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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**



meson press

KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

DFG Deutsche
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Bibliographical Information of the German National Library

The German National Library lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie (German National Bibliography); detailed bibliographic information is available online at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Published in 2020 by meson press, Lüneburg, Germany
with generous support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
www.meson.press

Design concept: Torsten Köchlin, Silke Krieg

Cover design: Mathias Bär

Cover image: © Antoine d'Agata, reprinted with permission from the artist

Editorial assistance: Fabian Wessels

The print edition of this book is printed by Lightning Source,
Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

ISBN (Print): 978-3-95796-008-5

ISBN (PDF): 978-3-95796-009-2

DOI: 10.14619/0085

The PDF edition of this publication can be downloaded freely at www.meson.press.

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FILM

RESILIENCY

VULNERABILITIES

FESTIVAL ECOSYSTEM

ECONOMIC SHOCK

[1 2]

Vulnerabilities and Resiliency in the Festival Ecosystem: Notes on Approaching Film Festivals in Pandemic Times

Marijke de Valck

Film festivals are hit particularly hard in pandemic times. Safety regulations restrict festivals in core activities and organizations suffer from the ensuing economic shock. The global health crisis interferes in the logics of the global art film economy, which is paced by an annual festival and award season rhythm. The impact of COVID-19 on film festivals, however, cannot be generalized. These notes distinguish film festivals on a continuum between film-driven and festival-driven events, remind scholars to consider the diverging vulnerabilities in the film festival ecosystem, and end with a call to combine a tradition in case-study-based scholarship with large-scale data projects to face the challenge of theorizing transitions in the film festival ecosystem.

On April 9, 2020 I took a seat behind the computer to attend the Zoom event “Screen Talks: moving film festivals online during Covid-19.”¹ The inaugural event of the online Screen Talks program discussed opportunities and challenges for film festivals during COVID-19. While *Screen* editor Matt Mueller engaged three guests² in conversation, attendees used the chat to flag presence and send amiable greetings to the group. It was this chat space and the sense of community evoked through a spontaneous presence check that added urgency and connectivity to the online event. It took well over 10 minutes before everybody who felt compelled had been able to express presence.

The conversation that evolved over one hour touched upon several pressing issues in the festival world: choosing between moving online, postponement, and cancellation, the status of world premieres, rights online, geo-blocking, IT solutions, the problem of revenue loss, what the big festivals would do and how this would impact the lifecycle of films and the award season. In addition, anticipated long-term effects were mentioned. One hoped festivals would reap the benefits of their forced digital adventures and expected they would continue working with online programs, in particular because of the advantages of increased access and diversification of audiences. At the same time the sentiment that the value of the theatrical experience would not be lost—and may even emerge stronger from this crisis—found resonance as well. Despite celebration of the connectivity gained, the longing for “real” contact persisted.

The Zoom event constituted an early public discussion on the future of film festivals in pandemic times. It offered a useful practical inventory of the immediate concerns of professionals working for festivals and a preview of debates that will need to be conducted more rigorously in the months and years to come. Despite local differences and a high level of uncertainty about future developments, it is safe to say the festival ecosystem is severely challenged by the enfolding crisis, and that this, in its turn, in time, will require film scholars to reassess the tools and frames they use to make sense of world cinemas and contemporary media industries in which film festivals traditionally take on nodal roles (Andrew 2010; Chaudhuri 2005; de Valck 2006; White 2015). Knowledge of what happens in the professional field will be indispensable for the task ahead of us, and close monitoring of developments, I contend, will have to precede new theorizing. These notes on approaching festivals in pandemic times are a reminder to distinguish amongst the multitude

- 1 The video stream of the talk was recorded and can be watched here: <https://www.screendaily.com/news/screen-talk-the-challenges-and-opportunities-for-film-festivals-during-covid-19/5148961.article>.
- 2 CPH:DOX director Tine Fischer, BFI director of festivals Tricia Tuttle, and executive director and director of programming at Miami Film Festival Jaie Laplante.

of festival events when assessing vulnerabilities and resiliency within the film festival ecosystem before, during, and after COVID-19.

