

Papadopoulou Melea; Eleni

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2022

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19189>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Papadopoulou Melea; Eleni: Embracing hybridity beyond the pandemic: The contrasting cases of PÖFF and SGIFF. In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Materiality, Jg. 11 (2022), Nr. 2, S. 301–309. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19189>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/embracing-hybridity-beyond-the-pandemic-thecontrasting-cases-of-poff-and-sgiff/>

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Embracing hybridity beyond the pandemic: The contrasting cases of PÖFF and SGIFF

Eleni Papadopoulou Melea

NECSUS 11 (2), Autumn 2022

<https://necsus-ejms.org/embracing-hybridity-beyond-the-pandemic-the-contrasting-cases-of-poff-and-sgiff/>

Film festivals have developed to be hybrid multi-layered, ever-expanding complex events that include diverse activities, engage multiple stakeholders, serve various purposes[1] and take place in multiple and diverse places.[2] The outburst of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020 caused an unpredictable crisis that put the film industry in a state of suspension and challenged film festivals' traditional methods of operation and their organisational logic. Forced to refrain from holding in-person events, which are considered fundamental to their experience and atmosphere, film festivals had to investigate alternative approaches.

During the last years, film festivals applied different strategies to overcome the uncertainty of the crisis and adapt to the new circumstances. The notion of hybridity, although always entwined with film festivals, emerged once again, as film festival professionals were trying to concoct strategies that met their needs and served their purposes. In this review, hybridity refers to the combination of physical and virtual events in the film festival format. In this context a hybrid film festival is one incorporating both online and offline formats.

Exploring the hybridity in film festivals from the perspective of film festival organisers as part of my thesis, I studied responses to the Covid-19 crisis from different festivals; amongst them were Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (PÖFF) and Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF). Both festivals are considered to be the

largest film-related events in their countries, having a significant impact on their hosting cities and surrounding regions. SGIFF (founded in 1987) has a strong focus on Asia. It aims to offer a platform that both encourages and nurtures local filmmakers and provides a showcase for the world and Asian cinema.[3] The mission of PÖFF, established in 1997, is to introduce European and international cinema to Estonian audiences, to foster the art of cinema in the country and to promote Estonian cinema.[4] Both festivals seemed to apply the same strategy in 2020 by incorporating both online and in-person elements in a hybrid edition, but their approach towards hybridity in general and as part of their future endeavours in fact is diametrically opposed, as I will show.

The aim of this review is to contribute to the documentation of film festival responses to the recent and ongoing crisis and also to shed light on the multiple factors that affect decision-making processes. Furthermore, I argue the history and the organisational management of a film festival may contribute to whether it embraces hybridity beyond the pandemic or not. The data for the review was derived from personal interviews with Ms Tiina Lokk, festival and programme director of PÖFF, and Ms Emily J. Hoe, executive director of SGIFF. These interviews took place through Zoom between May and June 2021. Ms Lokk kindly sent me reports and presentations of the 2020 and 2021 editions of the festival and the Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event. Also, other interviews with Ms Lokk and Ms Hoe and articles about the festivals were examined alongside official press releases and materials from their websites.

Hybrid edition 2020: SGIFF and PÖFF

PÖFF and SBIFF both take place between November and the beginning of December. This position on the festival calendar allowed them to take time and examine what other festivals did in response to the pandemic outbreak. By November 2020, several online screening platforms had been developed and used by film festivals across the world. Moreover, film industry professionals were already familiarised with the online environment. Both Ms Tiina Lokk and Ms Emily J. Hoe explain that they realised early that a fully in-person edition would not be possible

in 2020. In both cases however, cancelling was not an option.[5] Working on multiple scenarios, SGIFF preferred the hybrid model. They aimed to deliver a festival that would echo the spirit and the ethos of SGIFF.[6] Luckily, their initial concerns about having to pivot online exclusively were not warranted, and the festival was able to offer physical screening to film directors that chose to have their films only screened theatrically. Ms Hoe said that they respected the artistic vision of the filmmakers and never tried to change their minds.[7]

SGIFF managed to host an opening night ceremony that was divided into three screenings, beginning at seven, eight, and nine o'clock; that way they could accommodate more people while maintaining social distance. Ms Hoe stated that although they were able to stage a red carpet event the logistics were challenging. For example, the team had to make sure that people would not congregate in one particular area. To coordinate and facilitate photo shoots, they created 'restricted areas' where people could take photos – no more than five people, but with their masks off. On the online elements of their hybrid edition, SGIFF extended a collaboration with the company The Projector, which provides one of their physical venues. The company developed the Projector Plus platform which accommodated the online screenings for the festival.

