the effectiveness of its actions in preventing a large-scale epidemic. To briefly unpack the China-Taiwan relations, the divide over Taiwan's status has resulted in constant tension and political conflicts between the island and mainland, mainly because the Chinese Communist Party has relentlessly claimed sovereignty over Taiwan since the Chinese Nationalists retreated to Taiwan in 1949. Commonly known as the "two China conflict," the controversy regarding Taiwan's political status can be glimpsed from its deliberate use of ambiguous/diplomatic names, such as "Taiwan, China" or "Chinese Taipei" when referring to Taiwan in international events. The decades-long political instability between China and Taiwan faces more challenges when Tsai Ing-wen, who leads the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, was elected as the first female president of Taiwan in 2016, and China has been vexing commercial and cultural exchanges across the strait ever since.²

²For example, in 2019, the PRC announced a decision to prevent their citizens from traveling to Taiwan, with intentions to deal a blow to Taiwan's tourism industry.

Without a doubt, Taiwan's swift response had to do with the government's preemptive view against China, at a time when Beijing and the World Health Organization (WHO) were minimizing the threat of the virus. When Taiwan's health officials learned about a case of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan at the start of the outbreak and alerted the WHO, Taiwan was dismissed by the organization that backed Chinese officials' statement by insisting there was "no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission" (France24 2020; World Health Organization 2020). This discrepancy has since, in part, become a political battle between China and the U.S., in which the Trump administration not only threatened to cut funding for the WHO, the U.S. at one point issued a formal withdrawal of membership from the organization. Meanwhile, researchers at John Hopkins University initially projected that Taiwan would have one of the world's worst outbreaks due to the island's proximity to China via air travel (Gardner 2020). According to these researchers, cities that have heavy-traffic direct or indirect flights from Wuhan were at the highest risk, and based on flight data, experts estimated that Taiwan would have to cope with the second-highest number of imported virus cases just after Thailand. Despite these projections, Taiwan was able to defy the odds and keep the coronavirus contained.

Given that the country had avoided major lockdowns, these conditions have allowed the Taipei Film Festival (TFF) and the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards (hereafter the Golden Horse) to go ahead as in-person events in 2020. In what follows, I will briefly sketch out the history and backdrop of these two festivals, outline how the pandemic presents unique and different challenges to both, and account for the ways in which each handled the situation. These two film festivals are not only among the list of the longest-running events in Taiwan, each operating on a different scale and vision (TFF, a city festival, versus the Golden Horse, a glamorous, high-profile industry event akin to the Oscars or Cannes). Both have made a significant contribution to the sustainability and vitality of Taiwan cinema, especially by "keeping local film talents afloat when the industry was at its lowest ebb" (Rawnsley 2016, 384).

TAIPEI FILM FESTIVAL: WHERE GOVERNMENT IS A STAKEHOLDER

TFF, as one of the leading critical cultural events in Taiwan, has long been branded as a city festival that strategically positions itself as the nexus between Taipei and other global cities as a way to withstand Taiwan's political isolation (Chen 2011, 142–53). Founded in 1998 by the oldest evening newspaper in Taiwan, the festival—formerly called the China Times Express Film Awards—is subsidized through a combination of public and private sectors, with 60% of its support coming from government funding (after its partnership with Taipei City Council and semi-privatization under the Taipei Culture Foundation in 2007). TFF typically screens around 110 films over the course of three weeks each year, with an average of 43,000 viewers (Davis 2020). Unlike the New York Film Festival, which sets itself apart as a non-competitive festival, TFF was founded with a mission in mind to increase local independent film production. TFF was not only recognized as Taiwan's first urban film festival, but it also positioned itself as catering to young, hipster audiences who are interested in independent and non-mainstream cinema, aiming to brand itself as a major rival to the Golden Horse—the largest festival in Taiwan established to boost the Chinese-language film industry in the region. TFF would, using Dina Iordanova's definition of the festival's six essential functions, fall under the bracket of the film festival's attempt to “counter-balance nationalist tendencies” with world cinema (2011, 20).

In recent years, TFF has moved away from the city festival image onto sites of commerce and cultural exchange. In 2005, the festival introduced a new competition category called “the International New Talent Competition,” which was at the time the only festival in the country with a competing category for international feature films (as opposed to Golden Horse's sole attention to Chinese-language films). To promote the production of Taiwan cinema, the festival partnered with the Festival of the Three Continents (Festival des Trois Continents) in France and initiated a project development workshop. Those who were lucky enough to be selected for participation would be guided through the process of proposal writing, budgeting, production planning, and so on. TFF's endeavors in cultivating cinephile culture and commitment to new talents are instrumental in promoting the local film industry, and their efforts are certainly not trivial, as shown in collaboration with notable international film festivals. These exertions should be enough to recognize TFF as a

node in a transnational network. Yet, the festival is still lacking in qualifying international visibility, what Yun-hua Chen describes as “a large but still minor-ranking film festival” on the film festival world map (2011, 142).

There are many explanations of why TFF has not been considered a focal event in the festival circuit. First, TFF is not accredited by FIAPF (the International Federation of Film Producers Associations) and therefore not “officially” indexed in the film festivals directory to attract serious crowds or a steady flow of international journalists for publicity and coverage. Second, the festival is running on a relatively meager, non-competing budget, reported around US\$ 1.5 million per year (Yu 2015), a drastic contrast to Busan International Film Festival’s almost ten times more figure at US\$ 10 million. Third, TFF’s award ceremony origin (of which the Golden Horse also shares a similar trajectory, discussed later in this article) prompted some scholars to reject studying it as festivals, calling it “exhibitions” instead (Iordanova 2011, 12). The argument to disavow a festival citing linguistic consideration is rather objectionable: the Mandarin term *ying zhang* can be literally translated to “audiovisual exhibition,” and yet in common usage, the term is without a doubt synonymous with “film festival.” Here, I would like to offer another possible explanation: TFF’s low international visibility appears to be hindered by the kinship between TFF and Taipei City Council. The city government plays a role in overseeing and dictating the film festival and its artistic direction.

Taiwanese scholars, film critics, festival reporters, and festival staff have repeatedly spoken against the bureaucratic system and argued that their “task-based” administrative procedures constrain the creativity of a film festival (Hao-Chun Yang, personal interview, December 22, 2020). Yun-hua Chen (2011) writes: “the bureaucratic system ... lacks the strategic vision and the sustainable policy” thus undermines the linkages with other global cities (143). Between 2002 and 2015, the festival’s main slate was “City Focus,” showcasing international films and featured talks and roundtable discussions based on selected cities. This program was established by Lung Ying-tai, the then Chief of Taipei City Cultural Affairs. Several film critics and festival directors (e.g., Steven Tu, Wen Tien-hsiang) were skeptical of the city focus programming from the start, claiming audiences were not particularly interested in narrowly defined on-screen representations of global cities and that a city festival should focus more on its own urban space (Hung 2013) rather than blindly follow the upper administration that often has a blatantly political agenda (Wen 2006). This sentiment became prophetic in two subsequent affairs: first, a dispute between the

festival's steering committee and the city council ultimately attracted an explosion of media attention and public opinions to the incestuous relationship between TFF and the city council (Public Television Service 2015); and second, the City Focus program came to an end in 2016. The end of the City Focus program signals a new direction for the festival, embarking on a new era with new leadership. Apart from a domino effect of core staff and board members resigning from the festival in 2015, rejection of City Council's meddling also sparked discussions and debates about the political structure between the economics of film festivals and public sectors, as well as urging TFF to reorient itself as a new festival hub in the South-East Asia region. Currently, TFF runs without a director of programming but a team of programmers instead.

The government-backed nature of TFF has drawn a lot of criticism from the public. The Taipei Culture Foundation, which co-finances TFF, is a nonprofit organization incorporated by the city council. This means that as an extended executive branch of public authority, the foundation is expected to comply with government contracting procedures in terms of finance, service procurement, and commercial affairs. The Taipei Culture Foundation, however, is exempt from the same rules that govern state agencies; thus, the Foundation is able to operate flexibly both inside and outside the system. The Foundation is not only delegated to organize governmental events. It can also be authorized to manage state-owned enterprises, for example, the Taipei Arena,³ resulting in major backlashes in the past.

Laying out the context and the history of TFF shows the peculiar intricacies between the government and the festival itself, where the government acts as a stakeholder and holds the festival at arm's length. About 40% of TFF's staff functions as (and enjoys the benefits of) civil service employees, but like most festivals around the world, TFF also relies heavily on volunteers and programmers who are hired on a contingent basis, resulting in team members being shuffled between festivals like nomadic workers. If the vulnerabilities in the film festival ecosystem exposed by the pandemic are ultimately the issue of economic crisis, as Marijke de Valck

³The Taipei Arena, formerly known as the Taipei Municipal Baseball Stadium, was under major renovation from 2001 to 2005 to transition into a multi-function indoor facility for concerts and sporting events. The Taipei City Council took over the operation from 2007 to 2008 after the site's foreclosure. Taipei Rapid Transit Corporation now runs the Taipei Arena.

(2020, 125–35) suggests, it appears TFF, for the time being, has the government as a safety net to fall back on.

The decision to go ahead with an in-person format of the festival in 2020, committed only a month before the event, was, of course, a complicated process and ultimately a collective, unanimous decision among executive staff members themselves. Before reaching the final decision, the staff went back and forth between the uncertainty about the pandemic situation and daily conversations about whether they would have other options that go beyond cancellation or postponement (Katrina Hsieh, personal interview, December 18, 2020). When asked about how they came to a decision, TFF director Li Ya-mei (2021) shared that the first thing she considered was whether the festival could handle massive financial loss should the festival be canceled at the last minute. Her challenge was, if they carried on with their planning, arranged all travel and lodging for their international guests, paid out their vendors, cleared all the screening rights, and so on, could they absorb the financial losses, and still have enough cash reserve to handle the withdraw situation, in the event that the government shut down their festival the day before. The good news was, after thorough calculation, Li concluded that the festival would survive even if they had to take the financial hit. During the deliberation, Li (2021) also mentioned the problem of co-dependency with the government, suggesting the lack of autonomy in organizing and steering the film festival: because the city government has financial and artistic persuasions over TFF, Li was waiting for the Taipei City Cultural Affairs to green-light the event and to iron out the details for health and safety protocols should the physical event take place. The Taipei City Cultural Affairs, on the other hand, did not want to take full responsibility and deflated the situation to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, assuming that the Ministry would have the final word because of the pandemic. The issue bounced off between the two public sectors for some time, until the Taiwanese government lifted restrictions on cinemas and social gatherings, enabling TFF to proceed with ticket sales for screenings without implementing social distancing seating (which would drastically cut their income revenue of ticket sales by half).

During the event, TFF remained largely unaffected by the pandemic situation other than a few necessary protocols, such as mask-wearing, recording attendees' names for contact tracing, and withdrawing their invites to international guests (due to entry restrictions for foreigners). Apart from the 142 films they featured, they continued to expand their

virtual reality (VR) selections—a relatively new program that was just introduced in 2018. It would appear TFF was fortunate enough to have avoided the global crisis.

WHEN UPDATE FAILED

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2016), who famously proposed the radical concept “updating to remain the same” in the digital world, wrote about new media and the paradoxical relationship individuals have with the presumably unbounded, free-flowing network called the Internet. Structured around her formula “habit + crisis = update,” Chun stipulates a habitual urgency, if not anxiety, for users to constantly update, or refresh, new media to stay connected and remain relevant to society. Drawing loosely from this analogy, the logic of Chun’s formula applies to many film festivals’ responses to the Covid-19 crisis: they scrambled to “remain the same,” so to speak, as the health and safety challenges presented by the pandemic forced them to convert to online platforms, go virtual, or experiment with hybrid forms. Since film festivals are never just about the films, the traditional festival form is particularly vulnerable in pandemic times (de Valck 2020). The “habitual experience” festivals on digital platforms tried to create, unsurprisingly, simulated traditional onsite festival encounters, such as limited access to screening tickets, socializing and networking in the market/industries events, real-time talks, Q&As, roundtable discussions, and so on. Sundance 2021 even went as far as offering an immersive socializing experience at its New Frontier section. Each digital avatar could wander through virtual film parties and interact with other people while exploring the latest VR project exhibition. Tracking how festivals “update” themselves by attempting to recreate interactive opportunities in their digital/virtual forms, de Valck acutely points out that these festivals were well aware that “when the purpose of a film festival surpasses the screening of films, the void that is left by the cancellation of physical events cannot be filled with online offerings exclusively” (129). The “updates” these festivals have made, moving from analog projection to the digital world, and even before the digital crisis, referring to cinema’s upgrades to DCP (digital cinema package) projection, bring to attention the creation of new habits, new patterns, and different capacity of mobility and accessibility (not everyone has the same access to technology), brought forth by the outbreak’s disruptions.

Not having to “update” to “remain the same,” TFF’s unaltered format generates a different kind of concern: moving forward, TFF may have missed the chance of overhauling its infrastructure and the opportunity to experiment with online streaming delivery and virtual experience many other festivals adopted to reinvent and reimagine themselves. And if it is not a missed opportunity, it signals a delayed response. Festival programmers do not just rely on unsolicited submission (in some instances, festivals and their programs are by invitation-only, for example, Cannes); they typically visit neighboring and other world-leading festival events for discovery, to check out new releases, network with distributors at industry events, and keep tabs on highlights and popular trends happening at the moment. A standard timeline for programmers working at TFF requires about half a year ahead for the selection process, starting with Busan and Tokyo in October, Rotterdam, and Berlinale in February, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival in March (Katrina Hsieh, personal interview, December 18, 2020). Facing all kinds of disruptions in the latter half of the year 2020, where many film festivals were either canceled or postponed, TFF programmers are worried about planning the upcoming event as a consequence of their limited accessibility to new releases. Take, for example, the Busan festival, which ran physically during the pandemic in 2020. In the case of Busan, the event had to be significantly downsized and dates were briefly pushed back; all ceremonies were canceled, as were receptions and industry network events. In the end, the event was restricted to South Korean residents. Even with these changes, there have been reports that for those who could attend, it was almost impossible to obtain film tickets due to cinemas being restricted to one-third maximum capacity with social distancing seating arrangements (Twanmu 2020).

The challenge is real for TFF 2021, as programmers were unable to attend some world film festivals they regularly visit in sourcing and selecting appropriate films for the next edition of TFF. Starting with Rotterdam 2021 in hybrid form. Its Pro Days and talks were entirely on an online platform (no geo-blocking), but only national and local audiences can attend the physical program. The Berlinale was in a similar setup: industry-related activities were held online in March 2021, while the screening event is being planned as a physical event to run in June. As for Hong Kong, the festival returned in April with a hybrid 45th edition that included both in-person and online screenings. As I write, Taiwan, once hailed as a success story, is now seeing a steep rise in Covid-19 cases. In response to the ongoing global health crisis, TFF has decided to postpone

the 23rd edition to late September. Based on the changes and new practices that brought disruptions to TFF's regular calendar of planning, there is no way to predict what will be coming this year, only to presume that in this ecosystem, no festivals operate entirely in a vacuum, no matter how small or minor, or whether it caters to niche markets. The impacts of Covid-19 continue to further expose the unequal power relations within the globalized festival network, as many researchers had previously pointed out. It thus reinforces global hierarchies and creates a chain reaction—despite the survival and strife for the success of mid-level and regional film festivals, they still have to work closely with top A-list festivals whose infrastructures are crumbling.

TAIPEI GOLDEN HORSE FILM FESTIVAL: THE CHINESE-LANGUAGE “OSCARs”

The 2020 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival was in a better position than TFF, with its standard running time slotted in the last quarter of the year. The Golden Horse, which started out as the oldest award ceremony in Chinese-language cinemas that dates back over 60 years, sparked the debate on whether to consider industry-staged public relations events like the Golden Horse as actual festivals (Iordanova 2011, 11–2). The Golden Horse has since evolved—from an award ceremony initiated by the government in 1962 in reaction to social and geopolitical needs (a soft power strategy to ostracize propaganda-inclined films from Communist China) to the expansion of three separate screening events throughout the year, known as the Big Horse (the major/primary film festival), the Small Horse (Fantastic Film Festival, specialized festival of the fantastic genre), and the Old Horse (Classic Film Festival, its retrospective program). To start, it is necessary to recognize the two sectors, awards ceremony and film festival, as two separate entities developed over different time periods, yet mutually co-dependent after the two events were merged in 1990.

The Golden Horse Awards Ceremony (hereafter GHA) enjoyed the nickname, the “Chinese Oscars,” because at inception it was modeled and imitated after Hollywood's Academy Awards, especially by the variety of categories it offered for its main competition, as well as the live broadcasting format. The film selection process, however, is more akin to the Cannes Film Festival or the Berlinale. The Golden Horse uses a small team of judges who are chosen for their achievements in art and culture but are

not necessarily film professionals. The current GHA operates a two-step judging process: first, the film industry's unions and professionals can nominate candidates for the industrial and technical categories. After a list of nominees has been made, the jury committee evaluates the films and the talents to make their final decisions. Over time, the GHA has converted from rejecting films they believed prescribed certain communist political and ideological agendas to embracing Chinese-language cinemas from all origins. In 1992, the Taiwanese government approved the commercial screening of Chinese films from the PRC; by 1996, films and professionals from the PRC were permitted to enter the competition, according to the official statement released by the GHA: "all Chinese-language films, including Hokkien and other dialects, are eligible to submit regardless of production country, funding ratio or nationality of the crew" (Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival [n.d.](#)).

The festival component, introduced in 1980, started out as a non-specialized, non-competitive festival showcasing world cinema for Taiwanese audiences. Between 1980 and 1989, the festival was organized by the Chinese Taipei Film Archive (note the "Chinese Taipei" here; the place is now renamed as Taiwan Film Institute), before the GHA executive committee took over. Since its beginning, the festival runs two parallel lineups: the first screens Chinese-language films that include films short-listed for nominations; the second is the non-competitive international exhibition platform. The former category appeals to audiences who either work in the film industry or are interested in viewing all nominated films before the awards ceremony. The latter lineup focuses on non-Chinese-language cinema as an attempt to foster and advocate a global community. The only caveat for the second lineup is that once selected, the film has to make the Golden Horse its provincial premiere site before it can be distributed in theaters in Taiwan. Both categories qualify for the Audience Choice Award, which is separate from the jury selection and is not considered part of the official competition for the award ceremony. Compared to the TFF, the Golden Horse is less dependent on state funding—only 40% of its total budget comes from central and local governmental budgets. The festival is run independently by a private-sector organization.

This chapter begins by stating that most film festivals in Taiwan ran physically in 2020 and the pandemic did not seem to alter too much of the planned events, but it does not mean there was no cancelation at all. A case in point is the Golden Horse Fantastic Film Festival (hereafter Fantastic Film)—as aforementioned, one of the sub-events of its parent

festival—which was the first to announce its cancellation back in March, just a few days after the WHO declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. Following the Fantastic Film Festival’s decision, the Taiwan International Documentary Festival also announced its postponement; the event was moved from May 2020 to early spring in 2021. A few other smaller festivals in Taiwan made similar announcements, but it did not produce a chain effect. In fact, part of the reason TFF was able to move forward was that they observed and learned from Fantastic Film’s decision and thus decided to embrace the situation and its potential challenges rather than to give up months of their planned work. TFF’s senior program coordinator Katrina Hsieh relayed their concerns: (1) postponing was not an option because there were not a lot of vacant time slots left in the calendar year; and (2) they did not want to plan an event that was too close to the Golden Horse to steer clear of a scheduling conflict and direct competition for patrons (Katrina Hsieh, personal interview, December 18, 2020). Between moving forward or canceling the event entirely, they chose moving forward the physical event.

On the bright side, nothing was really lost by Fantastic Film’s cancellation, because its parent festival, the Golden Horse, moved most of the lineup to its main event in November, since all the films curated for Fantastic Film were cleared for screening and premiere rights. Apart from “saving” these films for the logistics and costs, the other reason for the Golden Horse’s programmers to combine the two lineups had to do with global impact: there were not a lot of new releases to choose from to begin with. The pandemic has drastically reduced the pool of selection for programmers in the past year; many distributors had decided to delay new releases or shift their strategy and move to a streaming platform entirely, for instance, Warner Bros.’s partnership with HBO Max. Some distributors, especially those whose films were art-house oriented, tended to hold out for the opportunity to premiere exclusively at A-list film festivals, at a time when festivals like Cannes were indecisive on whether to postpone, cancel, or move their festival online. Cannes’ premiere status, combined with distributors’ inclination and unwillingness to budge for a second-tier festival, made it a difficult job for the programmers at the Golden Horse.

In a recent podcast interview, Emma Chen, director of programming for the Golden Horse, mentioned the challenges she and her team experienced during the pandemic. One of the most unexpected things was when her team contacted distributors to inquire about a few film titles from the 2020 Cannes official selection. They found out that not all the films on

the list were in fact ready for distribution (still in post-production); thus, the films they wanted would not be available or ready in time to make their premiere in Taiwan at the Golden Horse (Chen 2020). The other common thing was the wait or holdout for other A-list film festivals: the distributors feared that if their films did not premiere at the usual places, it would take away audiences' interest or the film's prestige. Refusals like this clearly reflect on top film festivals' gatekeeping entitlement and the aura of prestige that is traditionally linked to theatrical premieres at select sites (Elsaesser 2005; de Valck 2016, 100–16). The “gatekeeping” practice from top festivals affects distributors' hesitance and reservation for “less desirable venues,” which in return did not work favorably even for places where physical festivals are possible, as the Golden Horse. The team at the Golden Horse tried to use an in-person event as leverage to bargain for films that would carry the Cannes logo—“the hallmark of approval,” but not successfully. The reality was that, as Emma Chen (2020) disclosed, whether the festival would run onsite/in-person did not make much difference to the distributors on whether they wanted to send their films to Taiwan.

