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# CULTURE IN CRISIS: A GUIDE TO ACCESS, EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION IN FESTIVALS, ARTS, AND CULTURE

by: Leanne Dawson, October 5, 2020

*For Marin, and the fight for him to grow up in a kinder world ...*

*and for Kat, a SQIFF co-founder who made the festival, and everything, kinder.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in online culture, information, and 'events' in response to a greater number of people having to study and work from home; it has also, of course, become the main source of entertainment and social interaction in lieu of attending events and meet-ups in person during lockdown. Examples include free online library resources, university courses, museum exhibitions, dance and music classes, concerts, film festivals and viewing parties. A swift shift to the digital has also allowed organisations to make use of months or even years' worth of work and enabled preparation for things such as film, literature, and arts festivals, which would otherwise have been cancelled.

This article clearly outlines inclusion measures needed to make festivals and other arts and cultural events more accessible for minority and disadvantaged groups, specifically people with disabilities, people who are working-class and/or in poverty, and parents and carers. I list specific and relatively easy to implement points of action, many of them free, in bold below for those who want to skip/return to them with ease. I then consider both the positive aspects and the limitations brought about by this switch to the digital for these aforementioned groups—a changeover which has brought events usually taking place outside of the home directly into the domestic sphere during this global pandemic. Throughout, I employ an LGBTQI+ (lesbian gay bisexual trans queer intersex) film festival as a case study precisely because of the significance of this article's key themes of access, community, and visibility to the festival. While accessibility, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are current buzzwords and often, unfortunately, used only for box-ticking to meet an agenda or get funding, this article sets out what is needed for real, sustainable change because everything really should be accessible to everybody. I argue for a blended model of both on and offline events in future: while it is important to offer digital events, it is equally vital for underrepresented and marginalised groups to gather together in

person for visibility, community, and activism and to ensure that a new hierarchy is not created of those present, socialising and networking and, by contrast, those who are watching from home and isolated behind a screen.

I take as my starting point smaller LGBTQI+ film festivals for two reasons. The first is that some are at the forefront of certain strands of accessibility and inclusion measures in the arts and I use such examples with the aim of demonstrating how access and inclusion do not always require a large budget, but rather care and consideration, in order to demonstrate and help many more events and organisations become more inclusive. The second is that queer film festivals are an example of events in which visibility, community, and, therefore, presence is important. Such festivals allow us to watch LGBTQI+ films together rather than alone in our bedrooms, as we often do in secret before we ‘come out’, and many more must-do during the social isolation of COVID-19 lockdown when screening venues are closed. This visibility—being seen while watching what is on the screen—is also significant as visibility can create community, help to gain rights, and demonstrate support for disadvantaged and minority groups. Inclusion means being seen, listened to, respected, and catered to as default. This is important for marginalised communities and even more significant for intersections e.g. queer BIPOC (Black, indigenous, people of colour). This article does not claim to be an analysis of EDI for all disadvantaged groups, but rather a consideration of some things venues and organisations can and must do better in future for some people.

[1].

There is a gap here specifically relating to BIPOC inclusion and while I will continue to do all I can to be inclusive and push for systemic change, and while BIPOC should certainly not be doing all of the labour around their inclusion, it feels inappropriate for me and my white privilege to be the voice listing what BIPOC need in this article (just as many white people and racist institutions have suddenly started to, often for their own benefit/image, since the killing of George Floyd).

I blend research, both academic, as Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, and my work in the arts/festivals including as former Chair of the Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF, which aimed to become as accessible as possible for people with disabilities). I bring to bear here a range of personal experience (I am a lesbian who was raised working-class and in poverty, and I am now a mother myself) as well as that of others who work within film festivals in various capacities. I specifically chose

only to interview and include the views of women and non-binary people who are also working-class, and/or BIPOC, and/or with disabilities and/or parents and carers in order to amplify the types of voices that are usually less heard and often silenced in the arts, which is both deeply unfair and bad for business because underrepresented groups make the most interesting, innovative, and important points, due to a dual insider/outsider perspective, among other things.

I spoke with the co-founder and director of QTIBIPoC (queer, trans, and intersex Black, indigenous, people of colour) film festival, GLITCH, Nosheen Khwaja; co-founders of Raising Films, a charity dedicated to equality for parents and carers in the screen industries, writer-director, Hope Dickson Leach and producer, Jessica Levick; working-class learning disabled non-binary femme filmmaker, Mattie Kennedy; Elizabeth Costello, founder and director for the film charity, Leigh Film, and the Wigan and Leigh Short Film Festival; and working-class butch lesbian filmmaker and disability rights activist, Krissy Mahan. Even before publication, this article created positive impact in the arts: two of these interviewees decided to write their own piece for this journal issue, based on my questions/prompts and this very article (resulting in Mahan's powerful work on abolitionist cinema and Khwaja's unmissable account of QTIPoC film curation and activism), while some of this issue's contributors (Mahan, Khwaja, and Kelly Parker) were invited to the journal's Editorial Board, making it simultaneously more brilliant and more diverse.

The contributors to this article have worked on and with film festivals in a range of capacities and this, too, is vital. Not only are better EDI measures needed, but different roles also mean different needs: filmmakers, who have often travelled a significant distance, may be screening their work and doing Q&A sessions, networking, and seeking funding and finances for work; while the audience will include local people, sometimes present only for one or two film screenings for pleasure, leisure, and/or education; and those running the festival, from director through to volunteers who all have markedly different needs, demands on their time, and socio-economic situations. Festivals absolutely must take this into consideration e.g. how are filmmakers with disabilities being supported to travel to festivals and to fully focus on their work, rather than their access needs, while there? how are working-class audience members made to feel included in the festival and represented on screen? and how are stay-at-home mothers, especially single ones without

childcare, getting the chance to gain the skills and confidence to re-enter the workplace via festival volunteer roles, which often require giving up time on a weekend?

On the subject of childcare, which is finally getting some of the attention it deserves because of the absence of it during lockdown, I am writing this article on my phone to show that I am still working hard during a global pandemic, while walking around my living room with my ten-month-old baby in his carrier because I finished maternity leave as the COVID-19 lockdown began and childcare became unavailable. Both my situation and the date of writing this, at the end of March 2020, should be taken into consideration when reading.

[2].