The part of the festival that mostly embraced hybridity was The Film Academy – the industry-oriented initiative that aims at training and supporting Southeast Asian film talents through workshops and mentorship. The Youth Jury & Critics Program went hybrid, as all the participants were in Singapore gathered in the same room while the mentor was abroad and connected to all the sessions online. Other sections of the festival that went online were the talks, sessions, and panels. The majority of them were recorded and uploaded to the festival's YouTube channel. The award ceremonies were also recorded, as well as the Q&As.

Overall, the SGIFF team was not very impressed with the outcome of the online screenings. They observed that online audiences were inclined to buy tickets at the last moment, driven by the belief that the tickets in a virtual screening were unlimited. On a positive note, however, they found that the recordings were valu-

able as a repository of content and an online library that could be used by researchers and audiences.[8] Apparently, physical presence seems to be essential for SGIFF, but also for PÖFF. Hosting physical events during the pandemic was important for the organisers, however, they embraced hybridity with great enthusiasm. Incorporating digital elements and online tools in their operations, especially into the educational initiatives, was a long-standing plan for PÖFF. Ms Lokk pointed out on several occasions[9] that Covid allowed them to accelerate their plans and build up the infrastructure to launch new initiatives. The pandemic forced them to a digital turning point.

In parallel with in-person screenings in Tallinn and other cities around Estonia, PÖFF tried to transfer the festival experience into an online environment which was developed in collaboration with the streaming platforms Shift72 and Elisa. The broadcast of the opening night and the award ceremony, the video interviews with filmmakers and festival staff, the introductory videos from the directors, and the online Q&As foster the online festival atmosphere.[10] The 'Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event' was the section of the festival that received the most extensive upgrade from physical to virtual. With an important 25% year-on-year growth rate,[11] the festival industry event was held fully online during 2020 and a substantial budget was invested in the development of the industry's PÖFF.ee webpage and the supporting service.[12] More than 800 online participants from 62 countries attended the online industry event.[13] The numbers were up from previous editions,[14] which proved correct the festival's decision of holding a fully online event. During 2020, the festival introduced another innovative project: the CREATIVE GATE or X-Road for films. The CREATIVE GATE or X-Road for films is an online place that connects and promotes different kinds of services. The CREATIVE GATE or X-Road for films aspires to become a gateway for anyone interested in filming in Estonia, by connecting existing databases.

It is evident that PÖFF made an investment in digitalisation that went beyond online screenings, as they aspire to create online hubs and gateways for film talent and film professionals. They were already eager to dive into digitalisation and the pandemic accelerated their long-standing plans and permitted them to lay the foundation for their future development. As Ms Lokk said, digital 'at least for PÖFF,

is here to stay'.[15] On the other hand, SGIFF used online elements to the minimum degree possible, and it seems that the organisers were not positive about continuing to integrate hybrid elements in future editions. Ms Hoe said that they were not satisfied with the outcome of the online screenings, and that she believed audiences would struggle with online fatigue in the future even more.[16]

Organisational management and festival background as turning point

Taking a closer look at the organisational management and the history of each festival, it can be observed that SGIFF suffered some turbulent times and at least two rebrandings throughout its history. The first reshaping of its identity happened in 1989 – only two years after the creation of the festival, when SGIFF shifted its programming from American to Asian cinema. Furthermore, the festival changed its frequency from a bi-annual event to an annual festival.[17] SGIFF did not happen in 2012 and 2013 'due to financial and personnel woes'.[18] After two years of hiatus, the festival previously known as SIFF rebranded as SGIFF in 2014.[19] Trying to preserve some stability and continuity, former directors were invited to join the rebranded event. The goal of the rebranded festival was to build up the legacy of the festival and regain the festival's status in the international film festival landscape.[20]

