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Film Festivals and the COVID-19 Pandemic:
How a Global Health Crisis Changed the United States Film Festival Circuit

By
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

An essential step in the life cycle of a film, film festivals provide an organized opportunity for filmmakers to present a film to an audience, gain feedback on their work, develop a reputation in the film industry, network with other individuals in the field, and attract the attention of distributors. Fulfilling these purposes became drastically more difficult because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects will bring about lasting changes to the independent film landscape once the virus is not an immediate threat to the success of a festival. This thesis outlines strategies taken among film festival organizers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and presents arguments for their utility in the traditional festival environment. It examines the origins of virtual and hybrid film festivals and discusses the components of each that are likely to persist in the festival circuit once the pandemic has ended.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDC	Center for Disease Control
CIFF	Cleveland International Film Festival
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
FFA	Film Festival Alliance
LAFF	Loudoun Arts and Film Festival
SIFF	Seattle International Film Festival
SXSW	South by Southwest

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic thrust the United States into an economic recession and has had a colossal impact on many U.S. industries; national unemployment peaked at an all-time high of 14.8% in April 2020 (since data collection began in 1948), according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (“The Employment Situation,” 2021), and the Bureau of Economic Analysis reported a 4.8% decrease in real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the first fiscal quarter of 2020 (“Gross Domestic Product,” 2020). Previous recessions, such as the Great Recession in 2008, came about with a gradual increase in economic distress, but the current pandemic was an “an abrupt and exogenous shock to the economy,” as the United States Congressional Research Service (CRS) said in a report on unemployment during the pandemic (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2021). This distress was caused by shifts in consumer behavior, such as physical distancing and capacity limitations, that accompanied various government-mandated “stay at home” orders among other methods of containment.

The pandemic affected every industry differently, but a study from McKinsey & Company identified the arts and entertainment sector as the industry second-most-affected by the pandemic in terms of small business job vulnerability, behind accommodations and food services (Dua, 2020). The arts and entertainment sector relies heavily on the presentation of a work to an audience, whether that is a theatrical performance, live music in front of a crowd, or a film screened in a theater. Social distancing and other precautionary measures that limit gatherings have decimated

the capability for the presentation to occur and have left their associated venues empty. For example, North American movie theaters sold nearly a billion fewer tickets than in 2019 (the-numbers.com, 2021), and revenue for the entire United States Movie Theater Industry declined 62% in 2020 (Miller, 2021). Included in these statistics are a crucial component of the independent (non-studio-produced) film landscape: film festivals.

Film festivals allow audiences to enjoy “commercially unviable films projected in a communal space—films that most communities, even the most cosmopolitan, otherwise would not have the opportunity to see,” as *CinemaScope* editor and publisher Mark Pernanson in his essay “First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals.” They are not exclusionary, though. “They still provide a venue for lively interplay between filmmaker and audience, or between film professionals. Festivals, it must be said and not forgotten... create the general atmosphere for the appreciation of film as art, and, in our transitional time, are thus essential.” (Frédéric, 2002).

Pernanson’s essay identifies two main festival models: “Business” festivals seek to provide opportunities for films to be sold to distributors, and “audience” festivals prioritize the audience’s experience with a curated slate of films (Frédéric, 2002). The shared ground between the two is offering a curated experience of independent film. Part of the festival experience is trusting festival programmers to provide screenings that they believe are worth the audience’s time, money, and attention to see. Audiences put a certain level of trust into the organizers of film festivals to give them a worthwhile viewing experience. This relationship sparks a wonderful, communal, and independent discovery of film that develops a culture around the art form. The COVID-19 pandemic threatened the very possibility of those discoveries. Film festivals are but a small sliver in the entire United

States economy and only a microcosm experiencing the effects of a much larger, national event, but festivals are a crucial player in the sustainability of independent film; the pandemic endangered an entire art form.

Festival organizers were forced to adapt to preserve this vital component of their operations. This paper will explore the strategies festivals implemented to do so. Organizers' reaction to such an intense time of distress indicates an impressive amount of perseverance of festival organizers to safeguard their industry. I am writing this paper just over a year since the pandemic began, and the amount of change the film festival circuit has gone through during that time indicates the capability for new presentations of film during festivals and allows for speculation that these strategies will remain a part of the festival circuit even after the pandemic is not a factor in festival planning. By analyzing firsthand conversations with festival organizers and supporting recurring themes with existing data gathered from audiences, filmmakers, and organizers, I will outline the responses of a diverse selection of festivals and present a case for the continued existence of these changes.

METHODOLOGY

My objective for this study was to understand and describe the effects that the COVID-19 outbreak had on the United States film festival circuit and hypothesize lasting changes that festivals will face. Due to the novelty of COVID-19 at the time of this paper being written, there was little published, peer-reviewed literature on this topic, so the majority of my findings and arguments come from dozens of inquiries and correspondences with film festival organizers across the United States.

First, though, I used existing information about the traditional film festival circuit in the United States to get a comprehensive understanding of the origins of film festivals so I could understand the ways they have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I consulted the following publications: Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, Skadi Loist's *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, Cindy H. Wong's *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*, and as well as several articles and essays from a collection of academic journals.

Then, I made thorough use of perspectives found in trade journals and news outlets, such as *Filmmaker Magazine*, *Film Quarterly*, *IndieWire*, *Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter* to learn about the decisions that film festivals were making as they happened. I also regularly consulted databases that broadly captured how individual film festivals were being affected by the pandemic, mainly via running lists of festivals and the changes they

were making to their program in reaction to the challenges set forth by the pandemic. *IndieWire* and The Film Collaborative were the two main sources that provided these records that gave me a clear picture of the decisions festival organizers were making.

The individuals most impacted by the pandemic, perhaps aside from filmmakers, were (and still are) festival organizers, so I prioritized gathering their perspectives. Following the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board research approval process, I gathered the email addresses of festival organizers and prospective subjects via public websites or, as the study went on, through another subject. I reached out to 40 different United States Film Festivals and conducted email correspondences with representatives of the 23 that responded to my initial inquiry. I then identified and conducted video-interviews with 10 festival organizers across the United States that, based on my initial research, collectively exhibited a diverse selection of festival identities and, concurrently, reactionary strategies to the pandemic that both encompassed common responses of festivals and begged to be further investigated in a case-study form. This collection of festivals is far from comprehensive, but it is one that I believe captures the climate of the film festival environment during this time, and it is as follows: Blackstar Film Festival, Cleveland International Film Festival, Dallas Video Festival, Fantastic Fest, Loudoun Arts and Film Festival, Outfest, Oxford Film Festival, Seattle International Film Festival, and True/False Film Festival.

I also consulted and conducted interviews with several individuals who are not responsible for planning a festival but who are connected to the festival circuit in some way. I met with Scott Macaulay, editor-in-chief of *Filmmaker Magazine*, a quarterly publication on issues concerning independent film, Paul Jun, Co-Founder and CEO of

Filmocracy, one of many streaming platforms that began to host film festivals online during the pandemic, Sergio Andrés Lobo-Navia, a freelance film festival technical director, Nathan Bowman, a client relations specialist at Gather, a realistic, web-conferencing software utilized by film festivals for screenings and social events, and Lela Meadows-Connor, Executive Director of the Film Festival Alliance (FFA), a not-for-profit organization that provides supportive resources to member film festivals and their organizers across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. I also (virtually) attended FilmEx, an annual conference hosted by FFA that brings together hundreds of festival organizers for discussions of the state of the industry, best practices, and challenges facing film festivals.

These interviews lasted 30 minutes to an hour each and were conducted and recorded with participant consent on Zoom over two months- December 2020 and January 2021. I followed a structured yet personalized list of questions and then left space to have a conversation with the organizer about the topics we discussed.

I was able to guide my qualitative research using findings that FFA published in their 2020 Film Festival Organizer, Audience, and Filmmaker Survey results. Conducted by Avenue ISR and in partnership with The Gotham Film and Media Institute, FFA surveyed film festival organizers, filmmakers, and attendees to a) understand how key film festival audiences responded to the events of 2020, b) learn both successes and challenges that faced respondents, and c) identify actionable opportunities to strengthen festivals and the festival experience- both live and virtual. This crucial data is one of the first opportunities for researchers to interpret the climate of the industry as a whole. My own

research takes these findings and exemplifies them through several case studies of festivals around the United States, despite the two being conducted in reverse order.

