Small Film Festivals Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic: The “Virtual Showcase” of Cine Las Americas International Film Festival 2020

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic was a major challenge for film festival organizers, who had to resort to online platforms to showcase films they had selected. While virtual film festivals did not offer the same experience, being deprived of the opportunity to gather people in a festive atmosphere, they provided a fairly accessible solution that enabled audiences to watch films they would have missed otherwise. Even major and economically stable festivals, such as South by Southwest (SXSW), decided to cancel, and not all film festivals embraced the opportunities provided by online platforms. Responses to the pandemic were as diverse as the six thousand film festivals organized on average each year. Small nonprofit film festivals, however, tend to be more vulnerable than large-scale events. When the pandemic was at its climax in 2020, their economic sustainability was at stake. This article focuses on Cine Las Americas, a small community-based Latino and Indigenous film festival that takes place in Austin, Texas. Based on interviews of members of the executive and programming team, on research about the history of the festival, and on the experience of the 2020 “Virtual Showcase,” it shows that solidarity between the festival and a wide range of local organizations played a great role in its capacity to survive this critical time. To retrace the festival’s history, the article draws inspiration from organizational theory, illustrating that Cine Las Americas became a field-configuring event (FCE) in the city of Austin, to the point where the friendship that its successive organizers, who have showed crucial adaptation skills over the years, had secured with local partners contributed to its survival.
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The start of the COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly a challenge for film festival organizers. When the world shut down in March 2020, organizers were faced with an unprecedented situation that threatened events whose core principle is to bring people together. Indeed, film festivals are more than the films organizers select; they are also about the experience they offer in the movie theater and beyond. As media specialist Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong explains, they are “scarcely festive without traditional human interaction,” which is why, for many, canceling was considered the only solution to avoid organizing an event that would just be about showcasing films.¹ This is not to say that films are not important. Cannes was first postponed from May to July 2020 and then canceled, but it was decided that a "special Cannes" would be organized online, followed by a small in-person event in October. The organizers were adamant about not wanting 2020 to be a "blank year" (une année blanche), because canceling a film festival also means failing to show and reward the work of filmmakers who were dedicated to a project for years and failing to keep a vibrant cultural industry alive.²

For small festivals with a social mission, especially ones that are nonprofit organizations, the situation was even more challenging. In addition to hindering their mission, the pandemic and its economic consequences jeopardized the funds that could be available in the following years. Professor in media industries Skadi Loist points out that film festival organizers work in "precarious" conditions that contrast with the glamour usually associated with the film industry.³ They often struggle with funds and with an unstable and limited workforce whose utmost pleasure rests in "having pulled off [the organization of a festival] against the odds."⁴ This expression could not be more appropriate to describe the situation in 2020 and to some extent 2021: in spite of lockdowns, social distancing mandates, and other safety measures, many film festival organizers lived up to their reputation of being "dedicated" workers and managed to "pull something off."⁵ They also had to deal with the extra pressure of proving that cultural events are not "non-essential" as they have "a strong role in supporting communities, screen practitioners and audiences."⁶ Not only was it important to entertain audiences at a time when much anxiety reigned, but it was also a way for film festival organizers to feel useful.

Using online platforms was the solution that spontaneously appeared to showcase films, so that people could watch them at home. It allowed festivals to keep providing cultural content at a time when the offer was severely limited. South by Southwest (SXSW), one of the first festivals to cancel, partnered with Amazon Prime to show the few films whose filmmakers accepted to be part of a virtual event, hoping that it would reach a large audience.⁷ Despite missing out on the social experience, audiences could still have a cinematic experience, one that was greatly different from the thrill of viewing a film with an audience in the same room but that provided cinephiles with films they would have missed otherwise. Thus, when shutdowns became impossible to avoid, film festival organizers had to decide whether they were going to "make do" and exist or cancel and, for some of them, run the risk of not coming back.

Cine Las Americas International Film Festival is part of a small community-oriented identity-