I am, however, incredibly fortunate that I am able to work from home, with a permanent contract and healthy salary, while others have to put themselves at risk on our supermarket checkouts, driving our buses, cleaning our hospitals, and caring for our elderly.

Meanwhile, many in the arts—a gig economy—are left without work or an income. One reason I decided to create this focus journal issue is to raise money for those who need it in difficult times. Those suffering most are of colour, women, working-class, and/or with disabilities, and they are already denied opportunities when, for example, filmmaking success often overwhelmingly depends on being from a wealthy family, white, and often male, and upon nepotism, rather than talent and skill. The arts are not accessible or inclusive on any level, whether we consider those employed in the sector, audiences, or what we see represented on screen, stage, or page. I am in no doubt that this article will make uncomfortable reading for some. And I ask those people to shift their focus to reflect on their privilege: how it informs their practice, and how the decisions they make can impact negatively on those excluded from events and job opportunities. Please do better in future!

As we are living through both an economic and a health crisis, some may ask why the arts and culture are of importance. The UK's Conservative government have repeatedly prioritised STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects and created job losses, misery, and insecurity for many in the arts and humanities, despite their socio-economic value and positive effect on wellbeing. Arts and culture opened up many of our worlds significantly after they became noticeably smaller because of lockdown. While the sciences are trying to create a vaccine and

therapeutics for COVID-19, the arts are playing a positive role in maintaining our mental health and wellbeing. Arts, humanities, and sciences go hand in hand for a life worth living.

## **Accessibility and Inclusivity: Queer Film Festivals and Disability**

Queer film festivals can be alternative spaces in a cis-hetero-patriarchal, systemically racist, ableist, and classist society. They provide an important, albeit temporary, place for those under the LGBTQI+ umbrella and allies to meet for culture and connection. Queer grassroots festivals, to an even greater extent than the big glossy commercial ones (which have often traditionally focussed on and catered to white gay men) have been outstanding with certain strands of accessibility and inclusion measures, especially relating to disability. This section outlines some of these measures to make clear how all arts and cultural events can improve access now and in future to become more diverse and inclusive.

The first wave of what are now known as LGBTQI+ film festivals took place in North America and Western Europe in the latter half of the 1970s and frequently focussed on gay and lesbian identities. Since then, more letters of the acronym have been foregrounded, as has intersectionality. There are now several QTIBIPoC festivals, highlighting BIPoC LGBTQI+ identities e.g. the Transition International Queer Minorities Film Festival (Vienna, since 2012), the International Queer and Migrant Film Festival (Amsterdam, since 2015), GLITCH, a biannual QTIBIPoC film festival (Glasgow, since 2015), the latter co-founded and co-run by the aforementioned Nosheen Khwaja. Glasgow is also host to SQIFF, the Scottish Queer International Film Festival.

Since it was founded in 2014, SQIFF has focussed on access for D/deaf people and those with disabilities. Although a portion of SQIFF's budget, from Creative Scotland and several other partnerships, has been spent on accessibility, mostly in the form of staff time, several measures do not require money. Access and inclusion fall primarily into three categories: space; technology; finances. SQIFF's access and inclusion steps are outlined in red below.

### **Access and Inclusion for People who are D/deaf and/or with Disabilities:**

- **access for wheelchair users and people with mobility issues;**

- **a Quiet Space;**
  - **assistance dogs welcome;**
  - **use of English captions/subtitles for films;**
  - **hearing loop systems;**
  - **British Sign Language (BSL) for live events;**
  - **large print version of brochure available by post;**
  - **some shorter screenings for those who cannot sit or concentrate for longer;**
- a paid Access and Engagement Coordinator** (See: <http://www.sqiff.org/accessibility/>).

These are important factors when we consider how some cinemas can be inaccessible for users with disabilities or, for example, how audience members with autism have been expelled from screenings for making a noise. Alongside the above measures, SQIFF also has:

- gender-neutral toilets in the main hub
- content notes highlighting potentially distressing themes
- community outreach for schools in deprived areas around Glasgow
- travel subsidies
- and sliding-scale ‘pay what you can’ ticket pricing, starting at free (for more information, see: Dawson & Loist 2018).

SQIFF stands on the shoulders of years of often unpaid labour by artists and activists of colour as well as those with disabilities and raised working-class, who have long been pushing for better access and inclusion measures. Wotever DIY Film Festival in London, Leeds Queer Film Festival (LQFF), and GLITCH are just some of the recent queer film festivals with smaller or no budgets that also paved the way for SQIFF. It is not just coincidence that Wotever, LQFF, and GLITCH are run either exclusively or mostly by people who are working-class, many of whom are BIPoC. As GLITCH co-founder, Nosheen states:

We had been at mainstream film conferences where the subject of subtitling English language films was laughed at from someone high up in the field of mainstream tech, from a time, money, and technical point of view. Access should be built into a budget, especially with larger festivals. Coming from an activist background we make things work and push boundaries with limited resources ...

We were the first non-disabled film festival to subtitle our entire programme in 2015. We undertook this ourselves whilst preparing for the festival. It was a feat of endurance as subtitling is a time-consuming task.

[3].

While festivals are doing great with some inclusivity measures, it is clear that others receive much less attention. This article is not, however, intended to position any group against another or to take issue with the amazing people giving their time to create festivals, but rather to encourage more organisers to make the arts as accessible as possible. I have, for example, been asked to use the only disabled toilet available to breastfeed my baby, directly in front of a person using a wheelchair, at a cafe run by people who also own a supposedly accessible arts venue. We need to create an environment where accessibility needs are met without people having to fight for space, time, and money—and this requires more care, better planning and, sometimes, funding.

