

Marijke de Valck; Antoine Damiens

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Film festivals and the first wave of COVID-19: Challenges, opportunities, and reflections on festivals' relations to crises

Marijke de Valck & Antoine Damiens

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As the year 2020 is slowly coming to an end, we are confronting an unprecedented crisis and witnessing what will likely be a major moment in the history of film festivals. The novel coronavirus COVID-19 provoked a pandemic of soaring proportions and the restrictive measures taken to contain the virus are heavily impacting the global festival world. This particular climate is defined by uncertainty: as such, it seems that the festival circuit is in a constant state of suspension. We do not know how long the disruption will last, to what extent we will be able to 'go back to normal', nor how deeply the festival world will be impacted. For those working in and for the film festival industry, the current crisis poses immediate challenges and severe risks. For those with scholarly engagement to film festivals and the industries and cinemas supported by them, the crisis offers challenges as well as opportunities to reflect on our ways of thinking about the festival ecosystem.

The festival reviews section in NECSUS was conceived eight years ago as a space for critical reflection and shared thinking. Since then, it has cherished its profile as 'a platform for writing that falls between the fast and prolific genre of individual festival reports and the slow and rigorous labor of film festival research'.^[1] In mid-March 2020, when the first film festivals were moved online, postponed, and cancelled, it was apparent the festival review section should offer its dedicated space to report on the various ways in which film festivals worldwide are responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The festival reviews section has always aimed to animate collaborative discussions

on the ramifications of festival cultures. It thus seemed particularly appropriate to use the format of academic festival reviews to document and think through this ongoing crisis as it unfolds.

This special dossier will be the section's first installment of reflective reports on the current crisis in the film festival world. The featured reviews were solicited from the responses to a call we sent out in April 2020 and therefore offer snapshots of early responses to the crisis, zooming in on specific cases in Canada, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Our goal here is to think seriously about the ways in which these festivals handled the first wave of COVID-19. To that end, the festival reviews section hopes to not only chronicle festivals' practices but also to encourage an open debate on the future of festivals. By bringing an analytical attitude to these examples, we acknowledge practitioners' efforts, document endeavours, and stimulate open debate and reflection.

This special dossier echoes the inaugural statement of NECSUS on crisis as a productive centre. 'Now is the time of/for crisis.' [2] With this sentence the first issue of NECSUS was launched in June 2012. The choice to focus on the theme of crisis for the inaugural issue of a media studies journal was deliberate. The relations between crises and media are inextricable and fundamental, the editors argued; crises are communicated by media that in turn feed on the news logic of crisis events. Moreover, a specific temporality – anchored in a concentrated and compressed presence – is shared by crises and media. Media scholars dedicate themselves to objects of study that are in continuous processes of transition and are always already challenged to find ways of dealing with this immediacy.

In documenting the impact of COVID-19 on various international festivals, the review section aims to highlight the concrete mechanisms through which practitioners 'manage' this ongoing crisis. In other words, our goal is not to make a grand argument about the lasting impact of COVID-19 on festival cultures, but rather to attend to and to historicise the specific forms taken by the pandemic in various geographic contexts; as such, the crisis does not necessarily impact every festival at the same time or on the same level. These contributions thus testify to the resourcefulness, adaptability, and creativity of festival organisers who had to, very quickly, find local solutions to a global calamity.

More importantly, this special dossier makes clear that COVID-19 cannot be understood apart from other crises. Our contributors pay particular attention to the ways in which the current pandemic precipitates, accentuates,

and/or transforms other (social, economic, and political) crises. Asli Ozgen-Tuncer resituates the solutions chosen by the International Labour Film Festival within growing concerns over censorship and political freedom in Turkey. Similarly, Montserrat Jurado Martin & Francisco-Julian Martinez-Canore frame COVID-19 as just one of a series of economic and political crises faced by the Elche International Independent Film Festival (Valencia, Spain), including the downfall of the organisation funding the festival. Justice Whitaker discusses the San Louis Obispo International Film Festival in California as it intersects with the Black Lives Matter movement and the fight against police violence, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy. Taken together, these reviews make clear that we cannot theorise the impact of COVID-19 on festival cultures without paying attention to how this crisis refracts and amplifies other political and cultural issues. Festivals matter – and scholars should not refrain from engaging with ongoing social movements.

While COVID-19 plunged many of us into a state of disarray, marked by isolation and uncertainty, our contributors note that the current crisis may also bring forth new opportunities for festivals, filmmakers, and cinephiles. Without being too celebratory or pessimistic, their nuanced analyses highlight how online screenings may lead to new forms of engagement with cinema. Brad Limov & Philippe Hobbins-White build on interviews with filmmakers and digital ethnography to discuss the opportunities and drawbacks of the partnership between SXSW and Amazon Prime. Dagmar Brunow looks at two virtual film clubs that capitalised on communal digital screenings to create new communities in COVID times and to theorise a curatorial ethics based on shared experiences of vulnerabilities. Sheila Petty analyses how the move toward online festivals has enabled her to watch African films with friends from all over Canada. However, despite this broader access, she discusses how it potentially prevents those outside the country from accessing films they would have seen prior to travel restrictions.

Taken together, these reviews analyse early examples of festivals responding to the pandemic. We hope that these snapshots will serve as both documents highlighting some of the first debates around the role and place of festivals in the pandemic, archiving scholars' and practitioners' hopes and fears, and as pioneering theoretical endeavours that aim to energise festival research.

References

- 'Editorial Necsus, #1, Spring, "Crisis"', NECSUS, June 2012: <https://necsus-ejms.org/editorial-necsus-1-spring-2012-crisis/> (accessed on 20 October 2020).
- 'Review Submissions', NECSUS: <https://necsus-ejms.org/review-submissions/> (accessed on 20 October 2020).

Notes

- [1] NECSUS 'Review Submissions'.
- [2] Editorial Necsus 2012.