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Come together? Curating communal viewing experiences for hybrid and online film festivals

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Come together? Curating communal viewing experiences for hybrid and online film festivals

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In the wake of Covid-19, watch parties and watch-alongs have become increasingly popular forms of audience engagement, providing communal viewing experiences. As singular events or film series they have made use of streaming platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, Facebook, Vimeo, Twitter, or Instagram. For film festivals, which are currently facing the challenge to go hybrid or fully online due to the pandemic, watch-alongs can become an inspirational model for achieving a community feel. Film festivals that decided not to go online during the pandemic tend to employ a rhetoric that cinema alone provides a setting for a communal viewing experience. And indeed, the notion of the analog space as a space of encounter for film festivals has been highlighted both by film critics and film festival scholars.[1]

Film festivals, particularly queer and LGBT+ festivals, are not only about the cinematic experience, but also about embodiment and affect, performed as cruising, romance, and friendship. However, not everybody has equal chance to participate in an offline film festival edition: people might not be able to afford the necessary costs for travel, accommodation, or tickets, or they might have health issues that prevent them from being in a crowd or in the dark, enclosed cinema space. For these audiences hybrid or online formats can offer new ways of participation, provided the festivals are reflecting on their access strategies. Here I would also include the need of increased funding for subtitles, sign language interpreting, or audio description. Hybrid or online festival editions also offer a chance for those queer and LGBT+ audience members, especially young ones who live either too far away in the countryside or have not yet come out. Going hybrid would also allow these groups to be part of a community.

Are online festival editions completely unable to reproduce the community feel that analog festivals can create? This article sets out to challenge the simple binary of the analog versus the digital. Online viewing tends to be framed as an individual, solitary activity in contrast to the collective experience of watching a film offline in the cinema. Questioning the binary opposition often constructed between online and offline viewing, this article presents two best practice examples illustrating how a sense of community can be achieved while streaming films online. These two examples of communal viewing experiences in online formats, which I have been following during lockdown, are Carol Morley's Friday Film Club and the event 'Come Together', arranged by the Swedish Archive for Queer Moving Images. Despite not being part of the film festival circuit, these cases provide best practice examples for film festival programming.

Suggesting that these events provide inspiration for film festivals, I argue that online watch parties can provide a sense of communal viewing experience. The reason for this lies in the multimodal forms of performing a sense of community. Community is here not understood as an ontological entity based on essentialist conceptualisations of identity, but rather as the result of a performative process which is initiated or furthered by a film festival.[2] The sense of community is achieved through the interplay of multimodal forms of engagement: via social media, an online platform, via chat entries, tweets, gestures, participation in live discussions, or streaming oneself watching the livestream while sitting at home on the couch with the cat.

The Friday Film Club – communal viewing via Twitter

The Friday Film Club on Twitter was initiated by British film director Carol Morley in 'reaction to becoming locked in and much more isolated'.[3] Each Friday night from 20 March 2020 until 31 July 2020 it screened a film by a female filmmaker or with a strong female lead. The followers would usually watch the film together at a given time (20:00h GMT) and provide comments and feedback via Twitter. Morley would publish the link to the film on her Twitter account before Friday night.

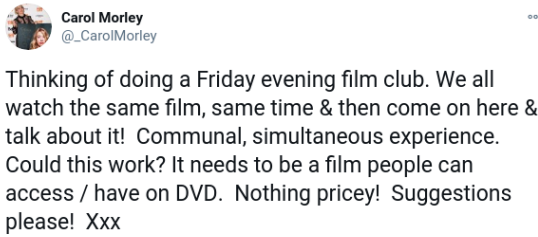


Fig. 1: Carol Morley initiating the Friday Film Club ©Twitter.
https://twitter.com/_CarolMorley/status/1240416134148567043

All of the films were freely available online and available on platforms such as YouTube or Internet Archive. On one occasion, the club collaborated with MUBI, which offered a free link (within the UK) to Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (F 2019). Sometimes the film screening would be followed by a discussion, for instance with filmmaker Jeanie Finley after *Sound it Out* (2011) or with actor Maxine Peake after *Salt of the Earth* (H. Biberman, 1954). Carol Morley sums up:

I started it because I really adore going to the cinema and I realised that during lockdown I would be without that joy! And there are so many pleasures associated with going to the cinema, but one of them is truly the audience you are part of, that is around you. We laugh together. We cry together. I adore overhearing snippets of what other people are saying after a film – and the discussions you can have with people you know, or if you have gone on your own, with others around you. So I

wanted to simulate on Twitter that experience. I really wanted to include as many women directors as I could – which is hard as not many films exist in the public domain by women – so I'm very pleased that many of the films have had a female director. And all the films have had a female lead. I've looked for films in the public domain, or that were streaming openly and for free, or that I got a deal for (MUBI) so that it was open to anyone and mostly it was an international affair! I've found everyone commenting/discussing afterwards to be truly smart and engaging and I've learnt a lot. There has been a real sense of connection, which has been wonderful.[4]



Fig. 2: Invitation to join the Friday Film Club ©Twitter.
https://twitter.com/_CarolMorley/status/1247670717669347329

What started as an individual incentive, without any commercial interest whatsoever, has generated communal experiences performed over 20 weeks.