After I had completed the interview portion of my research, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring ideas that would lead to my conclusions and compared them to the trends I had found in existing literature. I became increasingly aware that, while many festivals seemed to take similar approaches (such as choosing to cancel their program, postpone it or transition it online, or introduce new hybrid elements), I found upon closer examination that each festival had to take a different individual strategy to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic. These differences were due to many factors, such as the size and demographics of their audience, the size of their operations, their geographic location, the time of the year the festival traditionally occurs, and its proximity to the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. The diversity in these strategies exemplifies the validity of gathering qualitative data to study this topic and supports the predictions that I make in this thesis.

CHAPTER 1: CANCELED

On March 6, 2020, one of the United States' largest and most reputable film festivals, South by Southwest (SXSW) was canceled by city leaders of Austin, Texas ("City of Austin Cancels SXSW," 2020). In the subsequent days, a rippled series of announcements, press releases, and media updates from festival organizers around the world spread news of similar cancelations and postponements that would completely change how the 2020 film festival landscape would look both in the United States and worldwide.

Early that morning, Lela Meadows-Conner, Executive Director of the Film Festival Alliance (FFA), and several members of FFA were on a conference call speculating the likelihood that SXSW would happen just a week later. The probability that the festival would be canceled was rising, especially after key industry players Apple, Netflix, and Amazon pulled out of the event due to an increased number of COVID-19 cases around the world, and spread in the United States seemed imminent (Harris-Bridson, 2020). Even though there were only around 100 reported cases that week in the United States, according to the United States Center for Disease Control ("CDC COVID Data Tracker"), cases were quickly spreading worldwide, and it was starting to affect different areas of the film industry.

A new batch of cancelations and postponements came every day. Cinemas in China were ordered to close on eve of the lunar new year, and cinemas in Italy closed as the region

became the first outside of Asia to experience an outbreak. The Berlin Film Festival (otherwise known as Berlinale) would be one of the last film festivals to happen before the pandemic started affecting the industry, wrapping up just one day shy of the city's first COVID-19 case. A laundry list of studio releases like the upcoming James Bond film *No Time to Die* and *F9* (the ninth entry in *The Fast & The Furious* franchise) as well as production on series like ABC's *Gray's Anatomy* and CBS' *The Amazing Race* had all been postponed (Staff, *IndieWire*, 2020).

“We had been hearing all sorts of rumblings about things, so we just decided to hold a call and invited the community of festivals,” said Meadows-Conner (Meadows-Conner, 2021). She said the willingness to attend the festival of people on the call was split about half and half. That is, until two hours later when the city of Austin canceled the festival. SXSW would be the first major film festival in the world to be canceled due to the escalating health crisis, but this cancellation was just one of the hundreds of similar announcements that would occur over the coming months. In fact, over the following week, over 27 festivals announced they would be either canceling or postponing their festival programming or moving it to an online format. The following week saw another 94 cancellation or postponements (J. Winter, 2020).

Some of the biggest festivals in the world were members of this group, including Cannes Film Festival (one of the world's “Big Three” film festivals), CPH:DOX, Tribeca Film Festival, Hot Docs, San Francisco Film Festival, and Edinburgh Film Festival, to name just a few (“Coronavirus Cancellations,” 2020). Each of these festivals is a massive industry event with decades of history and reputations of curating some of the most

impactful films each year, and their cancelations threw the foreseeable future of film festivals into question.

Festival organizers were understandably shaken by the looming threat of inescapable change. To dispel some of these early anxieties, FFA began to host weekly, roundtable calls with festival organizers from all around the country.

We just invited people to come on. It was a really great way to bring the community together. And much needed. I think it was the emotional support that everybody needed to feel like they weren't alone. We already feel siloed in what we do because there are not many people that do what we do, so having that opportunity to gather once a week and see faces, private chat with your friends... it was really, really valuable for our community. (Meadows-Conner, 2021)

Festival organizers who had events scheduled for spring of 2020 suffered the most, because they had less time to come up with a new plan for their program, so some, like the Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) canceled their festival outright while festivals like the Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF) pivoted to hosting their films “virtually,” a term that has become increasingly used since the pandemic began in order to describe festivals hosting their programs online, which was uncommon before the pandemic. Festivals that were postponed or were planned for later in the year, like Oxford Film Festival, Dallas Video Festival, and Outfest, became “hybrid” events that included a mix of both in-person and virtual components of their program, and festivals slated for early 2021 had ample time to determine which of these strategies best fit their mission. Few festivals opted to completely cancel their events and refrain from doing anything. Scott Macaulay, Editor-in-Chief of *Filmmaker Magazine*, notes,

I don't think there's been a single festival that just decided to take a pause and not do something this year. Everyone has been trying to bring some version of the festival experience to an audience that is forced to be at home, as a way, I think, continuing to occupy their place in the film, the film eco-sphere, but also, it's just a continuity of operations, they have staff, they need to keep the festival going. (Macaulay, 2021)

Macaulay is mostly correct here. According to an FFA survey of film festival organizers, only 2% of responding film festival organizers reported that they canceled all of their 2020 events while 73% hosted an online/virtual film festival in 2020, another 14% were planning for an online event at the time the study was conducted, and 6% were planning for an in-person festival for 2020. ("2020 Festival Organizer Survey"). The most notable festival in that last category and was the Venice International Film Festival, the oldest film festival in the world. The 77th iteration of the festival was as close to a traditional, in-person festival as it could be while still taking preventative measures like mask enforcement, temperature screenings, and social distancing (Biennale Cinema, 2020). Even though FFA's survey indicates 6% of festivals still opted for an in-person model, no festival after March of 2020 proceeded without taking some degree of cautionary measures.

Pivoting to a virtual festival was the most popular response to adapting to the challenges set by the pandemic, but some festivals decided to not have any sort of film event in 2020. There was a group of smaller, regional festivals all over the country that fell into this category, but perhaps most notable are two of the biggest and most reputable festivals in the world, Cannes Film Festival, held typically in May, and Telluride Film Festival, typically in September. Both of these festivals canceled their in-person event in

2020 and did not host an online program in its place. They did, however, release a selection of films for their would-be festivals (Frémaux and Lescure, 2020) (Telluride, 2020). While these festivals didn't provide the traditional forum of film viewing, they used their reputation in the film community to elevate films of exceptional quality. This is perhaps a privilege reserved for larger, market festivals such as these, but it is notable because they did so without hosting any sort of viewing forum. It is important to distinguish the opportunity to enact this tactic as one privy only to a select few film festivals. If, each year, "reputable" film festivals released a list of "Most Impressive Films" of the past year—films that audiences and distributors should pay attention to—do festivals even need to host screenings of these films just to prove their point, or is the validation of the curators enough?

Not quite. Only a handful of films get picked up for distribution each year. According to the American Film Market, only 17% of all United States independent narrative features (non-documentaries) produced in 2017 experienced a "large theatrical release," meaning the film celebrated box office earnings over \$100K in their theatrical release that year. Another 8% of these films either had small releases that grossed less than \$100K, but over 70% of these films didn't see any sort of theatrical release at all (Follows and Nash, 2021). This dataset only included narrative features, which is the genre of film most likely to get picked up for distribution, so one can assume that the ratio would be even worse for documentaries or other films of a different genre (the-numbers.com, 2020).

Based on these statistics and a bit of intuition, the average filmmaker might not go into the festival circuit expecting to get their film picked up by a distributor, which supports the idea that festivals have a greater purpose than fostering distribution deals for

independent films. Filmmakers need the festival environment to increase buzz around their films. Without it, they would be overshadowed by films coming out of major, market festivals. Film festivals are more than collections of films lined up for distribution shopping. In the sections that follow, I am going to illustrate how festival organizers adapted different parts of their festival to combat the challenges set forth by the coronavirus outbreak. Each of these elements contributes to the general identity and role of a film festival in the yearly film circuit and generating an annual list of reputable films is not sustainable for the independent film industry. Independent filmmakers rely on festivals for the exposure of their films and networking opportunities. It is essential for independent filmmakers that these systems remain in place. Since the pandemic, festivals have found new ways to accomplish this, and, through an analysis of analyzing the conversations I had with film festival organizers, I hope to illustrate that these new tactics are significant enough to become new pillars of festivals' identities.