TAIWAN CINEMA AMID THE PANDEMIC

Another observation of the pandemic's impact on film festivals, award ceremonies, and the film industry in Taiwan is the absence of PRC films in 2020 (if not counting the low number of titles from Hong Kong), resulting in a favorable condition for Taiwan cinema, at film festivals as well as at the domestic box office. The 2020 TFF witnessed a 10% growth in ticket sales compared to the previous year, although their total operational funding was 20% less than what they usually received (Li 2021). The TFF also received never-before-seen extensive news coverage from international media outlets such as *Variety*, *Screen*, the *New York Times*, and *American Press*. At the 2020 Golden Horse Awards, four out of five nominees for the best picture were from Taiwan, a sharp contrast to 2018's edition, where there was only one film of Taiwanese origin competing with four other mainland Chinese films (Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival n.d.). As for movie theaters in Taiwan, even without a lockdown, they barely survived through the pandemic due to the lack of global blockbuster releases and Western conglomerates' direct-to-streaming deals. Interestingly, however, the situation comes at a time when Taiwanese film and TV production are enjoying a boom. Domestic movies' box-office

sales have gone up, especially in the last quarter of 2020. While not a record-breaking surge (currently no other Taiwanese production has yet broken the highest-grossing record of TWD 530 million in domestic film sales, the 2008 film *Cape No. 7* has received), we are seeing significant growth and a welcoming return to domestic production from the local audience.

The pandemic may be a catalyst for putting the Taiwan film industry in the spotlight, at festivals and in movie theaters, but the reason behind China's withdrawal from participation is, once again, political division. I am referring to the decision made by the China Film Administration, which banned mainland film production and professionals from participating in Taiwan's 57th Golden Horse Awards and, for the second time, called to boycott the biggest event for Chinese-language cinemas. No reasons were given, signaling an attempt to block off future participation and collaboration between the two film industries. The Beijing government's move to boycott the GHA was reactionary to the controversy just two years ago, when Taiwanese documentary filmmaker Fu Yue expressed her sentiment for Taiwan to be officially recognized as an "independent entity" during her acceptance speech on stage (Taiwan TTV News 2018). While the ceremony was broadcasting live, the Chinese government abruptly cut live coverage as a means to shut down ideological deviance. After Fu's comments, Tu Men, a mainland Chinese actor and awards presenter, came onstage and deliberately emphasized that he felt honored to be invited back to the ceremony taking place in "Taiwan, China," echoing Beijing's "one China" principle. This incident sparked an intense debate between Taiwanese and mainland film professionals, as well as in the online community, about questions and stances for Taiwan's independence. Chinese movie stars who attended the Golden Horse Awards ceremony in 2018 even censored themselves by refusing to go on stage to accept their awards or declined to attend the banquet reception following the show (Taiwan TTV News 2018).

The correlation between the absence of PRC films during Taiwan's award season and domestic films reclaiming Taiwan's box-office revenue remains to be made, but the number of ticket sales for the Golden Horse and box office is telling, even if it is only a part of the story. When asked to describe the impact of the Covid-19 on the Golden Horse, festival director Wen Tien-hsiang (2020) responded by saying the ticket sales for the festival already surpassed last year's number amid the pandemic, and he anticipated the number would continue to grow. In looking at the list

Table 11.1 List of highest-grossing films in Taiwan in 2020

Rank	Title	Country of Origin	Total Gross ^a
1	<i>Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train</i>	Japan	598,345,639
2	<i>Peninsula</i>	South Korea	356,348,484
3	<i>TENET</i>	U.S.	349,560,559
4	<i>Wonder Woman 1984</i>	U.S.	226,105,230
5	<i>Little Big Women</i>	Taiwan	188,029,518
6	<i>Bad Boys For Life</i>	U.S.	136,881,045
7	<i>Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey</i>	U.S.	112,521,772
8	<i>Your Name Engraved Herein</i>	Taiwan	103,200,596
9	<i>Monster Hunter</i>	U.S.	98,555,760
10	<i>Greenland</i>	U.S.	87,611,727

Data compiled from the website of Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (<https://www.tfi.org.tw/cn-US/BoxOfficeBulletin/weekly>)

^aBox-office numbers shown in New Taiwan dollar

of 2020 highest-grossing domestic films in Taiwan, the melodrama *Little Big Women* (2020) takes the lead at TWD 188 million, followed by LGBTQ drama *Your Name Engraved Herein* (2020) at TWD 103 million (Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute n.d.). When placed on the yearly box office along with international releases, *Little Big Women* comes in 5th place (after a Japanese anime, a South Korean zombie film, *Tenet*, and *Wonder Woman 1984*). In contrast, *Your Name Engraved Herein* is placed in 8th place (see Table 11.1). Another local title, *Do You Love Me As I Love You* (2020) did as well and placed itself in 12th place on yearly box-office revenue.

The results of the strong box-office performance can be attributed to the success in distribution vision and strategy; the more than 450 post-screening Q&As sessions the producers set up across cities in Taiwan have proven successful in promoting these films, a currently unlikely strategy in many countries worldwide due to social distancing and travel restrictions. As Angelin Ong observes—speaking for mm2Asia Taiwan, the company that co-produced *Your Name Engraved Herein*—“without Hollywood crowding the screens, local titles are given a rare chance to have a good run to get word of mouth out and play longer in the cinemas” (Wong 2020). The success of local films is worthy of attention because, in recent years, only one or two Taiwanese productions barely made it to the top list. Not to mention Taiwan’s GDP (gross domestic

Table 11.2 List of highest-grossing films in Taiwan in 2019

Rank	Title	Country of Origin	Total Gross ^a
1	<i>Avengers: Endgame</i>	U.S.	910,456,089
2	<i>Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw</i>	U.S.	454,474,344
3	<i>Captain Marvel</i>	U.S.	404,391,001
4	<i>Spider-Man: Far from Home</i>	U.S.	379,826,849
5	<i>Frozen II</i>	U.S.	333,387,855
6	<i>Joker</i>	U.S.	330,823,025
7	<i>The Lion King</i>	U.S.	314,868,532
8	<i>Toy Story 4</i>	U.S.	312,715,035
9	<i>Aladdin</i>	U.S.	290,433,029
10	<i>Alita: Battle Angel</i>	U.S.	276,857,126
11	<i>Detention</i>	Taiwan	259,854,760

Data compiled from the website of Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (<https://www.tfi.org.tw/en-US/BoxOfficeBulletin/weekly>)

^aBox-office numbers shown in New Taiwan dollar

product) growth last year outperformed China for the first time in three decades, thanks to the country's success in containing Covid-19 that contributed to a substantial increase in the export-oriented economy (Cheng et al. 2021). Looking at the results of box-office sales in 2019, the top ten grossing films were dominated by Hollywood blockbusters, from Marvel Cinematic Universe films to Disney live-action remakes and animated films (Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute n.d.). The game-to-film adaptation *Detention* (2019), despite its popularity, did not make it to the top 10 on the list and earned less than one-third of the highest-grossing film of that year, compared to *Avengers: Endgame* (see Table 11.2).

FUTURE LANDSCAPE OF TAIWAN CINEMA

Films need festivals and festivals need films; this notion has never been more convincing after the pandemic hit. As this chapter demonstrates, leading film festivals in Taiwan were fortunate enough to avoid chaos in 2020, while other places had to adapt their plans to the coronavirus pandemic. And yet, moving forward, TFF and the Golden Horse may still be impacted by the collateral implications of the pandemic, as there are many uncertainties and limitations on accessing film markets in many countries. Nonetheless, two observations about changes that happened on the

sideline provide a silver lining to the otherwise looming prospect. First, while major film festivals in Taiwan maintained in-person presentations, the cancelation of smaller, niche festivals early last year inspired a group of festival workers, who were temporarily out of a job, to create a podcast called “How to Read Film Festivals” that offers perspectives on the industry as well as featuring film festival professionals to discuss general themes and trends inside the industry. It is the first “festival hacks” type of podcast in Taiwan that is not affiliated with a specific festival or part of the official marketing channel. The second observation is the wave of a global resurgence in Taiwan cinema, be it the special curated selection of Taiwan New Cinema on MUBI, the first Taiwan Film Festival in Edinburgh, or the second edition of Taiwan Film Festival of Boston—all put across critical renewed interests in the cinema of Taiwan. Looking toward the future, perhaps, there is still room for the rise of second-tier film festivals in Asia, from regional impact to the global stage.

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Precarity, Innovation, and Survival in the Indian Film Festival Sector

Tilottama Karlekar

Film festivals have emerged as vital, thriving cultural and political spaces in twenty-first-century India, with a vast range of new festivals displacing the decades-long dominance of the state-sponsored International Film Festival of India (IFFI). Ranging from corporate-sponsored, industry-centric film festivals like the Jio MAMI festival in Mumbai to small, grassroots festivals in remote rural regions like the Jharkhand Film Festival, this festival expansion parallels global trends (De Valck 2007; Jordanova and Rhyne 2009; Wong 2011). Alternative, community, and activist film festivals have become significant and visible, engaging new audiences not just in the big cities but in smaller towns and remote rural regions (Rangan 2010; Kishore 2018; Basu and Banerjee 2018). In a deeply divided India marked by intensifying authoritarianism, this increased visibility has engendered controversy and, often, censorship. With scarce financial support, alternative festivals also contend with differing forms of state and mob coercion. Despite their vibrancy and visibility, then, activist festivals remain

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financially and politically precarious (Rangan 2010; Battaglia 2017). Over and above this, the Covid-19 pandemic has posed almost insurmountable challenges.

At the time of writing, in spring 2021, India is experiencing a devastating second wave of Covid. The medical system has collapsed, and casualties are mounting. The current crisis comes after a year of political turmoil. The year 2020 began with widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which discriminated against Muslims. It ended with an unprecedented farmer's movement, against farm laws enacted by the Modi government. The pandemic came between these two large-scale movements, casting into sharp focus the country's already striking social and economic disparities.

In a year of crises upon crises, Indian film festivals struggled to find ways to remain viable. But at the center of utter devastation, they also faced the bigger challenge of rethinking and reshaping the role film festivals could play, or should play, at critical historical conjunctures. As De Valck and Damiens (2020) have argued, "Covid-19 cannot be understood apart from other crises," as it had exposed the deeper fault lines within societies. In the context of a contentious national politics that scholars have described in terms of a national emergency (Viridi 2019), were festivals even necessary? If so, what role should they play for a population facing such formidable challenges? Now, more than ever, it seemed impossible to delink festivals—and the study of festivals—from ongoing social movements.

How did Indian film festivals respond to these challenges? What strategies did they use to reach their audiences, show new films, and remain financially viable? More importantly, how did they reframe their identity and purpose at a time when the challenges faced by so many eclipsed any challenges that film festivals, or the film industry, may face? In this exploratory chapter, I address these questions by focusing on the strategies of three distinct activist/community-based festivals. Two of the festivals I focus on had successful online versions, while the third refused to go virtual. I draw on archival material from film festivals, interviews with film festival organizers, and participation in an online version of one of the festivals to offer a preliminary assessment of the "frontline" strategies adopted by these festivals. I also explore what this may mean for festivals in India, and beyond, even in a post-pandemic world.

FILM FESTIVALS AND THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic challenged the central paradigms by which film festivals operate (De Valck and Damiens 2020). As festivals became virtual, they lost both their distinctive temporal intensity and their rootedness in a specific physical place (see Turan 2003; De Valck 2007; Iordanova and Rhyne 2009; Wong 2011; Stringer 2016).

The live, communal experience of the film festival has its roots in the idea of festivals as a kind of “collective effervescence,” or an “intensification of the collective being,” dating back to early folk festivals that acted as channels of community consolidation (Giorgi 2011). Traces of the sacred/religious dimensions of early folk festivals remain in a more secularized era, primarily through what Giorgi describes as a “sociability function.” The vibrant, communal gathering of like-minded people sharing the intensified time/space experience of the film festival accounts for the immersive appeal of the contemporary film festival.

As specialized, live interfaces with film in a time of what Reiss (2013) calls “digital overabundance,” film festivals can come as close as audiences can get to the rarefied experience of an “original” work of art in an age of digital reproduction (Benjamin 1968).¹ In the Indian context, this auratic encounter takes on culturally distinct resonances because of the ways in which film viewing has been conceptualized as taking on a “darshanīc” quality, evoking a devotional encounter between viewer and screen (Vasudevan 1995; Rangan 2010). Film festivals, because they concentrate viewing in time and space, intensify this “spiritual” dimension of film viewing.

The immersive, collective experience that defines the festival can also infuse it with a sense of solidarity, mobilizing festivals as potentially vital public spheres organized around specific causes or issues. The intense materiality of the encounter seems critical. The festival space exemplifies the idealized Habermasian formation of the public sphere where citizens can engage in public debate. Festivals can be places for the convergence of publics and counterpublics of various forms (Warner 2002; Wong 2011). Activist film festivals, Leshu Torchin suggests, operate as “testimonial encounters,” where “the transformative power of testimony is not something eternal or enduring, but is enabled through *situated*

¹The “cinophile” film viewing experience has often been described in quasi-mystical terms: see Bazin’s (1955) description of the film festival experience as a “monastic retreat” (quoted in Porton 2009, 10).

encounters” (2012, *italics mine*). Moreover, in activist film festivals, building context around the films is as important as the films themselves.

For documentary, activist, and community festivals in India, this face-to-face encounter becomes even more critical. In postcolonial India, film festivals were sites for the formation of the ideal spectator-citizen: rational, discerning, and appreciative of “good cinema” as opposed to the uneducated and prerational “mass” audience that preferred the melodramatic “bad” cinema produced by the popular Hindi film industry (Ganti 2012). The Indian Film Festival of India (IFFI) was set up as a part of state initiatives designed to promote “good,” realist cinema. However, IFFI remained limited to the cities, as was the film society movement that emerged alongside it, which also drew middle-class, cinephile audiences. Beginning in the 1970s, activist filmmakers sought to change this by building a grassroots screening circuit, showing their films in working-class neighborhoods, public spaces, riot-torn small towns, and remote rural regions. This building of an *infrastructure* for engaging with films was central to the work of activists who sought to take screenings beyond the cities and engage new cinema audiences instead of simply “preaching to the converted” (Butalia 2012; Sen 2011; Gangar and Heredia 2011). The vitality of alternative film festivals in India in the 2000s was in part the result of decades of such activism and infrastructure-building, as I have written elsewhere (Karlekar 2019).

The pandemic posed challenges for this form of community-building and activism. At first, it seemed to make festivals impossible (Jones 2020). Around the world, as film production screeched to a halt, as theatrical releases were postponed or replaced with streaming releases, film festivals were forced to rethink their central identities, find new ways of functioning, or simply, wait till the pandemic ended (and risk extinction). If mainstream film festivals like Cannes, or even Mumbai, struggled with keeping the “business of film” going, for smaller community-based festivals, the challenge was of a different kind. When the lockdown made the face-to-face encounter with neighborhoods and grassroots communities impossible, they were forced to reconfigure their relationship to community-building and activism.

FILM FESTIVALS AFTER THE LOCKDOWN

On March 24, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi abruptly ordered a nation of 1.3 billion people to shut down completely—“the biggest and most severe action undertaken anywhere to stop the spread of the

coronavirus” (Gettleman and Schultz 2020). The middle classes retreated to their homes in relative comfort. The poor, including thousands of migrant workers, were left completely stranded. Over the next few weeks, images of workers traveling on foot for days to get home, many dying on the way, saturated the media. Images of despair and death were searingly contrasted with Instagram feeds of middle-class home cooking and baking experiments. The lockdown also exacerbated an ongoing economic and political crisis—and the economy plummeted (Bharali et al. 2020; Roy Chowdhury 2020; Llamas-Rodriguez 2020).

Most major film festivals in India take place between November and February, peak tourist season, a time when the weather is pleasant and mild in most parts of the country. They could, therefore, “watch and wait” as global festivals experimented with four different options: cancellation, postponement, a hybrid festival if local conditions permitted, or a fully virtual event. Faced with uncertainty, several major festivals decided to postpone at first. Among these were the Kolkata International Film Festival, the International Children’s Film Festival, the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), and the Chennai International Film Festival. Eventually, these festivals held hybrid or scaled down physical events in the early months of 2021, when restrictions were eased on public gatherings and film screenings. The International Film Festival of India (IFFI), the biggest international film festival in the country, held a hybrid festival in Goa in January 2021. Since these mainstream film festivals all receive varying degrees of national or state government support, organizers could postpone without a great deal of financial hardship (Majumdar 2021).

The stakes were different for private film festivals and smaller festivals with less security and stability. Waiting *until* they could offer a viable physical festival wasn’t the best option. The Jio MAMI Film festival in Mumbai, the biggest private film festival in India, had to cancel in part because the pandemic’s economic fallout affected its sponsors severely. Moreover, Mumbai quickly became the epicenter of the virus in the country. Following the Cannes model, MAMI released its official selection list and focused on building its year-round digital programming, realizing that they could reach a much wider audience (Kiran 2020).

Smaller festivals needed to remain relevant for their audiences and maintain connections with sponsors and filmmakers until the situation returned to normal. Many decided to go online, including the mid-sized Delhi International Film Festival (DIFF), the independent/grassroots Madurai Film Festival, Dialogues in Kolkata, and KASHISH Queer Film

Festival in Mumbai. Smaller screening series continued online, like the Vikalp @ Prithvi screening series, Auroville, and Kriti Film Club. Other community film festivals, notably the Kolkata People's Film Festival (KPPF) refused to do so, preferring to wait for a physical edition. In the next sections, I map the strategies and experiences of two distinct, successful online film festivals. KASHISH became the first Indian film festival to hold a virtual edition with a completely new selection of films; Kriti Film Club expanded its online film series. I also briefly consider the position of the Kolkata People's Film Festival, which argued that going online ran counter to the spirit of their grassroots identity. In the different strategies adopted by these festivals, I argue that definitions of "community" on the one hand and the relationship of the film festival to a specific nation and location in time and place—concepts central to critical theorizations of the film festival—were at stake.

KASHISH: "THE WORLD MUST SEE US IN OUR SPLENDID COLORS"

KASHISH is an identity-based film festival bringing diverse LGBTQ+ communities and narratives to mainstream spaces. It has combined its niche identity with film industry support and corporate funding and created a deliberately "apolitical" stance (Sridhar Rangayan, Personal Communication, 2019). It is India's largest and most visible queer film festival and has received sizeable scholarly and critical attention (e.g., Schoonover and Galt 2016).

KASHISH's founder-director Sridhar Rangayan had traveled the world showing his films at LGTBQ+ film festivals. When the Delhi High Court overturned Article 377 of the Indian Constitution in 2009, decriminalizing homosexuality for the first time, it seemed possible to do a LGBTQ festival openly in a public theater, unlike previous LGBTQ screenings which were held in colleges, embassies, or community spaces (Sridhar Rangayan, Personal Communication, 2019).²

²This was a brief period of legality, for in 2013, the Indian Supreme Court reversed the decision and effectively recriminalized homosexuality. However, during this period LGBTQ+ communities became much more visible, and LGBTQ+ movements flourished and the mobilizations against 377 continued, finally leading to the Supreme Court's definitive overturning of the law in 2018 (Pokharel and Abrams 2018).

Even then, it wasn't easy to find a mainstream theater that was willing to become a venue partner. PVR Cinemas agreed to take the risk, and the first KASHISH film festival in 2010 took place in a 123-seater PVR theater and at the Alliance Française du Bombay (Sridhar Rangayan, *Personal Communication*, 2019).³ The response to the first festival exceeded expectations, and the festival continued to grow, even after the Supreme Court reversed the decision on Article 377 in 2013. KASHISH does not sell tickets, but if it did, around 9600 tickets would have been sold in 2019.

In terms of its organization and funding, KASHISH has embraced the model of the “neoliberal mainstream film festival” (Schoonover and Galt 2016). Its funding comes from a mix of global and national sources, and a larger part of its founding was underwritten by the United Nations Development Program in India.⁴ It has also been embraced by Bollywood, with actors and celebrities like former Miss India Celina Jaitley acting as a spokesperson for the festival.

Traditionally, many community-based film festivals in India have resisted funding from corporate sources and international development agencies, seeing these as forms of possible co-optation into the neoliberal world of film distribution and exhibition (Basu 2021). KASHISH's role and politics therefore are not easy to classify, straddling as it does both the worlds of neoliberal mainstream film festivals and alternative/activist film festivals. Its showcasing of diverse queer films in mainstream spaces, its inclusion of local LGBTQ communities and identities can on the one hand be seen as a form of commodified queerness. Yet this somewhat generic mainstreaming of queerness has also done important advocacy work at a time when homosexuality was still criminalized in India. The amplification of LGBTQ+ voices enabled by this strategic coalition between grassroots groups, corporate entities, international donors, film industry figures, and government officials was an essential roadmap for the festival to thrive.

As KASHISH planned for its 2020 edition, it had to contend with these ongoing divisions, and it was no longer as easy to project a seamless, universalizing narrative as it had done before Art. 377 was struck down.

³PVR Cinemas has been a leader in the multiplex market in India since the 1990s, calling itself “the market leader in terms of screen count in India.” As of writing, it operates “845 screens in 176 cinemas in 71 cities in India and Sri Lanka” (PVR Cinemas 2021).

⁴For example, has received support from Alliance Française, the Arts Network of Asia (linked with the Ford Foundation), Movies that Matter, the British Council, as well as a great deal of advertising. Its donors include corporations such as Barclays and IBM, UNAIDS, gay clubs, queer film festivals in North America, and a diverse array of interests (KASHISH 2019).

The festival's broadly inclusive and largely apolitical stance had become hard to maintain in India's increasingly fractious political context. The social movements that expanded across the country made it necessary for KASHISH to forge a new identity. While the pandemic was a disaster, it also provided an opportunity for a reconfiguration.

KASHISH is typically held in June, so when the lockdown took effect, the festival committee had completed its selection process for the 2020 edition. The organizers felt that they had a commitment to the filmmakers who had submitted to their film festival, and therefore decided on a full-scale online festival. Announcing "KASHISH VIRTUAL 2020," the festival committee wrote:

These are challenging times and we at KASHISH love challenges and take it head-on. Considering the safety and well-being of everyone, this year we have decided to hold the festival online. We are committed to bringing out LGBTQIA+ stories to the world, as a means of healing and empowerment. The world must see us out there, in all our splendid colors, and the show must go on! (Rangayan, cited in Awasthi 2020)

KASHISH became the first Indian film festival to go online with a completely new lineup of films. Significantly, it decided to embrace the global, opening the films to an overseas audience (Rangayan 2021). It was well positioned to do so, as the festival was in fact one of the best-known Indian festivals globally and had established a presence in a global network of queer film festivals. As Patankar, the festival's marketing director wrote: "I believe this is a great opportunity for the festival to use a technological platform and bring Indian queer content to international audiences ... In a post Covid world, it is important that we push borderless communication in a world that is poised to bring back borders" (cited in Pillai 2020).