Film and Festival

Of the two key components of film festivals—the films and the festival—it is the festival form that appeared most vulnerable in pandemic times. Confronted with safety regulations or lockdowns many film festivals were quick to respond by making (selections) of their programs available through digital platforms (de Valck and Damiens 2020).³ Having adapted to digital delivery standards in the early 2010s, technical options for moving films online were readily available and relatively easy to achieve by festivals partnering with platform providers. While films migrated online quite smoothly, creative attempts to emulate the festival experience online proved to be more complicated. Virtual talks, Q&As, cocktail parties, and markets differ from their physical counterparts in atmosphere and affordances. Once the initial excitement of online experimentation had waned off and screen time fatigue set in, virtual festivals are, simply put, less festive and therefore less effective in achieving some of their purposes.

The symbiotic relation between films and festival that is forged at film festival events is worth unpacking a bit further, because ties are far from uniform across events. Some festivals serve the films. At others, the films serve the festival. Cannes can serve as emblematic case at one side of the spectrum. On the opposite side we find a myriad of audience events (Peranson 2008). I will take mountain film festivals, an arbitrary choice of genre, as my example here. Cannes is famous as well as notorious for its “hoopla”—the hype and buzz, glitz and glamour, the indulgence and opulent pleasures, the scandals, sun, and sex (Sklar 1996; Bart 1997; Pascal 1997; Schwartz 2007; Jungen 2014). It is this affective and experiential decoration of the event that lubricates the business of international film industries and drives circulation of prime product globally. Festival serves film.⁴ Mountain film festivals are events where adventure sports enthusiasts gather to watch films. The social and communal aspects of the festival are crucial to their popularity, and many festival visitors have prior affiliations through climbing clubs or outdoor gear stores (Frohlick 2005, 177). Their engagement with the narratives and imaginaries of the films

3 See the special dossier Film Festivals and COVID-19 in NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies for reviews of various case studies (de Valck, Damiens 2020).

4 Please note that the use of the word ‘film’ in this context is not elaborated upon and deployed to contrast with the word ‘festival.’ More precise would be to write that the festival form facilitates film business or supports the functioning of a global film economy. Tensions between festivals’ commitments to serve the interest of film as an industry versus film as art form, however, have always existed and are a recurrent point of discussion and critique, in which the term ‘film’ (as art) is typically contrasted with ‘business’ (of film).

constitutes a welcome occasion to form and perform identities that hold social significance in the peer group. The films screened at mountain film festivals, in other words, are vehicles for mountaineering communities to investigate, articulate, and negotiate shared discourses. Films are conducive to the purpose of the festival. While many film festivals ought to be placed somewhere on the continuum between these two extreme poles, a pertinent question to ask is whether the impact of COVID-19 is felt differently on either side?

Impact of COVID-19

It is evident that festivals are hit particularly hard in pandemic times. In anticipation of a vaccine for COVID-19 safety regulations are required to prevent spread of the virus, and as long as social distancing is the norm film festivals are restricted in core activities. Antonyms for festival—described as “social gathering or enjoyable activity to celebrate something”—are solitude, isolation, and lack of company.⁵ At a first glance, the festival-driven events, like the mountain film festivals mentioned above, therefore appear to be heavily affected by the COVID-19 containment measures, precisely because the collective festival experience, the social gathering, constitutes such an essential part of their mission. The Dutch Mountain Film Festival (DMFF) for example states:

The film festival is the moment when memories become shared. It communicates and accounts for these, and excites and entertains its audience. The film festival provides new insights, education and inspiration. The festival is the platform for meeting film producers, adventurers, as well as old mountain comrades, in the ambience of a mountain refuge. It is like a mountain expedition, where new vistas open out after every corner.⁶