Ms Hoe took over from Ms Yuni Hadi, the former director of SIFF who returned and had been executive director since 2014, in a period when a crisis was imminent and inevitable. Plus, as Ms Hoe mentioned, the constant changes of the personnel added extra stress to a team that was struggling to find their rhythm (especially during newly-inserted remote working patterns) and serve a specific purpose)[21], only six years after the relaunching of the festival. Ms Lokk established PÖFF in 1997, in a period when the Estonian film sector was practically non-existent.[22] Essentially, the festival was Lokk's last attempt to regenerate cinema culture in Estonia by nurturing the audience's appetite for international cinema and by creating a better cinema experience in theatres.[23] Ever since, PÖFF has had a continuous presence and a constantly expanding attitude. PÖFF introduced the Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event five years after the festival's inauguration, which has been growing over the years. The festival also received a FIAPF accreditation

in 2014.[24] In contrast with SGIFF, PÖFF has established a solid brand and built on it, without facing the struggle of recovering from mismanagement, rebranding, and a re-definition of its position in the international film festival arena. PÖFF has grown to be an extroverted organisation that is not afraid to put itself in the global arena and claim a larger share of the market. For them, online initiatives had a supportive and expansive purpose. As Bakker[25] suggests, online events provide an alternative exhibition space and increase visibility. SGIFF perceives online presence as absent of physical existence, which does not serve their purpose for enhancing their status. Cinema spaces are still recognised as the natural environment for films, and the festival's rituals and ceremonies are of great importance as they add value, improve the status of the event, and attract media coverage in a way that cannot be done in an online environment.[26]

Hybridity as a choice

The hybrid festival editions of SGIFF and PÖFF in 2020 were responses to a challenging situation. Because the film festivals refused to cancel their events, they were forced to go hybrid. Two years into the pandemic, such a necessity is starting to fade, leaving a choice for festivals. The easing of Covid-related restrictions and the slow return to normality allow film festivals to choose if they are willing to maintain some of the elements inherited from their hybrid experience or if they feel that hybridisation and online streaming and meetings are not serving their purpose.

In the case of the examined festivals, the organisers were true to their aims and did not derail from their strategies. PÖFF plans to double the budget for the further digital development of Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event and Creative Gate during the 2021-2022 editions.[27] Also, they opened a year-round online cinema at the beginning of March 2021.[28] Meanwhile, in 2021 SGIFF held a cinema-only edition in several venues across the city[29] curated by their then-new programme director, Thong Kay Wee, who took over from Ms Kuo Ming-jung, who had been in the role since 2019.[30] The only element that was kept from their hybrid edition was the online availability of interviews and Q&As with filmmakers.

Film festivals are highly concerned with their own survival,[31] and their decision making is driven by that. However, the complexity of the decision making is as high as the festival itself and is determined by multiple factors. The adoption of a hybrid form has fallen into that category. This comparative analysis of PÖFF and SGIFF revealed that the backstory and the organisational management of festivals were fundamental in their decision making. For PÖFF, a resilient film festival, which works towards its expansion, the adoption of hybrid elements comes as a natural development. For SGIFF, a recovering film festival, which seeks resilience, the hybrid form and the virtual environment does not give the credibility that needs, hence the scepticism and the minuscule embrace of hybridity.

Author

Eleni Papadopoulou Melea is a communications professional specialising in cultural management and communications. She has worked in communications departments at film festivals and cultural events. She was an Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters scholarship holder for the Msc Tourism, Development and Culture at the University of Glasgow. She also holds a Bsc in Communication, Media and Culture from Panteion University.

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Notes

- [1] Harbord 2016, 2009; Rüling & Strandgaard Pedersen 2010.
- [2] De Molli & Mengis & van Marrewijk 2019.
- [3] Udhe & Udhe 2010.
- [4] PÖFF 2021.
- [5] Hoe, personal interview, May 2021; Lokk, personal interview, June 2021.
- [6] Hoe, personal interview, May 2021.
- [7] Hoe, personal interview, May 2021.
- [8] Hoe, personal interview, May 2021.
- [9] Blaney 2021; Lokk, personal interview, July 2021; Vourlias 2021.
- [10] Lokk, personal interview, July 2021.

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AND SGIFF

- [11] PÖFF 2020a.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] PÖFF 2020b
- [15] Lokk, personal interview, July 2021; Vourlias 2020.
- [16] Hoe, personal interview, May 2021.
- [17] Udhe & Udhe 2010.
- [18] CHAN 2014.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] Hoe, personal interview, May 2021.
- [22] Roxborough 2021.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] PÖFF 2020b.
- [25] 2015
- [26] de Valck 2008.
- [27] PÖFF 2020a.
- [28] PÖFF 2021.
- [29] Lui 2021a.
- [30] Lui 2021b.
- [31] de Valck 2013.