When taking stock of how the coronavirus pandemic caused havoc with film festivals in 2020, it’s wise to pay heed to the words of Tine Fischer, the director and founder of CPH:DOX: “2020 has – needless to say – affected my work but on a very small scale compared to the dramatic loss of life. The culture sector has been hit very hard, but many of us working in the international film festival world are still in privileged positions.”

It has been a year of ripping up the rulebook. The impact of COVID-19 was already being felt at the Berlinale, when Chinese companies and film teams pulled out of the festival because of a new coronavirus that first appeared in Wuhan, leading to a lockdown of the city of 11 million inhabitants.

For many in the industry, even this news didn’t signal the danger warning. Ebola, SARS and MERS had hit hard in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, but seemed a world away from the privileged elite making movies in the United States and Europe. “Who could have imagined that James Bond would be pulled from release and thousands of cinemas would have to shut down during the pandemic?” says Gloria A. Nazzaro, the recently appointed Locarno Film Festival Artistic Director. It would be easy to say the same about the Cannes Film Festival.

It was amazing to see how quickly festivals were able to adapt like chameleons to the new normal. CPH:DOX redefined itself as an online festival at breakneck speed, kicking off March 18. “I had to rethink and redesign everything that we do,” recalls Fischer. And six months after that reimagined event, she says, “We will survive, and we will even come out on the other side of the pandemic as a more relevant and inclusive organisation; hopefully ready to take on a role in the overall film ecosystem in a more agenda-setting and sustainable way. It’s been the most terrifying but also the most liberating moment.”

While it’s true to say that the global pandemic blindsided film festival heads around the world, it would be a lie to say that film festivals hadn’t been preparing for it; they just didn’t realise it at the time. Talking to Fischer, Nazzaro, and Berlinale co-heads Mariette Rissenbeek and Carlo Chatrian, and listening to many of the panels on the future of film, one overriding theme about the yesterday, today and tomorrow of film festivals emerges: “The pandemic accelerated something that was already happening,” states Nazzaro, “maybe it would have been four or five years until it manifested in the way that it has now.”

It’s important also to remember that lockdown hasn’t been the only story this year. While 2020 may feel like a ‘pause’ year to many, there has been continued attention and advances made on gender and race equality issues. Festival teams have adapted to the demands of the Time’s Up 2020 initiative, and no one can forget the impact that the brutal death of George Floyd and the subsequent #BlackLivesMatters protests had on raising awareness of racism in every industry across the globe. Additionally, ongoing concerns about climate change have not just vanished.
While Zoom became part of the everyday vernacular, we have all missed that human connection. The pandemic has made film festival heads reevaluate and think in new ways about how best to serve filmmakers, the industry and audiences. What’s become apparent as the coronavirus second-wave dominates headlines at the time of writing, is that the plans for 2021 remain in flux, but that hasn’t stopped festival heads thinking about the near future and beyond, even as Rissenbeek admits, “We work much more on a day-by-day basis than usual.”

There was a feeling when Berlinale finished in the week that Germany announced its first case, and the crisis unfolding in Lombardy, Italy that somehow the Berlin Film Festival had escaped unscathed. But things immediately changed. “Since early summer we have been working under different conditions,” states Rissenbeek, the festival’s Executive Director. “Part of the staff works from home, and we rented additional space to ensure every staff member can work under the health measures in force.”

For Berlinale Artistic Director Chatrian, “If I have to stick to my field of work, I’d say that the biggest challenge has been the absence of travels. Creating the selection is not just about searching or receiving films, as if they were a nice gift, but also to do with being in direct contact with producers and sales companies. Being able to discuss face-to-face with my colleagues from the committee of selection, or delegates, or professionals all over the world makes a difference. Also, watching films in the country of origin is an important element in the selection.”

A world without cinemas is the horror storyline that not even Stephen King could have conjured up. Yet that is what Fischer and many other festival heads faced in the spring. There was a silver lining, which oddly and somewhat ironically came from the very thing that many in the film industry had been complaining and fearing would be the death of cinema: the ability to stream films.

Advances in digital technology, broadband connectivity and piracy protection have made streaming part of everyday life. But streamers’ refusal to adhere to theatrical windows and the smashing down of territorial borders and rights has for many made the concept of digital streaming anathema. Streaming was supposed to be at the end of the cinema chain, not the start. Those arguments vanished when coronavirus closed cinemas and streaming became the wider industry’s only option.

