TIME TO INNOVATE, REINVENT & RETHINK

By Mike Downey

The Academy has already embarked on a programme which will revise, renovate and renew not only its websites and internet presence but also will re-asses and re-analyse our overall web and social media presence. We plan to reach out to the cinophile audience all over the continent, who are thirsty for European film, with particular focus on younger audiences.

Which is why we need to maintain and reinforce our active presence in the educational sector. Priorities include the expansion of the EFA Young Audience Award and the further promotion of the European Universities Film Award. The EFA Young Audience Award (which moved online this year) had been planned for a new record of 70 cities in 41 countries, involving 2,000 jurors from ages 12 to 14. This unique film education programme makes a huge contribution to our future possibilities and it has more global potential.

We are committed to sustainability and the establishment of a sustainability award: we have already planted the EFA forest in Iceland in anticipation of the Awards hosted there in 2022, going some way to offset our carbon footprint.

Also, we need to maintain our commitments to gender balance across the board and are planning to introduce an EFA gender balance Seal of Approval in 2021. Equality and human rights remain at the heart of our commitments and engagement, as defined by our foundation of and participation in the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk.

Equally, the need for inclusion and belonging can benefit from the current political awareness of unconscious bias and institutional racism, also in the European cultural environment, to that end, EFA will take an active role in ARTEF (Anti-Racism Taskforce for European Film).

These are just some of the highlights that the board, incoming EFA Director Matthijs Wouter Knol and outgoing Director Marion Döring, EFA Productions chief Jürgen Biesinger and the whole EFA team have been discussing, developing and curating over the pandemic period and beyond.

We are facing a great, historic upheaval, and we will only be able to master it if we are looking beyond our own personal needs, beyond the needs of our own individual professional departments, and, last but not least, beyond pure national interests.

Rebuilding the future of our industry and our societies will require new thinking. There are massive challenges and hurdles to overcome. But I believe that both EFA and the industry is resilient, strong and stubborn, and is willing to fight for its survival. With the help of national governments, regional funds and the European Union, the brick walls will for sure crumble. And we will come home safely through to the other side. It’s just a matter of time.

Mike Downey is a producer at Film & Music Entertainment and chairman of EFA.

As a group of professionals, we need to focus on our interests and those of our immediate industry. Equally, in the current environment, we would do well to find ways to connect in increased, symbiotic, and more collaborative ways to reach out to audiences.

This summer, we thought we were turning a corner. Autumn has brought us little hope. Winter will bring even less. People don’t want to risk their lives to watch a movie, when they can (to a lesser or greater extent) engage culturally and commercially with a version of cinema at home. The virus is not allowing us to create cinema in the same way that we have done before, and not in the same quantities. This is the stark status quo that the European film industry and the European Film Academy itself must face up to for the next six months … at least.

The time has come to innovate, reinvent, rethink and be increasingly flexible, in order to plan well for a time when there can be some sense of restoration and rebirth. Things will certainly not be the same at every level of our multi-layered industry.

What we have now is a period in which we can reflect, analyse and lay the groundwork for a future Academy that will be resistant, durable and able to survive the cultural, epidemiological and financial vagaries in an increasingly insecure global environment.

The Academy has been fortunate enough in these treacherous times to have been supported by its loyal funders, patrons, and last but not least, by you, its faithful members. The support of our public funders and patrons has become even more valuable than ever this year as we had to deal with a shortfall for the first time in our history, due to unpaid membership fees. We are aware of the difficult situation of many of our members and have engaged to find solutions for those cases of need. It is you, our members of the Academy, who are the centre of all our activities, and who, going forward, will be at the epicentre of our thinking as we reflect, consider and build for the coming years.

Which brings us back to the future. And not just the survival of the Academy, but the desire and vision to maintain its strong roots at the heart of European cultural life, consolidating the already high standards and quality of its membership, but also at the same to grow the membership to make it even more reflective of the European industry.

We need to reach out further into our existing chapters, and bring into the fold professionals who have not yet made an acquaintance with our guild, and to curate an entry of younger members to bolster our ranks.