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4. Ibid., 271.
5. Ibid.
based group of film festivals that are also nonprofit organizations. Its social mission is dedicated to improving the representation of the Latinx and Indigenous communities in front of and behind the camera. US Latinx film festivals, though part of a loose network with divergences, are “activist” events. Since its inception in 1998 in Austin, Texas, Cine Las Americas has striven to “educate, entertain and challenge” audiences and to offer a diverse program “for everyone.” In March 2020, when several film festivals started to cancel, Jean Anne Lauer (Cine Las Americas programmer 2009–15, director and executive director 2015–20, programmer 2020–present) and Gabriel Ornelas (executive director 2020–present) decided to launch the festival online under the pressure of Ernie Quiroz (lead program associate 2018–present) who argued that most of the work to select the films had already been done since the festival is usually held at the beginning of May. The festival was thus organized on an online platform in June 2020 (June 16–19 and 23–26) but was not numbered the “23rd annual film festival”; instead, Lauer insisted on calling it a “virtual showcase” to make clear that it was not a “real” film festival. In addition to corresponding to a wish to be accurate, her idea exhibited concern and sadness over the situation. Other Latinx film festivals, such as the Chicago Latino Film Festival (CLFF), also “went virtual.” The Los Angeles Latino Film Festival (LALIFF), on the other hand, renamed itself “LALIFF Connect” to insist on the wish to bring people together and on what professor in film and media studies Marijke de Valck has identified as the “celebration of … connectivity.”

This article, based on interviews with Lauer, Ornelas, and Quiroz, on research about the history of Cine Las Americas International Film Festival, and on the experience of the 2020 Virtual Showcase, sheds light on the challenges the festival staff overcame and the strategies they implemented to organize an event that allowed them to survive the pandemic. Even though online festivals can be considered virtual—that is to say, incomplete—they also showed that the pandemic crisis offered a space for festival organizers to make the most of their adaptation skills, illustrating that film festivals are events that constantly reinvent themselves, actively motivated by their mission to serve a community.

The article starts with a historical overview of the festival’s evolution and institutionalization into a field-configuring event (FCE) in Austin; it draws inspiration from organizational theory, especially from professor of organization and management Charles Clemens-Rüling’s analysis of the festival of Annecy and its successive phases of development. While becoming an FCE, Cine Las Americas grew roots in the city of Austin and developed partnerships that played a great role in its survival. The exceptional situation of 2020 confirmed that festivals are part of a network and that loyalty among an organization’s major stakeholders is a consequential element to understand event management. Therefore, this article also contributes to the conversation spurred by de Valck and film festival scholar Antoine Damiens on the role of solidarity and community building, and thus on the future of film festivals after this memorable pandemic.

Cine Las Americas: The Gradual Institutionalization of a Film Festival

Cine Las Americas showcases films from the Latinx and Indigenous communities of the Americas and seeks to “promote cross-cultural understanding” through film. Over the years, its crew members have turned it into an annual event that has partnered with important organizations of the city of Austin. Before the pandemic started, it may be argued that the festival
had gone through four phases that had solidified its presence in the city, which undoubtedly contributed to its survival during the crisis (figure 1). These phases follow the regular path of a growing event whose organizers feel more comfortable with experimenting, but they also reveal the strategies adopted to make it an FCE linked to film and film festivals in Austin.

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Figure 1. Growth of Cine Las Americas International Film Festival into an FCE.

FCEs are “temporary social organizations, such as tradeshows, professional gatherings, technology contests, and business ceremonies[,] that encapsulate and shape the development of professions, technologies, markets, and industries.” Most importantly, they form a “community of organizations that partake of a common meaning system,” in other words, that believe in the same values. Latinx film festivals, over the course of a few days, gather people from the industry and contribute to the development of projects that go beyond the screening of films and beyond the local area where they are organized but around the same goal of enhancing the visibility of Latinx productions. Some Latinx festivals, such as LALIFF, even have Industry Days.

These film festivals’ remarkable development from the 1970s onward has corresponded to the political demands of the growing Hispanic community, gathering around the celebration of “latinidad.” It also coincided with the development of scholarship on the on-screen stereotypes that affected Latinos and Latinas and concern about the “ongoing underrepresentation of Latino/a subjectivities and cinema in the cultural mainstream.” Thus, the festival started as a community-oriented event and progressively built on its success and on its network to transform the organizational field in Austin. It is not so much the network of Latinx film festivals that was affected by its growth but the way different Austin-based organizations started co-operating with
Cine Las Americas once it gained more legitimacy, giving a larger place to films of the Americas.

During the first phase of development, trial and error (1998–2004), the organizers built a program that responded to the demand for films from the Americas in Austin, which were rarely if ever screened in the city, as indicated on their website: "While programming the initial event, the organizers realized that although Austin was building its reputation as an important city for producing and showcasing independent film, films made by and about Latinos were largely absent from the community’s cultural landscape. The overwhelming success of the first festival proved that there was an audience for these under-represented voices."24 A trial event was set up in 1997, with a retrospective of Cuban films. Its success convinced the main organizer, Lara Coger, to venture into creating an annual festival showcasing films from the Americas. The festival was not unique in this mission; since the 1990s, there was a surge in the creation of Latino film festivals, in Los Angeles (1997–2011, 2013-present), New York (1999–2012, 2017-present) and San Diego (1994-present), for example. There was a growing demand across the country since the creation of the first Latino film festival in San Antonio in 1976, and Cine Las Americas was contributing to its development.25 More and more cities followed (Chicago 1985, Boston 2000), demonstrating that the Latino community was embracing such festivals as community-building events at a time when Latinos represented about 12.5 percent of the US population.26