“We ALL KNOW THAT EXTENSIVE TRAVELLING IS NOT GOOD FOR OUR CLIMATE. HOWEVER, THE PERSONAL ENCOUNTER BETWEEN AUDIENCE AND FILMMAKERS IS A SPECIAL MOMENT THAT SHOULD BE KEPT, IF POSSIBLE.”
Mariette Rissenbeek, Executive Director, Berlinale

Like some wild west movie on fast forward, the film industry had to quickly work out thorny rights issues, establish the rules of geo-blocking, and work out the caps on the numbers of viewers to ensure films still had “value” in the market. Filmmakers were faced with the conundrum of whether they should accept a digital premiere or wait it out for the day when a film could play in front of physical audiences again.

Fischer says putting CPH:DOX online, “was a life-saving experience. It was also that moment in time where I felt that real change could happen. I had been wanting to use the potential of gathering online for many years – to reach new audiences, to build networks that last in partnership with active civic movements, and to build alternative platforms to the existing streaming market, including a redesign of how markets work.”

Attending online festivals was the norm for much of the spring and summer. They gave a chance for many new encounters across the globe but could also be frustrating. “I was an online jury member of the Haifa International Film Festival and a small festival in Madrid, El Ojo Cojo,” says Rissenbeek. “I enjoyed watching the film selection but would have enjoyed much more watching the films in the cinema!”

“I have attended pitch session, jury meetings, screening online,” adds Chatrian. “I have followed them as a professional, and in the end, they all were productive moments, but I would be untruthful to myself without adding that I’d missed the collective experience and the warmth of real encounters.”

The online events felt novel and refreshing, necessary in a year that Chatrian argues, “is very much about survival.” However, even with the success of festivals as digital events, it was clear that it was not a replacement long-term for physical film festivals. Chatrian comments, “I still have to see a film festival which has a chance to happen in physical form choose to go online.”

Thierry Fremaux decided that Cannes would be better off not happening than to go ahead online, at least the red carpet media and public-facing part of it. (A Cannes industry event took place online in the summer). The fact that many festivals were two separate events running parallel under a single umbrella with a slight crossover at the stern became all the more apparent as festival heads began separating components of their events putting them on at different moments in the calendar.

“IT WAS A REAL BLAST TO BE IN VENICE THIS YEAR; YOU COULD FEEL PEOPLE WERE ENJOYING WHAT THEY WERE DOING. I EVEN THOUGHT THAT I NOTICED A STRONGER AND BETTER RESPECT FOR THE FILMS, EVEN THE FILMS THAT THEY DIDN’T LIKE. IT WAS AWESOME.”
Giona A. Nazzaro, Artistic Director, Locarno
Fischer explains, “A film festival reduced to a streaming platform has nothing to do with a festival. Reducing everything to an online event is not a future scenario. Many films belong to the physical space of cinema. Online events are the loss of the collective, community-based experience, the filmmakers not meeting their audience and of an industry that needs to meet to develop, push forward and at least acknowledge that it’s a collective effort to build a new and forward-thinking industry.

A euphoric moment in Venice

This collective feeling was apparent at the Venice Film Festival, the first A-list festival to go ahead as a physical event after lockdown. Back in September, Nazzaro was General Delegate of Venice International Film Critics’ Week and as a programmer and curator for Visions du Réel had been part of that festival going online. “Everybody feared the worst for Venice not happening. We started evaluating all possible scenarios, and we understood quite quickly that you had to coexist with the virus.”

In the run-up to Venice, Nazzaro argues, “The most complicated thing to deal with was the online speculation about how Venice would be an unsafe place to be. The reason why there were not many press releases was that the situation kept changing, from morning to evening. Finally, protocols were put in place, which played out wonderfully.”

There was more than a collective sigh of relief; attendees had a sense of euphoria. “It was a real blast to be in Venice this year; you could feel people were enjoying what they were doing. I even thought that I noticed a stronger and better respect for the films, even the films that they didn’t like. It was awesome.”