### **In/Accessible Arts for People who are Working-Class and in Poverty**

While disability and maternity are protected characteristics in the U.K. (along with: age; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy; race; religion and belief; sex; sexual orientation), class/socio-economic position is not included and can feel like an afterthought, if considered at all, at arts events. I am always shocked, but never surprised, when the term ‘chav’ is used at predominantly middle-class, white gatherings without anyone else raising an eyebrow. It exemplifies how ignorant and scathing many middle-class+ people are of working-class lives. Having been on free school meals at the state school I attended as the ‘chav’ daughter of a ‘benefits scrounger’ single mother, who worked part-time as a cleaner while raising us in an overcrowded council house, I understand the deep-rooted shame attached to asking for anything for free, including tickets or travel. Indeed many working-class people often want to pay our way, while those who come from wealth are frequently more comfortable asking for free tickets because of confidence, a sense of entitlement, and understanding how the system works and how to play it to get maximum benefit. Not having much in your wallet right now because you chose to freelance in the arts (from the overwhelming number of career doors open to you—often with large salaries—thanks to your background including a safety net of family wealth, an



expensive private education, professional networks, cultural capital etc.) is absolutely not equivalent to having nothing in your wallet because you grew up in poverty and know of not a single person who can help you with these aforementioned things.

In *Queer Festivals: Challenging Collective Identities in a Transnational Europe*, Konstantinos Eleftheriadis analyses queer festivals, many of which include film screenings, and notes that the majority of participants who filled out questionnaires for Oslo Queer Festival stated they were from middle-class backgrounds, are employed in high-skilled tertiary work, and have a significant amount of cultural capital, alongside an education to at least Bachelor's level. They were also young, which he classified as under 39 but makes clear many are under 29 (2018: 50-52). Festival organisers are often middle-class, university-educated, and employed elsewhere in the arts alongside their festival role. Although raised in poverty in North East England, I was in a position to spend my own money and time (weekends and evenings) travelling to Glasgow to chair SQIFF committee meetings and host events in my voluntary role because I earn well as an academic, do not have to do shift work, do not have any disabilities, and because I was not, at that point in time, a mother. The demographic of leaders and audiences in the arts needs to change. Working-class people must have the opportunity to employ knowledge and experience, rather than others imposing what they *think* people who are working-class and/or in poverty need and, often, getting it wrong and alienating audiences.

To achieve this we must foreground often silenced working-class voices. My voice was partly erased by a privately-educated, middle-class person in charge of a festival: I wrote a publicity brochure outline of a working-class film workshop I conceived of and hosted, making clear that middle-class people were very welcome to come along and listen, but only working-class people should be part of the discussion. This foregrounding of the space as a working-class one was removed without my knowledge or consent, which was unfortunate as its inclusion was important in attracting as many working-class people as possible. This example is tame compared to the discrimination I have received because of my class at the hands of middle-class+ people in academia and the arts: so what chance do working-class people have who do not have the many advantages and privileges I possess?

Indeed the term 'working-class' groups many different experiences together including those of us raised working-class, but who now have significantly greater cultural and financial privilege. Furthermore, growing up in an inner-city council high rise is very

different to a rural childhood in poverty and we also need to consider intersectionality, and be aware that being BIPoC or having a disability, for example, makes poverty more likely because of systemic racism and ableism. It is, therefore, inadequate to tick a box/meet an agenda by having one token working-class person within a project, festival, or institution, but rather a group of people with varied experience and knowledge are needed. This also possibly means supporting each other because pushing for inclusion is even harder work when being used as a mere token. All of this, does, however, require (often unacknowledged and unrewarded) emotional labour too. This consideration of class will ultimately enrich the arts for all.

Despite intersectional and geographical differences, there are often—though not always – some common factors for those of us raised working class, alongside limited access to the arts, such as: lack of money; non-existent or limited access to family and friend (or friend of a friend) networks who can provide a personal and professional leg up in the world; stereotypes and negative judgement from others, including being written off by society before we are even born. True inclusivity of working-class people means offering a range of support alongside free tickets. Indeed, evidence for free/cheap tickets is mixed (although I offer them whenever possible), while other accessibility measures are considered much more crucial: that people feel welcomed into spaces, that they have ownership, and that they are represented.

This ties into my next point: in order to make events more inclusive for people who are working-class and in poverty, more horizontal structures are also needed. This is to reduce exploitation and increase fairness when running events, where one or two very privileged people in organisations, institutions, or festivals can make or break the careers of others and too much depends on nepotism and pre-existing networks.

[4].

These privileged key players not only have the benefit of including their friends and excluding those who do not fit their agenda but also set the tone of publicly-funded festivals, which can and does work to exclude. Publicly-funded events do not just need to appear to be inclusive, but actually to be inclusive, in front of and behind the scenes.

When I was Chair of SQIFF, I frequently spoke up about inequalities relating to networks, finances, and vision. Examples of issues with networks include informal one-on-one ‘interviews’ in a social setting with only one friend in the running for a paid role, as well as a rule that missing a certain number of committee meetings

means being asked to leave the committee, which is already unfair on people who have to spend time and money travelling and/or work shifts, and/or have health issues etc., but even less fair when other committee members are allowed to miss every meeting, whether in person or digitally, for years because of friendship. Examples of issues with finances include a lack of transparency and fairness about who gets paid to host events or to travel to other festivals for networking and scouting films. With regard to vision, one example is issues with the inclusion of films that were considered transphobic. Audience members had clear concerns about transphobia in SQIFF's opening night film in 2017 (for more information, see Dawson & Loist 2018), yet in 2018 another film was screened, despite several members of the committee—including the trans members who watched it—stating we should not show it precisely because of transphobia. This can lead to people wondering why they wasted their time watching it or what their opinion is worth to a festival. While I often felt comfortable speaking up because I am not a freelancer in the arts, the issue remains that 'when you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about or if you went away' (Ahmed 2016:37). It is, therefore, important that the problem is viewed correctly: accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in the arts, rather than those who voice the issues or require access measures.

Eleftheriadis goes on to argue that while queer festivals tend to be in squats, queer *film* festivals 'often take place in art cinemas, fine art schools or independent spaces. Naming them queer does not necessarily imply that they are different from LGBT' (2018: 176). Queer is often used as shorthand and a catch-all for the whole LGBTQI+ spectrum and does not necessarily imply queer politics, which I will return to shortly. Queerness should challenge power and oppression, including capitalism, but many queer events fail to do this, whether through representation, format, finances, or location.

[5].

Furthermore, art galleries and arthouse cinemas are often intimidating to those without certain cultural capital or the confidence to appropriate the space, which means that many individuals and groups continue to feel excluded.

SQIFF's hub is the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow, an incredibly generous space, but like most galleries it can be inaccessible for some people of colour (like many galleries, much of the space is—quite literally—white), and those who are

working-class with no/limited knowledge of 'high culture' and the arts and little money to pay for, by way of example, expensive refreshments.

