INTRODUCTION

New Directions in Film Festival Studies

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2. Skadi Loist, "The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation," in de Valck, Kredell, and Loist, Film Festivals, 49.

Writing about Film Festivals after a Pandemic

This fourth issue of the Journal of Festive Studies is dedicated to film festivals, that is, a category of events that dates back to the early 1930s and has become particularly popular since the 1970s. As stated by professor in film and media studies Marijke de Valck in 2016, film festivals provide an exhilarating cinephilic experience that “beckons to be lived,” which was seriously challenged by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, several major questions arose in 2020 and 2021: How were events whose raison d'etre is to gather people in the same place meant to survive? How was it possible to provide a festive experience to people stuck at home? Would audiences even care to be involved when faced with more pressing problems, including life-and-death situations? For some organizers, canceling events was a heartbreaking yet inevitable decision, while others chose to postpone their festivals, hoping that the sanitary restrictions would loosen and allow them to organize in-person events at a later date.

In the spring of 2020, online virtual events multiplied, rooted in the belief that depressing times particularly required escapist experiences and entertainment. Needless to say, the profitability of an entire industry was at stake, but efforts to organize showcases no matter what also showed that the passion for cinema was a powerful driving force. Films are money-making ventures, but they are also an accessible form of entertainment, a medium with high emotional potential, and a tool for activism, which probably explains why there can be up to six thousand film festivals around the world each year. In the end, despite the unprecedented situation that the pandemic gave rise to, film festivals continued to be part of our lives. The loyalty of audiences, the determination of festival organizers, and the dedication of festival workers were clearly put to the test, but so was their creativity. Today, as it has become clear that the drive to organize film festivals has survived, one cannot help but wonder—with a hint of retrospective dread—how people would have handled the cancellation of all festive events in the absence of online platforms.

Much like film festivals themselves, the field of film festival studies also powered through the
A great deal of the most recent literature has focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. De Valck, author of the field-defining Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia (2007), was one of the first to comment on the pandemic’s possible consequences on film festivals. In an essay published in 2020, “Vulnerabilities and Resiliency in the Festival Ecosystem: Notes on Approaching Film Festivals,” she expressed the need for scholars as well as film professionals to reflect on the crisis and the ensuing challenges. Interestingly, she briefly commented on the use of online platforms, touching on the idea that some festivals might embrace the “connectivity” they had gained in past years and keep using online programs to increase their audience membership, while considering that for others, it would only be a temporary solution that would not compensate for the human experience festivals offer. She also pinpointed the “diverging vulnerabilities” that affect film festivals, especially in terms of financing and funding opportunities; indeed, the latter are often secured via networks of support.
that rest on friendship. The "#Solidarity" issue of NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies that de Valck edited a few months later with film festival scholar Antoine Damiens furthered the conversation. Five contributions highlighted the void the pandemic may potentially leave and the missed opportunities for social justice or human rights. Research about the impact of the pandemic culminated with the 2023 release of de Valck and Damiens’s edited collection, Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After, which involved a wide range of scholars who reflected on the halted circulation of films, on geo-blocking issues, and more broadly on the challenges and solutions that allowed festival workers to envision a life after the pandemic.