San Sebastian and Zurich followed Venice in having physical events with reduced seating capacities, attendees wearing masks and hand sanitiser placed at entrances. “The more we go forward with having festivals in pandemic time, the better we will understand how to deal with the complexities and potential issues of doing so,” says Nazzaro. He is also furious that the debate about wearing masks (“A very simple tool to protect ourselves”) has become an ideological battleground even within the film industry.

He adds that Locarno’s Piazza Grande will be open next summer, even if the capacity is substantially reduced: “We need a vaccine, we need it badly, but there is another vaccine that can protect the lives of our community, and that vaccine is culture.”

Based on his experiences, Nazzaro adds, “You can’t blame a film festival simply because they try to keep the industry alive. They try to keep spaces open for communities who speak about culture, film, art. Why not open for business, because business saves jobs. It’s easy to shut something down; it’s never easy to open again. For me, that is really something crucial.

We must not forget that lives are at stake if cinemas shut down.”

Chatrian adds, “We have to keep in mind that film festivals are at the service of the film business; behind the red carpet and the lights shining on stage for a world premiere, there is a whole system. The success of a premiere paves the road to a very complex trajectory which includes a number of professionals working in different fields.”

“I believe we still have to understand the future of physical film festivals in our post-Covid world,” he says. “They will clearly have to add online elements, and we need to find a balance. I think there will be more hybrid events.”

“We need to seize this moment in time we’re in and react to the way power structures are addressed. Festivals should be deeply involved in the way power and narratives around it change. It calls for a re-distribution of power, and it calls for a whole new way of rethinking and re-organising the way we work.”

Tine Fischer, CEO CPH:DOX

Festival heads were invited to Venice in September 2020 in a show of solidarity: Karel Och of Karlovy Vary, Vanja Kaludjercic of Rotterdam, Jose Luis Rebordinos of San Sebastian, Lili Hinstin formerly of Locarno, Thierry Fremaux of Cannes and Alberto Barbera of Venice. Photo: Independent Photo Agency Srl / Alamy Stock Photo
Festival heads agree that digital screenings and meetings have a significant role to play in the future as well, not just because of virus control. Rissenbeek says, “We all know that extensive travelling is not good for our climate. However, the personal encounter between audience and filmmakers is a special moment that should be kept, if possible. In the future, some of the film industry representatives might attend digitally. It is good to have alternatives to personal attendance; it makes it easier to represent a film on different places in the future with less investment in time and travelling.”

Also, the use of technology can become an equaliser in the hierarchical power structure that has defined the film world since the birth of cinema. Fischer argues changes are needed for festivals to stay relevant, “We also need to seize this moment in time we’re in and react to the way power structures are addressed. Festivals should be deeply involved in the way power and narratives around it change. It calls for a re-distribution of power, and it calls for a whole new way of rethinking and re-organising the way we work. Awareness of diversity is no longer enough. Action is needed.”

“WE HAVE TO KEEP IN MIND THAT FILM FESTIVALS ARE AT SERVICE OF THE FILM BUSINESS; BEHIND THE RED CARPET AND THE LIGHTS SHINING ON STAGE FOR A WORLD PREMIERE, THERE IS A WHOLE SYSTEM. THE SUCCESS OF A PREMIERE PAVES THE ROAD TO A VERY COMPLEX TRAJECTORY WHICH INCLUDES A NUMBER OF PROFESSIONALS WORKING IN DIFFERENT FIELDS.”

Carlo Chatrian, Artistic Director, Berlinale

Festival heads agree that digital screenings and meetings have a significant role to play in the future as well, not just because of virus control. Rissenbeek says, “We all know that extensive travelling is not good for our climate. However, the personal encounter between audience and filmmakers is a special moment that should be kept, if possible. In the future, some of the film industry representatives might attend digitally. It is good to have alternatives to personal attendance; it makes it easier to represent a film on different places in the future with less investment in time and travelling.”

Also, the use of technology can become an equaliser in the hierarchical power structure that has defined the film world since the birth of cinema. Fischer argues changes are needed for festivals to stay relevant, “We also need to seize this moment in time we’re in and react to the way power structures are addressed. Festivals should be deeply involved in the way power and narratives around it change. It calls for a re-distribution of power, and it calls for a whole new way of rethinking and re-organising the way we work. Awareness of diversity is no longer enough. Action is needed.”

Polymath Kaleem Aftab is a writer, festival strategist and film programmer based in London. Sometimes, he even produces too.