KASHISH VIRTUAL 2020

Once the decision to move online was made, KASHISH Virtual came together quickly. The festival was scheduled between July 22 and 30 and featured 157 films from 42 countries.

Fortunately, most filmmakers agreed to show their films online, due perhaps to the relationships, networks, and reputation KASHISH had built over 11 years (Rangayan 2021). The second challenge was to find an affordable platform to host the films. Most high-quality film festival

platforms come with a price, but for KASHISH, low cost was imperative. There were logistical challenges too, as the KASHISH team worked from different cities. Festival organizers eventually selected Mexico-based streaming service Xerb.TV, which offered a viable package. Indian viewers paid INR ₹600 for a festival pass, while international viewers paid USD \$30.

The films were streamed on the Xerb streaming platform, structured into 52 programs, of which 32 were open to international audiences. Panel discussions and filmmaker Q&As, as well as the opening and closing ceremonies, were on KASHISH's regular, free-to-watch social media. The films featured a diverse range of queer stories from 42 countries, with the highest number of films coming from the United States, followed by India. The opening film, *Shiny Shrimps (Les Crevettes pailletées* dir. Maxime Govaro and Cedric Le Gallo, France, 2019) a sports comedy about a homophobic swimmer trying to coach a gay water polo team in Croatia, became one of the best-liked films at the festival. The festival closed with the premiere of an unusual Indian film—*Hum Bhi Akela, Tum Bhi Akela* (I am alone, and so are you, 2020, dir. Harish Vyas): a story about a gay man and lesbian woman who bond on a road trip and form an unusual friendship.

The panel discussions were lively. *The Sporting Divide* focused on issues of homophobia and trans inclusion in sports, while *Moving Forward Together* featured prominent Indian LGBTQIA+ activists discussing the past and future direction of the LGBTQ+ movement. The third panel was particularly relevant for this project, as it featured film festival organizers from different parts of the world discussing *The Future of Film Festivals in the Time of Corona* (Fig. 12.1). The discussion featured Smriti Kiran of the Jio MAMI Film Festival in Mumbai, Cary Rajinder Sawhney of the London Indian Film Festival, Aseem Chhabra of the New York Indian Film Festival, Paul Struthers of Frameline San Francisco, and Andrea Wilson, of Inside Out Toronto. In a wide-ranging conversation about the challenges they had faced during the pandemic, all participants came back again and again to the realization that they could draw new audiences beyond typical geographical barriers. Though none of them wanted to replace the physical festival event, they wondered why they had not seriously considered exploring the online audience before the pandemic.

PANEL DISCUSSION:
The Future of Film Festivals in the time of Corona

Panelists

- Andrea Wilson, Inside Out LGBT film festival, Toronto
- Aseem Chhabra, Festival Director, NYIFF
- Cary Rajinder Sawhney, Festival Director, London Indian Film Festival
- Paul Struthers, Frameline LGBT Festival, San Francisco
- Smriti Kiran, Artistic Director, MAMI

Moderator

- Sridhar Rangayan, Festival Director, KASHISH MIQFF

Supported By

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Friday, July 24th 2020 | 5:00 pm (IST)

KASHISH 2020
VIRTUAL

Fig. 12.1 “The future of film festivals’ panel at KASHISH 2020.” (Courtesy KASHISH Arts Foundation)

EMBRACING THE GLOBAL

As a festival that already had strong global connections and resonances, KASHISH was well positioned to reach an audience beyond India’s national borders. The festival embraced a positive, even utopian vision of the virtual global village. The festival trailer showcased this global content and focus of the festival, featuring a fast-paced montage of faces and moments from the films, juxtaposing different skin colors, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, ages, captured in moments of joy, celebration,

Fig. 12.2 “Still from KASHISH Virtual 2020 festival trailer.” (Courtesy KASHISH Arts Foundation)



despair, loneliness, exuberance. From an image of two elderly white men kissing to the performances of drag queens in an Indian village and the passionate embrace of two Asian women, the trailer showcased a form of global diversity in which difference existed seamlessly within a universalizing humanitarianism. Words such as “multigenerational” and “multi sexualities” flashed across the screen, edited to fusion music with an Indian beat. This music grounded the festival in India somewhat, but other than that, this could be a queer film festival anywhere (Fig. 12.2).

This strategy, by all accounts, was very successful. The virtual festival attracted a similar audience in terms of size—1750 festival registrations, around 9280 tickets issued. According to audience polls, 53.7% were returning audiences, while 40.3% were attending the festival for the first time. This meant that a significant number of new viewers discovered the festival, many of them from outside Mumbai and many from outside India.⁵ But significantly, KASHISH lost much of the local LGBTQ+ community, many of whom were working class and lived on the city’s margins. These were often deeply closeted people or those who lived in spaces where it would be simply dangerous to come out. Nor could these same people attend KASHISH Virtual from home. Even if they had Internet access, watching a queer film festival at home would mean outing themselves. Besides, many were trying to survive through sex work and menial labor. Film festivals were a luxury they could ill afford. Acknowledging this inequality, KASHISH reserved much of the proceeds from the festival

⁵The numbers were impressive. Around 18,000 people watched Opening Night on Facebook, and there were 30.9 K views on social media. Among the downsides, viewership among non-LGBTQ+ audiences dropped, with 79.2% of the audience being LGBTQ+ community members. As the KASHISH team accepts, the numbers are unreliable and incomplete, but they do give an overall sense of the virtual audience (Rangayan 2021).

for helping LGBTQ+ community groups, especially those who were engaged in Covid-19 relief work (Rangayan 2021).

The festival showcased a global queerness that could be anywhere. Or nowhere. If the same selection of films were being shown in the physical event, it would have been impossible for audiences to attend without a tangible sense of the location of the festival, Mumbai. The experience would have been inseparable from the city's interminable traffic jams, the July heat and humidity, the monsoons, the stark contrasts between glamor and squalor, and the multilingual, multisensory embodiment in the city. The disembodied experience of KASHISH Virtual seemed to move KASHISH toward a somewhat different identity, a global LGBTQ+ film festival with South Asian roots. Because the festival was already networked well with global queer organizations, it made the online switch seamlessly. But without the embodiment and affect central to queer film festivals (Brunow 2020), did it really matter that KASHISH was "South Asia's largest film festival" or "India's most visible?" Undoubtedly KASHISH reached a new audience, perhaps a different kind of community, including those who could not physically travel to Mumbai because of costs or health issues and so on. But it lost much of its distinctive grassroots identity, even as in this new, geographically unmoored festival community, queer film festivals (and identity-based festivals such as South Asian film festivals in the United States) talked about collaboration instead of competition (Rangayan 2021; Chhabra 2020).

KRITI FILM CLUB AND THE LOCKDOWN FILM FESTIVALS

For twenty years before the pandemic, Kriti had been a small film club, regularly screening documentary and alternative films at the India Habitat Center in New Delhi. Kriti had emerged as part of a set of initiatives by filmmakers and activists in the late 1990s/early 2000s to create a vital, alternative screening culture for documentary films (Sengupta 2008; Sen 2011). Removed from Mumbai's film industry glitz, Kriti was unmistakably rooted in the documentary film, developmental communication, and non-profit media worlds of the capital city, New Delhi. Aanchal Kapur, Kriti's founder and director, had been trained in development communication and was driven by a strong commitment to the role of film in education, community-building, and social change. The idea behind the film club, therefore, was to "place thought-provoking cinema in a discussion group that will help to deepen understanding on social and developmental

issues among viewers” (Kriti Team 2021). Kriti began as “a labor of love”—a volunteer-run effort put together by people who held other jobs as their main source of income.

Kriti realized the potential of the online screening space for community-building early on in the pandemic. On March 21, 2020, as people retreated to their homes, Kapur began to share films from Kriti’s extensive archive of unusual and hard to access documentary films and shorts. Kapur had been revisiting the work of environmental filmmaker Nitin Das, whose nature films seemed to exude a sense of much-needed peace in difficult times. She decided to share Das’s film, *Lake of Peace*, “to give you calm.” Over the next few days, Kapur recommended documentary films about nature, healing, connection, and harmony. These films struck a chord with many people who were stuck at home. These otherwise obscure films reached an audience that would not have sought them out in pre-pandemic times. The “lockdown recommendations,” as they came to be known, gained widespread popularity in the early weeks of pandemic restrictions (Kapur 2021).

As the “lockdown recommendations” took off, old and new volunteers reached out to Kapur, offering help. What had started as one woman’s “whim” became a team effort that took on different forms through the year. Kriti showed 113 films in 102 days as part of the “lockdown series,” including “mini festivals” on Earth Day, World Environment Day, and so on. Kriti also inspired others to follow, including Sanjay Joshi of the Cinema of Resistance festivals, the Madurai Film Festival, and Vikalp@Prithvi. The Auroville Film Festival also began to post film recommendations and resources (Kapur 2021).

The success of the lockdown series led to more festivals, and Kriti went on to organize two larger festivals through the year: the South Asian Feminist Film Festival in November 2020 and The Rising Gardens Film Festival between January and April 2021 (Kriti 2020).

SOUTH ASIAN FEMINIST FILM FESTIVAL

As the lockdown film series wound down, well-known feminist activist, the late Kamla Bhasin of the Delhi-based feminist network Sangat asked Kriti to curate a South Asian Women’s Festival. Realizing that more professional execution was needed, Kapur recruited Rahul Sharda, who had recently helped run the virtual Delhi International Film Festival. They hosted all films on Vimeo and embedded them on “Doculive” (Kriti 2020; Kapur 2021).

The South Asian Feminist Film Festival (SAFFF) ran for three days between November 27 and 29, and screened 29 short and feature-length films, both fiction and documentary, focusing on issues related to women from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Israel, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. Taking an intersectional approach, the festival explored the meaning of feminism in South Asia by engaging with multiple forms of difference and inequality (Gupta 2020).

Kapur initially wanted to create a “live” feeling. The films would be shown as in a movie theater—with different show times, and she envisioned live Q&As with filmmakers alongside or right after the “show.” However, her colleagues argued that people needed more flexibility to watch the films and it would be an impossible amount of work for the small team. So, they ended up compromising: films were shown at specific times on the “now showing” page. If they missed the screening, people could go to the film festival schedule and watch the films for a specific period. Filmmaker Q&As took place separately on Zoom. The festival also featured panel discussions on “Minority and Queer Narratives” and “What it means to be South Asian Today.”

SAFFF featured films that achieved a great deal of popularity, including *Bebaak* (2019), *If You Dare Desire* (2017), *Have You Seen the Arana* (2012), and *Ask the Sexpert* (2017). While these films were not “new,” as many had traveled to festivals and won awards, they seemed to achieve a wider, and perhaps more diverse viewership at SAFFF during the pandemic.

THE RISING GARDENS FILM FESTIVAL

SAFFF’s success established the existence of new, online audiences for documentary films. It led to more partnerships between Sangat and Kriti and another festival that would take place over the course of four months, the Rising Gardens Film Festival (Meenal Manolika, Personal Communication, 2021; Kapur 2021).

The Rising Gardens Film Festival was curated by well-known documentary filmmaker Reena Mohan (who had also curated the South Asian Feminist Film Festival). Rising Gardens emerged as part of One Billion Rising, a global campaign against gender violence, whose 2021 theme connected violence against women with violence against the environment. The festival spanned four weekends, four months, four themes. These themes were Cosmic Connections/Women and Nature (January 15–17, 2021), Fields of Sorrow, Fields of Hope/Women and Agriculture (February 12–14, 2021),



Fig. 12.3 “4 weekends, 4 months. The Rising Gardens Film Festival.” (Courtesy Kriti)

Community and Sustenance/Women and Food (March 12–14), and Moving Mountains/Women and Solidarities (April 16–18, 2021) (Fig. 12.3).

The films at Rising Gardens were not geoblocked, unlike many films at the bigger, more market-driven Indian film festivals. Watching the films was free once you registered, though you could make voluntary donations to support Kriti’s work. Films were available for watching on your time for the duration of the festival (three days, usually between Friday and Sunday). Because most films were shorts rather than feature-length, it was possible to view all the films if you had the time. There were also panel discussions around the festival themes and with filmmakers, usually held via Zoom around a week after the films had screened.

The Rising Gardens Film Festivals connected with a broader rethinking of human relationships to nature that the pandemic had brought to the forefront (see Roy 2020). As curator Reena Mohan wrote while introducing the festival themes, “The ongoing pandemic has disrupted our lives, caused chaos, and shown us that our existing structures are unjust and unsustainable. Has the isolation we experienced affected our thinking and practices? Did the pandemic compel us to slow down and consider how to live with more compassion in relation to the environment?” (2021). There was a widespread feeling that there was no going back to a pre-pandemic normal, and more people were paying attention to the consequences our “normal” lives had had on the environment. The festival sought to expand and deepen the conversation around the environment and sustainability that intensified during the pandemic.

The festival also occurred against the backdrop of the farmer’s protests that gained force in the early months of 2021. Indian farmers had launched

an unprecedented movement against laws passed by the Indian Parliament in 2020, ostensibly directed at modernizing the agriculture system in India, but in fact reducing government protections on pricing and opening the market to large corporations. Images of thousands of farmers camping outside the capital, driving into Delhi, and storming the iconic Red Fort attained international visibility. While it wasn't planned that way, Rising Gardens' themes resonated with the ongoing farmer's movement.

RETHINKING COMMUNITY AT RISING GARDENS

My experience participating in the Rising Gardens Film Festival felt “in between”: it was not exactly like streaming films online by yourself, nor was it like attending a “live” festival event. The viewing experience was solitary, but at the same time I felt connected to the films' themes through the recordings of panel discussions and the continuing coverage of the farmer's protests on news and across social media. These experiences converged to create a somewhat dispersed, at times disorienting, yet an undeniable sense of community, connection, and engagement with the festival's narratives and themes (Fig. 12.4).

In the early months of the pandemic, a sense of solidarity brought viewers together, creating intense viewing experiences. Kriti Film Club had an “early mover” advantage, having been the first to initiate an online screening series during the lockdown. As Kriti's founder-director Aanchal Kapur told me, “In many ways, the lockdown has been good for us” (2021). The pandemic enabled this small, Delhi-based film club to engage a wider audience and grow in stature to become a regular organizer of documentary film festivals. If KASHISH expanded its global reach during the pandemic, Rising Gardens reached new audiences beyond Delhi, and even beyond India's borders. It also reached a more diverse audience than the typical documentary film festival. Partly because of the lockdown, it drew people who might previously not have considered watching documentary films. In this way, Kriti's experiences diverged from KASHISH's, where the proportion of non-LGBTQ+ community viewers dropped with the online version. Kriti was able to reach a more variegated audience across geographical boundaries (Kapur 2021).

If this new online audience was dispersed across space, the festival(s) also took on a rhythm and pace that differed considerably from the concentrated time of the typical festival event (Harbord 2016). While each edition was concentrated over a weekend, the festival unfolded over four months. Each festival viewing weekend marked an intensification in

Conversations on COSMIC CONNECTIONS

Friday, January 22, 2021 | Session 1

4 PM to 5:30 PM (IST)

Reflections on cosmic connections of women and nature, through films drawn from personal experiences of the filmmakers.

 <p>Ramana Dumpala Glow Worm in a Jungle</p>	 <p>Prasna Dongol Dolpa Diary</p>	 <p>Kshipra Shekhar Dhavle Amepa</p>	
 <p>Irushi Tennekoon Asha de Vos on Studying Blue Whales & Sybil Weetasinghe and the Umbrella Thief</p>	 <p>Balaram J Oru Thudakathinte Kadha</p>	 <p>Anoko Mega Amepa</p>	 <p>Moderator Aanchal Kapur</p>

Registration Link to Join:
https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_IGR5F09IRTipQXVmyTOiNg

Also available on:
<https://www.facebook.com/SangatNetwork>



Fig. 12.4 “Panel discussion: Conversations on Cosmic Connections.” (Courtesy Kriti)

engagement with the films, but then conversations about the film extended over the following week and merged with ongoing social media updates to create a larger, ongoing conversation. Presumably, there was no specific, shared temporality experienced by the geographically dispersed audience that watched the films and followed conversations in their own time, across different time zones. Through the pandemic, most people could move between screens and time took on a sense of continual unfolding, with distinct nodes of more intense engagement. Reconfiguring the notion of community and exploring new and serendipitous audiences was a distinct gain. In March, Kriti Film Club screened some films from “Rising Gardens” at the India Habitat Center, its first physical screenings in over a year. But even beyond that, the Kriti Team had every intention of continuing with online screenings, and building “Doculive” into a portal for documentary film screenings (Kriti 2021).

REFUSALS: THE KOLKATA PEOPLE’S FILM FESTIVAL

While many activist film festivals moved online with varying degrees of success, others steadfastly refused to consider this option. Among these was the Kolkata People’s Film Festival, a grassroots initiative in the eastern metropolis of Kolkata. Started as a “community-based” people’s film festival in 2014, it grew significantly in size and reach since. Rather than switch to a virtual mode in January 2021, KPPFF decided to postpone until August, hoping conditions would permit physical screenings. Kasturi Basu, of the People’s Film Collective which organizes the festival, questioned the purported reach of online film festivals. She asked:

Films can be moved online fairly easily—but do audiences move online that easily? It’s not a problem to show films online, in fact it will be easier for us in many ways, including in terms of the funding ... But our festivals are not just about showing some good films, political films ... It’s about the space ... a space where people can physically meet, argue. It’s where people can have questions and have arguments with the filmmakers as well ... which are in many ways dialectically connected with the films, their world views. It’s also a space where other art forms converge, it’s also a space for political art, for political publications. You don’t come just for the films ... It’s not a set of 50 films that we choose and then the audience watches.

Basu expressed skepticism about the audiences for online film festivals in a country where only around 40% of the population have Internet

access, and of these few have adequate Internet capacity to watch full-length films in HD (World Bank 2022). Most people in India watch on their smartphones, which is often the only device they have. The KPEF team felt that was “not fair to films which are made with so much passion and care, they deserve to be shown on the big screen. And I think that the big screen and collective watching are the soul of our festival” (Basu 2021).

As a grassroots film festival, KPEF screens films at locations ranging from village football grounds, common courtyards in villages, worker’s colonies, rooftop spaces, street corners, and local auditoriums. They decide on which films to show based on the needs and interests of the community they are screening for. The specificity of a location and the distinctive features of a unique audience grounded in a particular place are central to the festival. The idea of curating festivals for an uncertain and faceless online audience seemed to run counter to the spirit and purpose of a community-rooted festival.

Being a crowdfunded festival that had long resisted any form of sponsorship—from corporates, NGOs, foundations, any large entity—there was no pressure to keep sponsors happy or remain relevant for funders. Nor was it a source of livelihood for members of the People’s Film Collective. There was no real compulsion, therefore, to pivot to an online festival (Basu 2021).

IS THE FUTURE HYBRID?

In 2021, early optimism in India about falling Covid numbers enabled a brief return to physical screenings. Movie theaters could operate at full capacity, and the return of physical festivals seemed possible. By April, however, the country entered a deadly second wave. The medical infrastructure collapsed. And this time, the pandemic hit much nearer to home for India’s affluent classes, most of whom escaped the worst of the first wave. At the time of writing, the pandemic’s endpoint seems further than ever (Pakrasi 2021). Amidst much grief and despair, it no longer seemed possible to hold any festival.

Over the last year, film festivals have developed a toolkit of strategies to adapt to different crises. Unhindered by demands of sponsors, markets, and industry considerations of mainstream cinema, community- or identity-based festivals easily moved online. When they did, they realized their audiences doubled or tripled when physical considerations were removed. “Why didn’t we think about this before?” Rangayan exclaimed, talking about KASHISH’s experience, and this was echoed by many other

film festival organizers (Chhabra 2020; Kiran 2020). For community film festivals in India, especially, going online may be beneficial on some levels, yet it undeniably entails the loss of poor, grassroots viewers who neither have adequate technology nor the time to attend online film festivals. Since this defeats the purpose of many community-based film festivals, which seek engagement with non-metropolitan, poor, rural, and working-class citizens, organizers need to devise ingenious ways of enabling community viewing even online.

The path forward seems to be to combine a virtual edition with physical events, as KASHISH plans to do when the situation so permits. Virtual mini festivals and panels may spread through the year, like the recent “Kashish Trans Fest” to celebrate Transgender Day of Visibility. Kapur of Kriti envisions another screening landscape—combining online festivals and physical screenings in diverse places. The two could work together. For example, an online festival would be shared via a link to community groups, giving rise to multiple screenings of the same festivals in communities around the country, and perhaps even internationally, creating conversations around issues along multiple nodes and levels (2021). While many strategies for survival in the pandemic and beyond are still being forged and reimagined at the time of writing, the future for community-based film festivals in India, and perhaps elsewhere, does indeed seem to be hybrid (Fig. 12.5).



Fig. 12.5 “Poster for the virtual KASHISH 2021 festival.” (Courtesy KASHISH Arts Foundation)

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Curating as Care: La Semaine de la Critique and the Marrakech International Film Festival in the Age of Covid-19

Farah Clémentine Dramani-Issifou

The health crisis caused by Covid-19 has changed the organization of film festivals around the world. Some festivals have chosen to maintain their event by creating online platforms for the distribution of films and professional meetings; others have simply canceled their physical editions. Although they were canceled, Festival de Cannes' International Critics' Week and the Marrakech International Film Festival made specific arrangements to support the local, regional, and international film industry. Faced with this extraordinary situation, I argue that the pandemic fundamentally impacted festivals' programming strategies. As such, Covid-19 redefined the work of selection committees: it created what I call "flexi-programmers."