Such works are not temporary adjustments to an exceptional situation or mandatory assessments for lack of other perspectives of study; they have truly contributed to highlighting the nature of film festivals and launched a conversation on what they are. The pandemic did not just hinder the organization of festivals; it also enticed scholars to reflect again on the essence of film festivals. Are festivals about films or filmmakers? Are they a truly festive experience, or do they merely provide film professionals with market and networking opportunities? What role do they assign to audiences? Such questions were famously hard to answer before the pandemic even struck. As de Valck admitted prior to the pandemic: "To ask what a film festival is, then, appears to be a trick question that hopes to fool its audience into thinking it can be answered readily with a clear definition." The difficulty in coming up with a clear definition, however, does not mean that the question should not be asked. What do film festivals really celebrate? What is the role of programmers in their organization? Which communities do they serve? Clearly, asking what a film festival is requires us to identify the needs they fill, needs that can be different from one festival to another. Logically, large A-list festivals are not faced with the same issues as "Small" film festivals usually start small because they cater to an underrepresented community—for example, based on ethnicity, race, or gender—and do not necessarily aim at becoming annual events. Some start with the belief that "films can change the world" and are thus rooted in an activist agenda. As Iordanova explains, activist film festivals "are engaged in an effort to correct the record on a certain issue by highlighting lesser-known aspects for the benefit of improved understanding. They are driven by intentionality, be it to increase awareness, to expose, to warn, to prevent and sometimes change the course of events. Secondly, they embody the belief that film is powerful enough to have an impact." What is interesting with such festivals is that they sit at the intersection of different agendas: based on identity or community or motivated by human rights or activism. Identifications and agendas overlap, which takes us back to the difficulty of providing a clear-cut definition of a film festival.

LGBTQ festivals are good examples of this complexity. They have given rise to numerous publications that strive to understand the "polymorphous or heterogeneous nature of gay and lesbian cinema." With the "intense global proliferation" of queer cinema, there has been a clear interest in studying the development of LGBTQ film festivals in different regions of the world: in Asia, Latin America, Africa, Oceania, North America, and Europe. One of the reviews in this issue jointly analyzes scholar Stuart James Richards’s The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics...
Whatever the angle favored by scholars, the program is overwhelmingly seen as the backbone of film festivals. Even though programming has not always been an object of study, more and more scholars now reflect on the responsibility of programmers to global film culture. They are viewed as major stakeholders who are in charge of actively choosing films that correspond to the mission of a specific festival, whether they think the audience will enjoy them or not. In her 2011 book, media specialist Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong pointed out that programmers can be motivated by non-filmic values, such as “human rights, freedom of speech, equality, recognition for different groups.” This confirms the pedagogical dimension of film and turns film festivals into public spheres where discussion and debate take place. Activist film festivals, in particular, often lay out counter-stereotypical principles in their mission statements that, far from making them oblivious to their cinephile goals, stress the idea that film festivals seek to shape counter-publics. For this reason, programmers are often interviewed to share their expertise on the selection of films, as well as their experience in landing a “dream job.” Liz Czach, who programmed for the Toronto International Film Festival (1995–2005), recently confirmed the veneration that her job attracts but also shed light on its drawbacks. She explained that programming, as a form of “affective labor,” comes with a wide array of emotions that go from feelings of excitement to “states of despair, disappointment, and anger.” More importantly, she foregrounded the precariousness of the job, which has led scholars to illustrate the inherent contradictions affecting an industry that generates incredible profits yet leaves some of its workers in financial insecurity.

On a more positive note, the freedom that programmers have—and which they view as a major advantage of the job—is what makes film festivals places of innovation. The Indigenous film festival ImagineNATIVE Film+Media Arts Festival exemplifies the twofold desire to showcase films that portray the issues Indigenous communities struggle with and to leave space for innovation. Caroline Klimek, an early-career film scholar at York University, has shown how this particular festival, as well as the HotDocs Canadian International Film Festival, “push[es] the boundaries,” introducing new media and, thus, offering exclusive experiences, such as Virtual Reality (VR), to the audience. This versatility would not exist without the risks programmers take, which are combined with their desire to make audiences discover, learn, and cultivate their film culture. Even if no programmer can predict the audience’s reaction to a movie, the survival and growth of a film festival undeniably depends on the audience and their potential loyalty. What drives audiences to choose a particular film festival? Is it love of cinema? To what extent does it have something to do with an identity statement? Can their tastes also shape the programmers’ choices? These are the kinds of questions that scholars have attempted to answer while studying film reception, focusing on audience motivation and satisfaction. In New York City, for example, where there is a large supply of film-related events, one can expect audience motivations to be different whether they attend Tribeca, DOC NYC, the Nordic Film Festival, or the New York
The contribution of tourism and urban studies highlights another aspect of audience motivation to attend a film festival. Festivals belong in (and to?) cities and contribute to their reputation. It seems that every city wants to be known for its capacity to organize exclusive and unique events, balancing the need for international recognition with catering to local residents. Not only do festivals (any kind of festival, for that matter) bring revenue to cities, but they also participate in their branding, making them more attractive to tourists, investors, potential residents, and creative workers. This is one of the reasons why some cities offer grants to film festivals as part of their support programs for cultural activities. Considering that most film festivals are nonprofit and function “on a bare minimum” hardly enough to sustain more than a few full-time employees, this support is decisive. Funds secured by ticket sales, membership fees, and sponsorship grants undoubtedly offer some leeway; however, most film festivals rely on seasonal workers and volunteers to be able to operate. The details of this economic structure, along with the economic impact of film festivals, have also attracted scholarly attention.