Cine Las Americas started with six narrative productions and coproductions involving eight countries (Cuba, Colombia, France, Venezuela, Argentina, Spain, Brazil, and Mexico), spearheading a desire for diversity. In only five years, in 2002, the program included fifty films and for the 12th annual festival over one hundred, setting an average that was similar in the following years (figure 2). Documentaries were added in the third year (2000).

During the trial and error phase, festival organizers made the event look like other film
festivals—giving out awards granted by a jury of professionals and by the audience—while developing its niche. Indeed, the category “Emergencia” was created to showcase films made by teenage Latinx directors. With these initiatives, the organizers showed that they wished to contribute to film culture by using the power of legitimization of awards and by encouraging young Latinos to tell their stories. Film was thus fully embraced as a tool of empowerment for an underrepresented community, which is the direction that other Latinx film festivals have taken since then. LALIFF, for example, partners with a Youth Cinema Program, set up by one of the festival’s creators, whose ultimate goal is to show students’ films during the festival. In 2000, Cine Las Americas executive producer Maria Martin described the festival as “a natural outgrowth of this burgeoning aspect of Austin,” signaling the “renaissance” of the Latino community.28 Her comments suggest that, on the one hand, Latinos, who represented 28.2 percent of the population in Austin, were embracing the festival to tell their “stories” and, on the other hand, the city of Austin, its main financial contributor, supported their mission to redress inequalities.29

Following this initial phase, the festival entered a period of stability (2005–9) after having found a balanced model with a core program with fewer categories that has not changed since.30 To promote local filmmakers, a new category, Hecho en Tejas, was introduced for films made in Texas. Thanks to a partnership with the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI), the films rewarded by the festival were offered a chance to be featured on TAMI’s website. This decision showed that, even though the lineup makes Cine Las Americas a transnational event, since the beginning, its organizers were adamant about serving the local community of filmmakers. Not all festivals function this way. Professor of Spanish and Latino/a studies Elizabeth Barrios, in her study of CLFF, points out that very little was done to promote local filmmakers in that festival, which she perceives as a liability.31 On the contrary, clearly one of the endeavors of Cine Las Americas was to grow roots in Austin, to serve not only the Latinx community but also the Texan community of filmmakers, film industry workers, and film aficionados. Thus, more partnerships with influential organizations, such as SXSW, the Austin Film Society (AFS), the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP), developed over the years. UT Austin and NALIP, for instance, organized roundtables about the role of Latinos in the film industry, creating bridges with academia. Support of SXSW and AFS, major stakeholders in the city, has also undoubtedly helped the festival become a key organization in Austin.

The festival grew following a twofold dynamic: selecting films organizers promoted as excellent and serving a community. The program content gained in complexity, involving as many as twenty countries of production, and prioritized diversity, as explained by Jacqueline Rush Rivera, the director of programming in 2007: “The cultural and regional diversity of the program is complimented [sic] by the diversity of aesthetic approaches and subject matter. We have films that are intensely personal, experimental, political, poetic, formal—films that combine great artistry with great technical innovation.”32 In 2009, the festival showcased films that caught national attention, such as Sleep Dealer by Alex Rivera (a fictional film) and The Other Side of Immigration by Roy Germano (a documentary). Both films are about the border, an ongoing theme that mirrors political debates linked to undocumented immigration.

Being a leitmotiv in the history of the festival, the diversity of the program was taken over by subsequent programmers. Lauer started programming in 2009. Coming from an academic...
background and having worked for Mexican film festivals, she had sufficient experience to offer a "strong" program, according to Eugenio Del Bosque, who was executive director at the time (2006–14).

Because it is "the nature of the specific relationships between a festival’s various stakeholders that largely determines the social standing of a festival within the public sphere," the synergy between these two figures increased the credibility of the event. Credibility is crucial for growing "sponsorship and audience base," that is, securing not only audience loyalty but also financial contributions. In about a decade, Cine Las Americas had become a versatile and multifaceted festival eager to show as many stories as possible in different formats and with a loyal base of supporters. It was thus ready for new phase.