As a PhD candidate and a member of the selection committees of both Cannes Critics' Week (for feature films) and of the Atlas Workshops (the industrial platform of the Marrakech International Film Festival), I would like in this chapter to contribute to a new ecology of knowledge on curating film festivals. Building upon the theoretical contributions of film

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festivals studies and my own experiences and knowledge as a film programmer and a curator, this contribution combines theory and personal subjective introspection in order to account for the intimate and subtle nature of the lived experience to reveal collective lessons.

First, I will present the strategies adopted by the Critics' Week and by the Marrakech International Film Festival. Then, I will underline how the notion of care may impact film programming in the age of Covid-19 and why film *curating* could be the future of film programming.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FILM PROGRAMMING AND FILM CURATING

Programming expert Peter Bosma defines the profession of film festival curator or film festival programmer (he does not differentiate between the two) as someone who aims to “succeed in presenting an attractive program, which is outstanding on the global film festival circuit” (Bosma 2015, 69). In *Curating Africa at the age of film festivals*, scholar and festival director Lindiwe Dovey underlines how festivals can materialize a certain kind of African cinema through curating (2015). In so doing, Dovey argues that we need to deconstruct the western-centeredness of film festival studies: little academic work has been devoted to festivals organized on the African continent—even though they have grown exponentially these past fifty years and have developed new cinematographic approaches, often specializing on particular forms of filmmaking (including documentaries, short films, animation, environment, citizenship) (Lelièvre 2011, 126–128). Furthermore, most of the published scholarship on African film festivals has been written by European and American scholars. For example, most of the research on film festivals in French-speaking Africa concerns questions related to the gaze (Barlet 2003), production (Forest 2018), and the place of African film festivals in the world (Ilboudo 1998; Lelièvre 2011, 126–128; Dupré 2012; Dovey 2015; Forest 2020).

I build upon these scholars in my article “The curatorial enunciation of film festivals in Africa: the case of BeninDocs—International Festival of the First Documentary Film” and highlight how “a system of mediation, staging and time, mixing the curator, the institutions, the director and the audiences, inscribes the aesthetic perception of the works presented in a particular socio-political context which creates meaning” (Dramani-Issifou 2020, 63). It seemed important to me to distinguish between film programming and film curating. Film programming for film festivals can be

defined as the activity of selecting cinematographic works according to criteria that essentially correspond to the identity of the festival, with a view to their presentation to a large audience. Curating films refers not only to the notion of care but also to the appearance in the field of visual arts of the figure of the curator. This curator corresponds to a new way of doing criticism, taking into account the interactions between the discursive, conversational, and geopolitical elements of a program. Film curating is located between caring for the film and being concerned about the impact of the films. It is about ethics, which Ricoeur defines as “the wish for a fulfilled life—with and for others—within just institutions” (1990). To be a film curator is to be the author of creative and political thoughts in which the programming of the films is both an artistic proposition and the reflection of a responsibility toward the films and the communities (film professionals, cinephiles) to which these films are addressed. To me, a curation of care is not only prompted by the pandemic but also stems from the desire to make an intervention in capitalism and its impact on our societal structures.

Alongside a theoretical grounding in film festival studies, my methodology is based on research creation. Indeed, this reflection builds upon my experiences as both a film curator (for Cannes Critics’ Week and the Marrakech International Film Festival) and a PhD candidate. My methodology hinges on narrative of my experiences and takes into account my relationship with others in cultural and social contexts. This perspective uniquely enables me to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). My personal experience as a curator allows me to complement existing theories of festival programming by creating a space that reflects my exchanges with various other voices and experiences and that shows “the multiplicity, the overlap and the complexity through polyvocal, dialogical, juxtaposed, composite stories or visuals” (Berbary 2015, 27). Considering that experience is the springboard for a broader understanding of the social world, I use my practice of film festival programming for Cannes and Marrakesh and of film curating for the BeninDocs Festival in Benin, the Festival des Nouveaux Cinémas Documentaires in France, and the Centre Yennenga in Dakar in order to create a form of “situated” knowledge (Haraway 2009) that constitutes a complementary approach to more academically minded research work. I thus embrace by choice the movement of “decolonization of thought” which invites researchers to build a scientific

discourse that is the emanation of material life, of its socio-political context, which is an apprehension of oneself by oneself (Mudimbe 1988). Indeed, in a context where Western countries are characterized by a colonial aphasia, I register my reflections in a questioning of the hegemony and the universal authority of speeches and knowledge. What is at stake here is the coloniality of power and “geopolitics of knowledge” that highlights the historical conditions for the emergence of a “monotopic episteme” of modernity (Mignolo 2009).

My experience of being a minority, as a Black woman curator in France, is a condition for bringing out other forms of knowledge, voices, world-views, and perspectives. As such, this enables us to focus on a plurality of experiences of modernity—its promises as well as its disillusionments and on the subjectivities that Western modernity has produced, ignored, or even erased. Refusing to succumb to the temptation of universalism, I aim to question the practices and forms of thought of those who constitute what Enrique Dussel calls the “exteriority” (1998) of the hegemonic system in order to find alternatives. My wish in this chapter is to help change the terms of the conversation, to move away from an analysis in terms of international relations, and favor a cosmological geopolitics (Simbao 2020, 148)—to allow for multiple possibilities, to produce and to find knowledge, including a variety of spatial and bodily references, to blossom and to contribute to a project of liberation of the Humanities.

SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: TAKING CARE OF MOVIES

Created in 1962 at the initiative of the French Union of Film Critics, the *Semaine de la critique* [Critics’ Week] is a parallel section of the Cannes Film Festival that presents the first and second feature films of the new generation of filmmakers at an international level. The festival is programmed by two selection committees (short and feature films) made up of members of the French Union of Film Critics. The members of the selection committees are recruited after a call for candidates. Usually, the selection process lasts almost three months and spans from late January to late April. For the Feature Films Committee, it revolves around both collective theatrical screenings and individual screenings. Programming meetings are organized weekly. This greatly differs from the Short Film Committee: the entire selection process is done online.

In “normal” years, the feature film selection committee watches around 1400 films during the selection period—some in the movie theater (three or four times a week), some at home. Films are typically viewed in DCP, DVD, or Blue-ray formats. When watching a film at home, each programmer has to decide whether the film should be eliminated, seen by another programmer, or sent to the collective for an eventual selection. The weekly programming meetings are used to discuss the films that were seen collectively, semi-collectively, or individually. The discussions we have during the meetings are used to develop the program over time. Several shortlists are developed based on the committee’s interest in films. The program must take into account not only subjective criteria such as aesthetics, staging, script, or even acting but also the trends of world cinema. The committee also pays attention to cinematographic diversity (in terms of both genre and geographic origin). At the end of April, the short and feature film selection committees usually unveil a program of ten shorts and eleven feature films (seven in competition and three in special screenings). An international jury awards the following prizes during the festival: the Nespresso Grand Prize (for feature films), the Leitz Ciné Discovery Prize (for short films), the Louis Roederer Foundation Prize for Revelation (awarded to an actress from one of the seven feature films in competition), the Gan Foundation Prize for Broadcasting, the SACD Prize, and the Canal + Short Film Prize. First feature films in the Critics’ week selection also compete for the Camera d’Or (an award given by the jury of the official Cannes film festival).

On March 12, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron announced new containment measures, including a lockdown. The work of selecting feature films had already begun before these new social distancing measures: films were seen in the usual conditions (either during collective theatrical screenings or individual screenings at home and discussed collectively in weekly meetings). Unfortunately, these new social distancing measures changed viewing conditions. Starting in mid-March 2020, it was impossible to meet for collective viewing and discussion of films. This context profoundly changed the working conditions of programmers: all films were viewed individually, thus accelerating the digitization and individualization of the film programming work. Programmers could see and rate films on the festival’s viewing platform. Along with the individual screenings, the weekly meetings continued to be held—not in their usual face-to-face format, but online. This digitization of programming had the consequence of isolating programmers: almost all informal exchanges

disappeared. The digitization of festival programming meant that only formal discussions around films (during programming meetings, following the agenda established by the film office) were possible. This impacted not our appreciation of the films, but rather our experience of working as film programmers.

On April 12, 2020, the Critics' Week and two other parallel sections of the Festival (the Directors' Fortnight and ACID) announced in a joint press release the cancelation of their physical edition. Importantly, Cannes had not yet canceled the festival: as of April 12, 2020, a festival was still planned in 2020. After weeks without being able to draw specific perspectives and strategies, the parallel sections thus chose to take a direction opposed to that taken by Thierry Frémaux, the artistic director of the Cannes Film Festival, for whom it was still impossible at this time to give up the physical organization of the Festival. For the Critics' Week, it had become extremely complicated to maintain its operation in a totally uncertain context: it seemed impossible to continue working with salaried teams, selection committees, producers, broadcasters, and filmmakers in the context of the pandemic.

The choice to cancel the physical edition of the Critics' Week made it possible to think about alternatives and to define a framework that would enable us to continue the selection work we had started almost two months before. In this context, the call for submissions of films and the viewing period for programmers were extended until the end of May 2020. Most importantly, a Critics' Week label was created. This *Semaine de la Critique* label aimed to support the films that would be released in theaters. Instead of presenting eleven feature films, the programming committee selected a larger list of films.

Although it was favorably received by distributors and producers, this support system was difficult to set up due to both the pandemic context of instability and competition between festivals. Indeed, some distributors and producers preferred to withdraw their films from consideration in order to submit them to the Venice Film Festival or the Toronto International Film Festival. Others decided to wait for the 2021 edition of the Cannes Film Festival to try their luck once again to be selected for the prestigious festival. Importantly, *L'Officiel* (Cannes Film Festival, excluding parallel sections) waited several months before clearly communicating on its strategy and finally opting for the creation of a label. This unclear situation on the part of the *Officiel* in terms of strategy (first deciding to postpone the festival, then announcing that its selection would be

presented in Venice, before finally deciding to create a label) made our programming work more difficult than usual: most producers and broadcasters wanted to wait for the *Officiel* to announce their solution. In that context, we had to adapt our programming choices not only to the evolution of the health crisis but also to the strategies of the various stakeholders (festivals, distributors, and producers), thus complicating the programming procedures. Some accepting the label, others refusing it for the reasons mentioned above. The *Semaine de la Critique* unveiled its selection of labeled films in a press released on June 4, 2020:

To address this unprecedented situation, *La Semaine de la Critique* kicks off a tailored-made support programme for the films that Charles Tesson—artistic director—and his selection committees chose to actively support over the next few months. Accordingly, five features and ten short films will receive the “2020 *Semaine de la Critique* label”. The 59th edition of *La Semaine de la Critique 2020* honouring its commitment, the parallel section of the Cannes festival nevertheless continues to shine a light on emerging talents in order to support filmmakers and the film industry.

Four of the five feature films that benefited from the label “Critics’ Week 2020” were French films (*La Nuée* by Just Philippot, *Gold for dogs* by Anna Cazenave Cambet, *Sous le ciel d’Alice* by Chloé Mazlo, and *La Terre des hommes* by Naël Marandin). I hypothesize that French producers were more interested than their foreign counterparts in the label created by the *Semaine de la Critique* because of the direct impact that such a label can have on the release of films in France. For first or second French films, the main market remains the domestic market. *La Semaine de la Critique* decided to guide the selected features throughout their premieres and their theatrical releases in France. The French films were presented during a “*La Semaine de la Critique carte blanche*” event at the Angoulême Francophone Film Festival, which took place between August 28 and September 2, 2020. They then premiered at the Cinémathèque française in Paris (October 16–18, 2020). Some awards were still given:

Under these circumstances, the Gan Foundation for Cinema, *La Semaine de la Critique*’s partner, confirms its desire to support young filmmakers and vehemently continues to support first and second feature films by bestowing the Gan Foundation Award for Distribution to *After Love* by Aleem Khan (United Kingdom).

THE 2020 MARRAKECH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL:
 CANCELING THE FESTIVAL, DEVELOPING
 THE ATLAS WORKSHOPS

The Marrakech International Film Festival was created in 2001 by His Majesty King Mohammed VI to promote and develop cinema in Morocco. Its initial ambition was “to create a bridge between the cinemas of the North and the South, to reveal films and talents of different genres, and to promote the promotion of Moroccan film”. Each year, the Marrakech International Film Festival offers a wide selection of films of different genres and nationalities. Its program also includes masterclasses, tributes, a panorama section devoted to Moroccan cinema, “the 11th continent program” (a section created in 2018 which explores new territories in cinematographic creation), films in audio description, outdoor screenings on the Jemma El Fna square, and sessions for young audiences.

The Atlas Workshops were created in 2017 by Rémi Bonhomme (who was at the time the general coordinator of Cannes’ Critics Week) as part of the “industry” program of the Marrakech International Film Festival and organized with the support of Netflix. Intended to support projects in development and films in (post)production made by directors from Morocco, the African continent, and the “Arab world,” the Atlas Workshops target directors and producers who are developing and producing their first, second, or third feature film. They offer selected projects personalized support through screenplay, production, sales, editing and musical composition (according to needs and production stages), co-production meetings, pitch sessions projects, roundtables, and networking sessions with professionals from the sub-region. Rémi Bonhomme, who became the artistic director of the Festival in January 2020, chose the composition of the new programming team of the festival. The work of selecting films was supposed to take place between May and September 2020. Two members of the festival’s programming team (me and Hanna Mroué) also selected projects supported by the Workshops.

The state of health emergency entered into force on March 20, 2020, in Morocco. The population was ordered to stay at home, effectively stopping the work of the festival’s programming team just when it was beginning to get to work. Indeed, a first delegation made up of Rémi Bonhomme, Ali Hajji, Thibaut Bracq, and I went to the 21st edition of the Tangier National Film Festival (from February 28 to March 7, 2020) to meet Moroccan film professionals. Faced with the continual progression of the virus, the

activities of the programming committee never really started: it took six months for the Foundation to decide on a strategy to face these unprecedented circumstances, leaving the programming committee in an extremely vague situation. After a long period of uncertainty, the Festival Foundation announced on September 4, 2020 the cancelation of the 19th edition of the festival. However, five days later, the Foundation confirmed in a second press release that it would maintain the third edition of the Atlas Workshops in online form from November 30 to December 3, 2020.

The Atlas Workshops function as a revealer of talents. Through them, the Festival supports a new generation of Moroccan, Arab, and African filmmakers and creates a space for exchange between international professionals and regional talents. During the first two editions of the Workshops, the selection of films was made in-house, mainly by Rémi Bonhomme. For the third edition, the new artistic director wished to compose a committee tasked with reading and selecting projects for the Atlas Workshops. Alongside the Atlas Workshops team (artistic director of the festival and director of the Atlas Workshops Rémi Bonhomme, general coordinator of the Marrakech International Film Festival Ali Hajji, head of the Atlas Workshops Thibaut Bracq, coordinator Camille Hébert Benazet, and manager of the Atlas Close-Ups and of the co-production market Lucas Rosant), we read over 150 projects received after a call for candidates. Twenty-three projects were selected during several Zoom meetings. During these meetings, the reading and selection committee reviewed and discussed collectively all of the received projects. From November 16–27, the people behind the twenty-three selected projects benefited from individual (on script and production) and collective (on international distribution, production, and pitch preparation) consultations with international experts. Furthermore, the Atlas Workshops organized an online edition from November 30 to December 3, 2020. A total of 280 professionals were accredited. One hundred and twenty people participated in the online co-production market, accounting for around 350 appointments. About a hundred professionals took part in the presentation sessions of projects in development and in the screenings of films in production and post-production. More than 200 spectators attended the three webinars we organized. Prizes were awarded to the projects *Among Us* by Sofia Alaoui (Morocco), *Rising Up at Night* (Tongosa) by Nelson Makengo (Democratic Republic of Congo), and *Feathers of a Father* by Omar El Zohairy (Egypt). Finally, to support project leaders during this exceptional year, all projects were awarded a grant of 5000 euros.

CURATING FILMS AS CARING FOR FILMS AND COMMUNITIES

This chapter has shown how Covid-19 changed the work of film festival selection committees, accelerating the digitization of programming activities and increasing the flexibility of the film programmer profession. As we have seen, both the *Semaine de la Critique* and the Marrakech International Film Festival through the Atlas Workshops had to invent new ways of working with the selection committees, to imagine new mechanisms to promote the films they selected, and to think of new methods to guarantee the smooth running of professional meetings. Faced with the crisis, “flexi-programmers” continue to adapt to the incessant evolutions of the strategies (when they exist) implemented by film festivals so that they retain their role of platform for exchanges, meetings of various actors, and construction of meaning (Rueda 2009, 149–171).

As I am writing this chapter, the programming committees are preparing the 60th edition of the Critics’ Week. Faced with a constantly changing health context, the work of the programming committee (screening of feature films and meetings) is for the moment mainly—but not exclusively—held online. In a press release dated January 28, 2021, Thierry Frémaux announced the postponing of the Cannes festival from May 11–22 to July 6–17. A complete reorganization of the schedules and of the methods of viewing films is underway within the Critics’ Week, the outlines of which cannot be precisely known on the eve of an intervention by President Macron on the subject of a possible new lockdown in France. For its part, the Marrakesh International Film Festival is currently considering various strategies for its next edition, which should be held at the end of November 2021.

The understanding of films being linked to their context of distribution and reception and the extension of an unstable health situation leads me to hypothesize that film curating could be the future of film programming. I believe this crisis forces us to envision the work of programmers not simply as establishing a selection that will be seen at a later date but rather as taking care of the films and as creating a commitment to filmmakers, producers, and audiences. This ethics of curation is particularly needed given the many crises we are collectively confronted with. Going back to the origins of the term “curating” is essential: historically, curators were keepers and scientists, in charge of managing, preserving, and displaying art. As a film curator, I believe that festivals need a clear investment in caring: they should intervene in local issues and communities to invent a new

“mondialité” (Glissant 1997). By curating films that narrate a singular experience and vision of the world, faced with a health emergency and with the fact that people had to constantly adapt to capitalistic violence, film festivals and film curators should create a geopoetics that calls for the globality of the commons and for global cooperation rather than competition. Multiple, diffracted, and unpredictable, the Tout-Monde (Glissant 1997) is a moving space where identities, languages, and cultures are created and disappear. It is in this “Chaos-Monde” that a new humanity is formed, able to face the unforeseen. This “Relationship,” complex, arduous, unpredictable, and the link between cultures, is a demand for a poetic relationship to the world. As a film curator, I think that rather than merely “presenting an attractive program, which is outstanding on the global film festival circuit (Bosma 2015, 69) or following Dina Iordanova’s three curatorial purposes for niche festivals, as “a tool of diplomacy, or a promoting of a particular identity or exploring the economic potential of diasporic talents” (as paraphrased in Bosma 2015, 70), such geopoetics can be the starting point for conceiving a thought in action on the world for film festivals: a poetic and political responsibility toward films, collaborators, programmers, filmmakers, and audiences.

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PART III

Never Waste a Good Crisis: (Re)
imagining Festivals After the
Pandemic



Toward Decolonized Film Festival Worlds

Lindiwe Dovey and Estrella Sendra

I would like to see festivals decolonized. I would like to see more women, and people of color, and younger people directing and curating film festivals. I would like to see less of a Western canon at film festivals and more of an exploration of the undervalued and underexposed. I would like to see festivals push toward the future of cinema, whatever that may be, rather than investing in conservative models from the past. I would like to see an end to the word ‘film’ in festivals if festivals are never showing anything on celluloid. I would like to see an end to festivals using a rendition of a strip of celluloid as their brand logo. Maybe I would even like to see an end to using the word ‘festival’. In short, I am ready for something different! Greg de Cuir Jr (pers. comm. 2021)

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AFRICAN SCREEN WORLDS: DECOLONIZING FILM AND SCREEN STUDIES

This co-authored chapter has developed out of, and thus needs to be contextualized within, our collaboration on the “African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies” project (2019–2024), funded by the European Research Council, for which we are, respectively, the Principal Investigator (Dovey) and a key participant and contributor to many of the project’s diverse written and creative outputs (Sendra).¹ The project’s *raison d’être* is to contribute to making Film Studies, and the film industry, more globally representative of the diversity of our planetary populations, films and filmmaking cultures, with a specific focus on centering Africa, the most marginalized region when it comes to the international film economy and the academy. The project proposes the term “screen worlds” as a heuristic device to take us beyond the concept of “world cinema,” which has dominated Film Studies and the curation of film festivals for the past two decades and which often instills an inherent difference and hierarchy between the “West” and the “rest” (Dovey and Taylor-Jones 2021). The emphasis on “screen” rather than “cinema” shares de Cuir Jr’s interest in how we can all “push toward the future of cinema” in our current era, in which the forms of filmmaking, and film distribution, exhibition, and spectatorship, are changing so rapidly. In turn, the emphasis on “worlds” as a plural noun, rather than as a singular adjective, is intended to highlight the rich complexity of our planet rather than reduce ourselves to singular or binary narratives. As will become evident in this chapter (part manifesto, part reflection), our thinking is informed by the authors of *A World of Many Worlds* (2018), who cite a Zapatista manifesto that argues: “In the world of the powerful there is room only for the big and their helpers. In the world we want, everybody fits. The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 1). We are also significantly guided by the thinking of decolonial scholar Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who argues that the problem is “taking ideas from a singular ‘province’ of the world and making them into universal” truths (2020, 40). In addition to engaging with theory we also strongly believe that our scholarship needs to be informed by practice, as well as conversation with practitioners, and we are thus

¹ See www.screenworlds.org for all outputs as they are completed.

indebted to the 22 film professionals who have shared their recent experiences with us (see List of survey participants).