[6].

SQIFF, therefore, hosts events at a range of venues beyond this hub, such as Glasgow Women's Library (GWL), a lending library, archive, and events space that is located in Bridgeton—a rather deprived area of Glasgow that was chosen because it is accessible for people with disabilities and is a more trusted space for working-class people and people of colour. Some GWL events have been 'used as a hook' to get more working-class people into the CCA; and as I have previously argued 'through hosting events in accessible spaces, audience members are encouraged to come along to, and feel comfortable in, an art gallery' (Dawson & Loist 2018:13).

So, in order for working-class people and those in poverty to get what we deserve, organisers need to consider: use of space, representation (in the art, the makers/team, and the audience), event format, fairly expanding existing networks, finances, as well as job and other opportunities. They absolutely need to ensure that working-class people are part of the team and, even better, running the show.

### **Access and Inclusion Measures for People who are Working-class or in Poverty:**

- **a spectrum of working-class representation onscreen, not just tired stereotypes and tokens;**
- **a wide range of work by working-class filmmaking teams (who often have less film/education, equipment, and fewer networks, etc.);**
- **working-class voices telling working-class stories in addition to many others, not just related to class;**
- **working-class filmmaking teams present at the festival with accommodation, fares, sustenance etc. paid;**
- **more transparent and fair staff recruitment, reaching beyond existing nepotistic and arts networks, and including those with no experience, allowing them to train/gain new skills and knowledge on the job;**
- **transparency about who receives payment, ensuring working-class people are remunerated and that BIPOC, people with disabilities etc. are not expected to give their knowledge and time for free in the name of EDI;**
- **career development for all involved in running the event/festival, including a fair and transparent allocation of other 'perks' and opportunities to network,**

travel etc.;

- **working-class audience members made to feel welcome and included by all members of the team running the festival;**
- **free and sliding scale tickets without requiring proof/anything that identifies the ticket as not full price;**
- **a welcoming events space;**
- **facilitated festival socialising, including festival buddies;**
- **reasonably priced refreshments and free alternatives available/an agreement that people can consume items they bring with them so that socialising is not limited to those with money;**
- **inclusive formats, both timing and style e.g. the post-screening wine reception with middle-class people opining loudly because they have the 'right' accent and some cultural capital and knowledge or simply the confidence to blag these feels very outdated and often excludes not only working-class people but also some with disabilities or with accompanying children.**

## **Access and Inclusion for Parents and Carers**

Parenting and caring responsibilities can massively limit attendance at cultural and social events and this desperately needs improving, particularly when the gendered and financial dimensions are considered. While SQIFF tries hard to include people with disabilities, and has had some good events for those who are in poverty and/or working-class (but still needs to do more), there is significant work to be done to include parents and carers and not just at SQIFF; I do not aim to single the festival out negatively, but rather to use it as an example both because it is the festival with which I am most familiar and because the (now disbanded) committee, paid staff, and volunteers worked so hard on access for people with disabilities. My focus here is rather across arts events and venues overall. SQIFF has aimed to include children (kids' screenings, face painting etc.), and for the 2019 edition, when I spoke up again about the need for childcare, which has never been available, it was announced that babies were welcome at all screenings. This offer did not appear to be taken up, possibly because it needed to be publicised more widely, but there are other reasons: parents and carers feel self-conscious about taking a child to a screening or an event in case they make noise, are unable to be still for the duration, or simply do not enjoy

being there. Again, this is why people with lived experience are essential in making decisions about inclusion (while being present and visible at events as well as being paid for their labour).

An absence of childcare keeps a barrier to many film, arts, and cultural events firmly in place. It is important to highlight that childcare is often bound to socio-economic privilege and the finances to pay a nanny/childminder/babysitter/nursery. For those who struggle to meet childcare costs in order to be able to undertake paid work or those for whom childcare costs are prohibitive to working (and who therefore never/rarely get a break from parenting and caring duties), employing someone to look after children in order to take some leisure time is simply not an option. Only the relatively wealthy can afford childcare in addition to the cost of a regular cinema ticket (plus transport etc.), rather than simply watching a film at home. Free tickets are needed and should be more widely available, but to be truly accessible is freely to offer safe, registered childcare on site at events. There is also a very gendered dimension to this when we consider the often unfair division of caring responsibilities and so to be a truly feminist event childcare must be offered.

Perhaps parenting is too tied to homonormativity, a 'politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions—such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction—but upholds and sustains them while promoting the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2002: 179). Across swathes of the western world in recent times, there has been a focus on conservative values, such as family (same-sex marriage, adoption, assisted reproduction etc.) and finances (pensions, tax concessions, wills) and these usually benefit the people who are already most privileged: middle-class+ and white, while queers in poverty, queers of colour, and trans people (these identities often intersect) are neglected or abused. Those who are homonormative are most powerful because their identity is considered more palatable to cis and heterosexual people than those queerer on the LGBTQI+ spectrum and because this privilege affords them opportunities, a voice, and visibility, including job opportunities or being the talking head representing a group of people on television. But queers—and here it should be noted that queer should be political, anti-racist, anti-capitalist etc., very unlike the homonormative same-sex couples mentioned above—raising children rarely take the normative approach, with all of its financial and additional perks.

It was very much a balancing act to make my own childcare needs work for a series of queer film festivals I was involved with in various capacities recently, including as invited jury member for Mix Copenhagen 2019 and as Chair (until 2019) and then audience member of the Scottish Queer International Film Festival. This made me consider accessibility even further. MIX Copenhagen took place during my maternity leave when my baby was four months old and I was exclusively breastfeeding. I very much wanted to attend and felt the pressure to prove I was still a hard-working film professional, despite being a new and exhausted mother on maternity leave. There was no form of childcare or recommendations at the festival so I was very willing to pay for a family member's flight and accommodation out of my (greatly reduced) maternity pay, but later agreed with the understanding organisers that I would conduct jury tasks virtually as jury members are provided with passwords for online access to films in competition in advance to watch at home, so this meant no extra labour for them.