I will begin by examining festivals that canceled or postponed their scheduled, in-person 2020 festival and did not pivot to an online version but still offered some sort of programming that year. Then, I will outline several virtual and hybrid strategies taken by festivals that did transition their program to either a completely or partially online model. Lastly, I will provide a few case studies of the early 2021 festival landscape while highlighting the festival components that came about during the pandemic that are likely to continue, even as the pandemic becomes a decreasingly smaller factor in film festival planning and the overall festival experience.

Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF)

Above, I mentioned several festivals that either opted to cancel their event or were forced to by city officials. Most of these festivals were scheduled shortly after the news of SXSW's cancellation hit in the spring of 2020, so they were unable to adapt their event to an online format (at least, not right away). The Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF), the largest film festival in the United States in terms of feature productions (Ladwig, 2018), was one of those festivals.

With over 150,000 yearly attendees across a mighty 25-day event each May, SIFF is “a lumbering beast,” as Artistic Director Beth Barrett calls it. “Some festivals are like speedboats and can really shift very quickly, and others are much more like the Titanic, which doesn't shift very easily at all. The QE2 doesn't turn on a dime.” (Barrett, 2021)

In mid-March of 2020, SIFF was working on the logistics of its 2020 festival. They were planning for their usual selection of 250 features for their upcoming festival, which is already far more than the number of films screened by the average festival: 117, according to FFA. SIFF also boasts an enormous gap between its number of attendees (175,000+) and the average festival (10,100) (Film Festival Alliance, 2021). They had confirmed 100 of the 250 hopeful films for the festival when they realized they could not proceed as planned.

It was all very immediate that we realized that the festival that we wanted to have, there was no way we were going to be able to have it. We just knew that that was just not gonna happen. We weren't far enough along to put together a digital program, but we were too far along to push back our dates to the fall or to the late

summer, 'cause we already had venues, we had all of these things. We were at this very weird spot, so we just... We had to cancel. (Barrett, 2021)

As the largest film festival in the United States, they had built a reputation on “having the most films and being the longest and being the biggest, so it’s been an interesting challenge to then shift to not being that,” said Barrett. “The festival is such a cultural center-point of the spring in Seattle. People don't schedule anything else around that time because people are going to movies and the local arthouses.” (Barrett, 2021)

SIFF’s growth in size and popularity over its 45-year run has allowed them to open and operate five year-round cinemas in the Seattle area. In addition to canceling their festival, SIFF had to close its five year-round cinemas to comply with Washington Governor Jay Inslee’s “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order, which closed all non-essential businesses and required every Washingtonian to stay home unless they needed to pursue an essential activity. Similar legislation was passed in nearly every state, but because they usually employ 70 year-round staff members to help run their cinemas, which aren’t considered essential businesses (Stay Home—Stay Healthy, 2020), SIFF had to lay off 98% of their staff and was not able to bring in their typical, additional 70-80 seasonal employees for the festival.

That shift did not come easily at first; however, the festival saw a “huge outpouring of support for all arts and culture in Seattle,” as Barrett called it. Both filmmakers and audiences were overwhelmingly sympathetic with SIFF’s decision to cancel. In fact, every festival I spoke with reported a similar response to their choices, regardless of how unfamiliar they seemed. In SIFF’s case, Barrett hypothesized that it was because people started to realize that this moment would last much longer than anybody thought it would.

I think we're all recognizing that if you don't support the arts and culture that you believe in, it might disappear. It might not make it through this. I look forward to when we can reopen and really focusing on the cinemas as a center of our organization and the festival as a giant event that we do as part of this organization, as opposed to being a festival organization who runs cinemas. We've done a lot of work to shift the focus of what we do from 'everything is about the festival,' and then the cinemas can catch up to being about film and how we present it and where we present it and what that looks like. If it's in the cinema, that's one thing, if it's in the festival, that's another thing, if it's part of an educational program, that's a third thing. But centering film as the guiding force. (Barrett, 2021)

Thanks to that support, SIFF has been able to reevaluate the way that they showcase film and has had some time to reflect on the strategies that collegial festivals have taken. Unsurprisingly, the most common change that SIFF has observed in its peer festivals has been the transition to virtual programs. I discuss a few of these festivals in the following sections, but SIFF's experience remains a relevant introduction to that discussion because of the organizers' ability to weigh the validity of those models from an outside perspective.

It comes down to, I think, what part of the festival experience do you center? If it is the film, then you can center it in a lot of different ways, you can say there's one kind of experience that happens when you're all together in the cinema, and then there's another kind of experience that we still want you to have, because we still want you to connect with that film and connect with that filmmaker. Being able to be able to have that experience as well... both parts are equally valid now in the

cultural psyche. The world has shifted a little bit to not valuing one specific thing over the other. (Barrett, 2021)

She later elaborates, “The part that is missing is being in that audience that discovers something, and I'm not sure that there's a way to really replicate that in a virtual world, we definitely keep the discovery part, but it's more of an independent discovery.” (Barrett, 2021)

Every festival organizer I spoke to is now engaging in a struggle to find that balance between communal and independent experiences. SIFF, along with the majority of 2020 festivals, chose to lean into individual discovery during the pandemic. Despite canceling their initial 2020 festival, SIFF still hosted an online program during their previously scheduled festival dates; “SIFF Retrospective 2020” was a virtual showcase of films that had won awards at the festival in its 45-year history along with a few of the films that the festival would have had at its 2020 festival (“Telescope Film Announces SIFF Retrospective 2020,” 2020). The festival has also moved screenings that would normally take place in its five brick-and-mortar theaters to a virtual cinema platform. Before the pandemic, festivalgoers may have thought of “virtual cinema” as immersive, virtual reality (VR) presentations, usually as a supplemental part of the traditional program. Now, the term has grown to mean an online catalogue of on-demand films in response to brick-and-mortar cinemas closing as soon as the pandemic came about. Barrett said this decision was in reaction to how promising the virtual landscape looked for festivals.

I think that the virtual engagement is going to be a part of almost all festivals and art houses from now on, because we have now created this virtual engagement, and so now we kinda have to follow through with it. It's gonna be less because when

we can go back into cinemas, I think everyone is going to be really excited to go sit and watch a movie, but as time goes on, those are just gonna be a part of the way that we present a film. (Barrett, 2021)

As one of the larger, if not the largest, festivals in the United States, SIFF has the capability to be one of the louder voices in a noisy festival landscape. Clearly, they saw the longevity in other festivals' pursuits of a virtual option that was working. In the sections that follow, I will examine some of these tactics other film festivals took in order to reinforce the above argument that the virtual components of festivals have some lasting utility.

CHAPTER 2: VIRTUAL

Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF)

Within two weeks of its regular 2020 festival's cancelation, the Cleveland International Film Festival (CIFF) announced it would be shifting to an online event: "CIFF 44: Reinvented." ("CIFF 44: Reinvented, 2020). "It took us about two weeks to pivot," said CIFF Associate Director Patrick Shepard. "We announced that there would be a film festival put on a streaming platform in the month of April. Although, even on that date, we still did not know quick how quickly we were going to be able to pull it off." (Shepard, 2021)

Thanks to a little bit of luck and good timing (supported by a veteran team of organizers with over 30+ years in festival programming), they did pull it off. The cloud-storage-based web app CineSend had agreed to be a sponsor for CIFF's 2020 festival. Before the pandemic, it was mainly used by filmmakers for storing and sharing digital files, but CineSend's ability to host large files online for an audience allowed them to pivot to a hosting platform for festivals. CineSend was one of around 14 festival-hosting platforms that exploded in popularity and simultaneously began competing for the biggest stake in the online film festival market during the first couple months of the pandemic in the United States. Other notable platforms include Film Festival Flix, Agile, and (most successfully) Eventive ("Online Film Festival Platforms," 2020). Most of these platforms resemble conventional streaming services like Netflix, HBO, and Hulu, but an "entry fee" for either an individual film or for the entire festival. "We had enlisted CineSend as a vendor to

collect the digital files for the films, so as it turned out, they had pretty much all of our files already in their system, so they were somebody that could help us deliver the program,” said Shepard. “I often wonder if we did not have CineSend as a vendor, if we would have just completely shut down and given up, at least for that cycle.” (Shepard, 2021)

Despite the absence of festivals that pivoted to a virtual format in response to the pandemic, online film festivals have been around since the 1990s (“Webdance,” 1999). Out of the 10,000+ festivals on the submission platform FilmFreeway, about 1000 of them had some sort of online component before 2020. (FilmFreeway, 2021) CIFF would be one of the first of a new era of virtual film festivals in the world, alongside CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, Hot Docs in Toronto, and Annapolis Film Festival in Maryland. (“Coronavirus Cancellations,” 2020)

Nevertheless, they managed to pivot, even though the initial reaction from filmmakers was hesitant. On a national level, only 71% of filmmakers surveyed by FFA who released a film in 2020 affirmed that they had screened their film at a virtual film festival that year, with only 14% and 21% of those filmmakers participating in events in March and April, respectively (“2020 Festival Organizer Survey”). Most festival organizers I spoke with attributed this to the skepticism around how long the festival circuit would be disrupted by the pandemic.

