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On the habitus of festival-going: Digital anxiety and urban aspects of post-COVID Berlinale



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Accreditations typically determine how people access a film festival: they determine whether someone acts, for instance, as a journalist, a producer, a creator, a researcher, or as a regular member of the audience. The fact that a festival does not consider any accreditation system also conditions how attendees behave during the event. The spaces one can access – screenings, working areas, and parties – are conditioned by the type of accreditation someone holds. Accreditation is essentially based on discrimination and involves a selective system that organises participation in the festival.

The Berlinale distinguishes between three types of accreditations: students, press, and professionals. In all three cases applicants must demonstrate their affiliation with a company or institution. At major festivals like this, there are different schedules depending on the accreditation category. For instance, people with a press badge have exclusive screenings and press conferences, which coincides with the main purposes of their being at the festival. Berlinale and European Film Market (EFM) accreditations are clearly differentiated. EFM accreditation provides access to all festival screenings as well as to those programmed as part of the market. At the same time, for professionals just accredited for the Berlinale (without the EFM badge) there is a chance to visit the EFM during the first day of the festival, which allows producers and distributors to enjoy limited access to the market. This can be considered a clear example of what Marijke de Valck explained in her study of the Berlinale: that accreditation is a system of differentiation and ‘people with similar badges are led to similar locations at similar times by the invisible hand of this system’.[1]

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I attended the 2023 Berlinale with a professional accreditation. I could apply for this category because I teach audio-visual production and media systems at a university. As an example of the strict policies of the festival, I was required to provide some evidence of my teaching activity at that moment. As stated in the introduction, my accreditation conditioned my experience at the festival and my role among the diverse segregated audiences participating in the festival. In the same way that there are different categories for these attendees, the system itself distinguishes between accredited and non-accredited people (those who are considered 'the general audience'). Eren Odabasi refers to these diverse audiences as 'segregated' precisely because of the responsibility of the festival in the configuration of such categories.[2]

Once I had my accreditation, I was determined to make an exploratory approach to the Berlinale. It was exploratory in two senses: literally, because I decided to visit as many theatres as possible, and theoretically, because my decision required different frameworks than the ones I employ in my current research.[3] In that sense, issues like the location of cinemas, the distances between them, the means of transport, etc took me to the spatial dimension of cinema that has been focused on by the New Cinema History. Particularly, I was interested in how this field studies where cinemas are located (and how they have been disappearing from city centres in favour of multiplexes in the outskirts) and how it affects audience routines.[4] In a recent paper on the places where the section *Pueblos y barrios* (organised by the San Sebastian International Film Festival between 1977 and 1985) took place, Pablo La Parra-Pérez highlights the organisation of screenings distributed in a perimeter of 100km² within the province as determinant for reaching wider audiences and for the success of that programme.[5] His approach is an illustrative example about how the spatial dimension of a festival makes a difference. In connection with these spatial perspectives, my approach to the Berlinale explores the aspects of the city of Berlin that affect the festival and focuses on the time-spatial axis that conditions professional and general audience experiences of the festival.

My hypothesis was that focusing on locations instead of films would provide me with useful information about festival-going itself, its routines, and its rituals. This approach was essential for the detection of dynamics and rituals that are deeply connected to the urban environment of Berlin and the different cinemas where the festival takes place. What is more, my focus on the spatial dimension of the Berlinale directed my attention to certain changes related to the digitisation process of the festival. Some changes have been progressively introduced for years, but some others have been accelerated by the COVID-19 global pandemic. As such, the first part of the review focuses on the changes that have radically affected some festival dynamics like the online ticket system launched in 2022. The second

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part highlights these elements that remain stable and are linked to the city of Berlin: its theatres, its means of transport, and the in-person nature of the festival.