By promoting the festival as meeting place and memory site (Nora 1986; see de Valck 2006, 138) DMFF emphasizes the significance of onsite festival encounters for its event. Such a firm commitment to physical encounters was also apparent in the way COVID-19 was handled by the principal player in the field. The Canadian BANFF Mountain Film Festival, which supplies films to the local hosts of the BANFF Mountain Film Festival World Tour, pointedly did *not* chose to move the tour online, but initially opted for postponing events in Europe. Only when the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths continued to increase, BANFF decided to cancel all events for the remaining

5 For a full list of antonyms go to <https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is-the-opposite-of/festival.html>.

6 Website Dutch Mountain Film Festival. Accessed June 15, 2020. <https://www.dmff.eu/en/about-dmff/vision-and-mission/>.

part of the 2020 tour. Particularly telling is the way compensation was handled. Prospective festival visitors who had purchased tickets for the tour were addressed as “dear BANFF fans” and offered two alternatives; either a new streaming platform, where festival tickets could be exchanged for streaming vouchers or the option to receive a voucher for the World Tour 2021.⁷ Looking at communication and platform interface it is striking how clearly the streaming platform is distinguished from the festival. Where other festivals attempt to emulate their events in virtual forms, the BANFF World Tour did not eventify the new platform, but instead set it apart from the festival proper. They seem to have sensed that when the purpose of a film festival surpasses the screening of films, the void that is left by cancellation of physical events cannot be filled with online offerings exclusively.

On the film-driven side of events the cards are shuffled differently. Historically, film festivals are a product of the analogue age, where they constituted politically endorsed solutions to the growing power of globally operating film oligopolies (de Valck 2006). Film festivals were strategically positioned outside existing distribution and exhibition markets to create visibility for national cinemas and support their circulation. As the number of film festivals worldwide increased the global network that was formed displayed strict hierarchical stratification (Loist 2016), with a small number of top festivals taking up nodal positions in a global art film economy—combining multiple functions as cultural gatekeepers, market places, media events—and the rest assuming retail functions as aggregators of prime films launched at the wholesale events (Bachmann 2000) and/or as outlet for a variety of niche products, like mountain films.

In the contemporary digital age, however, the original access problem has lost part of its urgency. Possibilities to distribute media content and aggregate films have exponentially increased (Iordanova and Cunningham 2012; Tryon 2013; Smits 2019), and festivals have seen platform-based companies enter the market and take on roles as aggregators and producers of content formerly typified as festival product (Shattuc 2019; Smits and Nikdel 2019). As a result of the advanced digitized state of the film and media industries—in which digital platforms (e.g. Withoutabox, Vimeo, YouTube) also facilitate processes of festival submission, review, and sales—festival programs *could* be moved online relatively easily from a technological point of view. Decisions to do so, or rather opt for postponing or cancelation, were not only a matter of crisis management, but involved careful consideration of the strategic interests of the various stakeholders involved, and awareness of possible long-term repercussions on dynamics and power relations in the media industries at large. On the film-driven side of festivals, the global health crisis interferes most clearly in the logics of the global art film economy, which is paced by an