From 2010 to 2013, the festival became an institution of the city. After the festival’s rapid development during the previous years, its organizers decided to bet on smart growth to maintain a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Del Bosque chose not to add extra days or an unmanageable number of films, which was an unusual decision since most festivals tend to be obsessed "with growth." And Lauer made decisions that went hand in hand with the festival’s inclusive mission: fiction films were to be screened in a mainstream movie theater and documentaries were to be offered for free at the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in East Austin. These initiatives sent the message that "Cine Las Americas is for everyone." Locating screenings downtown, in such movie theaters as the Violet Crown Cinema, for example, not only made the festival more visible but also increased its chances of attracting mainstream audiences (figure 3). Screenings at the MACC also sent the message that the festival caters to the Latinx community and offers them a place to come to in a neighborhood where underrepresented communities tend to live. Indeed, in 1928, a city plan divided the city ethnically in accordance with "separate but equal" policies that had been implemented after the Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) decision: East Austin, nicknamed the "Negro district," welcomed Latinos, mostly Mexican Americans, who also founded their "barrio" around West Fifth Street. Since the 2010s, East Austin has experienced tremendous growth and gentrification, which has led to the building of new skyscrapers, bars, and restaurants around the MACC. This growth and development has made the area more geo-strategic for mainstream audiences, which, in spite of not being the original purpose, adds to the festival’s overall strategy to encourage audiences to travel across the city. At the same time, gentrification has forced many long-time ethnic minority residents

Figure 3. Map of the main venues used by the festival (Google Maps).
Creativity is not an alien concept to Austin. Its designation as a Creative City of Media Arts by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2015—the only such designation in the United States—was, in fact, the culmination of decades of work to promote the Texan capital as an ideal city. Already in 1987, a promotional video had praised its cultural offer to that of Paris, and the city strove to present Austin as a hedonic place catering to its inhabitants' cultural and sporting needs. Far from portraying the city as a place of idleness, the video stressed a quality of life that fosters creativity and economic growth. While many cities have the potential to become Creative Cities, only a few excel in the “3Ts” theorized by urban

Challenging audiences through film is crucial; however, because film festivals are also experiential events, it is just as important for audiences to experiment them physically, in places that have a special meaning. The full experience entails an immersion in parts of the city that have a historical significance in tune with the festival’s purpose. Because Cine Las Americas seeks to educate through film, its partnership with the MACC, whose mission is “dedicated to the preservation, creation, presentation, and promotion” of Mexican American “but also of Native American, Chicano and other Latino cultures,” allowed it to shed light on the niche the festival fills in Austin. The same dynamic motivates the Boston Latino International Film Festival (BLIFF), as professor of Spanish and cultural studies Michelle Leigh Farrell explains: “The de-centered showings encourage audiences to enter spaces where not all Bostonians feel at home while also bringing contemporary and dynamic dialogue to sites associated with past archives.” Cine Las Americas also encourages dialogue about a part of the city whose changes affect the most vulnerable communities. Professor of sociology Paul Brian McInerney notes that this strategy is typical of what he calls “institutional entrepreneurs” when they work to solidify their existence in an organizational field. Because the festival represents a particular niche that is barely exploited in Austin, the organizers act as leaders but also as a crucial link in the chain of cinema. They thus institutionalize “new practices of cinephilia” that encourage viewers to get out of their comfort zones.

Over time, the festival has partnered with the AFS to co-present Latin American films, showing that Cine Las Americas is considered as the specialist of this kind of cinema in Austin. From an organizational point of view, as Rüling explains, the partnership confirms that FCEs can “consolidate and change organizational fields by providing a setting for the emergence, reproduction and challenging of field-level identities, norms and standards.” Cine Las Americas challenges the classical organizational field of cinema in Austin and establishes new ways to watch and talk about film. That it is a festival dedicated to “the Americas” and not just another “Latino film festival” also shows that its organizers strive to break norms while associating with a wide range of partners to make the most of what Austin has to offer. Partnering with other organizations is precisely how the festival can guarantee its sustainability, betting on convergence and compatibility, that in turn can give birth to innovative and creative practices.
studies theorist Richard L. Florida in 2002: technology, tolerance, and talent. He argues that
for a city to achieve this level, the group of educated and ambitious people that he calls the
“Creative Class” must focus on these three criteria. Florida states that Austin is a model
for Creative City development, and according to professor of urban planning Carl Grodach,
the city found in Florida’s concepts an efficient way to boost its economic development
initiatives. Austin’s Cultural Arts Division, which gives an annual grant to Cine Las Americas,
became a part of the city’s Economic Development Department when Florida’s concept was
fully embraced by city officials to entice the Creative Class to move to Austin. The strategy
was successful: today, the city is a “high-tech innovation hub” that has even been nicknamed
“Silicon Hills.” While the nickname establishes a flattering comparison to the Californian
Silicon Valley, for its detractors, it also implies that Austin has been invaded by Californians.
Such success for the Texan city is not without its controversies; some locals lament the
increased cost of living, intense traffic, and potential loss of its soul. It is undeniable, however,
that the creative atmosphere of the city is fertile ground for creativity and innovation and that
film festival organizers draw inspiration from the city they live in.

