

Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies

Volume 15 Number 1

© 2023 Intellect Ltd Viewpoint. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00082_7

Received 25 May 2021; Accepted 26 January 2023

VIEWPOINT

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Film festivals in times of COVID-19: Online vs. live events – The case of Alicante region

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 caused many cultural events to change, also encouraged by the demand of an audience that would otherwise no longer have had access to culture. Among the diverse types of film festivals, it was the festival-driven form that appeared most vulnerable in pandemic times. Consequently, many of them faced important challenges to try to maintain their status and continuity. From personal interviews to directors or coordinators of film festivals in the Alicante region (Spain) this viewpoint aims at knowing how they managed their events in 2020 to use this experience for the future.

KEYWORDS

cinematographic
competition
cinema
cultural industries
creative industries
audiences
aids
sponsors

FILM FESTIVALS IN TIMES OF COVID-19

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 led to major transformations on the world scene. Culture did not escape this situation and is still adapting to it. In 2020,

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On: Tue, 13 Jun 2023 06:07:30

many cultural events had to be cancelled, but in 2021 a new option appeared: to evolve. Did innovative and creative proposals be fostered? Had the initiatives arisen out of desperation for continuity, regardless of the consequences or were they carefully considered? Had the pandemic stimulated new actions which otherwise would not have been implemented or would have taken longer time to implement? Will some of them be maintained in the future? Has a product adapted to the new circumstances been offered?

When contextualizing the phenomenon of film festivals the longest-established researchers on the field opt for underlining two trends. On the one hand, there are those who insert festivals into the study of cultural industries (Garnham 2011; Zallo 2011; Jurado-Martin 2018). They argue that it is an event that has its origins as an industry around the theme of cinema. This approach draws on theories of the culture industry developed by Adorno and Horkheimer (Aguado 2004) that summarize the result of a process of incorporating cultural products into the market and industry dynamics. On the other hand, there is the prevailing 'film festival studies' European trend, which tries to define the study of film festivals as an independent field of study with a multitude of relevant approaches (Peirano and Vallejo 2021). This multidisciplinary 'calls into question whether [the study of film festivals] can be considered a discipline in its own right, or perhaps a sub-discipline of film studies' (Peirano and Vallejo 2021: 24).

Regarding the case study of this viewpoint, the Alicante region in Spain, festivals are associated with two types of components, the cultural and the festive one, in line with what De Valck (2020) calls *film-driven* and *festival-driven events*. According to the author, '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' (De Valck 2020: 127). Whereas online showing was possible during COVID-19, the same did not apply to the rest of the activities. Consequently, all festivals were facing many challenges to try to maintain their status and continuity, except for those with unconditional institutional support, such as the San Sebastián Film Festival.

Traditionally, Spanish film festivals have depended on public and private subsidies and so they face a higher risk of disappearing if they lose their sponsors or contributors, since they lack their own income. Therefore, film festivals are forced to satisfy their sponsors and, 'this is where cultural, political and industrially biased decisions intertwine[d] with the new ones derived from COVID' (Jurado-Martin and Martínez-Cano 2020). This situation leads them to be constantly alert to everything around them: new cultural events in their area of influence, new trends deriving from their sponsors' interests, as the environment once was, including topics such as gender and equality, social integration, immigration and refugees and so forth or the latest topics such as corporate social responsibility; media or scientific impact that supports and proves its cultural, social, tourist or geopolitical function and value.

In this changing reality where 'possibilities to distribute media content and aggregate films have exponentially increased' (Iordanova and Cunningham cited in De Valck 2020: 7) distribution platforms and pay-per-view and live platforms have also contributed to the organization of these events and their relationship with the environment, audience, sponsors, tourism and culture, among others. For instance, the registration possibilities offered by platforms such as Vimeo, Withoutabox, Filmfest or FilmFreeWay have streamlined and facilitated the process. However, many initiatives with questionable quality indeed used the same platforms to organize events with little or no

transparency in the selection process, the panel of judges or even the showing. Here we find different profiles such as contests with no registration fee, in-person contests offering cash prizes, and others with registration fees where success is practically guaranteed by fee payment, and where showing has been reduced to the virtual platform without further expense. That is to say, there were free registration festivals that are expected to have large expenditures and contests with registration fees and low spending.

Nevertheless, in many cases, producers and filmmakers were attracted by these types of online events which facilitated their participation. In 2020, many in-person festivals chose to switch to an online version, based on innovation and necessity arguments. As pointed out by Ozgen-Tuncer, 'this option is not extremely innovative [...] but it is an easy substitute or alternative' (2020: 305). The author says so when describing the migration of the content of the International Labor Film Festival to YouTube, and explains that it may be seen as a direct way to reach a wider audience without having to rely on agreements with theatres or exhibitors.