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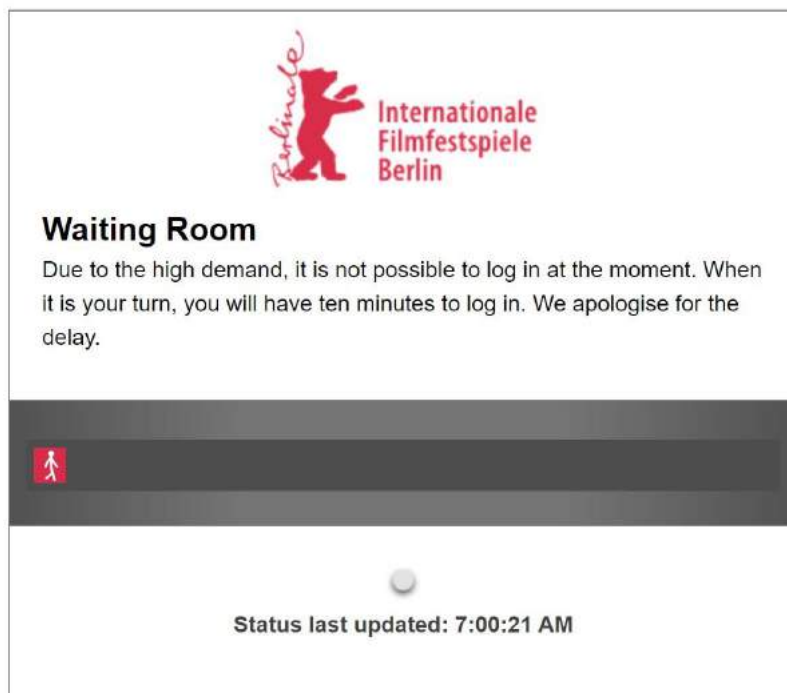


Fig. 1: Online booking system.

Digital and in-person queuing

Although there were already processes that were digital in 2014, the festival and its attendees were not as 'connected' as they are in 2023. The entire digitisation of ticket purchasing and the generalisation of roaming for personal device connectivity has modified many routines of the festival that were/are linked to its spatial dimension. Not so many years ago, roaming services were a kind of luxury, and festivalgoers depended on wifi connections provided by hotels, restaurants, the Berlinale Center, and one available close to the fountain in the middle of the Sony Center square. Now, we are online 24/7 and some commercial agreements in Europe provide roaming services free of extra charges for their residents

As to festival activity, the most radical change in terms of digitisation and connectivity has been the online ticket service. It was in the reduced edition of 2022 when the festival tested its new system in which tickets can be booked online by accredited professionals. In 2022 the number of screenings, venues, and participants were limited because of the COVID-19 measures, so the change was just noticed by a reduced number of attendees. As such, it was during this 2023 edition that the new system became controversial.[6]

The new online ticket service system meant a radical change for professionals in relation to their former daily pilgrimage to the Berlinale Service Center (at Theaterufer, behind the Berlinale Palast). Before digitisation it was mandatory to go there on arrival and line up to get one's accreditation, a catalogue, and that year's merchandising. The walk to the Berlinale Center had to be repeated every single day or every two days to get film tickets. The distribution of tickets used to start early in the morning and that provoked long queues of professionals at the Berlinale Center: they came early to ensure they got the tickets for the films they wanted to review, acquire, or attend for any other reason. Tickets were available all day long, but if you did not arrive early in the morning, you could find that the film you wanted was sold out by the time you got there.

In 2023, queues became digital. Professionals must only go once to the Berlinale Center: the day of their arrival to get their accreditation. After check-in, the entire process is now digital: you can acquire your tickets online and show them on your phone (together with your badge) to access any screening. As explained before, this online ticket service was implemented last year. Probably, the digital transition was accelerated because of the pandemic: one way to avoid queues in the Berlinale Center was to transfer the ticket service online. Once the system was tested, the organisation decided to maintain it for this 2023 post-COVID-19 edition. The 2024 Berlinale will show how the system evolves.