Some distributors were not willing to do it yet, even some filmmakers who not behold into a big company, then there were so many unknowns that we didn't know if we were gonna come out of this in three months or if it was getting longer or not, so I think many people were optimistic that maybe movie theaters would reopen and mass by the summer, but it was all on a kind of a case by case basis, and as I

said before, I think everybody was making it up as they went along, including the distributors, including the festivals, including all the stakeholders. (Shepard, 2021)

Despite this initial hesitation, there was an impressive response to the festival's decision to transition online. In the last two weeks of April 2020, CIFF showcased 325 of their originally slated 400 films.

The transition also resonated with CIFF's audience. According to data gathered by the festival organizers after the event, the festival saw over 42,000 streams (defined as at least 70% of the film viewed) and brought in over \$135,000, with over 80% of their surveyed audience reporting their experience was either great or fantastic ("CIFF at a Glance," 2020).

People were hungry for content in the heart of the lockdown. Things were pretty locked up in Ohio from... I would say March 12th, the day after we were canceled, until around May 15th, that's when things started opening up a little bit. So, for the most part, people were at home during the entire festival... and [about the aforementioned survey] obviously the reaction was pretty favorable. (Shepard, 2021)

Perhaps the biggest advantage of virtual festivals is the ability for remote audiences (both national and international) to be able to take part in the festival without physically being in one particular location. The accessibility that comes with online festivals is an invaluable development for the film festival industry because it allows audiences who might not have been able to attend the event the ability to do so remotely. Furthermore, festival organizers are realizing that if part of a festival's purpose is to curate films for their community, that community does not only have to be comprised of the festivalgoers who can attend an in-

person event for a few days out of the year. CIFF is a very region-focused film festival, and Shepard assured me the festival will remain that way, but he also said that the festival was able to reach a wider audience this year than in previous years and that they will continue to entertain those audiences even once the pandemic has ended (Shepard, 2021). About the relationship between film festivals and the communities they serve, Shepard said:

I think it's done nothing but strengthen it, because we're all going through rough times, and you can really tell who your friends are. Gosh, just all the people in the film festival community who have come together to help each other in the wake of a tragic worldwide event, it is heartening to see that good people are out there to help you, and you're glad to lend a hand to them too. (Shepard 2021)

Granted, organizers might be hesitant to share negative feedback, but the survey that FFA administered supports the praise that CIFF and other festivals received in 2020. The 61% of surveyed audience members who reported they had attended a virtual film festival in 2020 gave high marks to festival curation, ticket passes and sales, communications, and (unexpectedly) technical performance of streaming (2020 Filmmaker & Audience Survey”).

Shepard attributes CIFF’s ability to pivot mostly to having a perfectly timed partnership with CineSend, but he also touches on the convenience of the medium: “All these other things we were getting canceled like live music, theater, and Broadway, and we feel so fortunate that our art form is film because you *can* pivot that.” (Shepard, 2021)

But just because you can pivot the medium, should you? The genesis of the virtual film festival did not come without its drawbacks. Audience engagement with filmmakers

and other audience members was perhaps the biggest thing missing from the virtual festivals I spoke with. This seems to come from the idea that the overall sense of camaraderie that accompanies being around like-minded individuals is irreplaceable. The pandemic stripped these interactions from all aspects of life, not just from film festivals. Embracing an old friend after running into them for the first time in years, sharing ideas with a colleague over a drink, building a relationship with a stranger from the common ground that comes with being in a place of shared values—these are some of the most exciting, unexpected, and memorable parts of our lives that the pandemic interrupted, and no amount of simulation can recreate these human experiences. However, there other aspects of a film festival besides seeing a film in a theater that festival organizers have worked to emulate online to seek that engagement; for example, Q&A sessions with the filmmakers after their film is screened, on-site audience voting for festival awards, and screenplay competitions. CIFF is planning for a more robust virtual experience in 2021 after watching peer festivals innovate in unique ways during the pandemic (Shepard, 2021). In 2020, CIFF didn't have the capacity for any supplemental programming to their screenings, but this paper will explore some of those strategies that other festivals have taken.

There's been so much innovation in the last 11 months. Some of the things that we're doing now, I'm now literally punching myself in the arm that we were not doing this and saving ourselves so much time and energy in the past. So, it's terrible, this whole situation, but forced innovation is something that has completely changed the business model and the delivery model of our festival. (Shepard, 2021)

Shepard is claiming that the film festival industry is forever transformed, and he is correct. His own festival is proof: “We're going to keep streaming into future years, even after we're back at we're in Playhouse Square, because there were people who either were unable or unwilling to come downtown to go to the festival, but they participated in CIFF 44 Stream. We don't want to lose those people, so we're going to keep that going.” (Shepard, 2021)

There are essential parts of the traditional film festival that an online event can't replicate, but allowing any viewer to access a festival's selection online, regardless of their geographic location, has increased audience accessibility in a significant enough manner that some festivals will continue to pursue them after the pandemic is over.

BlackStar Film Festival

While the pandemic was still in its early stages internationally, Nehad Khader, Festival Director of BlackStar Film Festival, was anxiously awaiting an inevitable outbreak in the United States: “I was sure, just based on the science of it, that it was a matter of time and that we would end up in a quarantine situation.” (Khader, 2021)

Of the festival organizers I interviewed, Khader gave the earliest date of when they began worrying about the potential risks of COVID. BlackStar, founded in 2012, highlights the works of Black, Brown, and Indigenous filmmakers through a four-day festival in Philadelphia. It began as a one-day “micro-festival” that exploded in a buzz that grew the program to welcoming over 10,000 yearly attendees from all around the world and placing a heavy emphasis on supporting the artists within its community. Its 2020 festival was not supposed to be until August, but the festival had an annual seminar on the horizon in May. Khader said she began having conversations with the rest of her team about the possibility

of canceling their events in early February when no coronavirus cases in the United States had been reported, but they were spreading exponentially around the globe. (“CDC COVID Data Tracker”)

Everybody was laughing at me and making fun of me for a very long time. Nobody was like, ‘Oh yeah. She actually has a point.’ In February, nobody was paying attention. But I was, and it was pretty obvious... It was unfolding in real-time, and it just made sense. It's a virus that was airborne, so it made sense that it was a matter of time. (Khader, 2021)

Khader was proven right, but it was hardly an “I told you so” moment. The BlackStar organizing team canceled their May seminar, and they thought that would be enough, that the pandemic would not last long enough to interfere with their summer festival. It wasn't until June, when the United States was seeing an average of 20,000 confirmed cases per day (“CDC COVID Data Tracker”), that BlackStar accepted that an in-person gathering just wasn't possible for their August festival (“BlackStar Goes Digital,” 2020). Then, they started to scramble.

We had very little time to start shifting everything. We had to change everything from the dates of the festival to obviously the mechanism through which the festival operates. We had to change staffing, we had to change our language that we were speaking to filmmakers with, because by the time that we have decided that the festival couldn't happen, we had already chosen our slate of films that we were going to screen. (Khader, 2021)

Because it was only June when BlackStar was planning for its upcoming festival, “There weren't a lot of models really to go by, and it was just a lot of ‘think little and do a lot,’ like

just, the goal is here, and so everybody just had to do everything possible in order to meet that goal." (Khader, 2021)

The model that BlackStar settled on was an all-access, online experience. Ticketed attendees were able to see the festival's full slate at their leisure from August 20-26 along with live-streamed panel discussions and digital social events.