The next phase (2014–19) of the festival was ushered in by Lauer becoming the new executive
director when Del Bosque stepped down in 2014. Loist points out that the departure of a
festival team member can severely upset “the fragile mechanism of the festival organization,”
but, by the same token, the entrance of a new member can also be incredibly beneficial.
This phase was characterized by Lauer’s use of her programming background to innovate.
The festival adapted to content digitization and social media development. Programmers
did take risks before, but the door was now open for the development of initiatives that few
festivals embraced, except maybe for SXSW, whose core principle is to feature innovative
projects, or ImagineNative, a festival that is keen on using “new media.” Thus, Lauer decided
to feature music videos, public service announcement (PSA) videos, virtual reality events, and
exceptional categories from time to time, collaborating with local filmmakers, as well as with
UT Austin’s scholars and librarians, confirming that programmers also have a curating role
(figure 4). Indeed, according to doctoral candidate in cinema and media arts Caroline Klimek,

Figure 4. The evolution of the festival’s content from 1998 to 2021.
what is interesting with new media, for instance, is that they are "not available to the general public," which makes festivals exclusive events. As a result, they can potentially generate curiosity or loyalty in spite of "not fitting naturally with the collective experience of a film festival." Loyalty being a key element to secure a regular audience, organizing events that cannot be experienced elsewhere is a smart strategy.

The new programs offered by the festival include Femme Frontera, a Latinx-led organization that supports female and nonbinary filmmakers of the border region. It was cofounded by Iliana Sosa, a local filmmaker who also teaches at UT Austin. The virtual reality event was Lauer’s idea, inspired by the time she attended the ImagiNative festival in Toronto, another Creative City. Then, a partnership with Austin’s Originator Studios was set up through Sharon Arteaga, another local filmmaker. Lastly, the music video program was added to show what Latin American filmmakers, who tend to start out by making music videos, do outside of the traditional film format. Not only did these events strengthen the festival’s network, they also made it an innovating event that resembled the strategies used by the Creative Class, whose members tend to produce “new forms or designs” in resonance with the creative atmosphere of the city, which hosts powerful and creative tech companies (Amazon, Apple, PayPal).

As Rüling explains, new phases are usually ushered in by a crisis. At the end of 2019, Lauer decided to go back to programming. The new executive director, Gabriel Ornelas, came from an event management background. Even if he had been a volunteer for the festival and had sat on the board, his nomination made it clear that film festivals are events that need to be planned and promoted and that the quality of films is not always enough to make the event attractive. Creating a balance between the team members who know about film and those who know about event management is crucial. When the transition was made from one director to another, however, as Lauer said, “March happened,” in other words, they had to deal with a situation that no one had imagined and that made the festival transition into another phase, that of (forced) adaptation.

Although festival staff encountered a magnitude of obstacles, this next phase turned out to be a space for reinvention.

The 2020 Virtual Showcase: Reacting to a State of Emergency

Creating a “Dedicated Platform” for Underrepresented Filmmakers

The festival’s website described the 2020 Virtual Showcase as “an alternative to the 23rd edition.” The term “alternative” points to the idea that the 2020 showcase was not meant to be a mere substitute for Cine Las Americas but something else entirely. After all, film festivals are events that are supposed to be lived collectively; the screenings are at the center of myriad experiences offered alongside, such as Q&As and after-parties, that are arguably just as important, especially for filmmakers. According to the 2020 Filmmaker and Audience Survey, filmmakers value interaction with industry influencers, other filmmakers, and the audience much more than the possibility to win an award. While winning an award usually boosts their careers, networking can be a catalyst for more opportunities. But because the festive component of the event had to be sacrificed, the team’s efforts focused on the films.

In their assessment of SXSW, scholars Phil Hobbins-White and Brad Limov lamented that the 2020
festival did not organize more online events. “Had SXSW at least programmed live discussions with audience engagement through chat features, or even arranged video conferences through Zoom or other applications, then valuable interactions with fellow attendees might have taken place. Breakout sessions could similarly have encouraged this kind of connection, though more artificial than a chance encounter while queuing up for your next film. At the end of the day, little was done to recreate that film festival ‘energy’ discussed in our exchanges with filmmakers.”

