



CHAPTER 1

What Happens When Festivals Can't Happen?

Antoine Damiens and Marijke de Valck

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

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

A. Damiens (✉)

Department of Cinema and Media Arts, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada
e-mail: adamiens@yorku.ca

M. de Valck

Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht,
The Netherlands
e-mail: m.devalck@uu.nl

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PANDEMIC SCHOLARSHIP: DOCUMENTING AND THINKING THROUGH AN ONGOING CRISIS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RETHINKING FILM FESTIVALS IN THE PANDEMIC ERA AND AFTER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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