

Montserrat Jurado-Martin; Francisco-Julián Martínez-Cano

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Beyond a shadow of a doubt: For the Elche International Independent Film Festival dying is not an option

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Since March 2020 Covid-19 has led to a wave of cancellations in the event industry.[1] The Mobile World Congress of Barcelona, the world tourism exhibitions in Berlin and Shanghai, and the International Trade Fair for Wire and Cable in Dusseldorf, for example, were cancelled. The impact on tourism worldwide is far-reaching and has been a major issue for the Spanish economy specifically. In Elche (Spain), where the International Independent Film Festival of Elche (FICIE) is held, numerous events that bring together large groups of people have been suspended.[2] No exceptions were made for local festivals with emblematic functions for the city, such as the celebration of the liturgical act of El Misteri d'Elx, a recognised World Heritage Site.

FICIE is a film festival dedicated to shorts that takes place in Elche, the third largest city of the autonomous community of Valencia. The event is among the twenty oldest film festivals in Spain, which has a total of 200-plus events annually. The festival was founded in 1978 and had its golden age at the end of the 1990s, during the rise of Spanish cinema. It was at this time that the Mediterranean Savings Bank (CAM) promoted the festival within its Corporate Social Responsibility program. Since then FICIE has been a Goya-qualifying short film festival as well as a benchmark for the international short film festival circuit.

The festival is traditionally scheduled during the second week of July. It is staged in two open-air areas. The main venue is a park of palm trees, a symbol of the city which is also a recognised World Heritage Site. The second

venue is a beach: Arenales del Sol. Both locations constitute touristic hallmarks and are popular places of leisure for Elche's 230,000 inhabitants. The festival adds an attractive, alternative summer activity to these locations.

Throughout its history FICIE has experienced moments of intense crises. The most critical of these was in 2012 when the Mediterranean Savings Banks was acquired by the Sabadell Bank.[3] After the Spanish economic crisis of 2008, the Mediterranean Savings Bank began to accumulate debts. While its situation was getting worse, the financial entity was reluctant to merge with others. Only when the governor of the Bank of Spain threatened to intervene did the Savings Bank attempted to accomplish a merger. When this did not succeed the Bank of Spain stepped in and nationalised the Savings Bank in July 2011.[4] The auction began in September, and Sabadell Bank was the only party interested. It took over the Mediterranean Savings Bank at the symbolic cost of one euro.

FICIE was part of the activities developed by a specific department of the Mediterranean Savings Bank in charge of Social and Cultural Work. This department was excluded from auction and turned into a separate cultural foundation called the Mediterranean Bank Foundation. Since then, the festival has been supported by the Foundation. Financially, the festival is the most expensive activity of the foundation and, thus, the one with the highest risks. Culturally, however, it is the Foundation's flagship event, and therefore everybody put everything at work to make FICIE happen despite the pandemic outbreak.

In 2020 FICIE celebrated its 43rd edition, proving its long commitment to promoting film culture. The pandemic was not the first nor will it be the last enemy the festival has to face. As Jurado and Cortés argue in a case study on Madridimagen, for many festivals cultural interests are not always the most important thing when organising the event.[5] Festival events risk cancellation when confronted with great political or economic pressure. Madridimagen became extinct 'despite its specialization and prestige in the industry, [because] the political decisions related with its economic dependency led to its end'.[6]

FICIE today

This review focuses on the 2020 festival edition, but also takes into consideration past festival editions in order to highlight what changes were made in

response to the Covid-19 situation. We have conducted three interviews (April, early and late July) with the coordinator of the festival, Vicente Sanchís, who spoke on behalf of both the festival management team and Foundation. At the beginning of the pandemic in early April the festival issued an open call for the contest Short Films in Quarantine, asking people to submit short films that were shot in the confinement of their homes since quarantine had begun on 15 March. With this initiative FICIE contributed to the #yomequedoencasa campaign of the Spanish government, in collaboration with the Cuarentena Film Festival, Bedmar Films, and the Cinephone, and with support of the Fundación Caja Mediterráneo.[7] The decision demonstrated the attitude at FICIE and a willingness to move forward even in the face of the problematic health situation. In mid-June it was announced that FICIE would be held, despite the global pandemic and the fact that Spain was still easing the lockdown towards a new normality. The province's leading newspaper, *Diario Información*, published a hopeful headline: 'Elche will have an Independent Film Festival and it will continue to be held in July.'[8]

The organisers considered several options between March and May. The coordinator, Vicente Sanchís, explains that:

We valued several options related to dates and venues for the festival, parallel activities, opening and closing galas, awards ceremony, guests' management, virtual and in-person screening sessions for the jury panel, ways of arranging online jury panel meetings, different videoconference services, different forms of hotel reservation according to the possible states of alarm or confinement, both nationally and internationally, negotiations with suppliers and alternative ones if they could not offer their services: rental of chairs, screening devices, etc., in case of temporary lockdown.[9]

Eventually, the contest was held during the third week of July, just a little later than usual. The selection jury panel carried out the viewing sessions virtually throughout June, one month later than usual; the award jury panel was also gathered a month later than usual in an in-person meeting, in total compliance with all the distancing and health protocols. Film submission had been virtual for years, through a distribution platform, so it was not affected.

The most relevant changes affected the event itself: all parallel activities were cancelled and the festival was reduced to screenings of the films at the palm orchard. Indeed, it was not possible to carry out a proper control of audience capacity and distance at the beach venue. In the palm orchard, known as Hort del Xocolater, entry had usually been open and free. In 2020, a free ticket reservation website and a telephone service enabled potential

attendees to book tickets. Tickets were sold out every day. In this way, the audience capacity was limited. Social distancing was respected and the identity of the attendees were known in advance, which would have enabled the organisers to trace potential contaminations in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak during the festival. Sanchís said that: 'security measures will be taken to comply with health standards, ensuring the welfare of the audience, filmmakers and organisers'. There was no opening ceremony and no previous presentation of the non-competitive sections. While in previous years short film directors were usually present at the beginning of each screening, this was not the case in 2020.