7 See <https://banff-tour.de/en/veranstaltungsinformationen>.

annual festival and award season rhythm. In this economy, the top festivals exert crucial gatekeeping functions through eventified processes of symbolic consecration (Elsaesser 2005; English 2008; de Valck 2016). A look at Cannes's handling of the 2020 edition sheds light on the interests involved for a festival at the helm of the system. The Festival de Cannes 2020 was initially postponed from May to June, and when the pandemic was not brought under control, a split between the two core activities was made. The *Marché du Cinema*, the world's premier film market, was moved online and took place from June 22-26. Registration was available from 95 Euros up (early bird fee), including one-year access to Cinando,⁸ the online database of film projects and professional networking and streaming service of the *Marché du Film*. This streaming service was used to hold market screenings during the online edition of the Cannes film market. The official competitions and out-of-competition programs, on the other hand, were not moved online. Instead, on June 3, the festival presented an official 2020 selection list that included 56 titles with the Cannes hallmark of approval.⁹ The list included feature films and shorts as well as classics, all to be released in cinemas carrying the Cannes logo. Choosing distinct strategies for market and festival appears riveted on the hope, prevalent in the festival's offices in Cannes and Paris, that 2020 will remain an anomaly year, after which everybody will go back to business as usual. Hosting the market in virtual forms ensured continuation of pipeline business for future years, while *not* hosting a virtual version of the competition programs protects the festival-model in which cultural legitimization and prestige are traditionally linked to theatrical exhibition as a premier release window. The allegiance to theaters is buttered thickly by Thierry Frémaux in his official statement about the selection:

To be adamant in our decision to deliver an Official Selection is ultimately, for the Festival, the best way to help cinema, as well as focus on the films that will be released in theaters in the coming months. The reopening of cinemas, after months of closure, is a crucial issue. The Cannes Film Festival intends to accompany these films and support their careers in France and abroad, as well as confirm the importance of theaters as in what makes the value of the Seventh Art. We know that many festivals are taking the same position.

The statement closes with an incisive appeal on audiences, "Viva il cinema! See you in the movie theatres."¹⁰

8 Available at www.cinando.com.

9 See Festival de Cannes, "Announcement of the 2020 Official Selection," accessed June 3, 2020, video, 43:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbcvBAXYZCQ>.

10 See Website Festival de Cannes, "About the Official 2020 Selection," accessed June 15, 2020, <http://www.cannes2020.festival-cannes.com/%C3%A0-propos?lang=en>.

While many festivals did explore digital routes to connect to audiences, the hesitance and reserve of industry players, including the major festivals themselves, to embrace platform aggregation in lieu of festival curation is indicative of the anxiety over tech companies' growing power in the field (see Srnicek 2016; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018).

Vulnerabilities and Resiliency in the Film Festival Ecosystem

Approaching film festivals from a scholarly perspective in pandemic times ought to start by taking note of the individual situation of events. Use of stakeholder theory is common to map various interests involved (Rhyne 2009; Ooi and Pedersen 2010) and elucidate the position and function of festivals in their local, regional, and international contexts. Generalizations about the impact of COVID-19 on festivals are, at the time of writing this—a couple of months into the pandemic—premature, albeit perhaps one: In the short-term, the festivals' biggest problem is financial. How can film festival organizations survive COVID-19 when there are limited ways to generate alternative income? Monetization of online content is tricky, while straight-out cancellation of events results in sure loss of revenues and fees, loss of sponsoring, and a drop of interest in merchandise. The COVID-19 economic shock will come down hard on film festivals.¹¹ Uncertainty about extended lockdowns, second waves, and possible implementation of safety regulations for several years to come leads to less funding options. The recession caused by the pandemic, moreover, will force a range of companies to cut sponsor budgets, so new fundraising needs to be taken on while rising unemployment figures impact audience demand. Few organizations have sufficient reserves to withstand the economic shock without support and are challenged in achieving a healthy funding mix. It is the economic crisis rather than the pandemic then that exposes key vulnerabilities in the film festival ecosystem. In Europe, where governmental support programs and relief funds for the cultural sector are made available, two things are apparent: capital reserved for arts and culture is relatively modest, and support prioritizes established cultural institutions. Typically, these include the larger film festivals that already receive structural subsidies and have an industry function to sustain.¹² In other words, it is the film-driven

11 See, for example, staff cuts at North American festivals: South by Southwest laid off 50 employees (33%). *Variety*, March 9 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/sxsw-lays-off-one-third-of-employees-in-heartbreaking-step-1203528553/>; Toronto International Film Festival announced to lay off 31 full-time staffers (17%) *CBS News*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/tiff-layoffs-1.5623910>; and the Sundance Institute cut 24 positions (13%). *Indiwire*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/07/sundance-layoffs-cut-staff-budgets-labs-1234570905/>.