While it is true that online interaction has become easier nowadays and audiences are accustomed to using social media to share their experience of an event, such a statement neglects to account for the emergency situation of COVID that festival organizers faced. This crisis put pressure on staff at the last minute, and not just for SXSW, which is usually organized in March. Some festivals had more time, and probably more funds, to be creative than others.

Cine Las Americas did not organize video conferences or other interactive events, yet a few staff members recorded videos to present each screening, giving audiences a few minutes of a somewhat human contact. Even with these short recordings, the experience remained lonely for audiences. The organizers’ primary goal was to dedicate a space for films, whatever it might be. Lauer explained that it was crucial to “find a way to give these films and the filmmakers who created them a dedicated platform.” The use of the word “platform” is particularly meaningful, because, a few years before, it would not have corresponded to an online platform but to a stage that compensated for the lack of opportunities for Latinx and Indigenous filmmakers in the industry.

For that particular purpose, the stakes were higher if we consider the gap that Latinx film festivals fill in terms of representation of minorities in front of and behind the camera. According to the USC (University of Southern California) Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Report that studied 1,300 films released between 2007 and 2019, only 4.9 percent of speaking characters were Latinos, in general and despite some progress, women were underrepresented in the film industry in front of and behind the camera. On the contrary, Cine Las Americas pays attention to the inclusion of as many groups as possible. In 2020, for instance, about half of the films showcased were directed by female directors and also included films made by Indigenous, LGBTQ, and people of color (POC) filmmakers. Therefore, when one year is missed, opportunities are lost to promote better representation and counterbalance other content found on the most popular platforms, such as Netflix. Indeed, according to a report on inclusion on Netflix that was also conducted by USC Annenberg on “US original fictional films and scripted series” released in 2018 and 2019, progress is just starting to be made. Figures show a greater percentage of female leads and co-leads (an average of 52 percent for films and series in 2018 and 2019), which corresponds to the Census Bureau statistics, and compared to the industry, the number of female directors is also on the rise (25 percent for Netflix in 2018 compared to 4.5 percent for the industry). In terms of ethnicity, Netflix features more underrepresented leads and co-leads than the top-grossing feature films of the year, with an average of 35.7 percent compared to 28 percent for top-grossing films. The percentage of Latinx leads and co-leads, however, is substantially lower, with an average of 2.6 percent for films and series and 4.5 percent if the main cast is considered; most are male-identified. The numbers are just as low for producers (2.6 percent), directors (3.1 percent), and writers (1 percent). The figures thus confirm that such festivals as Cine Las Americas fill a gap and that their presence is necessary to counterbalance mainstream tendencies.
While it cannot be denied that it is hard for a small festival to compete with a multi-million-dollar platform such as Netflix, organizing the Virtual Showcase in 2020 was not so much about competing but about existing in a saturated market of online streaming. As scholars Jamie Chambers and Will Higbee explain, during the pandemic, the organization of virtual events served the “ongoing work of resistance” that small film festivals strive to do. The organizers were aware that it was going to be a special downsized event, but they insisted that they did make the “connections Cine Las Americas is famous for.” Indeed, since geo-blocking options had not been activated, a wide range of people were able to watch the films. The films circulated around the world; to the surprise of the organizers, people logged in from California, from Missouri, and even from a few foreign countries.

Crisis situations, because they force people and organizations to face unusual circumstances, can favor such surprises. By putting pressure on people and testing their resilience, the pandemic offered challenges that led to unexpected outcomes.

Managing a Crisis Situation: Personal Initiatives and Solidarity

According to professor of organizational communication Granville King III, an efficient crisis management team has to “possess excellent decision-making skills” and be accustomed to “designing a plan” that assigns roles to the right people. At the beginning of 2020, when Lauer stepped down due to other professional engagements, the programming team took over because they had already watched and selected the films. Quiroz, who works for a dozen film festivals each year, stepped up to be the main organizer for two reasons: to “keep the local brand alive” and to “support the community during difficult times.” Quiroz’s determination, supported by Lauer, confirms the role of stakeholders and the synergy that propel an event to reinvent itself. While acknowledging that she cannot take any responsibility for the organization of the Virtual Showcase, Lauer admits to having “empowered” the programming team to find a way to organize an online event, following the example of other festivals that had already made the decision to go on “forced digital adventures.”

In line with the festival’s mission and inclusion issues affecting the Latinx community, Quiroz expressed responsibility to the filmmakers that goes hand in hand with scholars Marisa Hicks-Alcaraz and Eve Oishi’s argument about curation being a form of activism: 

I felt for all these filmmakers … especially when SXSW was canceled. They announced their lineup and they canceled. This was their chance to show their film and to hopefully get it out there and get some sort of distribution deal and, like, advance their career. And then all of a sudden, that’s not gonna happen. So I felt like in the same sense, I had a duty and a responsibility. That’s what we do as programmers. These are the films, these are the filmmakers that we want to elevate, that we want to promote, that we want to help bring to a wider audience. We have that platform and I felt like … it sounds cheesy but it is like a sacred duty to promote these films. And whatever I need to do to do that, even if it is in a virtual space, we have to … sort of … reinvent what we are … well, that’s what we need to do.