Studies of the economic stakes surrounding film festivals have also stressed the crucial role they play in providing funding opportunities, especially to budding filmmakers or filmmakers from “emerging countries.” The Hubert Bals Fund (Rotterdam)—“the most venerated of all film festivals”—or the World Cinema Fund (Berlin) are examples of funding initiatives set up by international film festivals. They testify to the responsibility that festival organizers feel to go beyond their showcasing role. In a recent essay, scholar Tamara Falicov has underlined the collaboration between two festivals, the San Sebastián Film Festival in Spain and Cinélatino in Toulouse, France, in a common project titled Cine en construcción (Film in progress). Such programs provide a “stamp of approval” so that filmmakers can then find other sources of funding, particularly through the coproduction film markets also implemented by film festivals (CineMart for Rotterdam) to put filmmakers in contact with potential distributors and investors.

The interesting fact about these tendencies is that festivals cooperate to give a leg up to filmmakers: San Sebastián has partnered with Cannes’s film market and with Ventana Sur (Argentinian film institute), thus creating a bridge between Latin American filmmakers and European investors. This is one example among a plethora of initiatives showing that festivals actively participate in the shaping of global and transnational film culture and in the effort to make up for the discrepancies between filmmakers, industries, and countries.

Differences among festivals have led scholars to call into question the use of the metaphor of “the circuit,” identifying the difficulty of considering it as a simple and homogeneous structure. To carry on with Wong’s idea that it is hard to paint a film festival with “a single brushstroke,” one may argue that, like an impressionist painting, a closer look at the circuit reveals different
The very first film festivals were organized in the 1930s. In her groundbreaking work, de Valck has contributed to our understanding of this history by identifying three phases in the evolution of these events. The first phase (1932–68) was the "nationalist" phase, during which cinema was used to fulfill geopolitical means. Films, considered "national accomplishments," were supposed to show the best of the countries that made them. Nevertheless, in the 1920s, cinema had already started to be seen as an art form with great experimental potential, partly because of European avant-garde filmmakers. Clubs and societies in which intellectuals and artists gathered around films flourished. As de Valck explained, before it faded away, the avant-garde movement propelled the emergence of film festivals, whose international visibility offered more opportunities in the context of greater competition between nations.

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A Short History of Film Festivals

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Indeed, this dynamic continued into the early years of the Cold War: weary of not being
This does not mean that all the festivals created were molded to fit the geopolitical trends of the time. In 1946, the Locarno film festival—the history of which one of our contributors investigates—was set up as a tourist attraction, while an Edinburgh festival launched the first event dedicated to documentary films in 1947. These niche events were the early signs of the greater potential of festivals in terms of diversity of goals and focus, which were characteristic of the second and third phases.

The second phase started in the 1960s, “in reaction to social needs as well as to insufficiencies of established festivals,” according to Loist. What was then termed “Third World cinema,” and generally speaking underrepresented cinema, used festivals to increase its visibility. For instance, the Pan African Film and Television Festival (FESPACO) was established in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) in 1969. The 1960s was also the decade during which cinema was embraced as an artistic medium that should amaze audiences with the quality of the techniques mastered by filmmakers. The filmmakers of the New Wave, for instance, spearheaded “auteur” cinema to the point where they were sometimes better known than their films. Jean-Luc Godard, who died in September 2022, was probably the best representative of such a trend, and he is also an interesting figure because he was a staunch supporter of the Pesaro Film festival in 1965, which countered the Hollywood model that was in the spotlight at Cannes. The films selected for his festival were both fiction and documentary films that reflected experimental or political endeavors. Pesaro was in fact the first festival to show films from the New Latin American Cinema in Europe.