Online tickets are available every day from 7:00 am and can be booked for that same day and for the next one. That possibility determines a new ritual that starts at the hotel: you can log onto the official website at 6:40am, wait for your turn (digital queues are real), select the tickets you are interested in, have a shower, have breakfast, and then leave the hotel to continue the in-person routine that now starts directly with films instead of queuing at the Berlinale Center. As before, online tickets are available all day long while they are in stock. Similarly, professionals can wait in place to see if there are vacant seats to access the screening. What I have noticed is that these in-person queues at cinemas have become shorter, probably because now you can check online if there are available tickets, purchase them, and access the theatre without waiting for a last-minute available seat. This way, you

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double your chances of getting a ticket: being at the in-person queue and refreshing the web
to see if one ticket appears because it is returned by someone else.



Fig. 2: Berlinale Palast.

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Although digitisation has eased booking and the time invested in the operation, it has triggered some other issues. What I consider the most important is the digital anxiety provoked by the possibility of acquiring new tickets and discarding them in just two clicks. Being in a festival requires one to stay alert to those films that *Variety*, *Screen Daily*, international critics, the general audiences, and your colleagues highlight from what they have seen, and it can urge you to change your initial plan. In a pre-digital era, personal schedules were more fixed: you had to go to the Berlinale Center to get new tickets or directly go to the cinema to see if there were unoccupied seats when the screening started. Now, it is possible to discard reserved tickets and get new tickets in just two clicks, and you can do it while going from one venue to another, having lunch or being seated in one of the cinemas. What I mean by the digital anxiety caused by this situation is that professionals can update their schedule many times a day, maybe missing the focus of what they were initially interested in just because it is possible (and easy) to change plans. This stress can also multiply when professionals do not have an entirely fixed plan and they are rather interested in an explorative approach to the festival (which was my case). I will go deeper into the anxiety provoked by mixing online and in-person dynamics later in the article.

Distances and races in Berlin

The Berlinale locations are spread throughout the city. Most of the cinemas cluster in the surroundings of Potsdamer Platz / Sony Center (Arsenal, Berlinale Palast, CinemaxX), the same area where the Berlinale Service Center is based. Relatively near Potsdamer Platz are: Zoo Palast, Delphi Palast, and Akademie der Kunste, also with regular screenings. The other cinemas are in different areas. Alexanderplatz is another nodal point of the festival, with the International Theatre, Cubix, and Filmtheatre Am Friedrischain, all located close to this square, which used to be the center of East Berlin. Finally, there are theatres located further away from the central areas of the festival: Silent Green Kulturquartier (where Forum Expanded activities, exhibitions, and screenings are concentrated), Verti Music Hall (in the West Side Gallery area and with more than 2,000 available seats), Cineplex Titania, and Haus der Berliner Festspiele.

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Fig. 3: Berlinale 2023 Festival Map.

Distances between these cinemas and the headquarters of the festival illustrate how the scheme of centres and peripheries I developed in a previous work for the festival ecosystem also applies to a single festival considering the location of its venues.[7] I argue that the country and the city where a festival takes place can affect its importance and power (i.e. centrality) within the international festival circuit, while emphasising that this position is always relative and depends on the sub-circuit and the elements that are considered to measure the impact of the festival. My model can be applied to a single festival and to its sections according to the spatial dimension approach prioritised by New Cinema History. Applying it to the Berlinale, it highlights the festival has a central section (the Official Competition) and sidebars and that this is reflected in its use of central cinemas (near Potsdamer Palast), as well as second and third tier screens. The aforementioned model also explains how there are some characteristics that counterbalance the central or peripheral nature of a particular festival. Here, it can contribute to analyse how festivals attract their audiences to cinemas that can be considered peripheral in relation to the event's central venues. In Berlin: how to make the trip to Verti Music Hall attractive? How to include it in festivalgoers' routines in 2023 when this venue appeared for the first time in the Berlinale map? What can compensate Verti Music Hall's distance from Potsdamer Platz? For professionals, it can be a second chance to see a film they missed in previous screenings; for the general audience (and for professionals too), the interest can be in the spectacle provided by Verti Music Hall's super-sized screen.