Fig. 3: Film list of the Friday Film Club.
https://twitter.com/_CarolMorley/status/1289311390516170757

For Morley the notion of well-being (staying sane) was an important aspect: in the early phase of the Friday Film Club, Morley was reluctant to program films that were unsettling – both to her and the potential participants. Morley explained:

During lockdown I was careful, especially at the beginning, to pick films that weren't disturbing. I was conscious that many people were feeling fragile. I mean, I was. I know some people were lapping up Cronenberg films, but as it seemed we were actually living in a Cronenberg film, I couldn't quite go there.[5]

The Friday Film Club was guided by an ethics of curation that was aware of the vulnerabilities of many people during lockdown; it was a project of care. The same goes for my next example.

‘Come Together’ and its ethics of curation

‘Come Together’ was an online workshop by the Swedish Archive for Queer Moving Images (<https://saqmi.se/>) in March 2020. Initially planned as an offline event, it moved online during lockdown. Links to films were circulated a couple of days in advance, and instead of watching films together online the time slots during the Zoom workshop were dedicated to artists’ talks and a panel on archiving. Works by Mia Engberg and Del LaGrace Volcano were discussed, followed by a sneak preview of the documentary *Always Amber* (2020) introduced by the directors Hannah Reinikainen and Lia Hietala, who joined in for a live discussion. As organiser and curator Anna Linder concludes:

A shared online space (e.g. a Zoom room) could enable us to reach out to audiences and artists in the rest of the country. This might be important in leading to physical meetings at some point. There are always invisible barriers which need to be overcome. Online meetings involving different places and spaces could attract a new category of audience member or participant. The virtual space may be a less intimidating way to get involved than attending in person. It’s not for everyone, of course, but for some. [...] Going online allowed us to reach audiences all over Sweden, and even in other countries. We also had a very supportive atmosphere during the Zoom meeting. Everybody was really lovely, generous, listening in. They showed such a respect for each other and it felt really safe. Someone was sewing, somebody was cooking, someone was ill and was lying in bed and some had their partner with them. It was lovely to be part of this and to feel the trust and the community.[7]



Fig. 4: SAQMI logo. Design by Maryam Fanni © SAQMI saqmi.se

Curation, connection, care

The Friday Film Club and ‘Come Together’ are two examples of online film curation during the pandemic that created a sense of community. ‘Come Together’ managed to retain a community feel through some radical decisions: a) to not announce the event widely, but to directly invite persons from the list of friends and followers of the archive, and b) to limit the number of guests to a comparably small number of people: 25. Despite reaching out to a potentially unlimited number of Twitter followers, Carol Morley’s Friday Film Club created a community feel through the participatory notion established by Morley during the Friday night Twitter discussions and the users. Retweeting users’ comments contributed to their sense of belonging; it recognised the followers, it made them feel ‘seen’, and it made their opinion relevant. Interestingly, both organisers introduced a sense of materiality into the ephemeral online event: the Friday Film Club produced a badge which Morley sent out to the contributing users when the Film Club reached its end; the participants of ‘Come Together’ received a free T-shirt with the event logo. These presents not only offered something tangible and a lasting memory to the participants, but they also epitomise the notion of care which has characterised both events. ‘Knowing that we were watching these films simultaneously, as a connected audience, certainly helped my mind from drifting too far to the dark side’, as Carol Morley describes the effect of communal watching.[8]

Examples such as the Friday Film Club and ‘Come Together’ provide useful inspiration for film festivals and their audience engagement when planning online editions. Online and offline festival formats have both pros and cons. Rather than being binary oppositions, the analog and the digital can be brought together in a fruitful way. The examples also show that the quality of communal viewing experiences is not about audience numbers and ticket sales. A thoroughly curated event with limited audience numbers can provide a feeling among the participants of being seen, heard, and recognised. As B. Ruby Rich writes in her editorial for *Film Quarterly*, published in June 2020:

Nobody has any idea what viewing habits will emerge when/if the quarantines end. But in the short term, one benefit may be an emphasis on curation for online viewing. Perhaps the new interventions will end the dominance of algorithms for screening choices and usher in a new golden age of curation. That, at least, would be something positive.[9]

Events such as the Friday Film Club or ‘Come Together’ are just two examples paving the way for the ‘golden age of curation’ that will hopefully help us through the pandemic – and offer us inspiration for the future.

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Notes

- [1] Siegel 1997; Rich 2014; Loist 2015; Heath 2018; Damiens 2020.
- [2] See e.g. Loist 2015.
- [3] Morley 2020.
- [4] Carol Morley, personal communication, via Twitter, 8 July 2020.

- [5] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000l265> (accessed on 20 July 2020).
- [6] See also Brunow & Linder 2020.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Morley 2020.
- [9] Rich 2020.