To decolonize Film Studies and the film industry, it is vital that we all speak openly about our positionality and lived experience to understand how that affects what we think and do. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that we both have mostly engaged with in our research and film festival direction and curation (Dovey is originally from South Africa, and her research [e.g., 2015] has spanned sub-Saharan Africa, and Sendra's region of focus in her research is Senegal [e.g., 2018, 2021], where she has spent significant time, and learned Wolof). While we are both white people, we have tried to be transparent and self-reflexive about our racialized positionality and privileges and the effects of these on our work (Dovey 2020; Sendra 2020). We feel that there is a need for white film scholars, film festival practitioners, and filmmakers to reject "white fragility" (Di Angelo 2018) and to be willing to engage deeply with how the power associated with our racialized identities manifests itself. There is also a need, however, for us to respect Kimberle Crenshaw's (2017) emphasis on how our identities are "intersectional" in myriad ways (including gender, class, and sexuality), Obioma Nnaemeka's (2003) empowering idea that what matters is not just our intersectional identities but also our actions, and Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann's invitation to reject rigid, externally imposed categories and to embrace the dynamism of our own—and others'—*self*-definitions.²

FILM FESTIVAL FILM (2019)

Many of the complex questions surrounding how to decolonize filmmaking and the film industry are explored in the 48-minute, provocative, docu-fiction film *Film Festival Film* (2019), particularly in relation to the current constitution of film festivals and related film funding structures, which is why we chose to launch the "African Screen Worlds" project with a free, public screening of this film at SOAS University of London (where the project is hosted), followed by a Q&A with co-directors Perivi Katjavivi (who is Namibian-British) and Mpumelelo Mcata (who is South African) and producer Anna Teeman (from the UK).³ This was also the UK

² See Ndisi-Herrmann in conversation with Dovey here: <https://screenworlds.org/films/beside-the-scenes-a-conversation-with-director-philippa-ndisi-herrmann/>.

³ The filmed Q&A can be accessed here <https://screenworlds.org/resources/film-festival-film-screening-and-panel-discussion/>.

premiere of the film, and we appreciate that the filmmakers entrusted us with this as part of our public seminar series, rather than reserving the premiere for a prestigious film festival. Similarly, not many filmmakers have been courageous enough to turn their cameras onto the film festival world itself, and this is the first film—to our knowledge—that does so in a way that raises the critical question that we also want to pose here: if film festival organizers and curators recognize that there is a need for decolonization, how can we all work together toward decolonized film festival worlds? We recognize that not all film festivals will necessarily embrace the idea of decolonization—in fact, some may contest it—however, the fact that, as we complete this chapter, the 2021 Berlinale made the focus of its World Cinema Fund Day “Decolonizing Cinema” (5 March), suggests that even the most established film festivals are seeing this as a priority.

Film Festival Film demythologizes film festivals, showing their mundanity and micro-aggressions rather than their glossy surface glamor and cozy multiculturalism. It does this in several ways—both via the radical, improvisational, and non-hierarchical process the filmmakers used to make the film,⁴ and through what it focuses on—a fictional protagonist, Fanon (played by South African actress Lindiwe Matshikiza), and her private, personal struggles as she tries to navigate the uncomfortable spaces of the (actual) 2018 Durban International Film Festival to try to realize her dream of being awarded development funding for a film that she wants to make. A significant portion of the film is taken up with her nervous, solo rehearsing for her pitch session in her hotel room, as in the following monologue which she delivers while silhouetted against the sky and sea standing at her hotel window:

It’s a tale of one woman’s struggle for self-determination with a tragic conclusion, frustrated dreams ... there’s race, class, sex. ... It’s the right time for this kind of story. We’re all talking about Woman’s things, I’m a Woman. ... The NFVF [South African National Film and Video Foundation] is looking for that kind of thing, right now. And the Ford Foundation would jump on this, and so, it looks right, the optics are good.

⁴On the radical potential of collective, non-hierarchical, low-budget filmmaking, Mpumelelo Mcata said during our Q&A: “It was really free, and it really opened the space for ownership ... mutual [ownership] ... like even the person holding the sound thing could ask anybody we were asking a question, or stop at any moment. It wasn’t just our voices on set. ... It was more like a ten-piece combo jazz band jamming, you know, live, running through the hotel, and this as a model to make film, with that improvising element, is kind of like making film as sport or as a music jam.”

It is radical of the (male) directors of *Film Festival Film* to imagine how a young black female filmmaker might experience a mainstream film festival (the Durban International Film Festival, which is one of the most established film festivals on the African continent, and arguably the one with the most connections to “elite” international festivals, such as the Berlinale). But what is also radical is that the film that Fanon wants to make is about Marijke de Klerk, the murdered wife of former South African president F.W. de Klerk (who won the Nobel Peace Prize jointly with Nelson Mandela). And why should Fanon not want to make a film about a white woman just because she is a black woman? Why should we assume that she only wants to make films about black women?

This is one of many ways that the film challenges us as viewers to go beyond the “optics” that it parodies in terms of how film funders and film festivals can make surface, tokenistic decisions that do not address racism and sexism and other forms of oppression. Here we are confronted with what Stuart Hall (1992) has famously called the “burden of representation” that marginalized people carry, where they are expected to (and given funding to) endlessly foreground their “victimhood,” which is then cynically (albeit often unconsciously) used to keep those people “in their place” by the dominant group, which confirms its own subjecthood at the same time.⁵ The character of Fanon, like Hall, seems to want to “absolve” herself of “the black person’s burden,” which is that she be “expected to speak for the entire black race” (Hall 1992, 277). Hall’s antidote to this is to speak “autobiographically” but not in a way that could be “thought of as seizing the authority of authenticity” (ibid.).

Similarly, Fanon’s logline for her own film about Marijke de Klerk could, paradoxically, be used as one possible logline for *Film Festival Film*, showing a different relation to (auto)biography: “It’s a tale of one woman’s struggle for self-determination with a tragic conclusion, frustrated dreams ... there’s race, class, sex.” In the case of *Film Festival Film*, however, the conclusion is left open-ended—we do not know whether Fanon succeeds in her struggle for self-determination—in other words, in making her film. This absence is particularly loaded when contrasted with the fact that the first film screening Fanon goes to as part of her journey through the 2018 Durban International Film Festival is *The Adventures of Supermama* (2019), a film about a black female action hero (played by

⁵ See also Ross 2011, who discusses this “burden of representation” in relation to European festival funding for Latin American cinema.

Nomsa Buthelezi) directed by a white South African female filmmaker (Karen Van Schalkwyk). Fanon's visible dismay with the film, and at the racial dynamics during the post-screening Q&A, in which the white filmmaker speaks with no apparent awareness of the racial hierarchies that are at play, lead Fanon to ask Van Schalkwyk: "Why was this film made?"

The distinction here is very important: Fanon does *not* ask "Why did you make this film?", which implies an interest in what Van Schalkwyk's inspirations were; rather, by asking "Why was this film made?" the suggestion is that the film should not have been made at all. It is a rhetorical question and a statement of refusal that insists that the idea that anyone can make a film about anything is historically myopic. It is well known that the early history of filmmaking, through imperial and ethnographic film production, was dominated by a white Western gaze at non-white, non-Western Others, although less research and critique exists on how these practices are still often evident in filmmaking and film curation today.⁶ This is a topic the filmmakers courageously tackle, not only through Fanon's story, but also through a series of provocative interviews with key film industry players who are, in the process, challenged by the *Film Festival Film* filmmakers to think—among many other things—about how white privilege and male privilege operate in the industry.⁷ For example, the white South African filmmaker Sara Blecher is asked questions about racialized privilege, while the male South African filmmaker Rehad Desai discusses the South African #MeToo movement.

While we do not know whether or not Fanon makes her film, the making of *Film Festival Film* is to be celebrated, as it is filled with ideas and questions about what both decolonized filmmaking and decolonized film festival organization and curation might entail. As Perivi Katjavivi explained during our Q&A: "We were all just really trying to get to the essence of this strangeness that exists in the film world ... These institutions, these systems, these festivals, what are they? And everybody's having this sort of party at these festivals, but no one's really in a position to sort of stop and say 'What are we doing? This is kind of weird.'"

⁶See Dovey 2015 for a critique of this in relation to the curatorial practices of certain European film festivals.

⁷Notably these interviews take place in Fanon's hotel room, and the filmmakers of *Film Festival Film* have cited as a reference point Wim Wenders' film *Room 666* (1982) in which he interviewed filmmakers in the Hotel Martinez at the Cannes Film Festival about the future of cinema. However, the filmmakers were also quick to point out that the decision to shoot a lot of the film in Fanon's hotel room was also due to financial considerations, as they made the film on a shoestring budget.

FROM COSMETIC APPROPRIATION TO DEEP DECOLONIZATION

If this is, in part, a manifesto for decolonized film festival worlds, then we need to define what decolonization means to us. In our view, decolonization is informed activism that seeks to address and redress the complex, racialized legacies and ongoing institutionalized racism that is a result of the forced political, economic, and cultural domination of people of color (and particularly black people) by white people over the past five centuries. This domination has primarily occurred through imperialism, colonialism, and the Transatlantic slave trade, although we also have to take into account how these unjust systems have frequently overlapped with heteropatriarchalism and capitalism. Decolonization has been critiqued by some for becoming a buzzword, particularly as it has been taken up across so many areas of society since it was resuscitated as part of the RhodesMustFall movement in May 2015 at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. The ubiquity with which the word is now used can, indeed, make it very difficult to define, but we need to distinguish cosmetic appropriation of it and deep, lasting action in relation to it. The positive aspect about how pervasive the term has become is that it has empowered many, dispersed people to find solidarity and strength with like-minded, anti-racist activists from whom they were previously separated, due to disciplinary boundaries (in academia) or physical distances (something that Covid-19 has helped us to overcome to some extent through the shift online—although we acknowledge that digital inequalities make it impossible to speak in absolutes here). When we call here for decolonized film festival worlds, we are inviting everyone who works at or who has an investment in film festivals, to engage in such anti-racist activism.

As one dimension of this activism, we share Greg de Cuir Jr's views that we desperately need "to see less of a Western canon at film festivals and more of an exploration of the undervalued and underexposed" and "to see more women, and people of color, and younger people directing and curating film festivals." However, as Themba Bhebhe, Diversity & Inclusion director of the European Film Market at the Berlinale, warns in relation to the need for festivals to transform their recruitment practices:

I would by way of a caveat for future hires express that the essential condition for the meaningful inclusion of such staff is that they and their perspectives are not marginalized, [that they] receive equal treatment, pay,

decision-making power and financial security. Otherwise they simply become the so-called diversity hires in a tokenistic, disingenuous exercise of due diligence and “color washing” with no structural or transformational depth. (in Vourlias 2019)

Perivi Katjavivi’s first film *The Unseen* (2016), for which we held the UK premiere at the Cambridge African Film Festival, also critiques some of the problems around (white) assumptions that an increase in surface visibility—for example, through simply screening more films by people of color at film festivals largely attended by white people—will result in deep-rooted, political change. One of the questions that also needs to be asked is: what do we *do* with what we see? Visibility is complicated terrain—sight is where racial, gendered, and other classification/assumptions often begins, and, as many film scholars have taught us, there is a wide diversity of ways of looking at, and doing things with, films. In other words, decolonial, anti-racist activism at film festivals has to include a diversification of films and core staff, but it also has to go beyond this to engage in much broader and deeper questioning about what decolonization means and how to enact it.

REORIENTING FILM FESTIVALS

Decolonization means different things in diverse contexts and there is no one-size-fits-all model. Each film festival in each specific location needs to embark on its own process of soul-searching and self-reflexivity to determine what exactly decolonization and anti-racism would mean in *that* context, so that concrete actions can then be identified and embarked on. Although this chapter is partly a manifesto we do not want to be prescriptive, for that would fall into the (colonial) trap of dogmatically telling others how they should act and behave from a position that is not cognizant of local cultures and experiences. This is precisely why we are arguing here not for a decolonized film festival *world*, but rather for decolonized film festival *worlds*—a shift away from the competitive, capitalist “world of the powerful” (in this context, a hierarchical, white film festival world that seeks to maintain its privilege), toward a “pluriverse” of film festivals which would involve “the negotiated coming together of heterogeneous worlds (and their practices) as they strive for what makes each of them be what they are, which is also not without others” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4).

Moving toward decolonized film festival worlds thus necessarily entails a reorientation toward each festival's local context and scrutiny in relation to *how* each film festival interacts with other film festivals on the transnational and global scale. This reorientation is one that has of course been forced upon all film festivals due to the Covid-19 pandemic—in ways that we explore below—but how this reorientation can align with the principles of decolonization is our concern here. In particular, we want to emphasize the indigenous origins to much contemporary decolonization philosophy (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) and the insistence, in Indigenous practices, on the fundamental inextricability of natural and human life to the extent that if we are not addressing “the ecological crisis that threatens to eradicate life on Earth” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 2), and which disproportionately affects people in the Global South, then we cannot be said to be involved in decolonization at all. This is because full attention to this crisis means

an engagement with the current fate of the planet that takes stock of the colonial destruction of worlds as the destruction that the culprits of the Anthropocene imposed on its victims. The peculiarity of this destruction is that, waged in the name of progress ... it has never been recognized as such. Paradoxically, the end of the world as we know it may mean the end of its being made through destruction: facing destruction at an unprecedented rate, the collectives that colonialism—in its earliest and latest versions—doomed to extinction emerge to publicly denounce the principles of their destruction, which may coincide with the assumptions that made a one-world world. (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 16)

Blaser et al. then ask, more optimistically, “Could the moment of the Anthropocene bring to the fore the possibility of the pluriverse?” (ibid.) Ndlovu-Gatsheni similarly argues that it is “the decolonial turn” that offers the “discursive terrain of liberation and a foundation for pluriversality” (2020, 18). He thus puts out a “revolutionary call” for us all to “turn over a new leaf ... abandoning the ‘European game’ on the grounds that it is dehumanizing and dismembering other human beings” (2020, 5).

While recognizing the many negative impacts of Covid-19 on groups of people who were already marginalized before the pandemic, on a more positive level, it has forced us to question accelerated globalization and its environmental destructiveness as a *fait accompli*. It would be disingenuous

for all of us involved in festivals not to acknowledge how pleasurable it is to travel to different festivals around the world and meet and spend time with people from elsewhere. But the pandemic has compelled us to see more clearly some of the deep problems with these practices—their deleterious effects on our planetary environment (through long-haul travel for short-term events); their ongoing entrenchment of hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South in terms of *who* is able to travel; and their exclusivity (in that they are only accessible to those who can afford to travel to/enter them).

Many of the film festival practitioners who we surveyed for this chapter (see List of survey participants) acknowledged both the possibilities and problems wrought by the pandemic, and many felt that a “blended” or “hybrid” model of embodied and online activities would now inevitably be how film festivals run in the future, expanding our ideas of what constitutes festival “liveness.” Many were especially excited—as we are—by the larger and more diverse audiences, greater accessibility, and more ecologically friendly practice that comes with offering film screenings, masterclasses, and panel discussions online. Clearly, it is the most “elite,” industry-oriented film festivals that have felt the effects of the pandemic most dramatically, due to their stakeholders being more international than local, and due to the stakes being higher in terms of film premieres, and their relationships with cinema-owners and public and private funders. As Frida Fan Jingwen, curator at the Shanghai International Film Festival, notes, “A category” festivals would struggle if the pandemic continues unless they can “successfully persuade all the world premiere films to be screened online” and if they can make do with “a less international jury.” She says there are “enough” large festivals and that we need “more lovely smaller ones” that are more “creative.” Indeed, it is important to note that the majority of the film festivals in the world are audience-oriented, smaller festivals—however, it is the large festivals that continue to attract the most attention from filmmakers, the media, and scholars, due to their prestige. These stakeholder groups (including those of us who are academics) thus *also* need to take responsibility for helping to usher in decolonized film festival worlds through turning our attention elsewhere.

Many of the participants at the 2021 Berlinale’s “Decolonizing Cinema” event made similar arguments. As we watched these conversations from different locations in the world play out through screens, we felt hopeful that global conversation can continue, allowing film festivals, curators, and filmmakers to learn from one another, while each group that

is passionate about film becomes more invested in its own immediate context, shifting power to “small, grassroots communities” that might not even hold festivals (as Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, a filmmaker from Lesotho, said) or that might not even use cinemas to screen films (such as The Nest Collective in Kenya, which designs a specific screening strategy for each film, or the Sunshine Cinema venture in South Africa, known as “Africa’s First Solar Powered Cinema Network”). It felt as though, through this online event, we were witnessing a reorientation in terms of hierarchies—with the participants from different African contexts (e.g., South Africa, Burkina Faso, Sudan) speaking from their own locations on their own terms about their inspiring work, thereby situating the Berlinale as a somewhat parochial interlocutor on the margins. As Sydelle Willow Smith, co-founder of Sunshine Cinema, said: “Whose knowledge is privileged? European knowledge production being the baseline, determining the quality of something, is part of the thing that needs to be dismantled. ... And I think countries in the Global South are very tired of this notion of always being viewed in those categories of world cinema, world music, this notion that we are still developing, that we are still catching up to something of the Eurocentric standard and that is really part of that process of decolonization.”

In the second half of this chapter, we would like to delve deeper into specific examples of festival/curatorial work that have taken place before and during the pandemic and which we find inspirational and which we feel can serve as models and inspiration for other film festivals and curators interested in decolonizing their work. Many of these examples come from festivals/curators/filmmakers based in the Global South or from those celebrating the Global South in the Global North.

BLUEPRINTS FOR DECOLONIAL FILM FESTIVAL/ CURATORIAL PRACTICE

As Bhebhe says, this “future [decolonial] vision is neither factitious nor fictitious: it is already in operation in certain spaces of the industry (in identity-based festivals, public funders, capacity-building and talent development organizations, interest-group organizations), and embodies a blueprint of best practices that we can strive towards” (in Vourlias 2019). In Senegal, where I (Estrella) have been working and/or conducting research for the past decade, film festivals and cultural festivals more broadly have been experimenting with various formats in a search for

sustainability. Since 2000, Senegal has witnessed the foundation of over 100 festivals beyond the capital city, Dakar. These festivals are characterized by the way their leaders engage with their local communities, who in this way become co-authors of the festivals rather than mere “spectators.” While there is a shared aspiration of internationalization at these festivals—with their names often using the word “international”—their participants are predominantly local and their directors are often “rooted cosmopolitans” (Appiah 2015, 241), Senegalese people with international mobility but with a strong sense of commitment toward making their local regions better places to live (Sendra 2018).

Let us take the example of the Banlieue Films Festival in Dakar, which I (Estrella) have analyzed at length in previous work (Sendra 2021). This festival was founded by Abdel Aziz Boye, who returned to Senegal after being based in Paris for 22 years, where he studied and made films. The festival was preceded by a film school in the outskirts of Dakar, the *banlieue*, the area where the Senegalese population was displaced during centuries of French colonialism. It provided free access to cinema training, where films emerged from the lived experiences of young Senegalese people from the *banlieue*. The small number of cinema venues in Dakar and the difficulty of accessing them motivated Boye—with limited institutional support—to create a festival to be able to screen and celebrate these films locally.

Decolonizing film, according to Bhebe, “necessarily poses the question of the formation of alternative circuits of distribution in Africa and among the peoples of the global south” (in Vourlias 2019), and here too there are positive examples to explore. Many film festivals and curators in Africa have engaged in horizontal forms of collaboration, “building reciprocity practices” (Peirano 2020, 64) with each other. One of the most remarkable examples of such collaboration during the pandemic can be credited to the Centre Yennenga, a filmmaking hub located in Grand Dakar, founded by the acclaimed Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis. On 30 April 2020, as film festivals all over the world were grappling with how to proceed in light of the first wave of Covid-19, and with many canceling their 2020 editions, the Centre Yennenga was a pioneer in offering an online film program. The program did not have a fixed set of dates or films announced in advance. Rather, details were communicated spontaneously, and films were shared through a link and password, available for streaming internationally for 48 hours. As Farah Clémentine Dramani-Issifou, deputy director of Centre Yennenga, reflects: “It was a way for us to continue the work that we had already started to do: to

support filmmakers, mainly from the continent, in the exhibition of their films and to try to create links with the audience in Dakar, but also, regionally, and internationally” (pers. comm. 2021).

It was not easy for the Centre Yennenga to undertake such a venture. They had to convince African filmmakers to let them share their films online, which “can raise issues of copyright, piracy, etc” (ibid.). But, through the care Centre Yennenga took with their programming, and through the generosity of African filmmakers in agreeing to share their films, this pioneering online “event” respected Greg de Cuir Jr’s call of moving beyond the word “festival” to something entirely new and exciting, motivated by a collaborative and activist spirit. For film curators, Dramani-Issifou says,

it is about the way in which our heart can be in the center of our reflection and activity. It is about how we commit to take care of our community. ... No matter what happens we need to continue to give voice to those filmmakers whose work we are interested in. (pers. comm. 2021)

One of the films they screened was celebrated Mauritanian-Malian filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006), which was made available online for free through their Facebook page on 16 May 2020, and geo-blocked to the African continent (with a few exceptions), followed by a live streamed Q&A the following day on Facebook. The Centre plans to keep testing “new ways of doing things,” through hybrid formats combining physical and online events to create “spaces of encounter.” Having to move online quickly during the pandemic has also inspired the Centre Yennenga to “use social media better” and to develop its own archive to keep a record of its community-building process and events (ibid.).

Examples of such collaboration and the creation of alternative circuits can also be seen at African film festivals outside of Africa, which thereby place a region often marginalized in the mainstream film circuit at the very center of attention. These festivals have fostered a peripheral circuit, with a shared aim of showcasing African films to international audiences. This commitment was sealed at FESPACO 2013, when the five UK-based African film festivals (Africa in Motion, Afrika Eye, the Cambridge African Film Festival, Film Africa, and Watch Africa) signed the Ouagadougou Declaration. This is how the TANO (Swahili for “five”) network came into existence, “committing to [work] together to promote African cinema throughout the UK through sharing films and touring African film directors, joint publicity and funding applications, promoting the

screening of African films on all platforms and formats by all means possible” (Africa in Motion website). This has been accomplished through shared film seasons, such as “South Africa at 20” (for the twentieth anniversary of the country’s democracy) and “From Africa, with Love,” with a thematic focus on love. During the pandemic, these festivals joined forces once again to curate WE ARE TANO—an online film season that ran from 1 to 21 October 2020, screening ten of the best African films curated at the five festivals over the past decade. As Sheila Ruiz, then director of Film Africa, says: “One of the interesting or very satisfying things to see was that a lot of the titles that we had screened back in the day that did not have distribution at the time, or maybe did but did not get a long theatrical run, were now on Netflix, on the BFI Player, on Amazon Prime.” She thus concludes that a collaborative rather than competitive approach has helped with “mainstreaming African cinema in the UK” (The F-Show online, 2020). Such unity “is the nerve centre of decolonization ... There is ‘*amandla*’ (power/strength) in unity. There is revolutionary spirit in unity. There is relationality in unity. There is future in unity (pluriversal-ity)” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020: 15).