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These distances can also be amplified or reduced depending on several factors. In addition to kilometres, unexpected situations (related to traffic jams, delays in public transport, diversions and work on roads, etc.) must be considered, as they could interfere with schedules. Any festivalgoer has probably had a similar experience to what happened to spectators who went from the *Manodrome* (John Trengove) official competition gala at Berlinale Palast to the Panorama screening of *Stille Liv / The Quiet Migration* (Malene Choi) at Cubix. The distance between both areas (Potsdamer Platz and Alexanderplatz) is about 20 minutes by train-subway (combining S+U) or directly by bus (line 200). Those who decided to take the bus (like me) had to run to get to Cubix on time for the screening because of an unexpected delay of 30 minutes. Something similar happened on the Sunday afternoon when I was riding by bus from viewing *El Juicio / The Trial* (Ulises de la Orden), screened at Arsenal in Potsdamer, to see *Blackberry* (Matt Johnson) programmed at Verti Music Hall. I did not foresee the traffic jam and I barely arrived at the cinema in time for the film.



Fig. 4: Delphi Palast.

Dealing with the digital dimension of an in-person event

I have previously mentioned the idea of anxiety in relation to online tickets. Stress is by itself a constituent element in festivals: premières, interviews, meetings, parties must all be scheduled in each day and hour. This is what traditionally has triggered races between venues at any festival. The problem arises when digital dynamics must also be considered in the planning. Especially when it goes against you, because the new online system is very difficult to master in your first attempt at getting tickets for all the screenings you are interested in.

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Consider a hypothetical film: 'A'. Imagine you failed in getting an online ticket for 'A'. You would have probably tried again (refreshing the website) many times unsuccessfully. You try it one last time after a film at CinemaxX. Again – no tickets available. Anyway, you decide to run to be in time for the Delphi Palast screening of 'A' in spite of not having a ticket (you hope that someone has forgotten to cancel their ticket and you expect to have a seat at your arrival). You face two problems: getting to the film in time (dealing with public transportation) and having a ticket. You can run through Berlin, but the fact that you refresh your online session will not influence someone to discard a ticket. In the meantime, you assume there must be more people refreshing the website in their search for a ticket for 'A'. You quit. You search for available tickets for the film 'B' at CinemaxX. There are. You book one. You calculate how many minutes you need to be back there – you have time, if you immediately jump out of the bus where you are!

I find there is something new in this anxiety. In previous editions, you just had to run to the cinema and queue (in-person); if there were any available seats, you could see the film. These effects seem to have been particularly severe in this edition because of technical reasons. It was supposed to be forbidden to book tickets for films that were screening in the same 90-minute time slot. Also, there were meant to be restrictions for users who did not discard their tickets at least 60 minutes before the film started. However, the application permitted anyone to reserve all the tickets they wanted, which meant that some screenings were half-empty though they appeared to be sold out on the website.

The year 2023 was the first regular post-COVID-19 Berlinale with this new online system, so probably it will take a couple of editions to get used to it. On the other hand, it would be desirable to have an application that eases the booking process and integrates some functionalities already available on the website (e.g. calendar, search tools, lists). Let us accept, anyway, that from now on digitisation must be considered among the elements that configure a film festival dynamic as well as participant routines. Having a successful experience at a festival (in the sense that each attendee considers) requires know-how that goes beyond an in-depth review of the programme and the design of a detailed personal schedule. It now demands a combination of (new) digital and (classical) field skills.

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Notes

- [1] De Valck 2007, p. 79.
- [2] The ideas of segregated audiences and general public have been explored by Eren Odabasi. Odabasi 2019.
- [3] About transnational and global trends in the international film festival circuit related to alternative production models as well as Latin American contemporary cinemas. Campos Rabadán 2020; 2018; 2023.
- [4] Maltby et al 2011.
- [5] La Parra-Pérez 2021.
- [6] Some problems with the system were reported in *Variety*. Frater 2023.
- [7] Campos Rabadán 2020.