They selected fewer films than in previous years: the showcase included forty-nine films (seven feature films, thirty-two short films, and ten music videos) from twelve different countries, while usually the festival includes a hundred films from an average of twenty-five countries. All of the
films were free of charge and the audience was involved in the granting of eight awards. Diversity was still at the core of the program: there were narrative and documentary features from different Latin American countries (Brazil, Costa Rica, and Argentina) as well as from local filmmakers (Hecho en Tejas), long and short films from experienced and budding filmmakers (Emergencia), and music videos. The films dealt with a wide range of topics; however, in almost all of the different categories, immigration was represented, as a reminder that it is still an issue affecting the Latinx community in the United States. The youth film *The American Dream*, by Janet Cruz, dealt with a Mexican immigrant whose journey across the border made him alter his definition of the American dream. *Dear Homeland*, by Claudia Escobar, a documentary feature, followed the life of the Mexican singer-songwriter Diana Gameros, described as an advocate for immigration rights. In the Hecho en Tejas category, which featured eight films, the short narrative film *When You Clean a Stranger's Home*, by local filmmaker Sharon Arteaga, represented the issue. Arteaga’s film sheds light on the intergenerational and interracial issues Latinos face while trying to make a living in blue-collar jobs in the United States.

The program did not include its traditional categories of New Releases and Panorama (set up during the second phase of development). Due to reduced funds, such a decision was made for financial reasons and also to focus on the categories needing more visibility—Hecho en Tejas and Emergencia—to give them “the stamp of approval” from the team of programmers. Although scaling down represented “difficult decisions,” according to Lauer, such a strategy kept the festival afloat not just for 2020 but also for the following years, anticipating the long-term repercussions of the pandemic.

The Hecho en Tejas showcase was important strategically because the festival could thus garner support from local partners, such as the AFS and the MACC, which, despite not being able to provide venues to the festival, contributed financially. On top of representing signs of loyalty and solidarity at a time when most organizations, companies, and governments had to deal with financial strain, these relationships underscore the ties among the members of a well-established organizational field and, to some extent, their friendship. Interestingly, in her early assessment of the situation in 2020, de Valck insisted on the need for festival organizers to be able to count on their friends. The city of Austin and its Cultural Arts Division also remained loyal to the festival. Despite having to cut funds, a grant was given to Cine Las Americas, another sign that its organizers had secured the city’s loyalty and trust. After all, festivals are localized events that affect the tourism of a city. Even if tourism was drastically limited in 2020, betting on the future and potential revenue that festivals can bring when in-person events come back is strategically relevant, especially if we consider the location of the people who registered to watch films in 2020. Festivals also often represent a city’s identity card, and with the cancellation of SXSW, it seemed important for Austin to try to exist culturally speaking and keep “the local brand” that Quiroz talked about alive. Assistance from different organizations prevented the festival from having to look for other funding sources, a time consuming and stressful endeavor. As scholars Mariagulia Grassilli and Alexandra-Maria Colta explain, the pandemic illustrated that “bonds and interconnectedness” become “tools of resistance” in difficult times. Cine Las Americas undoubtedly benefited from the “trust, emotional attachment and commitment” that are at the core of the principle of loyalty. The pandemic revealed that solidarity occurred at several levels: between the members of an organizational field and organizations that are used to working together for similar goals, between film professionals and filmmakers, and between festivals and their audiences.
Quiroz’s assessment of the Virtual Showcase is nevertheless somewhat harsh, as he described 2020 as a “stopgap” year. Lauer was more ambivalent: she talked about “missed opportunities” but considered the pandemic years as not “wasted years.” Ornelas, on the other hand, preferred to see the silver lining and viewed 2020 as a “learning experience” that showed “what Cine has to offer, for the filmmakers and for the community.” The different statements of these three team members may be in keeping with their background: for a film aficionado, 2020 was clearly a missed year whereas from an event management perspective, it was a success in that it existed. Interestingly, Lauer acknowledged that there were hard years before and there will probably be more to come, implying that crisis management is part of film festival organization. As a result, the pandemic offered new interrogations as to the future of film festivals, for scholars and for organizers.