This phase is also significant because it saw the emergence of the first American film festivals. Up to that point, the Hollywood machine had set a model that had stifled filmmakers’ creativity. In 1957, though, the San Francisco film festival was created, showcasing films that had already been released in an effort to educate audiences. A. O. Scott from the New York Times wrote that San Francisco was “a film festival with a penchant for making taste, not deals.” The educational stance chosen by San Francisco was poles apart from Telluride, which was created in 1974 as an elitist endeavor. It was impossible to buy tickets, only passes (which cost between 390 and 4,900 dollars), for a total of twenty films (about fifty today), none of which was eventually rewarded.

In spite (or perhaps because) of the exclusive experience the festival offered, success was not lacking and Telluride has remained a key festival, whose aesthetic choices fire up conversations before the awards season. Finally, Sundance (originally the Utah/US Film Festival) was created in 1978 as an “anti-Hollywood forum” intended to spearhead independent cinema. Despite a few derogatory comments accusing the festival of having lost sight of its original purpose, Sundance remains a renowned festival and most filmmakers dream of having a film selected to show there.

Eventually, this tumultuous period in which new forms of cinema flourished and new festivals called into question norms and standards progressively gave rise to the third phase identified...
by de Valck, characterized by the development of a great range of niches enmeshed in an international network. In 1972, Hubert Bals founded the Rotterdam film festival, the first European festival to showcase Asian cinema as well as international coproductions. The festival was eager to promote “Third World, political, underground, and independent cinema as well as documentary, experimentalism, and avant-garde filmmaking.” It also bet on proximity and inclusion, being organized in downtown Rotterdam and accessible to anyone, contrary to such festivals as Cannes or Telluride, which were reserved to an elite. Rotterdam is a good example of how festival organizers have striven to break down barriers and encourage the creative potential that is at the core of the making of movies. Bals also encouraged coproductions, betting on transnational cooperation to support lesser-known and smaller film initiatives around the world. In a visionary statement, he believed that this was “the future of cinematography.”

At the turn of the twenty-first century, more specialized “niche” festivals proliferated and offered specific types of films. In addition, smaller festivals in developing countries adopted an anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic approach, while others focused on identity-based endeavors. As Loist puts it: “The 1980s and 1990s were a time of massive proliferation of the festival model,” which gave rise to a deeper commitment to guide, promote, and even sponsor filmmakers.

More than showcasing films, festivals could embrace marketing strategies and become business events. Cannes probably has the most renowned market, a large-scale event organized alongside the festival that presents thousands of films and involves a great number of film industry professionals and buyers. In that sphere too, inequalities remain: while large-scale film festivals tend to eventually host film markets (Berlin, Hong Kong), some regions barely have any. In Latin America, Mar del Plata—with its Intercine—and Guadalajara are exceptions. Yet recent initiatives, such as Ventana Sur, promise to change the landscape of markets in the future and increase transnational collaboration initiatives.

“Hub” might be a more appropriate word to describe the film festival network. Festivals are hubs: like airports, they draw flows from different parts of the world and involve different types of films and people that converge in the same place, for relatively similar purposes. Arrivals, departures, crossings, encounters, and opportunities are all part of the film festival phenomenon. It is what makes film festivals incredibly interesting objects of study, and it guarantees a fertile future for the field of film festival studies. In this issue, we present to you a sample of what the field has to offer, hoping that it will spur new conversations.

**Contents of This Issue**

In accordance with the multifaceted aspect of film festival studies, the articles of this issue offer a close-up on a variety of topics. While most of the academic articles of our issue are based on case studies, they all concern different areas of the world and different kinds of film festivals.