Discussion flows less easily from afar, but decisions about winning films were easily reached and conducting this role virtually was kindest on my baby, myself, and the environment without the need for flights etc. The festival would have benefited from having all jury members present in terms of extra hands to take on roles such as hosting Q&As and I certainly missed out on the socialising and networking aspects of it. The latter would, however, also have been true if I were there in person, as a breastfeeding mother needing to excuse myself at regular intervals. Working in this way was certainly a forerunner of how festivals would run, at a distance, in times of COVID. During lockdown I was asked, for example, to host a New York City-based film festival event from Scotland, in which I would interview filmmakers speaking from their homes in Germany to be broadcast to audiences around the world. While this greater acceptance of digital attendance is useful for some who cannot be there in person, it still maintains some divides e.g. those without the necessary equipment or with work or family commitments, which I will return to soon.

[Z].

Reflecting back on before the COVID pandemic, I realise that although I was present from start (midweek) to finish (Sunday night) for most previous SQIFF festivals, I only attended the 2019 edition for a few hours on Sunday daytime – especially for a meetup hosted by Rainbow Families, who run social events for LGBTQI+ parents and their children as part of LGBT Health Scotland. There were some issues with the

children's screening (the volume was too loud for a baby; conflicting advice from festival staff about whether the Quiet Space could be used for breastfeeding and babies napping etc.) and we only watched the beginning of it, while I also missed every other screening and event I would have otherwise attended pre-motherhood. Timing also played a role here, as I needed to get back home to another city for my son's bedtime routine. I was, however, not there especially for the screening (my son was too young to enjoy it), but rather to expand our social circle of queer families and also catch up with old friends from the queer film/festival circuit before the event, therefore bringing my worlds as film scholar and mother together. In my personal queer film festival networks and friendship groups, which are fairly large, I know no other parents of young children—which speaks volumes about inclusion.

While there is little attention paid to parents, carers, and children at many LGBTQI+ film events, this is not always the case elsewhere. Parenting at Film Festivals started out as a 2019 WhatsApp group and went on to set up Le Ballon Rouge crèche at the Cannes Film Festival Market, which was a huge success and quite a leap from breastfeeding mothers being excluded from that very space in the past. In addition, Raising Films is an organisation that champions and supports parents in the screen industries in the U.K., while challenging these industries to do better. Co-Founder, Hope Dickson Leach says:

Raising Films have been sharing stories about film festivals that are inclusive to parents, for example, Locarno, True/False, and SXSW and would like to invite more festivals to apply for our Raising Films Ribbons, which are a good way to see what efforts are being made to be inclusive to parents and carers. We have offered to consult with festivals over simple interventions that they can take to make their festivals more parent-friendly but very few of them feel they have the resources to implement these changes. Which is a shame as many of our recommendations require no resources but just thought and attention. (See also:

<https://www.raisingfilms.com/raising-films-ribbon>

)

Arts events need not only to follow this lead, but to go beyond it, offering cutting-edge inclusivity, especially because so many film screenings and festivals take place on evenings and weekends when children are not in school or childcare and people often have to travel far from home to attend. Here, parenting duties and finances intersect.

As Hope says:



Having reliable childcare in place to allow you to go away and leave home, is rare. Very few of us have the highly paid, round the clock childcare in place that allows the demands that festival attendance place on you so parents and carers either go to festivals for the minimum possible time or they take their children or they don't attend at all. All of these things mean they don't get the full festival experience and therefore their career development suffers.

Not only are parents and carers missing out on culture and entertainment beyond the home because of how events are organised and run, this impacts women and those in poverty in even greater measures, because mothers frequently do the majority of childcare and the cost of childminders and babysitters is prohibitive to those with little money. However, even some relatively privileged people struggle with this and it has a negative impact on careers e.g. industry professionals who are parents – especially mothers – have their careers negatively impacted by being excluded from weekend and evening events and networking – especially those taking place at a significant distance from home.

### **Access and Inclusion for Parents and Carers:**

- **secure childcare (a crèche, babysitting services), which could be on a sliding scale, much like tickets, if payment is indeed needed;**
- **more consideration about the timing of events and how they work for parents. Unlike many adults, a child's lunch and bedtime cannot be significantly delayed;**
- **a quiet space to breastfeed and for children to take naps;**
- **decent facilities including nappy changing and bottle-making/warming;**
- **free/sliding-scale child-friendly catering and/or the venue's café featuring cheap, nutritious child-friendly meal and snack options and/or the venue being understanding about some parents and carers bringing their own food to be consumed;**
- **high chairs and other suitable seating;**
- **toys or other ways to amuse children;**
- **cheap pushchairs and ride on boards available, particularly for those travelling from afar for work with children in tow;**
- **a consideration of transport (including train or flight times, nothing too early or too late) and accommodation needs for parents invited to the festival who need to bring their children;**

- **festival committees and staff who are parents and volunteers who will literally hold the baby if/when needed;**
- **acceptance and understanding that children may make noise through some screenings (but also that parents are willing to move elsewhere if this were very disruptive/ongoing);**
- **widespread advertising about family friendly measures;**
- **a space/venue/atmosphere in which parents and carers are made to feel comfortable bringing their children;**
- **children's activities and films as part of the festival.**

[8]

## **Lockdown Lessons: In/Accessibility and the Digital Divide**

Building on this knowledge and experience of in/accessibility, specifically for film festivals and arts events, this section will consider the shift from in-person/at a venue to digital/at home events in relation to accessibility and inclusion for the three groups outlined previously: people with disabilities; people who are working-class/in poverty; and parents and carers. I do this in order to consider both advantages and disadvantages of the digital and what we need to remember, retain, and continue with when we move beyond lockdown.

The current crisis has demanded a rapid shift to more digital 'events', although some film festivals launched online decades before the COVID-19 pandemic, both out of fear that the rise of the internet could kill their festival if they were not flexible and in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. Queer film festival, MIX NYC, for example, created an online version back in 1997.

[9].

In the U.K. context, BFI Flare, the large glossy, commercial LGBTIQ+ film festival, did not have an online festival proper pre-COVID but did have two methods of accessing films online while the festival was taking place in London each Spring in recent years: online access to some films for festival delegates, and Five Films for Freedom, a global online LGBTIQ+ short film programme, which runs in cooperation with the British Council and encourages people globally to watch films in solidarity with queer people and communities in places without equal rights. It is positive that there is no direct cost to watch the latter as films are free, but there are issues with accessibility as only

those with the technology (a device to watch on and internet connection suitable for streaming video and audio) and the safety or privacy to view the work (consider countries where homosexuality is illegal, or those who are not out to their families and without the privacy to explore such online content) mean digital and other divides remain.