Many of the measures proposed as “Curating a Pandemic Recovery Plan for UK Distribution and Exhibition” (hosted online only to participants with an industry accreditation as part of the 2020 BFI London Film Festival) have long been practised by festivals in Africa and African film festivals outside Africa (Dovey 2015; Sendra 2018). Alison Gardner, co-director of the Glasgow Film Festival, described the actions of film festivals in times of pandemic as “the revolution of people over profit.” Melani Iredale, interim director of Sheffield Doc/Fest, stressed how “despite everything we have never been so connected with peers.” Festivals have had to engage in resilient curatorial practices, innovating and responding rapidly to changes. As Kenyan filmmaker and Executive Founder and Creative Director of Docubox Judy Kibinge puts it, “festivals have been thrown into complete confusion ... The quick collapse of Tribeca [film festival] was a very clear sign that whoever did remain in the game really rolled up their sleeves and committed to continuing” (pers. comm. 2021). Sara Fratini, co-founding director of the Guarimba International Film Festival in Italy, says that “it felt like organizing a whole new festival” (pers. comm. 2021). And José Luis Cienfuegos, director of the Seville European Film Festival (SEFF), emphasizes that “many of us are considering re-evaluating and clarifying our goals, rethinking deeply who we are and what we are doing for our environment” (pers. comm. 2021).

The move toward online film festival formats has translated into a decentralization of festival space (Sendra 2018) and, consequently, more democratic access to festivals. As Ana Camila Esteves, director and curator of the *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos* in Brazil, says about her experience of running this festival during the pandemic:

The festival circuits are far from democratic in terms of access to our population ... For the first time I saw a very democratic way of building a festival. The main festivals in Brazil are located in the south of the country, which means people from other regions could never attend, and loads of them don't even have a venue in their towns. To me it was amazing to have feedback from people from everywhere in Brazil, telling me they were watching an African film for the first time, or celebrating the fact that they could finally attend my festival. (pers. comm. 2021)

Mane Cisneros, Marion Berger, and Federico Olivieri, director, curator, and organizer, respectively, of FCAT, the African Film Festival in Tarifa-Tangier, similarly argue that the impact of online programming from an audience perspective was remarkable, since it allowed many people who had never been able to attend their festival to watch African cinema (pers. comm. 2021).

Film festivals across the world during the pandemic have also decentralized festival time (Sendra 2018). Many festivals extended their dates, spreading their screenings across longer periods of time. For instance, the *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos* ran from September to November 2020, hosting one film screening per week. Africa in Motion, in Scotland, was hosted over a month, from 30 October to 29 November 2020, with two to three events per day. While audiences were encouraged to watch the films “live,” which was defined on its website as “at the time and date listed on the event page,” all films were available for 48 hours after their scheduled screening time. Jozi Film Festival, in Johannesburg, was initially programmed for just four consecutive days. However, following audience feedback, they decided to extend their festival for an extra weekend. These decisions demonstrate openness to new formats and curatorial strategies which will no doubt redefine the shape of festivals in the future and—we hope—will make them far more accessible and inclusive.

Festivals have often been associated with the creation of a festive time-space “*separate* from everyday routines” (Gibson and Connell 2012, 4). Considering what online festivals mean within the context of people’s

quotidian lives thus requires innovation, empathy, and imagination. Esteves explains how spreading out the *Mostra de Cinemas Africanos* program was aimed at providing enough time for people to watch all the films, as well as avoiding competition with other festivals that had moved online. This allowed them to reach an average of 3000 viewers per week from all over Brazil. However, even when spreading out a film program, there is the risk of audience exhaustion with the “ceaseless international stream of online content” (de Cuir Jr., pers. comm. 2021), leading to the audience being “overwhelmed by choices and eventually opting out” (Etzo, pers. comm. 2021). Judy Kibinge reflects on how difficult engagement has been for film audiences in Kenya during the pandemic:

Initially it felt very novel and interesting to sign in to some of these festivals online, and it has just somehow become exhausting. First of all, it is not that we were not already watching many films online, with Netflix and all these other streamers. ... You are not immersed in the buzz of what to watch and when to watch. The more time goes on and the less novel that an online film festival becomes, it really just starts to feel like you are streaming something online, because you are not part of a bigger community. (pers. comm. 2021)

Spanish film critic Manuel Lombardo and Greg de Cuir Jr suggest a solution based on quality rather than quantity programming—“to do less, but to make each intervention more impactful and meaningful” (de Cuir Jr, pers. comm. 2021). Similarly, de Cuir Jr notes how online curation cannot be a mere translation of curation of films for “embodied” screenings. Rather, it involves “crafting programs and exhibitions that could not live anywhere else except online” (ibid.). Nashen Moodley, the South African director of the Sydney Film Festival in Australia, suggests that the pandemic compelled his team to localize their program more in terms of their online offering and deepened their understanding of how reliant they are on their local physical venues. Since their 2020 festival had to be canceled, they “looked at alternate ways of connecting with [their] audience”—which involved a “Virtual Edition and Awards in which [they] presented predominantly Australian films online ... and also presented a selection of films through the Australian television channel SBS’s On Demand service.” They also, however, collaborated with other major international film festivals on “We Are One: A Global Film Festival” (an online festival of free films from 29 May to 7 June 2020)—a remarkable display of collaboration rather than competition by many of the world’s “elite” film

festivals. But Moodley also notes that the “pandemic has shown ... that the future success, viability even, of festivals and cinemas is inextricably linked” (pers. comm. 2021)—in certain contexts, we would add.

As we suggested earlier, it is the major, “elite” film festivals that face the most significant challenges in relation to decolonization, given that they are more invested in their position within a “one-world world” international film festival circuit which reifies hierarchy. Another significant challenge is how such festivals—if, like the Berlinale, they are confirming their commitment to decolonizing film—can ensure that they support the work of film professionals in the Global South who often rely on the resources provided by these wealthier film festivals, but in a way that does not reinforce (post)colonial hierarchies. As Kibinge points out, for film professionals in the Global South, the shift to online festivals during the pandemic has been problematic in some respects. For example, her Docubox team in Kenya found that they simply could not engage properly online with IDFA, the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, and limited physical participation in festivals has made it challenging for filmmakers to “shop for their next projects” (pers. comm. 2021).

As Ruiz says: “One cannot replace the magic of those moments when people connect and mingle, and new projects or partnerships are formed based on a positive exchange of ideas” (pers. comm. 2021). Etzo adds that “there is a whole ecosystem made of encounters and interactions that cannot be replicated online” (pers. comm. 2021). Kibinge says that she foresees a wave of nostalgic film-going in the future, when things open up and “people ... remember how much they loved being together in cinemas, discovering new waves and new authors, new films” (pers. comm. 2021). Watching films together in an embodied way can also increase the identification with the stories on screen, particularly when these are showcasing unknown cultures and followed by live Q&As or discussions. The question then becomes, how can we ensure that the *best* of both embodied and online film festivals is preserved in the future, but with the principles of decolonization firmly in mind?

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

Capitalism hasn't worked for Africa. Right now cinema is capitalism. So what I'm raising here is that the whole concept of cinema today, including the one of public funding, is following the Hollywood model.—filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo, in *Film Festival Film* (2019)

I don't see that vision [of decolonization] as utopic. In the first instance, it's an attainable goal on the proviso that the dominant groups show a real willingness to be self-critical and, above all, self-aware. Such willingness, if it is to be truly effective, necessarily has to translate into sharing the power.—Themba Bhebhe (in Vourlias 2019)

The practices of certain festivals before the pandemic, as well as the self-reflexive transformation that many festivals are undertaking during the pandemic, provide models toward decolonized film festival worlds. But this is a process in which festivals' differences from one another—as diverse worlds in specific socio-political contexts—have to be celebrated and valued, as much as festivals' ability to work collaboratively with one another to create the kind of unity that is the “nerve centre of decolonization” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020, 15). “Turning over a new leaf”—as Ndlovu-Gatsheni encourages us to do (2020)—will entail a great deal of humility and vulnerability, the giving up of certain power, privileges and pleasures, and embracing “the practice of a world of many worlds, or what we call a pluriverse: heterogeneous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity” (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4). It will also mean finding ways in which to form relationships outside of the frame of white neoliberal capitalism so as to encourage more dynamic interactions that result in real social change, rather than the kind of competitiveness that has blighted the international film festival circuit to date.

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Festivals, Covid-19, and the Crisis of Archiving

Antoine Damiens

This contribution is conceived as a call to document festivals and cinematic events organized during the Covid-19 pandemic. As this volume makes clear, most festival organizers and curators were forced to stay at home: they pivoted to new platforms, experimented with digital possibilities, and reimagined the festival format. I argue that this proliferation of immediate, innovative online or hybrid festivals poses specific challenges for both amateur and professional archivists: most of the documents and webpages created by these festivals may be lost in the near future.

My insistence on the need to historicize Covid-19 may at first seem counter-intuitive: after all, most of us have experienced this pandemic as a somewhat traumatic historical “moment”—as something we will never “forget.” To that end, I am convinced that the affective dimensions, epidemiological facts, and political debates around Covid-19 will be properly documented and historicized. However, we may not fully remember how cultural organizers responded to the Covid-19 crisis: ephemeral and fleeting modes of cultural organizing are particularly difficult to archive

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(on archiving ephemeral cultural production; see Cvetkovich 2003; Eichhorn 2013).

This concern with the (gaps in the) festival archives largely stems from an interest in the methodological and epistemological parameters of festival studies. As scholars have recently made clear, archives matter not only because they contain historical “evidence” but also because they exemplify the mechanisms through which history can be thought and mobilized (see among others Scott 1991; Eichhorn 2013). Dagmar Brunow elegantly summarizes this issue:

Archives are not only storehouses of neutral material but play a crucial role in the construction of ‘historical sources’, of documents through selection, classification and categorization, for instance through meta-data. Thus, the archive itself is an agent in its own right. It entails a performative dimension in constructing documents and sources and, as a consequence, in creating the grounds from which history is written. (2015, 40)

These questions take on a particular significance when researching identity-related cultural production. As scholars working on minoritized histories know all too well, something always seems to be missing from the archives. Indeed, archives have historically neglected—and at times actively erased—the contributions of marginalized groups. In that content, researching minoritized cultural production often means having to both confront the “colonial, racist, and patriarchal structures that define which histories are deemed worthy of preservation” and imagine a wide array of documents that were never archived in the first place (Chew et al. 2018, 6; see also: Stoler 2009; Stone and Cantrell 2015; Dunbar 2006; Ramirez 2015; Thompson 2018).

Similarly, any conceptualization of festival archives requires us to ask a set of larger questions regarding the very status of festivals in the cultural sphere. Most crucially, we are urged to think about why some festivals ended up being archived and why others have been forgotten. In turn, these interrogations enable us to question our work as scholars: Which festivals do we center in our historical and theoretical endeavors? What seems to be missing from the historical record? What does this marginalization of *some* festivals say about knowledge production institutions?

I took on some of these historiographical and epistemological issues in my book, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (2020): I became fascinated with a wide range of cultural events that do not fit neatly with

contemporary definitions of film festivals and that were not properly archived. In examining both the principles of organization of archives and the historiographical project of festival studies, I argued that the operative definitions used by both academic and archival practitioners participate in the marginalization of queer cinematic culture.¹ To put it succinctly: scholars and archives tend to prioritize festivals that happened several times (emphasizing longevity over ephemerality), that are organized by independent institutions (often neglecting events organized by businesses or by anonymous, diffuse collectives) and that adhere to a specific format (five to ten days of screenings organized in discrete units). A lot of cinematic events are usually overlooked because they do not correspond to preconceived ideas of film festivals. My goal, then, was to effectively “queer” festival studies: in taking seriously these ephemeral festivals, often only existing as archival traces, I hoped to both bring light to events overlooked by festival scholars and rework some of our main theoretical concepts.

While a full scope analysis of how these tacit parameters shape academic research on festivals clearly exceeds the scope of this chapter, I believe these questions are particularly urgent in pandemic times. Most festivals were forced to innovate—to experiment with or pivot to new format. However, festivals cannot be said to have been equally affected by Covid-19. As Marijke de Valck argues, large, international film festivals will likely survive the pandemic: as such, they benefit from major economic and social resources. Smaller and mid-sized festivals, however, may face additional difficulties. Mid-sized festivals are particularly at risk as they typically rely on ticket sales and sponsorships and may thus not be able to recover from a Covid-related lack of funds (de Valck 2020). Conversely, smaller festivals mostly depend on the precarious labor of volunteer organizers: they do not necessarily have the sort of resources that would be needed to access some of the professional services that are available to larger cultural events (see, in this book, Petrychyn).

In that context, this chapter is explicitly written as a call to focus on smaller, experimental, and/or minoritized festivals. To put it bluntly, no one will ever forget the history of major film festivals. There is, however, a risk that our archive won’t account for smaller festivals organized in Covid

¹Jonathan Petrychyn’s analysis of *New Cinema Histories* makes a similar argument: our methods are not suited to capturing ephemeral and/or minoritized modes of cinematic organizing (Petrychyn 2020).

time—thus depriving us of a unique opportunity to consider these forms of cultural expression. Conversely, I argue that the current crisis provides us with a unique opportunity to expand our understanding of festivals: as such, most of the events organized at the height of the pandemic did not necessarily aim to replicate the offline festival format. This proliferation of innovative events will fundamentally complicate the work of historians: some events will likely not be archived *as festivals*.

A FEW ELEMENTS OF CONTEXT: ARCHIVING PRE-DIGITAL FESTIVALS

In arguing that we need to develop strategies for archiving and historicizing Covid-19-related cultural events, I do not aim to suggest that festivals were sufficiently archived before the onset of the crisis. Writing the history of festivals is a complicated matter: while a few large events are well documented, most festivals are not properly archived (Damiens 2020). In particular, the festival format does not lend itself well to archiving: festivals are ephemeral *live* events that cannot be reproduced at a later date (Harbord 2009). While archives contain *documents* edited by and written on festivals (Dayan 2000), they cannot account for the festival *experience*.² Archives necessarily offer a partial view of the festival phenomenon: they are often limited to specific textual discourses (such as catalogs, press releases, and newspaper articles) edited by the institution itself or, more rarely, by journalists. In that context, historians are forced to work with festival ephemera that tell us little about the *actual* festival as it happened (Zielinski 2016). These documents, for instance, rarely account for festival-goers' experiences. As historical evidence, they mostly present us with an institutional perspective on festivals.

Most archives on festivals come from one of two sources: someone (usually a film critic or a scholar) who kept documents they gathered at

²Tellingly, most archives cannot safeguard the films that were screened at festivals (either because of copyright regulations or because the archives hosting this collection doesn't have the capacity to preserve films and videos). A lot of the films and videos screened at festivals focusing on less commercial forms of cinema (e.g., experimental filmmaking, short formats, or videos) are already lost. In some rare cases, archival collections contain tapes of the films that were submitted to a festival: these tapes correspond to screening copies of films that were never shipped back to filmmakers. These collections are, however, often incomplete and mostly include films that were rejected from a festival: filmmakers attending a festival were able to get their tape back from festival organizers.

various festivals they attended or a festival itself. In the first case, archival collections tend to reflect the collector's participation in festival culture: typically, the archive will contain the catalogs of the festivals they attended, thereby documenting their movement in the festival circuit. In other words, these collections often exemplify connections among festivals. They rarely include organizational documents: their scope is often limited to a few catalogs from disparate festivals. Collections started by festivals tend to include a greater variety of documents: catalogs, of course, but also press releases, budgets, meeting minutes, and letters from and to other stakeholders. Unfortunately, these collections are quite rare: festival organizers often do not have the material resources needed to preserve their documents. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that not all festivals are committed to preserving their own history: a lot of festivals may, for one reason or another, not want to be historicized.³

In any case, the preservation of a festival's documents is largely a function of its material resources. Most festivals have relatively small operating budgets. They are often run by volunteers or underpaid cultural workers (Loist 2011) who do not have time to focus on preserving the history of a festival. In some cases, workers are the sole custodians of a festival's institutional memory: a lot of information can be lost when festival workers retire or leave the organization.⁴

Similarly, one must consider the capacity of an organization to stock physical documents: while festivals produce a plethora of documents, they do not necessarily have the physical space needed to preserve them (Dayan 2000; for a more general analysis of the challenges posed by proliferation of paper documents, see Gitelman 2014). In most cases, several festival workers share a small office—*de facto* limiting the amount of space that

³This is particularly the case for festivals that do not want to be publicized in the larger public sphere. For instance, some activist festivals may want to limit their potential audience to people who are actively interested in a cause. Similarly, festivals that screen adult materials rarely want to be widely advertized: they typically aim to stay below the radar so as to not attract problematic audience members and to avoid potential legal issues.

⁴Oral history can thus be one of the most generative methodology for scholars interested in festival histories: testimonies from staff members can, for instance, help us understand the work of organizing a festival. Importantly, oral history can bring forth elements that are rarely archived: gossip, for instance, constitutes a source of historical knowledge that can potentially explain some of the challenges faced by an organization (on gossip as a queer historiographical methodology, see VanHaitsma 2016; Potter 2006; Holmes 2015). Unfortunately, tracing festival workers can be quite a complicated task—especially given that some festivals have a high employee turnover rate.

can be allocated to stocking paper. Furthermore, festivals are often forced to move their operation from one site to another. In the process, they may have to downsize and/or get rid of documents. Kay Armatage summarizes the situation:

With a few exceptions, women's film festivals have usually existed on intermittent or volunteer labour, government grants and community centre venues and without permanent institutional homes. Like Toronto Women & Film 1973, often they have been one-off events. Thus they have come and gone, with their erstwhile founders caching old catalogues in their basements (if they had basements) or not at all. (Armatage 2009, 83)

Furthermore, the temporality of festival organizing isn't particularly conducive to archiving. Indeed, festivals are cyclical events often ran with a sense of urgency (Harbord 2009, 2016). Festival workers' priority is always the organization of a festival's *next* edition. Working for a festival entails being constantly worried about the near-future—it is about securing films and venues, negotiating sponsors, and publicizing upcoming events. Put another way, there is a fundamental tension between the temporalities of archiving and historicizing (thinking of festivals as *institutions* solidified over the years; using documents as historical evidence) and the reality of festival organizing (constantly working on a festival's next edition; using documents as a means to achieve near-future goals). Tellingly, some of the documents historians and archives rely on have little value to festival organizers: as Ger Zielinski argues, festivals are ephemeral by design; texts and catalogs are often discarded once a festival is over (2016).

“IF IT’S NOT ON PAPER, IT DOESN’T EXIST AT ALL”:
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES
OF THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Throughout my pre-Covid research, I was already struck by the fact that recent festival editions tend to be less documented than older ones. Since the archival collections I consulted were constituted quite recently, I had assumed that I would find a lot of contemporary documents: after all, festivals rarely preserve their own archive and paper documents are easy to lose or damage! This was not the case: these archives only contained a few documents on recent festival editions, in most cases just a catalog.

This relative absence of recent documents can be linked to major technological shifts that fundamentally altered festival organizers' daily activities. Indeed, archives typically contain documents that organizers *needed to* preserve such as receipts, meeting minutes, internal memos, and phone logs. Most importantly, festivals often archived their correspondence with partner organizations: the letters they sent to and received from filmmakers and stakeholders were often preserved in labeled folders. In other words, festival organizers kept these documents not because they wanted to constitute an archival collection, but because they were useful and could be easily sorted and stored in folders and boxes. These preserved documents constitute the bulk of archival collections. Importantly, they often ended up in archival collections by happenstance: "forgotten" boxes of documents can be, for instance, donated years after they were written. This typically happens when a festival moves its office location, stops its operation, or when someone who collected documents moves or dies.

With the popularization of the personal computer and the Internet, a lot of these documents no longer need to be safeguarded on physical paper: they can be typed and saved on hard drives and servers. The ability to easily create and stock organizational files on a device often paradoxically creates a gap in the archive: dematerialized files are rarely archived. Indeed, archiving digital files requires a lot of conscious decisions on the part of both archivists and festival organizers: after all, *working* computers and hard drive need to be given to an archival collection. Given that computers and hard drives can break easily, they cannot be "found" and donated years after the fact. These strategies affect not only the volume of documents given to archives but also the content of archival collections. In particular, the dematerialization of festival operation may lead to new ethical concerns around privacy: for instance, while traditional archives often contain personal correspondences, organizers rarely archive or give access to their email accounts.

Furthermore, dematerialized documents pose specific challenges to archival institutions. As such, digital files are not particularly archival friendly: computers and hard drives are time-sensitive media that can easily become unusable. Technology can quickly be outdated. Files written a decade ago may no longer be readable. The history of audiovisual formats is here a fascinating example: a lot of archives cannot read (let alone transfer) some of their holdings as the devices needed to play them are no longer manufactured. The situation is quite similar for digital files: archives may not be equipped to read files contained on floppy disks or ZIP drives

(McKinney 2020, 167–71; Astle and Muir 2002). Furthermore, files can be corrupted or may no longer be compatible with contemporary software.

Overall, archiving dematerialized files requires a lot of financial and human resources: these documents have to be stocked on costly archival servers or drives and to be migrated to new formats on a regular basis to avoid becoming damaged or unreadable. Since this process takes a lot of time, archives will be forced to prioritize some documents over others. This may be an issue for documents pertaining to smaller festivals or preserved at smaller archives. This constant obsolescence of technology is important to keep in mind, especially given that we traditionally think of computers as machines that can almost perpetually stock a large number of documents—as archiving our textual production.