**Conclusion: New Perspectives for the Reinvention of Film Festivals?**

Management of the COVID-19 pandemic did not just concern events in 2020. The following year, social distancing recommendations still made the organization of the 23rd Cine Las Americas film festival a challenge. Most of the June 2021 festival consisted of online screenings, but six in-person events were also programmed, including a screening at a drive-in cinema and a get-together at a local bar. Ornelas described the event as “a quality successful festival” despite the large part that online screenings took; what mattered to him was to bring people and “the community” back together. “If there is an opportunity, even if it is completely scaled back in terms of having the opportunity to bring some people together, even if it is just for a handful of times ... because that’s what the festival is ... I mean that’s the community it represents. So, if we can figure out some sort of way to do that in a safe environment more than anything, then we’ll visit that.”

Considering what Lauer, Ornelas, and Quiroz said, Cine Las Americas appears to be a festival that pays equal attention to the films and to the social experience they foster. As a result, de Valck’s categorization between film-driven and festival-driven events falls short for this specific case study. Even though it is a “small festival organization that relies on volunteer labor, community encouragement, eclectic support networks, and creative fundraising,” Cine Las Americas also serves a series of films that would have difficulties finding other outlets in the United States. It is true that it caters to a community, but the festival does not exist without the films it showcases, which are part of an extended market and complex transnational circuit. As Farrell explains about BLIFF, “small festivals such as BLIFF play an important role in both serving their community’s need for representation as well as contributing to the field of filmmaking.” In 2020 and 2021, the pandemic compelled the organizers to set priorities that focused on the local community, which probably explains why the only online Q&A event that was organized in 2021 was about a film made in Texas and showcased in the Hecho en Tejas program.

In 2022, however, the festival recovered its pre-pandemic form, with a selection of a hundred films that fit into the usual categories, in-person screenings and Q&As at the usual venues, and get-together events. In other words, a real endeavor to “go back to normal” motivated the decisions of the staff when restrictions due to the pandemic waned. As de Valck rightfully explains, organizing festivals online is not sustainable: not only is the “festivity” significantly jeopardized, but the isolation of people in their homes also renders cross-cultural interaction—and, therefore, the mission of the festival—impossible.
Efforts made to organize in-person events suggest that the inclusion of online options was only a temporary adaptation strategy to survive the pandemic and that the festival is ready for a new phase yet to be determined. The 24th festival in 2022 did not include any online event, whereas other festivals, such as LALIFF, still offered an online option for local audiences. As Quiroz explained, the pandemic gave birth to “a newly imagined virtual film festival tour,” but it is still too early to determine whether online events will become more than temporary adjustments. Back in 2016, referring to online festivals, de Valck explained that “a new generation of film festivals [was] dawning.” At the time, the creation of such events seemed to be a conscious choice that responded to the inclusion of technology, such as the use of cell phones to make films. There is a difference between the festivals that choose to be hybrid and offer a digital experience because they want to experiment and be as innovative as possible and those that had to use digitization to survive the pandemic. Cine Las Americas is part of the latter: organizing in-person events remains the priority, even if no one can predict how the festival will evolve. Indeed, as cultural events usually seek a balance between continuity and change, new leadership and partnerships can take the festival in a new direction and reshape it. For the moment, it is safe to say that the pandemic was a temporary adjustment that did not have long-term consequences, for the decisions made by the staff allowed them to secure enough funds and sponsorship to carry on.

To answer Chambers and Higbee’s questions as to whether online festivals annihilated “the possibility of the in-person collectivity and conviviality” or if a “sense of community remained, albeit translated into a different form,” one would have to answer that generally speaking, while conviviality was truly challenged, the sense of community remained a resilient component for film festivals, especially for the most vulnerable ones. Even if film was at the origin of a series of creative initiatives during the pandemic, such as watch parties, for film festivals, what mattered was to secure “friends and funding,” and funds are more likely to come from friends or organizations with which one already had friendly relationships.

Can we conclude that the pandemic offered virtual, in other words, incomplete, events that verged on approximation? In spite of the “missed opportunities” that paint a darker picture of the situation, it is still possible to see new practices arise and new forms of solidarity that could solidify some relationships and networks in the future. Ornelas, for instance, mentioned his intentions to reach out to other festivals and “build on partnerships.” In the end, as Lauer explains, despite its magnitude, the pandemic revealed “opportunities to reimagine and reinvent” film festivals. It would, therefore, be a harsh statement to state loud and clear that virtual festivals were not events organizers should be proud of, for “resilience, creativity, and inventiveness” were deployed for what will probably be remembered as an exceptional situation that required extraordinary measures.

87. Quiroz, interview.
91. Ornelas, interview.
92. Lauer, interview.
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HOW TO CITE


The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.