For those with the technology and space to view, however, BFI Flare is more accessible than ever because of COVID 19. Instead of paying for tickets/passes, travel, and London accommodation, people can either opt for a 14 day free trial or pay £4.99 per month for access to BFI Player, which is hosting Flare at Home. Festivals without significant money and an (online) platform have also been doing what they can in lockdown, such as watch along at a pre-arranged time with films already available online via iPlayer, Netflix, and so on; Q&As with filmmakers etc. via Facebook; people watching films using social media hashtags such as #togetherapart.

During lockdown, SQIFF created SQIFFLIX, a series of films available for free online, thus demonstrating that a lot of time and extra 'glossiness' is not always needed. Quite the opposite: many of the online last-minute film events are more interactive, inclusive, and accessible than in-person festivals as they use as their starting point things like social media votes for what to watch, helping to move beyond the issue of a small group of insiders setting the tone.

Mattie Kennedy, a queer and learning disabled filmmaker based in Glasgow, whose work has frequently been part of SQIFF (including the GWL working-class event mentioned earlier) and the Oska Bright film festival, says:

COVID has changed the way arts and cultural events are facilitated. Activists, artists, and cultural workers are having to get used to not sharing space with people from their communities, having to move their conversations or events to online video chat platforms like Zoom and Whereby. What has to change after this pandemic is that arts and cultural organisations need to be more open about possibilities, particularly when it comes to accessibility as not everybody can be physically there. Organisations like LUX and Cinenova are doing great things at the moment.

Here we can consider community, disability, etc. in relation to both in and outsider status and that virtual events allow more people access to them.

It is certainly cheaper to watch at home, without the cost of tickets and travel and, for some, childcare. Even children's films that should be in cinemas, but instead are available to rent on e.g. Sky Store Premier for around £16 are, although expensive, still cheaper than family cinema tickets, snacks, etc., although watching in the living room is a very different experience and not every home has the technology or is a safe space (domestic violence, homophobia, child abuse, etc.). This is unfortunate as events beyond the home may have offered respite pre-COVID: the cinema means escapism and even a refuge. At the lightest end of this, a trip to the cinema is a treat for children, but as they are confined to their homes during lockdown for family time, schooling, and entertainment, watching films within a possibly increasingly claustrophobic space may feel less enjoyable.

Leigh Film Society, a community cinema charity in a socio-economically deprived town in Northern England, works with a local refugee and asylum seeker organisation called Everything Human Rights to deliver 'orange bags of cinema sunshine' during lockdown, 'which has highlighted a problem in digital access for the disadvantaged in our community' according to Elizabeth Costello, who directs the film charity. They 'asked for donations of unwanted DVDs and redistributed them to people without the streaming channels or access to Netflix or Prime' and organised for families in need to receive DVD players, meaning some people have even more accessibility to film during lockdown than before it, thanks to those aiming to improve the poverty-induced digital divide.

These access issues are present across the world, even in other so-called developed countries. According to working-class filmmaker and disability activist, Krissy Mahan (who was also part of a SQIFF working-class filmmaker event), from New Jersey, USA:

The digital divide has been magnified by the almost total dependence on having internet access. I'm glad that people use phones to access the internet. In the working-class neighbourhood where I am quarantining, many people are already moving out, and when the restrictions are lifted, many more will be evicted from their apartments. I already see belongings piled on the sidewalks for the trash trucks. For some, it won't be possible for people to install the cable company's proprietary modem in a stable home. Digital media that is available needs to be mindful of bandwidth and the expense of data for people on limited budgets. If this will involve lower-resolution versions of films, I'm not sure, but the cost of ,

data is something I'm thinking about. Access to the internet is especially difficult right now during COVID-19 with the public libraries being closed because in my town. The public library is the only place where some people can access the internet. But I believe that the arts, especially movies, can help make abstract concepts of resistance feel like achievable and valuable ways to *not* return to normal after COVID-19.

Location also needs to be considered in relation to the mass move to the digital e.g. living in a city with lots of events in close proximity or living in the countryside with a reliable car and plenty of money for petrol and tickets are very different to a home somewhere remote with a lack of money and/or transport to attend events. Location and transport become even more important when children are involved. Throughout her life, Krissy 'noticed a shift from cinemas in or close to neighbourhoods where working-class people lived to much larger screens in malls and other places that often required a car'. The same became true in the U.K., as many cinemas in towns closed down because multiplexes in larger cities and out-of-town shopping centres opened up. For Krissy and others, movie-going was often impossible due to both location and incompatibility with family life schedules.

For some of us with internet access and equipment, the digital shift has been useful. Lockdown was implemented as I was reaching the end of maternity leave. New parenthood usually means attending baby groups but no/very few events for oneself and no/little socialising without children or beyond the home. Because of children's routines (early to bed, early to rise) and the initial exhaustion of parenthood (nappy changing and feeding around the clock), simple bite-size at-home entertainment is needed and streaming services are a highlight (I am filled with gratitude that I could afford them). Maternity leave, a period of being at home more than I ever had, while turning down both work and social invitations to events, made me think about all of the other people who wanted to attend the events I had created or been part of in the past, but who could not or did not because they were not accessible or inclusive. I certainly do not want to draw a direct parallel, but I do want to highlight how lockdown has given some incredibly privileged people a small glimpse into how those with caring responsibilities, limited budgets, or disabilities are denied the opportunity to partake in things many people take for granted. This has to change.

Dickson Leach claims that the increase in online culture in our home during lockdown has

absolutely been a positive. Not just for parents and carers but also for people who have access issues, and might be unable to afford attending festivals, or live outside of the major festival/industry centres. It has also shown that these are all possible and hopefully they will become part of festival culture going forward. The negative is that often these events and masterclasses are at bedtime so it's difficult to attend if you have a young child, and of course that we are all still home-schooling so engaging with any work at the moment is compromised. I think also there is a real fear of the lack of the work that happens in the social contexts at festivals – how can an online experience replicate that? Furthermore, parents and carers often look forward to festivals as a time to engage with their adult, professional colleagues, and doing this work from home doesn't give you any of that.