In addition to changing festivals' relationship to archives, technology has led to the development of new forms of festival documents. In particular, festivals' social media accounts and websites have quickly become a major source of information for festival scholars: they contain a wealth of information that can be accessed everywhere. Furthermore, festival websites often aim to narrate a festival's history. They may even include an “archive” section, typically containing scanned pdfs of past catalogs or links toward older versions of a website. Unfortunately, these “archive” sections are never truly archival: as such, there is no guarantee that these documents will be available in the future. Websites are not a stable entity: they can be updated and rewritten, thus erasing earlier content. Similarly, organizers have generally no interest in renewing the domain name and server of festivals that ceased to exist: it is often impossible to access the website of defunct festivals.⁵

In that context, the dematerialization of festival documents may lead to a new archival crisis. Indeed, festivals are increasingly uploading a maximum of documents online in an effort to reduce printing costs and to offer innovative, user-friendly experiences. For instance, the experimental queer film festival MIX NYC decided in 2015 to get rid of their paper catalog: hoping to save money, they created a mobile-friendly website that enabled festival-goers to conveniently read film synopses, create a custom festival schedule, and buy tickets. In 2016, the festival was confronted to a major institutional crisis, which led to the election of a new board and

⁵Internet archives (such as the Wayback Machine) exist, but they are far from perfect (for an overview of some of the methodological issues of these tools, see, e.g., Arora et al. 2016; Hartelius 2020).

to a complete overhaul of MIX NYC's mission and communication. The website was entirely redesigned: the 2015 catalog can no longer be accessed. This gap in the MIX NYC archive may be particularly damaging for international curators and filmmakers: since MIX NYC was one of the main venues for experimental queer shorts, catalogs were a treasured resource that could be used as a sort of archive of experimental and/or short cinematic production.

ARCHIVING FESTIVALS ORGANIZED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Festivals organized during the Covid-19 pandemic also poses specific challenges to historians and archivists. Indeed, the pandemic forges an interesting momentum because it accelerates the crisis of archiving that is linked to the digitization of film festivals. Most notably, the popularity of online screenings will force us to think about festivals' relationship to platform economies. Indeed, most festival organizers decided to host their event on already established streaming platforms such as Vimeo and Eventive (or, in the context of adult film festivals, PinkLabel, see Chap. 8), de facto shifting part of their organizational burden to private companies. Although these platforms are often rhetorically positioned as the virtual equivalent of the theater (a site of exhibition), they cannot be thought of as neutral intermediaries. As Marc Steinberg and Joshua Neves make clear (2020), these platforms are fundamentally in the business of convenience: offering a sense of immediacy and comfort, they position themselves as a form of essential service (a "safer" option than the theaters) that "set the terms for how we inhabit and respond to the current crisis." This, however, should not obscure the fact that these platforms are service providers: their relationship with festival organizers is clearly delimited in time. Given the cost of data storage, these platforms have no interest in preserving a festival's content after the event: documents and webpages created for a festival only exist for a set amount of time. The tension between the convenience afforded by platforms and their ephemerality can be particularly damaging: some festivals, confronted to the crisis, did not even maintain their own website. In that context, a lot of materials created by festivals organized during Covid-19 may already be lost: unless they were saved by festival organizers, documents hosted on a platform (e.g., presentation

videos created for the festival and post-screening chats with filmmakers and organizers) are no longer accessible.

Furthermore, archives were heavily impacted by the pandemic. As such, Covid-19 affected the volume and scope of information that can be processed and archived. Many libraries closed for a couple of months. Budgets (conditioning the acquisition of new collections) were frozen, staff members (who do the work of archiving) were furloughed (see, e.g., Roe 2020). While amateur archivists and festival enthusiasts may have collected some documents, these efforts were far from systematic. Furthermore, archiving digital content requires specific competences. Without consistent protocols and “without metadata, archives risk becoming attics, their contents perhaps preserved but largely unseen and unused” (Tebeau 2021). Rapid-response archival projects such as *A Journal of the Plague Year* aim to capture a wide range of digital materials that would otherwise be forgotten. These projects, which often pay particular attention to disenfranchised cultural expressions, will capture several ephemeral festivals. However, these collections are fundamentally detached from traditional archives and may thus be overlooked by future scholars.

In any case, archives are always partial: they will likely not include documents that detail festival-goers’ experiences with Covid-related festivals or that explain the decision processes and steps that led some festival organizers to pivot—two elements that will likely seem particularly relevant to future scholars. Conversely, we may need to find new ways of archiving *absence*: as such, we have yet to develop mechanisms to distinguish between what is *not* archived and the fact that there *wasn’t* anything to archive in the first place—between the absence of documents on festivals that happened and the fact a festival did not happen. This may pose a serious methodological issue to future scholars: a lack of documentation will not necessarily mean that a festival “skipped a year” (a similar issue is raised in Zielinski 2016).

Overall, this crisis will require us to think about the temporalities of crises in relationship to both archiving and knowledge production. To some extent, festivals organized during the Covid-19 pandemic have been understood to be “exceptional” responses to the pandemic—to be *unusual*, *ephemeral* events that, ultimately, won’t matter once the situation is resolved and we are back to “normal.” As a form of emotional labor, rapid-response archiving is marked by this same sense of urgency and exceptionality: we feel (rightly so) compelled to document our “moment” before it becomes “too late.” This focus on immediacy, on an

unfolding crisis defined in opposition to “normal” times, may have unintended consequences. In particular, it is worth wondering what will happen when/if we become accustomed to a crisis that never seems to end: will we still work on theorizing and historicizing these festivals if they are revealed to be not “exceptional” but rather our “new normal”? Can we still find a sense of urgency and of value in our work once pandemic fatigue sets in? Conversely, our focus on pandemic festivals as anomalies somewhat detached from the *longue durée* of festival histories may prevent us from seeing some form of continuity and/or thinking about the afterlives of crises. As Marijke de Valck and I argued elsewhere, “Covid-19 cannot be understood apart from other crises. (...) The current pandemic precipitates, accentuates, and/or transforms other (social, economic, and political) crises” (2020). How do we account for the temporalities and the material effects of these intersecting crises—in particular in terms of how they affect both festival organizing and archiving?

In focusing on the intersection between two crises—epidemiological and archival—this chapter hopes to draw attention to the historiographical dimension of our own practice. As such, the pandemic provides us with a unique opportunity to not only reassess the festival toolbox and question some of our theoretical assumptions, but also to develop a new commitment to historicizing and theorizing various ephemeral forms of cultural organizing that would otherwise likely be forgotten. In both pandemic and normal times, festival archiving cannot be left to the responsibility of festival organizations: it often requires the cooperation of a wide variety of stakeholders, including archivists and scholars.

Thinking about the temporality of academic writing may here be a good starting point: after all, our scholarship not only bring theoretical light to particular objects but also consecrate them as worthy of attention. In focusing on particular festivals, using them as case studies or examples, scholars participate in the symbolic economy of knowledge production and preservation: academic research fundamentally gives a new life to our objects of study—simultaneously validating and reproducing them through critical analysis (Wiegman 2011). Put another way, scholars focus on *some* festivals because they believe that these events *matter*. Our work legitimizes these events, presents them as paradigmatic examples that illustrate our theoretical endeavors, and in so doing ultimately grants them symbolic capital. In turn, our scholarship *retrospectively* becomes evidence of the importance of a festival: our books and articles will be read *in the future* as historical sources that contain detailed information on *some*

festivals *that mattered*.⁶ Here, my goal is not to position scholars as archivists, but rather to understand how our work contains a form of counter-archival impulse: our scholarship not only documents our present but also calls forth particular lifeworlds (Chew et al. 2018).⁷

These questions take on a particular significance in pandemic times. The current pandemic makes clear that we should develop forms of scholarship that both “document and think through this ongoing crisis as it unfolds” (de Valck and Damiens 2020). Set somewhere between the *longue durée* of academic scholarship and the constant sense of urgency, such rapid-response projects provide us with already-outdated perspectives on already-forgotten festivals. Philipp Dominik Keidl and Laliv Melamed make a similar point in their introduction to the edited collection *Pandemic Media*:

Whilst the pandemic enabled the emergence of ephemeral and inchoate expressions, an outcome of a mode of transition that the crisis mobilizes, their ephemerality became evident while we were working on the volume between April and September 2020. Between the process of reviewing the essays throughout the summer and writing the introduction in early fall, some amateur videos have already disappeared from the virtual sphere, comments have been deleted from social media, new technologies designed to contain the virus have evolved, social responses have shifted from comprehension to anger, and conspiracy theories have questioned the validity of science and expert opinions. As such, this volume is the outcome of a form of “pandemic scholarship,” representing a certain moment of change as much as it is aware of the effects of the crisis on its own operations. (Keidl and Melamed 2020)

As a coherent edited collection, this book can largely be understood as an attempt to historicize an ongoing crisis: it simultaneously aims to theorize our present and to provide a partial account of *some* festivals organized during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. In positioning this book as an archive of sorts—testifying to festival organizers’ resourcefulness and

⁶As a scholar working on festival histories, academic books and reports have become one of my main historical sources (Damiens 2020).

⁷While I do not necessarily want to suggest that scholars *should* be committed to documenting events and people who would otherwise not be remembered, thinking about our role as knowledge workers raises a lot of questions regarding the status of academic institutions and our relationships with non-academic knowledge workers (including artists, archivists, and festival organizers).

historicizing scholars' responses to the crisis—I hope this contribution will incite readers to take seriously the need to document and theorize ephemeral festivals during and after pandemic times.

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Greening Film Festivals

Marijke de Valck and Ger Zielinski

[...] a Niagara of printed paper [...] Huge amounts of texts were pouring out every day. (Dayan 2000, 52)

In this chapter we seize the momentum of the pandemic crisis and its disruption of the film festival world to consider festivals' stake in the climate and ecological crisis. Juxtaposed to the immediate risks of the global health crisis, a range of environmental issues causes our planet to suffer longitudinal adverse effects that are threatening livability on earth.

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In the long term, environmental hazards pose risks more severe than epidemic and pandemic outbreaks, and awareness of the need to make structural changes now in order to avert future ecological disasters is growing. According to a recent newspaper report, “Two-thirds of people around the world said climate change is a global emergency” (Carrington 2021), based on a recent study by the United Nations Development Programme (“The Peoples’ Climate Vote” 2021). Film festivals have played a role in raising awareness about environmental issues through the power of film, both thanks to the persistent programming and agenda setting of thematic film festivals dedicated to eco-issues¹ and on account of the buzz, critical acclaim, and impact created by major festivals around films that promulgate environmental concerns, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (David Guggenheim, 2006).² Yet, while public concern worldwide over global warming has never been greater, progress toward making necessary transitions in the film festival world *itself* is falling behind. Therefore, Covid-19 offers a welcome opportunity to take a step back and reassess from an environmentalist perspective the mechanisms, practices, and logics that have been powering film festivals. At a time when regular festival flows are breached, there is space to imagine what a “new normal” might be in the post-Covid festival world.

We seek to commence this future-oriented discussion. Evidently we are very much at an early stage in such a formulation and our approach will lean toward the exploratory. Drawing on a variety of sources we point toward important issues to be raised and directions to be taken. We will touch upon three layers of concern that need to be considered holistically when taking on the challenge of greening film festivals.

¹Thematic film festivals that are dedicated to environmental issues go back to at least the 1970s, with the International Film Festival Ekofilm (Czech Republic), 1974. Numbers surge in the 2000s and 2010s (“Green Film Network (GFN)” 2021). Other early examples include International Environmental Film Festival of the Canary Islands, FIMEC (Spain), 1982; Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital, CDEFF (USA), 1993; CinEco—Serra Da Estrela Environmental Film Festival (Portugal), 1995; CinemAmbiente—Environmental Film Festival (Italy), 1998; and Planet in Focus International Environmental Film Festival (Canada), 1999.

²The documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* features the slide show presentation of former US Vice President Al Gore’s campaign on global warming. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festivals in 2006 and screened out of competition at Cannes later that year.

The first layer tackles the context of festival operations, namely, all arrangements and preparations required to organize festival events.³ Awareness that operations logistics ought to be laid along an ecological yardstick is growing among both festival organizers and visitors as concerns about climate change and the environmental crisis are gaining weight. In order to make the transition toward greener practices in the festival world, substantial efforts are needed. In particular, Covid-19 is making us face the facts regarding film festivals' share in harmful air travel.

The second layer addresses the emergent discourse of environmentalist media studies. There has been a notable recent increase in interest in environmentalist critique in visual and media studies (Belkhir and Elmeligi 2018; Chang, Ivakhiv and Walker 2019; Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020; Stine 2018). What can film festival scholars learn from it and in turn contribute to the area? The Internet infrastructure has long been masked and kept tidily out of the view of most of the population (Carruth 2014; Crawford 2021). Let's consider critically the consequences of the virtualization of film festivals, among other online media streaming. In this section we will warn against simplistic framing of virtual events as green solution.

The third layer puts the "eco" back into "ecosystem." The phrase "festival ecosystem" itself is becoming popular in the discourse on film festivals in which "ecosystem" takes its more general figurative sense beyond the original association with biological environment. We think that the time is right to bring what we are calling the festival ecosystem back into a more literal relationship with "environmental media," media infrastructure, and its material relations to the biological environment. This will entail a rethinking of how that ecosystem can be made to work in balance with our planetary needs regarding its natural resources. In a salute to the Club of Rome⁴ we call upon festivals scholars and professionals alike to consider the limits of widespread festival mechanisms that are rooted in a logics of growth and abundance.

³In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, FIAPF has put out two calls to governments to aid their film festivals and film industries through the pandemic ("Why Film Festivals Matter? Call to Policy-Makers from 41 International Film Festivals and Trade Associations." 2020).

⁴The idea that planet earth has a finite supply of resources and therefore that there are limits to the exponential economic and population growth became widespread through the 1972 report "The Limits of Growth," which was commissioned by the Club of Rome (Meadows 1972).

BLUE SKIES

The success of *An Inconvenient Truth* on the film festival circuit stood at the beginning of what is arguably one of the most effective campaigns to raise international public awareness on issues of climate crisis.⁵ One of the most memorable moments in the film is when Al Gore uses the dramatic power of data visualization to persuade his audience of the alarming state of global warming. We see him deliver his presentation on stage before a huge screen. He shows a graph with CO₂ emissions over the centuries and their correlation with temperature change. The pattern appears cyclical until the present age when the curve turns into a steep upward, almost vertical line. Gore stands on a rising scissor lift for the climax: if no action is taken, the line continues to move up and up until it goes off the chart and off the screen.

It is standard scientific practice to rely on data for monitoring the condition of our environments, measuring immediate effects and predicting long-term developments. It is a more recent phenomenon to see an increase in use of such data in the public domain to raise green awareness. In the 1980s when the problem of acid rain garnered widespread visibility in Europe and North America, media coverage relied heavily on alarming scenarios featuring dying trees, corroding monuments, and lakes floated with dead fish. The underlying scientific story of harmful SO₂ (sulfur dioxide) and NO_x (nitrogen) emissions was told, but reporting and governmental campaigns were carried by dystopian imagery. In the late 1990s William Rees' striking metaphor of the ecological footprint propelled a turn to datafied discourses. He co-developed the notion of ecofootprint (Ecological Footprint Analysis) as a practical model for measuring impact on the environment (Wackernagel and Rees 1996), thus ushering in an era in which calculators for measuring impact would move into mainstream discourses on sustainability. Media coverage of today's best known environmental calamity—global warming—does not revolve around footage of melting icecaps and polar bears stranded on thin ice floes, rather such

⁵ *An Inconvenient Truth* won numerous awards, including two Academy Awards for Best Documentary and Best Original Song (2007). Al Gore was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2007, along with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) “for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change” (“The Nobel Peace Prize 2007” 2021). In 2017 the sequel to the documentary was released: *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Schenk.

audiovisuals are part of multimodal communication strategies that equally deploy data visualizations and data infused discourses to maximize their effect.

In the film world, calculators for carbon footprints and other practical tools have been on the rise for a decade. Notable initiatives for green film production are the American Green Production Guide (GPG)⁶ and the European Green Film Shooting platform.⁷ The GPG Toolkit includes a sustainable practices checklist (PEACH/PEACH+), carbon footprint calculator (PEAR), and plywood tracking worksheet (PLUM). In Europe, various institutions provide information and advice on sustainable filmmaking and offer their own calculator tools: such as Carbon'Clap (*EcoProd* collective, France 2010), Albert carbon calculator (developed by the BBC in 2010, adopted by BAFTA in 2011), E-mission carbon calculator (Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds, Flanders 2014), and the MFG carbon calculator (Medien- und Filmgesellschaft Baden-Württemberg, Germany 2017). In the film festival world an equivalent does not yet exist. While much has been written on the importance of the meanings produced and circulated by film festivals, nothing has addressed their refuse and environmental costs.

In his pioneering study of Sundance Film Festival, anthropologist Daniel Dayan writes,

While Park City officials kept showing films and throwing parties, a *Niagara of printed paper* was spelling out meanings, offering captions, telling and retelling daily events until they reached a stable, paradigmatic form. *Huge amounts of texts* were pouring out every day. Some preceded the event, some looked at it in retrospect and many ran parallel to the festival. One could talk of a double festival: the visual festival of films and the whole of Park City as 'the written festival'. (Dayan 2000, 52) [emphasis added]

Dayan's original point in this passage was undoubtedly to draw our attention to the impressive textual production of meanings circulating throughout the festival. With a different, more environmentalist lens, we may now

⁶ Founded in 2010, the GPG is a joint effort between the Producers Guild of America's Foundation's PGQ Green Committee and the Sustainable Production Alliance. www.green-productionguide.com.

⁷ *Green Film Shooting* is a platform for sustainability in the media industry established in cooperation with the Filmförderung Schlesweg-Holstein (FFHSH) in 2013. <https://greenfilmshooting.net/blog/en/>.

appreciate it for its acknowledgment of the *materiality* of the ephemera and documents produced by and around the pre-Internet festivals of the 1990s. Where did this “Niagara of printed paper”⁸ end up, after all? Did anyone ever seriously consider the ecological impact of so much waste?

Starting to think about greening film festivals begins with the acknowledgment of their ecological footprints. Besides learning from initiatives for green film production, we can turn to the sector of green event management for insights into the various areas of impact. Green Events Nederland, for example, draws on Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economy model (Raworth 2018) and the UN sustainability goals (“THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development” 2021) to distinguish between six areas of direct impact.⁹ Once festivals have a good sense of the components that make up their eco-footprint, they can move to monitoring their use of resources and/or adopt smart practices that will lower the footprints in those areas. As such, Dayan’s Niagara of printed paper is indicative of the need to leave old-fashioned “Take, Make & Dispose” approaches behind and adopt greener “Reduce, Reuse & Recycle” practices (www.greenevents.nl/areasofimpact/).

Film festivals may start with low hanging fruit but will certainly have to address the highest areas of impact in order to achieve green practices that are most effective. This shall make mobility a priority area for film festivals in the period ahead of us. Aviation has a major impact on climate change. Flying is the most climate-intensive form of transport and has been one of the fastest growing sources of greenhouse gas (GHG) in the past 20 years (“Flying and climate change” 2021). While more and more people book flights, especially in affluent countries, it still is only a very small percentage of the world population that can be considered a regular flyer. In 2019 the aviation industry produced 2.4% of global CO₂ emissions and was responsible for about 5% of global warming due to the CO₂ emissions plus other gases and water vapor trails (Timperley 2020). Growing awareness that flying bumps personal carbon footprints, however, has not weakened the curve of airline passenger growth and chances to mitigate the climate impact of air travel seemed slim at the start of 2020.

⁸It is worth noting that the modern industrialized Niagara Falls is not merely an impressive image of nature, water flowing, but harnessed to produce electricity for millions of people and industrial sectors in the region, which adds to Dayan’s figure.

⁹These are natural resources, food and drinks, energy, mobility, water, and nature. In addition, they work with four areas of indirect impact that are also deemed vital for sustainable futures: health, social change, economic impact, and legacy. <https://greenevents.nl/areasofimpact/>.

The Covid-19 pandemic, however, caused an unprecedented decline in world passengers traffic and brought the festival flux of people transferring to and from events to a standstill.¹⁰ Earlier crises like the Gulf Crisis of 1990–1991 and the Financial Crisis of 2008 had caused stagnation in air travel. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon too put a temporary hold on passenger growth and led to implementation of enhanced securating measures (Clark et al. 2009). But the clear impact of these historical markers pales in comparison to the 2020 situation. A key concern in light of climate change and sustainable development goals is whether Covid-19 will mark the moment a structural shift in industry and consumers' behaviors regarding air travel will be forged. Bringing it back to this chapter's topic, will the “new normal” see a reduction of film festivals' gross aviation footprint?

While individuals should assess whether flying is necessary or if there are alternatives, organizations and businesses must take on their responsibility as they become more aware of the environmental consequences of their actions. Companies can reduce the requirements on their staff to fly, promote other forms of travel, prioritize the use of conference or video calls, and, if flying is necessary, book the least harmful flights (newest aircrafts, economy class, direct flights), even if these are more expensive (Timperley 2020). Film festivals need to take such criteria into consideration as well when arranging guest travel and opt for partnerships and sponsors that invest in sustainable mobility.

Covid-19 has brought about creative responses to the social condition of life under the pandemic, some of which will likely remain in some form or another. The increased virtualization of film festivals is one of our specific concerns here.¹¹ Looking through the environmentalist lens, the

¹⁰World passenger traffic collapsed with -60% or 2699 million passengers compared to 2019 levels (“Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis” 2021).

¹¹To clarify our vocabulary, we suggest the following. Since dedicated “online festivals” have been with us already since the beginning of the millennium (Hernandez 1999; Castle 2000; Straw 2000; Rownd 2000), the phenomenon before us currently is much more of a virtualization of legacy film festivals, namely, existent conventional in-situ film festivals that have a history of taking place in physical spaces with in-person participants and audiences that are extending themselves virtually through a variety of video streaming possibilities afforded by social and other digital media. Diane Burgess and Kirsten Stevens (in a chapter in this book) qualify the difference between the historical online and virtualized film festivals further, unlike online film festivals, many virtual film festivals moved into the online space out of necessity rather than choice. Throughout 2020–2021 festivals have had to decide whether to go virtual in some respect or cancel the edition (De Valck and Damiens 2020; Zielinski 2020).

pandemic period of forced experiments with virtualized forms of industry events and filmmaker participation is—at least partly—a blessing in disguise. Out of necessity many film festivals have tried out alternatives to the physical events that do not depend on extensive traveling of film festival visitors. Festival organizations now have a broader palette of possibilities at their disposal, some on-site, some online, others taking hybrid forms. If we assess the mood in the film festival world correctly, the hybrid model is here to stay, even if it is not embraced by all festival organizations. Yet we are only at the beginning of finding out how it can be unfolded in the most ecofriendly way.