The issue opens with an article on Locarno, a well-known and prestigious European film festival situated in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. Like Cannes, Locarno benefits from a highly attractive location. Situated at the foot of the Swiss Alps and on the northern shore of Lake Maggiore, the festival has built its reputation on the scenery it offers and its open-air screenings in the Piazza Grande. Contrary to most scholars who have written about Locarno, historian Cyril...
Cordoba adopts a historical perspective intertwined with an analysis of the economic stakes of the festival's evolution. His article is the fruit of minute archival work, which confirms, as he states, that getting access to archives for film festival scholars is crucial. The ephemeral and financially unstable situation of most film festivals does not always enable archiving, but one can hope that the digital possibilities that exist today will create new opportunities for festivals to leave their mark.

To study Locarno, Cordoba received help from Pro Locarno, the organization in charge of tourism in the city, as well as the Archivio di Stato (in Bellinzona) and the Cinémathèque suisse (in Penthaz). With impressive subtlety and inspiration from stakeholder theory, Cordoba navigates through the festival's history, shedding light on the conflicting agendas of the different actors involved. While retracing the history of the festival, he identifies several phases of development that highlight the struggles festival organizers had to deal with. Locarno had to battle to become a legitimate event from 1946 to 1977 and suffered from cancellations in 1951 and 1956. Because of a lack of support from local authorities, the festival was first pigeonholed as a tourist attraction meant to “promote the region” rather than as a cinematic event, despite the fact that classical films were screened. In addition, because of the demands of the local film industry’s most powerful stakeholders—such as representatives of Twentieth Century Fox—at first, only movies that were commercially distributed in the country could be screened in Locarno. Cordoba shows that it was not until the 1960s that a compromise pleasing both the film industry and the tourist industry was found, with a competitive selection that allowed the festival to showcase new films. This new turn was instigated by its new president, Vinicio Beretta, who paved the way for the “internationalization, professionalization, and transformation” of the festival into a meeting point for “cinephiles with an artistic taste for avant-garde cinema.” Locarno illustrates that festivals evolve and change under the influence of key people who make critical decisions with consequences for the future of the event.

The influence of key stakeholders on the evolution of a film festival is also a major element of the following article, written by scholar Emilie Cheyroux. Also using a historical perspective, she analyzes the evolution of Cine Las Americas, a small community-based film festival in Austin, Texas, from its inception to the COVID-19 crisis. Belonging to the broad category of Latinx film festivals, Cine Las Americas founded its core mission on counter-stereotypical purposes rooted in the belief that on-screen representation matters and that film festivals can be platforms for underrepresented filmmakers. The mandates and restrictions of the pandemic prodded the organizers to find a way to set up an event online. Interviews that she conducted with the executive and programming associates shed light on their decision to call it a “showcase” and not a film festival. Their comments add to the conversation on what a film festival is, a concern that affects film festival organizers as much as scholars. Should online film festivals be considered failed events? Or should organizers rejoice that they survived the pandemic?

In the case of Cine Las Americas, the pandemic also revealed that a festival’s local network of connections matters more than the general circuit of film festivals. Drawing inspiration from organizational theory, Cheyroux argues that the festival organizers, while deciding to make the festival sustainable, turned it into a Field-Configuring Event (FCE) that can rely on the support of key organizations—film organizations, film festivals, and the cultural division of the city of Austin—
that showed great solidarity during the pandemic.

Community solidarity is also the focus of film scholar Ana Rosa Marques’s essay on CachoeiraDoc film festival, an annual Brazilian film festival organized by the faculty (including the author) and students of the Film and Audiovisual program at the Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB). The article was originally published as a book chapter in 2020 and was translated from Portuguese by Isabel Machado for this issue. It echoes several topics that readers will come across in the other articles of this issue, CachoeiraDoc being a small community-based film festival. What sets it apart is that the festival is not organized by professionals but by faculty and students who progressively, as the article shows, felt empowered by their programming mission, however difficult they considered it to be. Their testimonies, included in the article, are enlightening comments that confirm the unifying role of film festivals in underprivileged communities. Not only does CachoeiraDoc fill a void in the region (the closest movie theater was originally 116 kilometers away!), but it also helps students envision a career in film or film festival organization. Additionally, a webdoc workshop is organized to teach public school students how to direct a short documentary, which can be subsequently uploaded online. The festival also offers teenage directors the opportunity to show their own films during the festival. Not only is the webdoc program a chance for them to learn from professional filmmakers, some of whom were accepted into prestigious universities abroad, but it also allows them to share their stories. The article emphasizes the cross-generational pedagogical aspect of the film festival.