Hope's colleague, Jessica Levick, Film Producer and Co-Founder of Raising Films agrees with the positive aspects of the digital, but laments that

I've hardly been able to participate in anything because I have a 4-year-old child. One panel event I took part in had event hours up to 8pm—to accommodate American participants so completely understandable – but it's been absolutely hopeless for tea and bedtime. Once schools are open again this world would open up for me, and online film culture events would be far better for me than physical attendance'. This echoes my own thoughts about being able to partake in the MIX Copenhagen jury virtually pre-lockdown. Jessica had been considering the financial viability of attending Cannes 2020, weighing up her need to be there for the pitch she is involved in with both attendance costs and childcare issues, and appreciates that 'doing it online is completely free. Presumably this is going to be an issue for the commercial viability of these events in future, but it is great as a user.

The shift to digital has several advantages and disadvantages, depending upon individual circumstances. It is clear that which some of us consider accessible, as culture comes directly into our homes, is not at all accessible for those without the devices, time (childcare etc.), or safety to consume or engage with it. We also need to think here about passive and active, consumption and participation, as well as asynchronous and synchronous events e.g. viewing a film that is available for a long time on an online platform for fun and at your leisure is different to having to participate in a live online event such as a meeting. This is also important to consider in relation to education and work, not just entertainment: the current shift to online

teaching, both local (schools) and distance (universities), and how these impact those without digital access or mean getting up in the middle of the night for an online meeting when a synchronous event is led by someone somewhere across the globe.

### **Home and Away: A Blended Model for an Accessible and Inclusive Future?**

There are clearly pros and cons for both in-person events and digital ones, with neither being a solution to accessibility and inclusion for *all* people. It is imperative that some groups underrepresented in the arts are not negatively impacted even further by new measures. I want to return now to queerness, to consider the significance of space, while also thinking about a blended model of both on and offline events as it is important to offer digital events for reasons outlined above, but it is equally vital for minorities and disadvantaged groups to gather together for visibility, community, and activism.

SQIFF 2020 will be an online festival, available online via Vimeo on Demand for UK viewers to access for two weeks in October and while it is great to see it will run despite the pandemic, it is a shame that it will be digital only. Queer film festivals are significant as queer in-person spaces and meeting places. When considering in person versus digital, it is important to note that the rise of online socialising, including dating apps, has contributed to the closure of some gay/queer, specifically lesbian, bars. The normalisation of same-sex relationships, outlined earlier, has also played a role (see: Dawson 2018 for further discussion of this). It would be a shame for the great shift to digital, because of COVID-19, to have the same long-term impact on events like queer film festivals. It is imperative for those who do not consume alcohol to have a queer social space/event that does not revolve around drinking and that people on the less fortunate side of the digital divide, without access to the internet at home, are catered to as well. The importance of social interaction in relation to wellbeing cannot be overstated. Such spaces are vital for young LGBTQI+ people to meet others in real life in a non-cis-heterosexual space and, at the other end of the spectrum, they offer older people, including those with little to non-existent computer 'know-how', a place to meet. SQIFF partners regularly with both LGBT Youth and LGBT Age, for example, and this year will include an Elders Social Dance Club, where, according to the website, 'LGBTI+ Elders and their allies' can 'dust off their dancing shoes and charge their glasses for a free afternoon of carefree and

inclusive socialising.' This will be impossible for many, because of the digital divide, and for those who do partake, it will not have such a positive effect on wellbeing and physical and mental health as an in-person social.

Queer film festivals, indeed any queer spaces, are also massively important for visibility. This 'economy of visibility [is how] queerness reveals itself, even to other queers, only through acts of queerness ... or sites of community' which makes queer festivals a 'double representation on and in front of the screen' (Fung 1999: 90).

Queer film scholar and curator, B. Ruby Rich compares queer film festivals to gyms, saunas, and bars (2013: 36) i.e. community-based places where queerness reveals itself (Damiens 2020). There is already an invisibility around sexuality, hence the need to 'come out'. As a femme lesbian, I was very used to passing as straight, but add motherhood and preconceptions about femininity and family into the mix and my lesbianism is even more erased in most non-queer and queer spaces. It is also true that many people of colour and people with disabilities often have their queerness erased, because they are read primarily in terms of race and ability by a white supremacist and ableist society.

The more queer physical space we have the better. Consider how many of us spent time in our teen years secretly consuming LGBTQI+ culture in our bedrooms: we should not be shut away, once again, watching queer films alone or in small household groups. Queer film festivals and events also temporarily queer buildings/locations/cities (and some effects are more than temporary e.g. buildings and organisations keeping up queer posters, gender neutral toilet policy, etc. long after the festival has ended), while other LGBTQI+ spaces such as gay book shops and bars were closing their doors permanently even pre-COVID, because of the success of the internet for meeting people and buying things.

Also of importance for film festivals is the

liveness of the event, i.e. the bodily presence of audiences, filmmakers, and critics, which is a significant element in the formation of festival community and for the festival operating as a public sphere. ... Rituals, hype and the feeling of belonging to a group—whether at an A-list festival, a genre festival, or an LGBTI\*Q one—create the event culture that make festival screenings attractive to many, although ... these events can sometimes also exclude the least privileged, e.g. the working-



class. They are, however, a big factor in the ongoing proliferation of film festivals at times when Netflix and other, much cheaper, platforms to view films are available (Dawson & Loist 2018:3).

Audiences should have the opportunity for real-life encounters with film makers via post-show Q&As, and in-person workshops and masterclasses, while filmmakers deserve to be present fully at premières and screenings in their preferred format, rather than the small screen of a laptop, for example.

Going forward, rather than a binary of either-or, in-person events should be available simultaneously to those at home via streaming, allowing greater numbers of participants. Some might feel more confident to be introduced to a wider range of arts and events this way, but we would have to be cautious that this does not become a division of those who are able to be present and network and socialise and those (with disabilities, who cannot afford to travel to the festival, with parenting responsibilities, etc.) passively watching while isolated at home, and that festivals and events do not use a blended model to get out of ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for all on-site, therefore setting the less privileged back even further. Indeed a new classist and ableist divide is highly likely if dual modes of delivery are adopted with the digital event considered the accessible option so that measures do not need to be put in place for the in-person event.