I think our responsibility is primarily about caring about the works that filmmakers work so hard to produce, pay a lot of money for, and put a lot of energy, physical, emotional, mental energy into. People were worried that we would cancel, and I think, for us, one of the most important reasons to go forward with it is that so many folks had worked on their films and weren't expecting a pandemic, and so to honor the artist and the makers and all of the work that they put into producing their films, we wanted to make sure that that space was still available to them, we also felt like that was all we could do at that moment. (Khader, 2021)

Additionally, two weeks before the festival, the festival organizers realized they could do in-person programming if it took place outdoors. Conveniently, at the same time, the city of Philadelphia was exploring the idea of creating a drive-in theater in the parking lot of the Mann Music Center, a culturally important venue space in the city, according to Khader. She describes their new connection with the city as a positive outcome of the pandemic.

If you can say that, right? With all due respect to all the suffering that's happened throughout this pandemic, there were some things that were positive that were generated at the tail end of it. One of them is that we partnered with the city in order to produce these outdoor screenings because they had already sort of set them up

for the residents of the city, and we got to be the pilot, we got to do the first three shows of their drive-in, and so now we have this really beautiful relationship with the city of Philadelphia. (Khader, 2021)

That relationship was, again, a minor part of the successes that BlackStar enjoyed as a result of their online festival. They, like CIFF, reported an overwhelmingly positive response from both filmmakers and audiences.

There was nothing that we offered that people were not very happy to have an opportunity to receive or to participate in everything was really well attended and applied for. It felt like in that environment, what we could offer to people is this: an opportunity to sit down and watch films and to watch panels and just sort of turn that paranoia off a little bit because we were all feeling it too. It felt like it would be good for us to do it for our own selves, for our own mental health, we all still had jobs, and so I think it was a lot of that thinking that led us to commit to putting it forward, and people really felt that. (Khader, 2021)

Also similar to CIFF were two of BlackStar's dissatisfactions with moving their festival online: concerns around the festival platform's security, which had little impact on their perception of the festival's success, and audience engagement, one that did.

Of course, there is always concerned about safety, security, and piracy online. We know now a lot more than what we did over the summer in terms of DRM (Digital Rights Management) and watermarks, native browsers, and what is the best way to protect filmmakers' work. But they could see that we were also really, very deeply thinking about that and engaged in conversations internally, and so... we didn't hear any complaints. (Khader, 2021)

Still, BlackStar had difficulty simulating some of the conventional aspects of the festival experience. The festival built out the capability to do virtual Q&A panels and Zoom social events, but “during the normal festival, not only do we have parties and happy hours and all of that at the end of the evening, but people are coming together that haven't seen each other probably in a year or in several months. So there is something that's missing that you can't recuperate... You can't recuperate that, that's the space where people come together, where the audience can speak to the filmmakers, where the filmmakers meet each other.” (Khader, 2021)

Khader's disappointments hold up in the larger festival sphere and are supported by the FFA survey referenced in the previous section. Festival organizers chalked most of their challenges up to audience engagement, digital fatigue, and technical issues. Around 80% of festival respondents indicated that their biggest priority for their future success is implementing new formats/approaches for audience and filmmaker interaction. (“2020 Festival Organizer Survey”)

Unlike CIFF, Khader says she doubts BlackStar will continue its virtual model any longer than it has to, but that doesn't mean that all elements of its virtual festival are gone for good. According to FFA, festivals reached on average 29 states and 14 countries outside of their own (“2020 Festival Organizer Survey”). She admits,

There is something to making our panels, for example, accessible to audiences all over the world that is really beautiful... I think as the technology gets more and more secure, we might consider... And this is a big might, but it's possible to consider doing the festival that happens in real life and then feeding it into some

kind of a virtual platform for people to watch if the filmmakers are okay with that.
(Khader, 2021)

Despite technological complications and barriers to traditional audience engagement, BlackStar's 2020 festival experience again suggests that the strategies film festivals used to develop their virtual festival model have unearthed new avenues for festivals to fulfill their purpose and have allowed for their identities to expand to a program that has the capability for a global presence, regardless of geographic location. Still, it is difficult for festivals to find the proper balance between the two. As I'll explore in the following section, some festivals incorporated strategies of both in-person and virtual models to create "hybrid festivals."

CHAPTER 3: HYBRID

Through my conversations with festival organizers, two elements that festivals were most pressed to replicate were the limited availability that comes with seeing a film at a festival and the in-person atmosphere that accompanies those viewings. Some festivals were able to remain grounded in their physical location despite having to take necessary preventative measures to slow the spread of the pandemic. Under such limitations, serving large crowds indoors proved difficult, so festivals relied on outdoor events that took the form of either socially distant, open-air venues or drive-in showings. Because these in-person experiences were altered, many festivals supplemented their programming with an online slate of films or vice versa. These hybrid festivals that included both in-person and virtual components allowed festivals to offer coordinated programming to different audiences based on varying degrees of accessibility. If a viewer felt comfortable enough to travel to a festival, they could watch a selection of films at the festival's drive-in, but if they were unable to attend the in-person festival, they still had the opportunity for an online experience. Given that many festival organizers indicated an interest in having future versions of their festival include both in-person and online components, the experiences of hybrid festivals in 2020 could be especially helpful in seeing models of the future of film festivals.

Outfest

Both of the festivals examined in the previous section allowed passholders to stream their festival selection on their own schedule at any point during the festival run. Virtual attendees could watch however many films they wanted to, whenever they wanted to. While some festival organizers named “flexibility for viewers to participate on their own time” as one of the more successful elements of their festival (“2020 Filmmaker & Audience Survey”), the number of times a film is shown at a traditional festival depends on the festival in question, but films only screen once or twice during an entire event. Because this exclusivity is a standard part of the festival experience, some festivals restricted viewing windows of their films to a short timeframe within their program in an attempt to simulate the scarcity found in the limited number of screenings a film may have at any given festival.

Festivals saw viewing windows as an effective way to simulate the liveliness of in-person festivals, but there was some variety in the length of the windows, which had intuitive yet notable effects. On one end of the spectrum, The Oxford Film Festival extended its previously planned five-day 2020 festival over the summer of 2020. Each week for three months, the festival released new blocks of films, only viewable during that week. (Thompson, 2020)

The festival was preparing to showcase over 200 films before its online pivot, but “people were too overwhelmed,” Festival Executive Director Melanie Addington said in an interview with the Mississippi Free Press. “They were just not going to pay attention to 200 movies over a couple of days. So, we stretched it out to Sept. 11, so people could tune in to watch a couple of blocks each week” (Lucas, 2020). While this model “brought a lot

of genuine value, connecting with people all over the world,” Addington told me she wouldn’t stretch the festival out for so long again, and understandably so. Expanding what was typically a four-day program to over three months presents the challenges of maintaining engagement during the festival. Despite hosting events that supplemented the screenings, such as weekly live-streamed panels and Q&As, Addington said the festival struggled to keep its audience engaged for the entire length of the program. (Addington, 2020)

On the other end of the spectrum were festivals that simulated true live viewing windows by not giving audiences much of a window at all, like Dallas Videofest, which streamed each of its films at specific times during its festival running from April 3-5 (Dallas Film Commission, 2020). There is a sense of urgency and exclusivity that accompanies watch the only screening of a film at a festival, and Dallas Videofest’s strategy was intended to replicate as much of the in-person urgency as possible in an online environment.

“Do you remember the days of video stores?” asked festival founder and artistic director Bart Weiss in an interview with NBCDFW. “People would spend hours walking around trying to decide what to see. I call it the oppression of choice. Too much choice leads to inaction. And having until the end of time means you won’t see it. But making it an ‘event’ that you have to schedule to do, you will actually do it. Sacristy leads to action” (Richard, 2020). Weiss is suggesting that the fleeting availability of each of the festival’s films entices audiences to be as involved with the festival program as they would be in an in-person environment. While this may be true, it comes at a cost; festivals that operate under this model lose out on some of the rewards of a virtual festival’s accessibility.