Considering this, it can be argued that cultural industries adapted to the pandemic and even to lockdown. In this context, as mentioned above, the internet made cultural activities easier as the business model of cultural industries was already being transformed into the digital mode over the analogue one (Paz García 2011). On the contrary, many major business, sporting or tourist events, such as the *Mobile World Congress* in Barcelona, the tourism fairs in Berlin or Shanghai or the *Wire Fair* in Dusseldorf were cancelled.

As for pay-per-view and live platforms, they can be seen as friends or foes of traditional festivals. They can be complementary to ensure the broadcasting of films. In other cases, the platforms offer films, typical of film festivals, as an innovative product in their offerings and with an added value to commercial productions. They keep the exploitation rights and create value for themselves, but to some extent, they restrict the possibilities that filmmakers can provide for the film.

In this regard, platforms such as Amazon or Netflix seem to be gaining ground on festivals with completely online versions, with which they can hardly compete quantitatively in terms of a potential audience. This reinforces the role of the contest as a live meeting event, since it satisfies other types of activities beyond the exhibition. Whitaker (2020) highlighted the damage Netflix was causing to the industry and emphasized that the festival experience goes beyond the screening of the film. Hobbins-White and Limov (2020) analyse the case of Amazon Prime as an online exhibitor of the South by Southwest (SXSW) Festival and question the relationship between potential audience and actual audience, as well as its film profile.

Nevertheless, virtual versions of cultural events seem to have soared when, shortly before, this option hardly inspired confidence or seemed to be at an initial stage (Jurado-Martín 2018: 190). The pandemic caused many events to change, also encouraged by the demand of an audience that would otherwise no longer have access to culture and so 'this emerging economic/virtual environment is dictating new logics of consumption and artistic dissemination, as well as public interaction' (Maggioni 2021: 85). It was also a watershed in the organization of film festivals. Although it is early to determine how things will develop after this situation, in a very short time, researchers and experts in the field have dared to develop studies and descriptions of local cases that have certain actions in common. All cultural events have been affected by COVID and this is generating a virtual cultural market that still needs to be described

and standardized (Maggioni 2021: 85). As economy is considered a priority, we are and will be confronting an unprecedented crisis that affects cultural events and so this makes us witnesses of a major moment in the history of film festivals (De Valck and Damiens 2020).

VIEWPOINT OF THE FILM FESTIVALS ORGANIZERS

This study considers twenty film festivals in the Alicante region as case study for identifying the main challenges and trends experiences in their organization during 2020. The region is one of the most active ones in organizing film festivals in the Comunitat Valenciana, according to the official report *Festimapp Dossier* (Institut Valencià de Cultura 2021). The study sample consists of a total of ten interviews. There were carried out in 2020 to directors and coordinators of the Elche International Independent Film Festival (FICIE), Sant Joan Film Festival, Alicante Film Festival, Sax Film Festival, Fantaelx Film Festival, Santa Pola Regional Short Film Contest, Rural FilmFest, Festival de Cine Pequeño from Aspe and Cortifestival. The interview contained fourteen questions organized in three blocks. The information was distributed in the blocks as follows: (1) festival's profile before COVID-19; (2) consequences of the 2020 edition and (3) general assessments and proposals for the future. The case study as a valid method for the analysis of film festivals is verified and validated by authors like Peirano (2020), Vallejo (2020) and Campos (2012) among others.

The organizers highlighted that, after the setback suffered due to the state of emergency and lockdown derived from the COVID-19 crisis, the audience preferred on-site festivals to virtual versions. Nevertheless, the three organizers who opted completely or partially for online modalities assure they had more audience and participation through this option and that they reached sectors that otherwise would not have been reached. Vicente Sanchís (FICIE) explained that, 'at that time it was not about filling the venue, but about winning over the hearts and minds of people and overcoming fear by offering a protected area where people felt safe'.

The coordinators affirmed that their participants preferred on-site events because they can network and promote themselves, as well as having the audience's feedback on their films, but they found that a dual mode was also a good option. On the contrary, we found statements like that of Toni Cristóbal (Sant Joan Film Festival): 'Nowadays, it is more difficult to move ahead with a project and promote a film. The film industry, in general, is in a delicate moment which is not favoured by the saturation of content offered in the online mode'.