12 In a post COVID-19 world, greening of international film festivals with their heavy trafficking of guests and visitors, could emerge high on the agenda, and pose the

side of the earlier sketched continuum of film festivals that receives support. Will the rest bounce back as well, or will COVID-19 constitute the turning point after an age of festivalisation? It is too early to tell. What we can say is that moving towards the festival pole this question becomes more and more intertwined with the resiliency and resources of festivals' support communities. The proliferation of film festivals has been described and analyzed by scholars positioning themselves as part of a new subfield of film festival studies (see de Valck and Loist 2009; de Valck and Loist 2013; Iordanova 2013).¹³ In the context of COVID-19 I want to draw special attention to the conceptual frames that elucidate the appeal of festivals *as physical events*. Following Janet Harbord (2009) and Odile Goerg (1999), Lindiwe Dovey, for example, emphasizes festivals' liveness in her reading of the popularity of festivals. She argues: "It is the participants at film festivals who bring the possibility of the contingent with them, and with this human contingency and face-to-face collectivity also comes the possibility of disruption and, thus, perhaps some kind of change to the status quo" (Dovey 2015, 15). Ethnographic studies of festival audiences too, emphasize the attraction of being there, live; the physical pleasure of watching films together and favored experience of "coming closer" to industry professionals (Dickson 2015; Xu and Reijnders 2018). Understandings of festival encounters have been further refined by including attention to the role of friendships and collaborations (Damiens 2020). When we take a cue from these scholars and concentrate our perspective on the possibilities generated at festivals through their enabling of social contact and affective labor we may get a good sense of what type of resources can be tapped into, in addition to the much needed economic support to face the challenges posed by COVID-19. Friends and funding, that is in short what film festivals need more than ever in pandemic times. In what proportions heavily depends on each festival's individual situation and needs, which is to be observed on a case by case basis.

Film festival studies has a strong tradition in case-study-based research and is well equipped to take on the task of monitoring what happens at individual film festivals. Assessing how the film festival ecosystem as a whole may be impacted by COVID-19, however, requires a new set of tools. A few scholars have begun the work of collecting larger sets of data to map film festival landscapes regionally and historically (e.g. van Vliet 2018; Peirano 2020; Vallejo 2020) and study film circulation through festivals (Loist and Samoilova 2019). It is such work that will enable the tracking and tracing of mutations in regional contexts and confirm or contradict expectations about diverging vulnerabilities. Anno 2020 the film festival ecosystem is dotted

challenge of lowering festivals' footprint while sustaining their crucial networking function.

13 Updates on the 2009 and 2013 annotated bibliographies of film festival research are provided at www.filmfestivalresearch.org.

with small festival organizations that rely on volunteer labor, community encouragement, eclectic support networks, and creative fundraising. Typically, these are festival-driven events. I would not be surprised if, considering their strong dependence on human capital, the effect of COVID-19 on such events is temporary. The longing for “real” contact will not disappear as the first Screen Talks alluded to and people are likely to reassume their affective investments in cultural encounters when opportunities arise. It is also clear that developments on the opposite side of the continuum will be couched in a power play of economic, geopolitical, and cultural interests. It is the space in between—the mid-sized festivals that have professionalized their organizations but are devoid of solid financing and depend on incidental sponsoring and funds—that may be most at risk; they need a lot of friends to make up for a lack of funds. For the moment, this remains speculation. By combining the wealth of case-study based contextual knowledge with large-scale projects that map and analyze the long-term impact of COVID-19 our film festival landscapes, film festival scholars will have a solid base to rethink festivalization in pandemic times.

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these “pandemic media” reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and politics with which they are entangled. Highlighting media’s adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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