The Outfest Los Angeles Film Festival, centered around empowering and showcasing the works of filmmakers and artists of the LGBTQIA+ community, poses a third option between these two models. Along with its drive-in screenings, the organization hosted its annual event from August 20-30, 2020, on an online platform it created called Outfest Now. Each day, a new selection of films became available for a 72-hour viewing window, with live-streamed Q&As about the films that became viewable that day (Outfest, 2020). Festival Programming Coordinator Daniel Crooke said that Outfest prioritized its audience in this decision and saw enough success with their virtual model to expect it to continue in the future.

What pretty much all festivals, unless they're geo-blocking super regionally, have noticed in this virtual film festival landscape that you have an opportunity to build your audience. For our festival, which is just as much about fostering community and creating change, the notion of either seeing yourself on the screen or seeing someone else's story on the screen... that forces you to change your own thinking. It gave us an opportunity to reach more people who were hungry for queer and trans media. Pandemic or no pandemic, there's a lot of folks who are not able to attend a film festival, and for something like Outfest, when it has this additional community social component... that was really meaningful for us. So, it's shifted our definition of what the Outfest family and the Outfest community is, and it expanded our numbers in that way too, which for me is maybe the most exciting part of the virtual film festival landscape. Now, on Outfest Now, which we're still running... Just the ability to reach folks who otherwise wouldn't have access to these films, that has been a huge bright spot for me in a very dark year, and it's a discovery we made

because of the festival, it was really exciting to know there was so much appetite out there, and that they trusted Outfest to curate and provide those films for them. (Crooke, 2021)

Crooke added later:

I think that all festivals, especially ones who are as community-oriented as ours, are going to employ some form of digital or virtual screening... I just think because you are able to reach so many more people and you're able to have these films spread even further and more widely and wider, it's not even about leaving money on the table, it's about what is the... What is the MO [*modus operandi*] of your organization? Is it in some way to create a better culture and a better society through art through film? If so, again, you're not leaving money on the table, you're leaving audience members off of the table, and so I would hope that we continue to see virtual screening moving forward. (Crooke, 2021)

Outfest has already started to see some of these lasting effects in its own festival. The festival is now using the online platform they used to host their program as a year-round virtual cinema of LGBTQIA+ films, shining a new spotlight on a catalog of independent films that reflect Outfest's mission. "I hope that folks would learn the lesson that these hard-to-find gems that you might not have watched otherwise, if you were more concerned with going to see the latest *Avengers* movie or something, exist every single year, and they're always worth seeking out." (Crooke, 2021)

While the virtual components of festivals allow those films to be found a little easier and, despite Outfest's experience being a testament to their effectiveness, that only matters

as long as virtual elements don't overshadow the essential, in-person elements of the festival, in Crooke's eyes. Shifting to a virtual festival was the most popular option among film festivals, but many festivals, including Outfest, still hosted in-person events, all of which had to abide by event capacity restrictions set in place by the CDC and state governments.

The in-person component of 2020's Outfest Los Angeles was a drive-in theater. Drive-in screenings and open-air viewings were the mediums that festivals used to accomplish this, and while neither of them was unfamiliar to audiences, they were not as commonly used by festivals before the pandemic, especially drive-ins. According to an annual Statista count, in January of 2020, only 321 drive-in locations existed in the United States—down from nearly 600 theaters across the country in 1995 (Stoll, 2021). Additionally, an IBISWorld industry report of movie theaters in the U.S. (including drive-in theaters) from September 2020 noted a 16.6% (\$6.9 billion) decrease in annual revenue from 2015-2020 and cite, not to mention a 62.6% decrease in the revenue for U.S. movie theaters in 2020 alone due to the pandemic (Miller, 2021). However, these theaters became summer 2020's go-to venue because of their ability to allow audiences to experience shared entertainment without exposing themselves (or anyone in their vehicle) to individuals outside of their immediate circle. They weren't just used for cinemas; some churches practiced drive-in services (Koeth, 2020), musical artists held drive-in concerts (Staff, *Billboard*, 2020), and stand-up comedians performed for audiences of vehicles honking in place of laughter. (Frishberg, 2020)

For film festivals, though, drive-ins allowed for more in-person interaction than a solely online program, and they were perhaps the closest festivals could come during a

pandemic to the traditional viewing experience; drive-ins could project a film onto a big screen and had the capacity to gather an eager audience in a dark environment. Festival organizers were able to assemble many more people in this setting than they would have been able to indoors. Audience members could watch a film with a group of people in their vehicle, but they could also look over and see other people enjoying the same film that they were, and they could speak with each other from a distance through their windows, which is something that audiences can't do when they are just watching from home.

Plus, these venues surely benefitted from a certain nostalgia factor associated with drive-ins. According to the New York Film Academy, between the 1950s and 1970s, there were over 4000 drive-in theaters around the country (New York Film Academy, 2017), so their sudden spike in popularity likely resonated with 55–75-year-olds who, according to FFA, made up over 50% of all film festival attendees last year (“2020 Filmmaker & Audience Survey”). The pandemic gave an adrenaline shot to a nearly forgotten element of American culture, and they became an integral part of the 2020 festival landscape. According to FFA, of the 23% of festivals that hosted an in-person festival, 71% said they incorporated drive-in screenings into their festival. Some film festivals, like New Jersey's Lighthouse International Film Festival, only hosted drive-in screenings as their festival's program (McNary, 2020), but the more common model was to use the venues as supplemental programming to an online film festival to attract audiences to an in-person event as Outfest did.

The mood was really bright at the drive-ins. I spoke with a number of patrons who said that even though they were masked, and they couldn't get closer than six feet to a friend, it either gave them some hope or just really sort of made their summer

that they were able to at least access some sort of Outfest analog, even if it's not being packed into the Director's Guild of America where we generally host our festival. (Crooke, 2021)

As Crooke later explained,

When it comes to film exhibition, I'm just one of those people who thinks there's something magic in the room once the lights go down, in a packed crowd, and there's really no way to replicate that virtually. I consider that such a fundamental part of film culture and culture at large, and it'd be a real shame if we lost that. I'm not a pessimist, but I've been very scared about the theatrical experience disappearing for years, as many people have, and this past year, I think, has both shown how fragile its survival is, but also how voracious the appetite for it is as well, 'cause this is a very common refrain. (Crooke, 2021)

Crooke is right to be worried about the longevity of theaters. Research suggests the rise in popularity of streaming services as a cause of the falling favor of theaters. A Statista study held in June 2020 indicated a significant shift in preference of U.S. adults who favored watching a film for the first time in a theater to preferring to watch a film for the first time via a streaming service. In November of 2018, 53% of adults said they preferred watching movies for the first time in a theater with another 30% saying they preferred streaming, but in March 2020, only 37% of adults said they preferred theaters and 60% said they preferred streaming. When the survey was conducted in June, the margin widened (Morning Consult, 2020). This is an understandable consumer preference during the pandemic, but it is unclear whether or not these trends will continue after the pandemic is over. If they do, movie theaters could be in trouble.

These statistics alone are enough to suggest streaming platforms are becoming an increasingly viable medium for film presentations, even in an industry not affected by a pandemic, so it is reasonable for festivals to be attracted to these options, but it seems that while virtual screenings can generate a new, invaluable sense of community, that community pales in comparison to that of in-person festivals. While Outfest's virtual festival saw the same satisfaction and positive reception from its community as other festivals I have cited, Crooke provided an additional perspective on the necessity of in-person elements as the focal point of the film festival experience. He argued that festivals should be more about finding a balance between serving different audiences in their own ways than replacing the in-person experience with a virtual one. Despite all of the aforementioned benefits of virtual festivals, it is necessary to emphasize that virtual components of these festivals came about and should remain just that—components of a larger festival experience that fulfills the same purpose through different tactics for different audiences, all within the same community. Outfest's experience illustrates the difficulty that comes with finding that balance, but they will be in good company as more and more festivals assess new ways to reach audiences attracted to their mission, both locally and globally.