By way of example, we mention some promising sustainable directions to consider. First, holding Q&As via live video connection could become a common practice that coexists with in-person festival appearances. Many film festivals have a two/three-night policy in which filmmakers are flown in to attend the screenings of their film and pay a snap visit to the festival. This generates a high-speed rotation of festival guests, which weighs heavily on festival's mobility footprint. Greening festivals' guest policies would entail thinking about criteria for stricter selection—for example, in-person visits for premiers and retrospectives, quota for other program parts—and slowing down the turn-around rate of hosting. Festivals could opt for directing their resources to hosting *fewer* invited quests for a *longer* period. When guests provide and enjoy multiple benefits with in-person festival visits—outreach, networking, training (giving and/or receiving), and so on—their traveling and aviation footprint can be justified. Other guests will be able to participate and make a meaningful contribution to the festival in virtual form.

Second, the option of hybrid markets should be further explored. The combination of physical and virtual components grants professionals the choice to attend at a distance. If such a mix is embraced industry-wide, individuals could adhere to a personal flying-diet or company-imposed flying quota plan. It is not unlikely there will be plenty professionals who are not so eager to return to a job that requires them to live in the air and spent significant amounts of time away from home when ways to execute (parts of) their work alternatively have been tried and tested. The industry needs to take its responsibility in reducing requirements and changing practices. Having experimented with virtual alternatives, professionals are in a much better position to reflect when and how often the face-to-face encounters have added value for whom, and what online counterparts work well, well enough or perhaps even better.

Let us be clear, we are not arguing film festivals should give up organizing physical events and markets nor stop hosting international guests or making use of air travel altogether. In-person encounters and collective experiences are festivals' bread and butter and vital for sustaining the diversity, transnational collaboration, and international exchange that are driving our global film cultures and industries. However, the pandemic moment offers an unprecedented opportunity to make progress on the issue of mobility from a sustainability agenda. Do we want to return to a crowded airspace or strive for blue skies? How can the total number of film festival-related flights be reduced compared to 2019 levels? Which alternative green practices need to be embraced by the global film industry and festival world now in order to prevent a U-shape scenario,¹² in which the pandemic drop in world airline passenger traffic is followed by an accelerated rise and return to the curve of continuous growth?

HEAVY CLOUDS

As festivals have digitized and virtualized themselves over waves of adaptation and cost-cutting, the range of media employed by festivals has expanded much since the 1990s. Moreover, we have witnessed the related processes of digitization and going “paperless” since Dayan’s study was published (De Valck 2008). While printed paper is still important at major film festivals, an assortment of electronic documents and video- and live-streaming initiatives have been tested out during the pandemic, some have become routine, others are still in an experimental phase. However, while the shift to digital and virtual lowers festivals’ footprint in some areas, it *increases* impact elsewhere exponentially: energy use.

¹²During the pandemic several forward-looking scenarios are developed in the aviation industry, that sketch possible paths—following different recession shapes like the V-shape, W-shape, U-shape, Nike-swoosh, or L-shape. A V-shape recovery shows a quick recovery to baseline level (previous pandemic outbreaks had a V-shaped impact on air travel in the Asia/Pacific region); the W-shape scenario is characterized by capacity to start with smooth recovery, but then turns back down due to over-capacity; the Nike-swoosh shows smooth and swift recovery by pent-up demand but at diminishing rate of growth; the U-shape begins with a slow recovery capacity that is followed by accelerated growth (the financial crisis and 9/11 attacks show U-shape recovery); and finally, the L-shape shows capacity of recovery only at diminishing speed due to continuous demand slump and sluggish demand growth (“Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis” 2021).

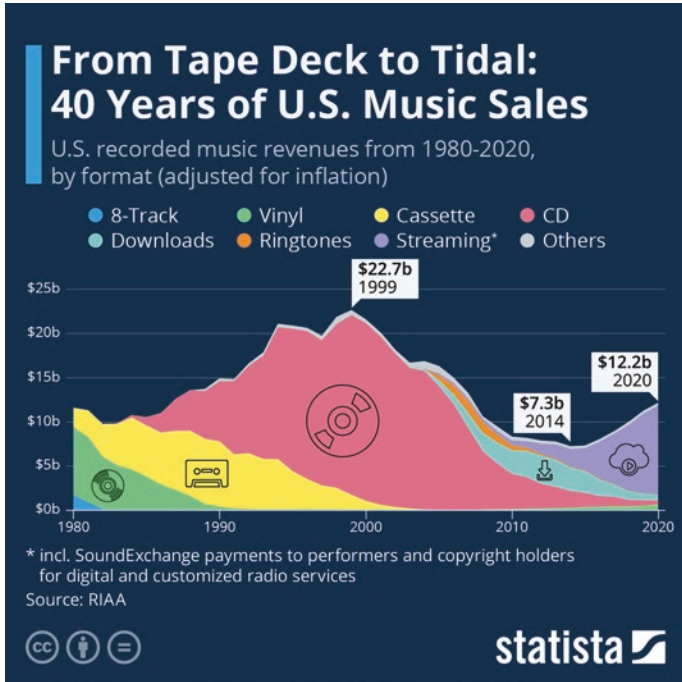


Fig. 16.1 “From tape deck to tidal: 40 years of U.S. music sales” (Richter 2021) (CC BY-ND 4.0)

The music industry has led the way in new technology adoption in the past and continues to do so today. Figure 16.1 “From Tape Deck to Tidal: 40 Years of U.S. Music Sales” (Richter 2021) shows the decline of physical media and rise of streaming and other digital media over the last few decades. Video (and television) is following a similar path. As Zielinski (2020) recently noted, before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic our total Internet activities consumed as much energy as the entire airline industry, namely, about 2% of all energy consumption worldwide. As detailed earlier, the airline industry today is facing its own severe crisis, while we are keeping ourselves distracted by streaming and bingeing our favorite series and films online at home, so it is reasonable to anticipate that our Internet activities have overtaken the airline industry at least for the duration of the pandemic and that the estimate of 2% will need to be adjusted upwards. In his essay-manifesto “Cinema and Media Pedagogy in

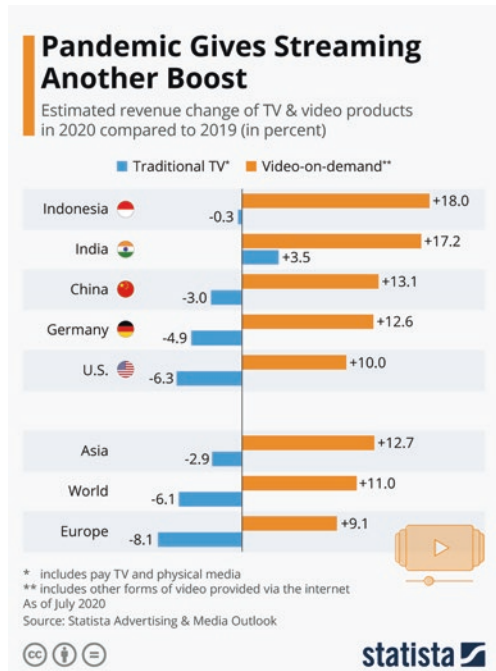
the Streaming Era” Lucas Hilderbrand posits the following acknowledgment as a part of an environmental media studies consciousness-raising strategy to be placed in the context of university and college courses and conferences. He states,

Streaming media has a significant carbon footprint due to the high energy usage necessary for data storage on servers, for transmission, and for playback. The scale of emissions depends on both the energy sources (fossil fuels create more impact than renewable ones) and the amount of data streamed (higher-definition streams use more energy than standard-definition ones, and video requires more energy than audio). Although migration to renewable energy sources has improved, demand for streaming content and bandwidth has accelerated even more. You can reduce your carbon footprint by reducing how much you stream, by reducing the resolution of your playback, by dimming your device, and by lobbying your energy provider and government regulators to switch to renewable energy sources. Broadcast sources (such as radio), tangible media (such as vinyl records and DVDs), and collective viewing (such as in a movie theater) have a lower carbon footprint than everyone individually streaming music and audiovisual media. (Hilderbrand 2020)

He then goes on to lay out a program of action that ought to be implemented in cinema and media studies courses that screen videos. Evidently, not only university students are in need of this consciousness-raising. “Festival studies” much like the larger umbrella field of “media studies” presupposes an infinite raw resource of materials that goes unnoticed in the discourse. Somehow media takes place. Somehow we are able to email, text, upload, or “share” a photo of our cat or latest meal with a friend on their device. Somehow we are able to search, load, and watch a seemingly unending list of YouTube or Vimeo videos. Somehow we are able to access, choose, load, stream, and binge our favorite series on demand. As the material consequences become more and more tangible and evident to large segments of society, it is crucial to engage in an environmental critique of streaming and other forms of virtualization, all the more because these have been boosted during the pandemic.

The special conditions of the global pandemic on households in relative isolation have significantly hastened a sharp increase in online video-on-demand streaming services worldwide and smaller decreases in physical media (DVD/BluRay), old broadcast and pay television, according to Fig. 16.2 “Pandemic Gives Streaming Another Boost” (Buchholz 2020).

Fig. 16.2 “Pandemic gives streaming another boost” (Buchholz 2020) (CC BY-ND 4.0)



Much against the grain of Hilderbrand’s manifesto, the tendency now and in the near future strongly favors streaming video and music over the older formats. How do we as film or media studies scholars take into account such changes and their consequences not only formally or textually but also in relation to energy consumption?

In the last few years there has been a striking growth of scholarship on the material consequences of media, new and old, their energy infrastructure, as well as the material composition of the media technologies and mobile devices. In the first issue of the *Journal of Environmental Media*,¹³ founding editors Shriver-Rice and Vaughan lay out their expansive meaning of

¹³As the effects of climate change and global warming become more apparent to more people, it is not surprising that two English-language journals dedicated to the myriad of relations between media and the environment have emerged in the last few years, including the impressive online open-access journal *Media+Environment* (Chang et al. 2019).

environmental media studies, as both a range of topics and as shorthand for an emerging interdisciplinary subfield, refers to applied academic studies motivated by the need to address problems at the overlapping spheres of environmental issues and the production and use of new media. (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 3)

The guiding principles that undergird this nascent interdisciplinary field of environmental media studies take a narrow view of media with an emphasis on digital screen culture that “treat[s] the digital as material rather than virtual: the Internet and its infrastructures exist in real spaces that use resources in measurable and destructive ways,” which is very important to our aim in this chapter. The writers continue in a note,

reading this article on an iPad requires extensive precious metal mining, and may not actually be more environmentally friendly than holding the printed page in your hand if your iPad is connected to a power grid run on ‘dirty’ energy and receiving information from server farms thousands of miles away. (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 3–4)

Their example brings to our attention the materiality of our digital habits, namely, the elements required to manufacture our devices and the quality of the energy required to run the Internet servers that keep data available to us 24/7 as well as the local power grid. The Internet has become a rich resource with great potential, but its infrastructure is neither magical nor without material consequence. Therefore it ought not to be overlooked when measuring individual, institutional, and corporate footprints. Awareness of the impact of energy consumption in media-use habits can be raised by making their materiality visible—showing images of massive data centers popping up like mushrooms across the globe, wind and solar parks that are changing landscapes—and also by using tools, calculators, and datified discourses similar to the ones leveled at others parts of society.

Let’s consider a handful of proposals. First, media artist Jason Livingston proposes developing a “speculative app” that identifies “streaming times and data transfer quantities, and [translates] those into energy consumption and thus into IRL consequences” (Livingston 2020) such as the Carbonalyser smartphone app developed by The Shifters to monitor our energy consumption through online streaming (“Carbonalyser’: The Browser Extension Which Reveals the Climate Impact of Internet

Navigation” n.d.).¹⁴ Second, media scholar Laura Marks offers a cogent analysis and useful suggestions for reducing the carbon footprint of online streaming. She writes, “[c]alculating the environmental impact of streaming video requires identifying the energy source at each point, from data centers to end user. While this varies greatly among countries and regions, currently about 80 percent of global electricity is generated from fossil fuels” (Marks 2020b). In the same article, a method to calculate estimates of the amount of energy consumed in video streaming is developed. She elucidates,

For example, I stream thirty-five hours of video a month to my computer at 1080-pixel resolution. The energy that this requires is 382.36 kWh. According to the EPA calculator, that’s 2.68 metric tons of CO₂. It’s equivalent to the CO₂ emissions from 30.4 gallons of gas consumed by a vehicle, or the carbon sequestered by 4.5 tree seedlings grown for ten years. (Marks 2020b)

This certainly unsettles any naïve intuitions one may have concerning the material effects of streaming habits. Marks also offers a series of general recommendations to media consumers on lowering their carbon footprint, namely, stream less, use physical media (USB drives), watch films at cinemas, watch broadcast/cable television, consider high resolution for special occasions, borrow DVDs from the library, pay carbon offsets, lobby governments to include carbon taxes in the business model of Internet providers, avoid the HD option on cameraphones, and slow the frequency of replacing cellphones. To media producers, she recommends that they make “works in versions: one for live screening or installation, another for streaming” (Marks 2020b) See also Marks (2020a).

As film festivals follow through on the impulse to virtualize themselves, the work and recommendations of these ecominded media scholars offer valuable starting points for thinking the ramifications of virtualization through. What will be clear from the above is that moving things online does not constitute a quick fix for greening film festivals. The more we rely on the convenience of the cloud, the heavier this become. The cloud metaphor is quite deceptive in masking how cloud computing depends on

¹⁴ Livenstone’s proposal is clearly at a preliminary stage and will require much more concerted research and development to monitor and calculate with greater accuracy, since a part of the estimation would be dependent on the quality of the user’s local energy grid and the quality of the energy sources wherever the servers are stationed.

large-scale industrial server farms with its connotation of being airy and light, immaterial and intangible (Carruth 2014). Ultimately, everything comes at an environmental cost and it will be a matter of weighing and measuring the various components of festival organization in a holistic way. A large auditorium or square filled with festival viewers will easily trump on-demand streaming to individual users in sustainable use of energy. But if such collective gathering includes ample international visitors relying on long-distance travel, this ecological advantage, evidently, is annulled.

GREEN FUTURES

Thinking forward, we are anticipating not only changes in how film festivals are designed, run, and experienced, but also how they are studied within an expanded environmentalist media framework. As a growing awareness of and consensus over the fact of climate change becomes more pressing, not only will our actions and technology in our everyday worlds be questioned and transformed but also the questions we ask and research we pursue as media and festival scholars.

The time is right to put the “eco” back into the film festival ecosystem, a metaphor itself that is gaining popularity vis-à-vis other terms, such as the international film festival circuit, the film festival network, and, more recently, film festival world(s).¹⁵ With our environmentalist glasses on, we need to cast a critical look at drivers in this film festival ecosystem. Kenneth Turan, seasoned film critic and author of *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made*, already pointed at festivals’ most prominent characteristic; that they are everywhere and a “growth industry” (Turan 2003). While the proliferation of film festivals is often lamented, the system’s logics of growth is not commonly contested. After all, the reasoning behind their expansion is the ever shrinking space for foreign-language, independent, and other peripheral films in mainstream distribution. Festival expansion is fueled by desires to preserve and promote diversity, to use film to educate or activate audiences, and by agendas to protect (minoritized) industry interests against conglomerate power.

A similar yet distinctly less idealistic version of this logic, however, can be found underlying film festival management and funding. Many festivals

¹⁵See Chap. 13 by Dovey and Sendra for an argument to use the plural “film festival worlds.”

are in the business of orchestrating abundance and compete with each other not only qualitatively, but also quantitatively. In a crowded film festival world, size matters. The festivals in the top tier of the hierarchy reassert their position with a demonstrative use of resources—branded visibility, lavish parties, red-carpet fashion displays. But also in the lower tiers and on the level of audience festivals a taste for plenty is leading; a typical festival offers accessibility to more films, events, and ancillary programming than any individual can consume during the event. Is it notoriously tricky for festivals to downsize.

With the advent of neoliberal modes of governance, the pressure on festival organizations to be accountable toward their sponsors increasingly leans on datified forms. Funders require measurable proof of impact, and festivals comply by providing the statistics. Evidently, not everything lends itself to the quantifiable approach, so the parameters that do gain more weight in the system's logics, creating a self-generating effect. Let's zoom in: a typical key performance indicator is the number of guests attending. Festivals count how many official attendees are welcomed, in what capacity they are visiting and where they are from. They also keep track of general audience numbers. Visitor growth is a sign of success, consolidation is stagnation, and decline really sets off funders' alarms, with the perverse effect of setting the incentive for festival organizations to pursue growth. This can have catastrophic consequences from an environmentalist perspective.

The Cannes Market, for example, claimed a record number of participants in 2019: 12,527 attendees, representing 121 different countries (*Variety* 2019; Goodfellow 2019). The Cannes Film Festival and market together boosted no less than 40,000 visitors with official accreditation that year, including around 4500 press accreditations (*France24* 2019). That is a doubling compared to the 2004 level of 20,000 (Follows 2014). Picture these numbers as data visualization and you will see a graph that coincides exactly with the rising curve of pre-Covid world passenger air traffic development.

Our plea here is to seize the pandemic moment to review the logic of growth at film festivals and consider its limits. We call upon scholars and professionals alike to start rethinking the film festival ecosystem, finding green solutions or tweaks to common festival habits and practices and drafting film-festival-specific sustainability goals to make things happen. There are plenty of inspirational initiatives that can point us toward green

futures, some of which have been around for years,¹⁶ others freshly hatched during the pandemic. Let us provide some detail on one of these by way of a concrete case study.

The innovative online environmental media activist Small File Media Festival¹⁷ made its debut during the pandemic August 10–20, 2020. Based at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, it is already planning its 2021 edition. According to its website the festival introduces itself as celebrating

low-bandwidth movies that stream with no damage to the planet! Streaming video has an alarmingly high carbon footprint: it's the cause of about 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions. But these movies at under 5 megabytes each—about the size of a small PDF file—show that great cinema doesn't have to mean great big files. (“Small File Media Festival” 2020)

The organizers choose an estimate for video streaming instead of that for overall online activity. The proposition here is to advocate for smaller-size video files that require less bandwidth in their streaming and therefore reduce the carbon footprint. Its larger aim is educational while calling attention to the fact that “streaming media has a massive carbon footprint” (“Small File Media Festival” 2020).

The inventive “small file” videos themselves were curated into thematic programs¹⁸ by a team of three, namely, Faune Ybarra, Radek Przedpeński, and Alejandro Rodriguez-Silva. The festival continues the tradition of low-fi (low-fidelity) or small gauge media, for example, Super-8 film festivals, where the “small file” critically challenges professional formats and standards. Not surprisingly, many of the films were short in duration and of an experimental nature that tested out formal qualities enabled by the small-file constraints of the medium. Under “solutions” on the festival website, the organizers suggest two poetic strategies to the potential videomakers, including the clever use of sound and still image as in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), and the ephemeral media demoscene computer presentations. On the other hand, they offer technical solutions on how to compress video via several digital editing software such as Handbrake and Avidmux. The festival is clearly niche but important to consider. While the

¹⁶ See, for example, the environmental film festivals mentioned in footnote 2.

¹⁷ Other aspects of the Small File Media Festival are discussed in Zielinski (2020).

¹⁸ The festival had a nominal fee of \$1 CAD with the option to donate funds in the support of its second edition. Notably, all videomakers represented in the programs were paid screening fees.

much larger international film festivals have significantly different aims and occur at a much larger scale, the aim here is to encourage better, environmentally informed “greener” practices in creating videos, particularly for streaming.

While this “tiny file” festival is far from the major international film festivals, it provokes us to reconsider a variety of aspects of festival design. It is through the heightened awareness of the environmental consequences of the design of film festivals and the activities that constitute those festivals that we bring a biological and especially the environmentalist sense of “eco” back to the concept of “ecosystem” that currently circulates within the discourse on festivals. Moving people or things in space and time, whether physically or virtually, doubtless has material consequences in the real world, as we have argued above. Travel, particularly via air, and online streaming together compel us to rethink the nature of the mapped-out festival circuits or networks in a more material sense and ask questions concerning the consumption of resources and the accumulating carbon footprints of the festivals concerned. It seems reasonable to posit that the abstract mapping of the flow of films and people in physical or virtual space now needs to take into account the environmental cost involved.

FINAL REMARKS

Generally, our collective magical thinking that we somehow live in a Newtonian universe of infinite time, space, and resources needs to be adjusted in the light of the current climate crisis. More specifically, as film festival researchers and organizers, our approach to festivals ought to be influenced by the emergent environmentalist critique as it expands media studies.¹⁹ As festivals virtualize and become accessible online from anywhere in the world, how will that new structure alter other ones? Will the value of having several regional or national festivals continue from the public-funding perspective of a government funding agency, if all are equally accessible online? The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified and sped-up the process of virtualization of film festivals and proliferation of festivals with virtual components. Perhaps we will witness the rise of exclusive in-person boutique festivals, such as the Telluride Film Festival, as alternatives to mass gatherings, but will it come with extended virtual access at a

¹⁹See, for example, the forthcoming “On a Greener Film Festival Studies: Towards an Environmentalist Critique and Multidisciplinary Methodologies” (Zielinski 2022).

distance and at the expense of some exclusivity? Perhaps local festivals will increase in popularity as people realize that their on-demand streaming habits contribute to their individual carbon footprints. Perhaps industry agreements on regional markets can lower the pull of the larger international film festivals and reduce need to travel to each. Evidently, these are only a handful of questions and consequences that we anticipate to grow in importance in the near future.

As research continues to develop in this nascent area and the results disseminated, festivals themselves will surely be able to devise greener practices, as noted above, in order to reduce their carbon footprint. Covid-19 has put film festivals' resourcefulness to the test, but also crafted space for future-oriented contemplation. As such, there has never been a better time to start thinking seriously about greening film festivals.

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