## **Conclusion:**

About the future of festivals, Hope Dickson Leach is hopeful:

We don't need to travel so much to be involved with film festivals. Filmmakers can do Zoom Q&As, festival attendees can attend virtually. It's about options and knowledge, and I hope that the awareness that society has gained of caring responsibilities during lockdown means that they will remain part of how we ask people to work. We don't want to go back to where we were before.

Jessica Levick adds:

It would be fantastic if there could be digital panels and events for all going forwards. Like a digital free Cannes option to avoid costs and logistics.

Krissy Mahan echoes this with slightly more reservation:

I feel both encouraged and discouraged about how COVID-19 might change film and film festivals.

We must certainly ensure lessons can be learned from this period about accessibility and inclusion for film festivals and other arts events, which are overwhelmingly for and by white, wealthy people, and we must ensure that this does not result in a binary, in which in-person events, including networking, socialising and all of the opportunities relating to these, are only/mostly available to the most privileged, while the rest of us are at home behind a screen. Inclusion means having the same opportunities as others and the in person-at home binary could result in EDI measures excluding rather than including. There is room for this to become something positive e.g. a global online option opens up events to a massive audience compared to local in-person ones and if these were to be delivered with a sliding scale, starting from free, money made could be used to implement access and inclusion measures to ensure an even more diverse in-person one. However, the negative side of this could be one event or series of events by one team of people becoming the go-to (online) one for a specific theme or identity, meaning smaller events and festivals have even less money and market.

It is very clear that many people want and need to access more from our homes and lockdown has created a greater measure of equality of culture for those with digital access, but everyone needs to have the equipment, the online access, the finances, the safety, the education and skills to make use of such open access knowledge and culture. What we really need is for everyone to have great computer literacy, fast free internet, and the equipment to access it. Issues with all of these will surely cause even greater divides in future attainment for children living in poverty because of home schooling compared to more wealthy families, for example, and this cannot continue. COVID-19 lockdown has shown us that the internet, which offers connection while being apart from people, is as vital as other household utilities.

Unless drastic measures are taken, the crisis will further widen the gulf between those in poverty and working-class people and others, between people with disabilities and others, between parents/carers and others, between people of colour and others. So whilst the Conservative government is *appearing* to make the most socialist moves we have ever seen in the U.K, and lockdown means many of those with the most privilege are getting a glimpse of what those who have disabilities go through every day (e.g. exclusion, having to consider carefully trips out of the home, logistics, etc.), we must

keep the crucial matters at stake here in mind. We do this so we can return to access, which has been turned into a feminist issue, and a queer issue, and a disability issue, and a working class issue, and a person of colour issue exactly because doors are, after all, always open for able-bodied, wealthy white men. I want to stress though that access and inclusion are everybody's issue because *every* body should be catered to.

I very much hope that more funding will be provided to make the arts more inclusive. Taking LGBTQI+ festivals again as an example, each one runs for 'around ten years' because of organisers' limited money, time, and energy, and, in the 2000s, the instability of the financial crisis (Dawson & Loist 2018: 10). We are sure to see the largest financial crisis in our lifetimes because of COVID-19 as well as pervasive mental health issues caused by all forms of illness, unemployment, homelessness, lockdown, and loss, which will impact queer people and, in turn, the festivals and events we organise. After writing this piece, various funders made money available to those in the arts, while the Arts and Humanities Research Council (who already fund my current project about working-class onscreen representation and offscreen inclusion in the arts) generously launched both an open call for research and innovation ideas to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts as well as a new fellowship route for arts and humanities researchers whose work has a significant Equality, Diversity and Inclusion dimension. There is some hope.

*While money is limited, care and thought does not have to be.* Organisers need to listen and act. Going forward, I will work with a range of festivals and organisations to create some best practice documents on working-class inclusion, onscreen and off, amongst other initiatives. Event attendees can also take action by looking around at who is present at events and thinking of all of the people (with disabilities, single mothers, people in poverty, people of colour and so on) who are not present and who have not been included because the organisers have not been inclusive enough with accessibility measures. And you can speak up/provide feedback to help make everything accessible to *every* body.

If you enjoyed this article and can afford to, please consider making a donation to feed mind and body via the Free Black Uni, a space for radical knowledge production, and/or The Trussell Trust, which runs food banks while campaigning to end the need for them.

**<https://uk.gofundme.com/f/the-free-black-university>**



This focus issue includes some work by people I already knew, demonstrating that it is not always possible to operate totally outside pre-existing networks. Furthermore, the Editorial Assistant for this special journal issue is my nephew, who offered to step in and help with administrative work, from a distance, as I juggled creating this journal issue with work and childcare during lockdown. My nephew is Black, deaf, and working-class, so not the typical recipient of a helping hand.

[5].

Analysis and activism about poverty and capitalism was conducted by Queers for Economic Justice, a New York-based organisation that built a platform for voices of poor and homeless queer people, whose experiences were ignored by the mainstream LGBT movements, such as same-sex marriage, but which closed in 2014 after running for twelve years, precisely because there is no economic justice and they needed funds.

[6].

Reliability is a factor as SQIFF has always used CCA as its main base. It was closed for a while due to the Glasgow School of Art fire, but still managed to host a—slightly later, December rather than September—SQIFF when it reopened. Not all festivals are this fortunate: Leeds Queer Film Festival, for example, lost its space for the 2019 festival at the eleventh hour. I was due to host a working-class queers workshop (not the one with the working-class erasure), but this was postponed and the amazing organisers managed to run a smaller version of the festival at a different location. Eleftheriadis discusses how queer festivals across Europe, rather than queer film festivals, often take place in squats, as it is part of ‘how queer actors imagine their belonging to specific localities’ (2018: 55)

[7].

As an aside, festivals and events I have been asked to take part in since lockdown have always come with an offer of payment, so perhaps travel and accommodation money is now instead being used to pay a fee, which is good news for those in the arts without a stable income.

[8].

This list does not include many of the things needed for those who are carers for adults with additional needs.

I certainly intend to write about digital film festival events, history, potential, and accessibility in future. Future work will also include collaboration with festivals and organisations to work on best practice with regard to accessibility and inclusion.

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