Loudoun Arts and Film Festival (LAFF)

Another example of a hybrid festival that is indicative of the pandemic's lasting effects is the Loudoun Arts and Film Festival (LAFF), a first-year festival in Loudoun County, Virginia, that hosted a two-weekend drive-in event and arts showcase at a Virginian vineyard in September, alongside a virtual component. LAFF's model has

several similarities with Outfest's, but it has some key distinctions that make it worth examining. Namely, 2020 was the inaugural year for the festival. Out of the festivals that FFA reports to have held a festival last year, only 12% of them were less than five years old ("2020 Festival Organizer Survey"). A telling statistic, but it is unlikely that many other festivals chose to host their inaugural festival during a pandemic (unless they were lucky enough to have slipped their festival in before the pandemic hit the United States along with about 8% of 2020 festivals). LAFF wasn't one of those festivals, but they persisted despite the daunting task ahead of them. Festival co-founder and creative director Wendy Keeling said it was because "the community needed it. The community was locked down and they could not leave their houses, and we offered them an opportunity to do so after several months of not being able to get out, so... Despite the troubles, despite the headaches, despite just the simple frustration of trying to work out the details, I'm very proud of what we did." (Keeling, 2021)

Among the challenges that accompanied birthing a festival during a pandemic was creating a physical space for their community to form and begin to develop for the first time. LAFF found this space in its drive-in screenings, along with a socially distanced art show with food trucks and live musical performances. These additional elements of the festival allowed LAFF to still draw their prospective audience to a physical space despite not having built their community before the pandemic hit—something that seems like a necessity for a festival in its first year, especially during such a difficult time for its industry. Keeling likes to think of LAFF 2020 as "in-person, just... different."

She, just like every other festival organizer I spoke with, reported nearly unanimous positive feedback on the event, and she says that the pandemic actually helped LAFF when it came to recruiting bigger-name filmmakers, at least in terms of short films.

As a first-year festival, we had last year's [2019] Oscar-winning short. We had films from Sundance, Slamdance, South by Southwest, Tribeca, TIFF. We had big films. A lot of them were shorts. Our features... I think everybody said the same thing: there weren't many features out there to wrangle, and the ones that were out there were being very particular. I think a lot of those are releasing this year, but I had a plethora of shorts and they were amazing. My jurors even said the same thing, 'how did you get these?' As a first-year festival, I do not think it would have happened had it not been for COVID. (Keeling, 2021)

Keeling says that most of the filmmakers who submitted to the festival approved of LAFF's new model; that compliance lines up with FFA findings that indicated filmmakers' willingness to participate in virtual and hybrid festivals increased steadily as the year unfolded ("2020 Filmmaker & Audience Survey"). Filmmakers submitting to LAFF, which occurred in late August and early September, were likely among those who realized that these new festival formats would be around significantly longer than everyone thought they might.

Because this year was LAFF's inaugural year, they will likely seek to preserve some of the better performing elements for its future years. Even though it would be reasonable for the festival to return to a very traditional festival model in a non-pandemic year, they have already created a brand-new community by implementing hybrid solutions to continuing during the pandemic. Of course, neither the festival's organizers nor its

attendees will want to take such intense precautions any longer than they have to, but both of these parties are likely going to want an experience at least a little bit familiar when it's time for their second festival.

Keeling understandably has reservations about the longevity of a virtual festival environment that echo those of the aforementioned festival organizers, but she too recognizes its newfound importance.

I can't stand on a bar stool with 50 other filmmakers, and we take a group photo, I can't do that. I miss that. But it still allows us a way to show our work, a way to express ourselves, a place for creativity to happen, and I think now with the virtual aspect of it, it's allowing people that are locked in their homes to be engaged and to feel relief, to be stimulated, to learn to try to laugh. In the age of COVID, the arts are everything. (Keeling, 2021)

LAFF isn't important to examine during this time only because it was in its first year and implemented many of the same strategies that other festivals did. More importantly, what they did worked. They were able to build a community around independent film using these tactics; they identified a group of people hungry for art and curated an experience that satisfied those wants—one of the most important roles of a film festival in the arts sphere. All of these mediums fulfill this purpose in different ways, and these case studies have shown that each of them is qualified to be considered alongside one another as effective means of doing so.

CHAPTER 4: FESTS OF THE FUTURE

There is one more class of festivals whose experience is important in determining the lasting utility of these new hybrid and virtual components of film festivals: the beginning of the next generation of film festivals—the 2021 film festival landscape. This group is significant mostly because of the amount of time they had to watch the 2020 festival landscape unfold, to consider which strategies are best aligned with their mission, and to plan for their next event. This is a process that every festival had to undergo after the pandemic hit the United States, but the farther out a festival was from that time meant that virtual and hybrid options became increasingly valid alternatives. Furthermore, the less of an all-consuming threat the pandemic becomes, the more festivals are going to return to in-person models, but they will now have the opportunity to consider incorporating hybrid components into their traditional program.

True/False Film Festival

Among the planned festivals since the pandemic took hold of the United States in early March, the True/False Film Festival in Columbia, Missouri, has had the most amount of time to observe and consider options for its next festival, because the pandemic did not start to affect United States festivals until just after True/False 2020 wrapped—SXSW was canceled on the Friday of their festival. Despite barely escaping the expanse of uncertainty

that plagued so many other festivals that spring, festival Development and Communications Director Stacie Pottinger said the festival still saw a severe drop in attendance and had difficulty retaining their sponsors. “It does not escape us—our luck,” said Pottinger. “We couldn't say it enough, how lucky we fell by timing and placement.” (Pottinger, 2021)

True/False, unlike many of the other festivals I spoke with, is prioritizing a physical, in-person element of their upcoming festival (True/False, 2020). “The most important part about True/False is the community experience and the being together with other people—the communal experience of the whole thing, and so we knew that going virtual was not an option to just do a strictly online festival. That didn't feel like a fest to us. That feels like online streaming” (Pottinger, 2021). In late November 2020, the festival announced its plan for a five-day, “outdoor, communal celebration of resilience and the arts,” that complies with state and national guidelines for diminishing the risk of infection. (True/False, 2020)

However, the festival is also providing a unique virtual option. The True/False “Teleported Fest” is a “hyper-curated interactive film experience,” driven by nontraditional ways to engage with the festival’s films. “Teleporters” can experience a selection of about half of the full True/False lineup and a series of custom-designed viewing packages that include a package of curated items related to each film to accompany the at-home viewing experience. For example, a hypothetical documentary about climate change was among the Teleported Fest slate, perhaps that film’s items would include a book by someone interviewed in the film, or maybe it would provide usable postcards with messages written to elected officials calling for legislative action. While this approach is an innovative model

that further expands the array of strategies festivals can choose to take to replicate in-person environments, True/False is heavily prioritizing their in-person festival (planned for May 2021, two months later than their usual March festival), and the Teleported Fest is only accessible by application and a steep \$695 fee. (Teleported True/False, 2020)

The United States government has suggested that every American will have at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine by May 1st, so True/False's waiting might just pay off (White House Fact Sheet, 2021). Still, the festival was forced to innovate and develop new strategies because of the pandemic. Organizers may find that they want to preserve some elements of the Teleported Fest in future years with an in-person festival. "Teleporters" might find that there is a part of the online experience that they don't want to go away in the future. Even if neither ends up happening, True/False's reaction to the pandemic is expanding the possible ways that festivals share worthy independent films with their audiences.

Sundance Film Festival

The changes and models implemented in response to the pandemic are not restricted to either business festivals or audience festivals; they apply to the festival circuit as a whole. Of the festivals I have examined, SIFF leans the most towards the business-side of the spectrum while festivals like LAFF fall more into the audience category. However, SIFF still holds their audience is still at the forefront of their priorities; they focus on enhancing the viewer's experience over elevating a film's status. Sundance Film Festival, on the other hand, is one of the better examples of an ever-expanding, premiere-centered business

festival, and it was as much a victim to the pandemic's obstacles as any other festival I have mentioned.