Marques also studied the impact of the pandemic on the curators of the festival, arguing that it made the issues of solidarity and representation even more urgent for them. The representation of stereotyped communities, such as the Black Brazilian community, therefore, became a focus of the festival’s program, also because 83 percent of UFRB students identify as Black or Brown. More than redressing issues of underrepresentation for the Black community, Marques argues, the selection of films made by Black Brazilian filmmakers allows audiences to appreciate their talents. While the stories these filmmakers tell can be very personal and unconsciously intent to counter stereotypes, the article shows that the festival contributes to the recognition of their film as quality cinema.

Marques’s piece translates with enthusiasm, and also humor, the outreach efforts that are at the core of the festival’s mission. Since the region is isolated and lacks basic infrastructure, it has sometimes been a challenge for filmmakers and audiences to get to the festival, but Marques shows, through several comments, that attending the festival, however challenging it might have been, was sometimes seen as a “scavenger hunt” people were happy to participate in.

In the following article, media specialist Heshen Xie also focuses on a small community-based festival founded in 1989, the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (HKLGFF), the first LGBTQ film festival in Asia. Arguing that the HKLGFF festival is a second-tier queer film festival, Xie shows that its programming is highly dependent on the films programmed at top-tier festivals. This trickle-down effect, apart from not allowing the festival to embrace full curative autonomy, makes its programming Western-centered. Noticing that HKLGFF’s catalog often mentions that the films selected were previously screened at other major film festivals, such as Cannes or
Berlinale, two festivals with specific sections awarding queer-themed films, Xie brings to light the imbalance in both the general film festival circuit and the queer film festival circuit and zeroes in on the power of Western film festivals, which have more funds and more resources.

Xie participates in the discussion of the definition of the "circuit" and rightfully mentions the geographical disparities affecting scholarly research, which has tended to be "Euro-American-centered." Such statements need to be taken as an encouragement to expand film festival studies to all confines of the world. His article testifies to the fact that the trajectory of a film through the circuit seems contingent on a series of factors that cannot be planned. Though certain elements can predict the circulation of a film (reaction of audiences, reputation of the filmmaker, number of festivals willing to screen it), its success sometimes remains an enigma. So does the success of a festival. Securing the sustainability of a film festival and making it legitimate thus appears to be a constant challenge: showcasing films that were screened or awarded at more prestigious festivals partakes in a strategy to attract more audiences. Interviews of both programmers and audience members allow Xie to understand that the choices of the programmers also come from a strong commitment to please Hong Kong audiences, corroborating that reception is a key component of film festival research.

The next article requires us to stretch the definition of a film festival. Indeed, after conducting qualitative studies on several documentary film festivals, professor of adult education Carole Roy, with the help of organizational change management professional Lindsay McVicar, launched a volunteer project involving the screening of several special-themed documentaries in a Canadian prison for women. Seventeen documentaries were shown to incarcerated women over the course of a month, followed by discussions about the content of the films and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. While most people imagine film festivals as glamorous places where actors and filmmakers display their best attire to celebrate the screening of a film, their project ventured to a place where festivities are not an everyday phenomenon. Therefore, it is not a traditional film festival in the sense that it does not include the main components of most film festivals (filmmakers, actors, film passes, premieres, the red carpet, a film market, etc.), yet it makes the most of the educational potential of film.