In general, they stated that they continued to work with their sponsors and contributors, although in some cases those were not able to support them during 2020 due to the economic situation they were facing, risk of closure, in anticipation of a crisis, as explained by Vicente Seva (Alicante Film Festival). They coincided with their great dependence on state aids, but there was more uncertainty for those who depended on income from private entities or had a strong dependence on them, 'since funding has been reduced and has generated instability', as mentioned by Miguel Herrero (Sax Film Festival). To give just a few examples, on the more optimistic side, given the unexpectedly large virtual attendance, we find Aspe's Festival de Cine Pequeño and Santa Pola Film Festival and, on the opposite side, Sant Joan Film Festival, Rural FilmFest and Cortifestival. The latter is supported exclusively by El

Corte Inglés business company, whose main activity has nothing to do with promoting culture and cinema, and decided to cancel the festival. In addition, its educational nature depended on teacher and student productions in a period of lockdown.

The organisers' general assessment was that attendance is necessary for their cultural and geographic area of influence, since festivals are a cultural activity with an audience interested in attending in-person; therefore, physical attendance must have continuity. However, the online mode made the competition accessible to more participants. Festivals are a meeting place for professionals, regardless of whether they are on-site or virtual, but the challenge at that moment was to offer the same possibilities for meeting, promotion and feedback in both formats. 'The dual mode should be seen as a new aspect to be developed in future editions. Something that has arisen out of necessity, and that otherwise would not have been developed, offers new possibilities', explained Fran Mateu (Fantaelx Film Festival).

Regarding the economic consequences of the pandemic, they deemed that would probably affect their budget and, in some cases, their continuity. 'Sponsors and private contributors in the hotel and restaurant and tourism industries do not expect to have sufficient aid to quickly overcome the crisis and their investment in festivals will suffer', stated Toni Cristóbal (Sant Joan Film Festival).

As proposals to ensure the continuity of festivals, they considered that it is necessary to 'offer side activities that attract the audience and make them loyal to the festival' (Juan Torres, Aspe Festival de Cine Pequeño); to 'foster the importance of culture and cinema, as an identity and a social expression' (Jaume Quiles, Rural FilmFest) or to 'provide incentives to sponsors and contributors and encourage participation and hybrid viewing' (Vicente Sanchís, FICIE), as well as having alternatives both in open and closed venues in case of last-minute changes.

LIVE AND VIRTUAL CAN BE A DUALITY THAT REMAINS IN TIME

Film festivals in the province of Alicante are characterized by their local nature, acting as an exhibitor of alternative productions to commercial films and as a platform for new filmmakers, and also providing a wide cultural offering in the film industry with showing, film competition, and side activities that meet the needs and tastes of their audience. These festivals develop several functions proper to film festivals in addition to being an exhibitor and a competition, since they facilitate physical gathering, live experience of audience and participants, city promotion, training (lectures, conferences and workshops) and so forth. They serve as a stimulus for the city and tourism, and some of them have a training function, but they are in general culturally oriented film festivals (the so-called *film-driven events*). Thus, the festive character prevails over the market function in these film events. These functions were not able to be developed during the pandemic, and that is why these festivals were equated to the array of events that only showed films and awarded prizes through distribution platforms or to non-commercial film packages offered by pay-per-view platforms.

As these events are highly dependent on public and private aid, they cannot support themselves and so it was relevant for them to draw on strategies that could guarantee their continuity in the time of the COVID-19 crisis. Likewise, online versions were the most effective alternative in that context.

Today, there has been a return to face-to-face events, and film festivals in the region are meeting place for professionals, promising filmmakers and audiences. However, virtual resources have not been ruled out and now they complement the offering, and so this would be a worth-studying phenomenon. Regarding the case study presented in this viewpoint, the remarks and the trends derived from the implementation of these strategies are the following:

- Live and virtual can be a duality that remains in time.
- Reinforcement of what makes the festivals different: physical gathering, live screening, side activities and so forth.
- Increase of their visibility as a cultural event, for audiences, participants and sponsors.
- Shared awareness that after the tsunami they will have a lot of work to do and that it will take a few years.
- Recovering lost sponsorships: in a long-standing struggle where economy prevails over culture.
- Audience and participants demand physical presence to be worthwhile and have an added value.
- And conversely, the door should be open to the audience and participants who decide to follow the festivals virtually.

After nearly three years of the pandemic, festivals are still fighting a battle. They took a hard blow and, although they have managed to endure, they are still analysing COVID-19 consequences. Survival techniques involve learning from experience to assimilate what worked during the health crisis, but also what has always worked in the sector. This essay has shown a preliminary presentation of the problem and requires continued work, based on deeper analysis and theoretical engagement in order to see how the pandemic has impacted film festivals both at local and global level.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Jurado-Martin, Montserrat (2023), 'Film festivals in times of COVID-19: Online vs. live events – The case of Alicante region', *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 15:1, pp. 143–50, https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00082_7

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