The closing ceremony was held under strict COVID-19 protocols. Generally, the event was structured in the following way: a host guided the event; in parallel there was a music group or theatre company that entertained the audience between speeches or sections; a summary of the edition was carried out which led to the reading of the awards in order from least to most important. Prior to the delivery of each award, it was announced who would present the award, usually a representative of a sponsor. This person entered the stage, delivered a speech, and opened the envelope to communicate the name of the winner. A hostess handed the trophy to the sponsor representative, who in turn would hand it to the representative of the film. This representative took the stage and gave a speech of gratitude. This formula was repeated with all the awards. After this phase, a screening of the winning short films was carried out. At the end of the event all attendees were invited for a local drink called *horchata* and a sweet bun.

This year the closing ceremony took a different format to comply with health regulations: the host had an exclusive microphone, while the representatives of the sponsors used a single-use cap for the microphone head that they were putting on and taking off themselves before and after they used it. The winners did not go up on stage and did not collect their prize. They were notified in advance so that they would not travel to the event, except for the winner of the extraordinary prize. In this way, transit through the stage was limited. The music or theatre group that traditionally entertains the event was also dispensed with. There was a final screening, but no snack invitation. 'There was no family photo, nor did they shake hands, all to maintain personal distance', Sanchís explains.

Based on the analysis of the data collected in relation to the celebration of FICIE during the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus, and the comparative analysis regarding past editions, the results are as follows:

- FICIE opened the registration period in March 2020, but without specifying the date of celebration. At this time, they were evaluating various options between July and December and both in-person and virtual versions.
- The registration term was held several weeks longer than usual.
- The selection jury panel evaluated the short films virtually and almost a month later than usual.
- The award jury panel assessed the films in an in-person meeting a month later than usual, with all sanitary measures taken.
- All activities parallel to the event were cancelled, only the exhibition remained.
- The exhibition in one of the two usual venues was cancelled and the capacity of the other one was reduced. This venue had a capacity of 900 seats. Given that the public usually stayed for a bit before leaving, a session of the festival usually accommodated around 1,300 people. This year, it was reduced to 300 seats and 300 people.
- Assistance, which has been always open and free, was available but with a previous request for access via web or telephone reservation.
- The previous presentations of the directors in the screenings, as well as the official opening, were cancelled.
- The closing and awards ceremony was reduced to an event focused on the speeches of the sponsors, where the winners did not collect their awards, but rather received it by post.

Discussion and conclusions

FICIE is a festival organised by a non-profit foundation. It receives all its revenue from sponsors and has no income from other activities, such as ticket sales or merchandising. In general, film festivals that depend on sponsors must manage their budget with the approval of their stakeholders. At the same time, organisers must offer an event of cultural quality for the public, as well as for all the agents involved. In this sense, Jurado and Cortés explain that ‘the festivals that really respond to market demands will ensure their permanence more firmly’.[10] Actually, the tension between the cultural, the

economic, and political perspectives in this type of event is not a new issue, as has already been explored by authors such as Iordanova, De Valck, Elizagarate, or Inkei.[11]

Finally, the majority members of the Foundation decided to celebrate the event taking the appropriate sanitary measures, and probably this decision was not approved by all members. In fact, one of them, the Elche City Council, had to cancel practically all its social and cultural activities. The filmmakers had the chance to present their work, compete, and enjoy the public exhibition of their films. However, the audience was not as substantial in size compared to past editions, which usually reached 1,300 daily visits. In the 2020 edition the festival had to settle for the allowed capacity of 300 attendees.



Fig. 1: FICIE 2020 Closing Act. The distance from the public can be appreciated. Source: Elperiodic.com

FICIE organised a festival that promotes culture, with a clear priority for exhibition and competition. It aborted all parallel activities around cinema, cancelling them in compliance with health regulations. The past crisis experiences that threatened the continuity of the festival have been more present

than ever. For this reason, the festival organisation has been particularly sensitive to their sponsors, demonstrating the viability of staging a smaller version of the festival.



Fig. 2: FICIE 2017 Closing Act, celebrating the 40th anniversary. Full capacity. Source: <https://elche.aquimediodecomunicacion.com/>.

The audience was the most affected in the 43rd edition of the festival. In 2020, FICIE organised an event where all the human and technical effort invested was compensated by an attendance of 25% compared to any other past edition. Those responsible for the event were clear that celebrating the 43rd edition was important despite the situation caused by the pandemic. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, for FICIE, dying is not an option.

Montserrat Jurado-Martin & Francisco-Julián Martínez-Cano
(Miguel Hernández University)

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Notes

- [1] Juárez 2020.
- [2] See <https://www.festivalcineelx.es/>
- [3] Saborit 2012.
- [4] Valenciaplaza.com 2011.
- [5] Jurado & Cortés 2018
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- [7] See <http://cau.edu.umh.es/2020/04/03/se-abre-la-convocatoria-para-el-concurso-cortometrajes-en-cuarentena-dentro-del-festival-internacional-de-cine-independiente-de-elche/>.
- [8] <https://www.diarioinformacion.com/elche/2020/06/17/elche-tendra-festival-cine-independiente/2274278.html>
- [9] *Ibid.*
- [10] Jurado & Cortés 2018, p. 249.
- [11] Iordanova 2014; De Valck 2016; Elizagarate 2005; Inkey 2008.