Sundance has the reputation of being the most prominent festival in the United States and is a notable pathway to film distribution. In 2015, Entertainment Media Partners found that 80% of Sundance films get picked up by distributors (Leipzig, 2015). The festival is held each January in Park City, Utah, which means that the 2020 festival was unaffected by the pandemic. However, like True/False, Sundance was able to watch the 2020 festival landscape unfold in preparation for its 2021 festival. In December 2020, the festival announced that it too would be taking a hybrid approach with its 73-film slate: The virtual component of the festival was similar to previously examined models and featured 3-hour premiere windows, which included live interactive elements of chat and Q&As. The in-person component was comprised of 28 drive-in, open-air, and socially-distanced cinema screenings that showcased 51 of the festival's 73 films—not just in Park City, but at satellite screens all around the country (Sundance Institute, 2020). The festival fused its reputation and market model with common hybrid festival practices, which provides an authoritative stamp of approval on the longevity of such practices. In a press release, Keri Putnam, Sundance Institute's Executive Director said,

Of course, the pandemic year demanded adaptation. On a deeper level, we also recognize the urgency of supporting independent storytellers at a time of great upheaval in the film and media fields. We're proud this edition of the Festival is fiercely independent and will reach people everywhere, celebrating both the theatrical experience at our Satellite Screens and streaming on our platform. (Sundance Program, 2020)

Additionally, Sundance took the challenge of recreating in-person elements a step further than many festivals. Attendees could create a digital avatar to explore 3D environments as part of the festival's virtual program. The festival's online platform "Festival Village" used integrated video chat features to simulate proximity-based conversations; if two attendees' avatars were close enough to each other, their webcams would turn on, and they would be able to have a conversation as if they were in the same room. Other festivals have used similar hosting platforms for their events, but Sundance took their program a step further by extending many of the principles of its "New Frontier" gallery to its online festival. Sundance's New Frontier was among the first of festival events to have a dedicated space for showcasing virtual, augmented, and mixed reality projects, and for its 2021 festival, all 73 features had virtual spaces for social events after their screenings, and anybody with access to a virtual-reality headset (which were given to all of the directors in the festival lineup) could be even more immersed in the festival by being able to see "Festival Village" through their own eyes, not from a top-down view of an avatar; all that it required was an internet connection and an open mind. (Kohn, 2021)

Such an investment in building out these virtual spaces indicates that replicating as much of the in-person experience as possible was among the festival's top priorities. This contrasts with the aforementioned market festivals like Cannes and Telluride that just released their festival slate in a news release instead of having any sort of film showcase and indicates that Sundance was looking for something more with its 2021 festival, and that thing supports what festivals may look like in the future in a more supportive/collaborative environment.

This is perhaps most evident in its methods of hosting its satellite, drive-in and open-air screenings around the United States and Puerto Rico. Because of its notability, it is unsurprising that the festival's attendees are primarily industry and media personnel along with a handful of overzealous film fans, but for the first time, the most prestigious festival in the country became accessible to anyone who could afford a ticket. The "democratization of Sundance" is what G. Allen Johnson of the San Francisco Chronicle calls it in a 2021 festival reflection piece. "For the first time, a film geek sitting on a couch in Georgia could buy a ticket to a world premiere of a highly touted film, join Q&As and then hang out at virtual afterparties. Or a fan in, say, Iowa City, Iowa... could buy a ticket and see a premiere at a theater." (Johnson, 2021)

Sundance was able to accomplish this coordinated, nationwide effort by enlisting the help of more localized film festivals, arthouses, and other independent film organizations. Festival director Tabitha Jackson called these organizations, "the backbone of independent artistic communities across the country, where filmmakers are born and cinephiles are developed. We're entering these partnerships because a healthy ecosystem for artists and audiences requires that independent cinemas across the country survive and thrive." (Sundance Film Festival, 2021)

Some might consider this an unexpected sentiment from a market festival like Sundance, but the festival's commitment to providing an experience for its community speaks to its consciousness of the larger film community and the gravity of the festival's decision to provide such an accessible program. Sundance could have easily taken the same approach to its 2021 festival as Cannes or Telluride, and audiences might have not even been that surprised, but the festival boasted a goal of "expanding the reach and community

of independent film in this challenging year” (Sundance Attendance, 2021). By offering such a robust hybrid program (that only a festival with comparable resources to Sundance can feasibly undertake), Sundance organizers were recognizing the challenges the pandemic presented as facing the entire independent film community, not just each festival within it. They were acknowledging that because of the pandemic, it wasn’t just each festival that had to adapt, it was the entire independent film industry.

“It came from kind of a ‘what if?’ moment, where we thought, ‘OK, maybe we won’t be able to be here in Utah the way we want, but what if the festival could be held by our incredibly vital and currently very challenged independent art houses?’” Jackson said. “It worked more than we had any right to expect.” (Johnson, 2021) Indeed, the festival reached an audience 2.7 times larger than its normal festival, despite its shorter duration and limited slate. Sundance estimates about 500,000 views of its program through its online platform from audiences in all 50 states and 120 countries, clearly accomplishing its goal of increasing independent film accessibility through its programming. (Sundance Attendance, 2021)

While Jackson prefaced the festival by calling it a “singular response to a singular year” and “a grand experiment” she also noted,

At its core is something that speaks to our most enduring values. For thousands of years, humans have gathered to tell stories and make meaning. In this pandemic year, we gather to celebrate a constellation of artists with unique perspectives that express this current moment and who together are saying, ‘We exist. This is who we are. And this is what we see.’ (Sundance Program, 2021)

Jackson also hinted at some aspects of the virtual and satellite components sticking around after the pandemic subsides. This echoes earlier claims from other festivals I have examined, and Sundance's success, perspective, and experience further support the longevity of virtual and hybrid components of the festival circuit. However, they do so by establishing the independent film community as one of collaboration and shared purpose, and while each festival in the United States was affected in its own way, it was the independent film community as a whole that could have suffered at the hands of the pandemic if festivals had not adapted to establish virtual and hybrid elements as new yet crucial ingredients in preserving the overall mission of independent film.

CONCLUSION

Through the examination of a selection of United States film festivals, this thesis has outlined the main strategies film festivals took in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and has provided insight into the different tactics festivals used to provide a forum for independent film presentation and discussion in such a difficult time. This varied for each film festival based on factors including but not limited to when their program is typically held and the resources at the festival's disposal. Regardless, most festivals took one of three main approaches: cancelation, transition to a virtual model, or pursuit of a hybrid strategy.

The case studies and data referenced in this paper reveal that while one reasonable reaction to a pandemic that was quickly transforming the global economic landscape was for festivals to simply cancel their events or attempt to postpone them, virtual and hybrid components of festivals were the most utilized strategies among film festivals and that, more importantly, they unlocked new avenues for festivals to connect with their audience. Because festivals were able to stream their program to viewers outside of their immediate geographic location, they were able to expand their audience to patrons all over the world. Even more exclusive festivals like Sundance were able to reach more viewers than their traditional, in-person festival typically does.

Festivals also emulated supplementary aspects of the traditional festival experience online, such as filmmaker panels, live-streamed Q&As, and virtual social gatherings. The accessibility that comes with an online program allowed festivals to increase their reach,

and filmmakers and attendees could participate in these events regardless of their location. Because festivals experienced such strong, positive feedback from their audience when they implemented these changes, they have the opportunity to implement them in future years after the pandemic has subsided.

The conversations with festival organizers examined in this essay yielded two important findings: they all indicated that both organizers and attendees cherished the in-person environments of traditional festivals and look forward to returning to those models once the pandemic has ended, but they also insisted that virtual components are worth keeping around, at least in some capacity, in order to continue exploring these new ways for festivals to engage with their communities. Even the festivals I examined that said they would return to an in-person model as soon as possible noted that they would still consider virtual options. Khader with Blackstar, for example, said the festival would make some of their Q&As available online for posterity's sake. While actions like these were certainly available to festivals before the pandemic, the adapted festival circuit presented these possibilities as viable models, so the festival landscape is more likely to see them used in the future than before the pandemic.

I have shown that these tactics have provided enough value to festivals for them to consider adding some version of these components to their traditional festival once the pandemic has ended. Perhaps virtual-only film festivals might have seen their longest moment in the spotlight, maybe festivals won't use online environments to host social events when they don't have to, and perhaps the drive-in theater will recede back into a cusp of familiarity. However, the evidence in this paper suggests that festival organizers will still pursue these components at least in some capacity in the future. This information

allows researchers to consider the future film festival landscape as one that transcends geographic location—an increasingly accessible industry that is shifting towards maximizing the fulfillment of a festival’s mission in ways that weren’t possible before the pandemic. Such a distinction would not be possible without a detailed inquiry into a diverse and significant representation of the film festival industry such as this one.

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