It is eye-opening to learn about the restrictions that both authors had to handle to further their project. Most film festival scholars only have to think about getting a film pass and actually going to the festival. In Roy and McVicar’s case, it involved a series of approvals and permissions that dragged on for nine months, testifying to the patience required to conduct ethnographic work in unusual and isolated places and/or with a specific audience. The other challenge the project entailed consisted in selecting the right films for this specific audience, avoiding content that could trigger traumatic responses, for example. As a result, and for the purpose of the study, all documentaries involved people who faced adversity yet who displayed courage and relied on solidarity. Referring to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of indignation, Roy and McVicar insist on the transformative power of film. Not only were the participants exposed to a series of documentaries, but their reactions were also directly channeled via post-viewing discussions. The article shares the fascinating comments incarcerated women made after watching the documentaries. While such a project might be a small-scale and unique initiative, it offers perspective for film festival scholars to study atypical festivals in atypical settings.
The next piece in our issue makes it clear that film festivals depend on international events, to the point that they can drastically challenge their organization. Barely a year after the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine further disturbed the plans of some film festival organizers. A few weeks after the beginning of war in February 2022, film festival specialists Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist, as chairs of the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS) Film Festival Research Workgroup, organized an online roundtable and invited five film festival organizers from all over Ukraine: Anna Machukh, executive director of the Ukrainian Film Academy, which she founded, and executive director of the Odesa International Film Festival, one of the largest film festivals in Ukraine; Bohdan Zhuk, a programmer of the Molodist International Film Festival, the oldest film festival in the country (established in 1971); Yevgeniya Kriegsheim, who works for the MeetDocs Film Festival, a young documentary and feature film festival that takes place in Kharkiv, a city that has been heavily bombed; Victoria Leshchenko, a program director of Docudays UA (Ukraine), one of the biggest documentary film festivals in the country; and Olha Reiter, who works for the Wiz-Art Lviv International Short Film Festival, the most important festival in western Ukraine. Reflecting on the consequences of the war, the participants all commented on the political role of cinema. In spite of the cancellations they had to face, they remained determined to help filmmakers document the war and send the resulting films to international film festivals; some of them live in cities that face air raids and power outages on a daily basis. They also called attention to the responsibility of the programmers of other film festivals, calling for solidarity and support. Interestingly, the pandemic had already made them comfortable with the use of online platforms to the point they were not afraid to use them again during the war. What remains then is a powerful statement of film festival organizers’ determination and passion in times of crises and in their belief that cinema can change the world.

Our thematic section on film festivals ends with an interview of director of communications for the Slemani International Film Festival (IFF) Hemn A. Hussein. Alan Ali Saeed, lecturer in English literature at the University of Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan, presents the Slemani IFF, set in the eponymous city of Slemani, the cultural capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Even though the festival was set up by people who had no experience in film festival organization and were mainly motivated by their love for film, the festival has become the largest in Iraq. Saeed starts with a short account of Kurdish cinema, starting with an introduction of Yılmaz Güney, whom he considers to be one of the “founding father[s]” of Kurdish cinema. His 1982 film Yol, awarded a Palme D’Or at Cannes, is the epitome of his political activism. Written while Güney was in prison, the script tells the story of men imprisoned in a Turkish jail who were given a one-week furlough, only to notice that repression followed them outside of the prison. The film thus resonates with Güney’s lifelong endeavor to tell stories of the Kurdish community, which is also the mission of the Slemani IFF, created in 2016.

Saeed also mentions that the festival accepts international films. The interview makes clear that the help of international organizations, such as the Goethe Institute of Germany and the French Institute in Erbil, was key to the foundation and sustainability of the festival. Overall, Hussein, while giving an account of the festival’s challenges, including the pandemic, demonstrates the enthusiasm that motivates the organizers to take challenges as opportunities to make the Slemani IFF grow and secure worldwide partnerships.
Overall, this issue provides insights into a wide variety of film festivals that, despite being organized in different regions of the world, testify to the common determination, resilience, and even passion film festival organizers have in setting up festive and unifying events in sometimes unfavorable conditions. This section of the issue is representative of the good health of film festival studies, and we hope that you will find it enlightening and that it will spur new discussions about the significance of film festivals.
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