As a group of professionals, we need to focus on our interests and those of our immediate industry. Equally, in the current environment, we would do well to find ways to connect in increased, symbiotic, and more collaborative ways to reach out to audiences.
2020 has been an exceptionally tough year for everyone. Since March, we have all been struggling hard to find our ways through a new landscape of sudden insecurity, and while the end of this weird year is coming into sight, we still don’t know what is awaiting us behind the horizon, in 2021 and beyond. At the same time, 2020 has been a year of accelerated learning and adapting ourselves to a future which requests our readiness to new approaches as it may be deprived of long established and reliable coordinates.

The industry is resilient, strong and stubborn, says EFA Chairman Mike Downey. Exactly. These are three good characteristics to take up the challenge of this crisis. It was encouraging to see that the fundamental upheaval caused by the pandemic has released new energy instead of standstill and depression. We have seen innovation embraced – and an ever-present desire for communication and cooperation. Our industry can rely on a solid ground of functioning networks that have grown over the past three decades.

The European Commission’s Creative Europe programme and its preceding programmes have not only supported the European audio-visual industry with grants in a wide and growing range of schemes (with an increased budget for the next seven years to still be passed by the European Parliament and Council) – it has fostered its beneficiaries to connect in networks, to form alliances and to cooperate across national borders and professional departments. Creative Europe brought us together in festivals and markets and in promotional, training and educational programmes. Creative Europe has all rights to claim its invaluable impact on shaping an industry of true European dimension and spirit without which we would feel desperately alone and disconnected in this demanding situation. In these turbulent times we should therefore pause for a moment and send a big Thank You to Brussels.

Sharing more gratitude, the European Film Academy has particular respect and appreciation for the faithfulness of its EFA Patrons who stood with us in a moment when they themselves were facing big challenges in their own countries. We salute the flexibility with which our public funding institutions such as the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, FFA German Federal Film Board, German State Lottery Berlin, and Medienboard Berlin-Brandenberg and the already mentioned Creative Europe responded to the crisis, allowing us to re-allocate our budgets to the needs of an exceptional year, when the activities of the European Film Academy were fundamentally affected by COVID-19.

Already during spring, during the first lockdown, we were forced to quickly transform our Young Audience Award from physical events across the whole continent to an online adventure – a surprisingly satisfying adventure, although it couldn’t replace the physical cinema experience of the young jurors.

We had hoped that the European Film Awards Ceremony in December would be preserved from the same fate, but we had to react to the growing number of infections, and together with our Icelandic partners we finally had to take the painful decision of cancelling the ceremony in Reykjavík, which we all had been dreaming to become an emotional moment of post-pandemic reunion of the European film industry. And here, again, we can’t praise enough the flexibility of public institutions: Within only a few weeks, the Icelandic Minister of Culture and the Mayor of Reykjavík managed to pave the way to finally host the European Film Awards in the Icelandic capital in December 2022.

As a consequence of force majeure, the European Film Awards will be presented this week in a completely new format – a series of virtual events from Tuesday, 8 December to the Grand Finale on Saturday, 12 December. Will these events be able to replace the social gathering of nominees and winners, of EFA members and EFA Patrons, EU representatives, the industry and the media? Certainly not, like nothing can replace us being physically together. On the other hand: Haven’t we all experienced the strong bonds that keep us connected in times of social distancing, maybe, even more than ever, because we suddenly became aware of this great quality of our industry which we took for granted before, without even thinking about it?

Let’s remember this when we will meet virtually during the next days. Only together will we be able to make the virtual 33rd European Film Awards a memorable event of an industry that stands together in promoting and celebrating European cinema in a very memorable year.

Marion Döring is Director of the European Film Academy.
WHAT WILL LONGING AND BELONGING LOOK LIKE IN 2021 AND BEYOND?

By Johanna Koljonen

This year I have been thinking a great deal about my youngest friends and the children of my oldest friends. They are the under 25s, and their generational event will be this pandemic.

I’m 42. For my generation, our portal events were the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, and wedged between them the changes that shaped my life most practically: the expansion of the European Union and of the internet. We became the generation that would never quite understand borders.

I wonder whether this will be a generation that can never take safety or mobility for granted.

For my generation, especially people in power, the lesson of the pandemic is that it is possible to enact science-based policy quite rapidly, even at the cost of disrupting economic systems. (This is good news, because it means we can address the climate crisis). For younger people? I am not so sure what their lesson will be. In many places they have not handled the restrictions well. They are not stupid, no more than we are; but many seem to be lacking some core concept of a society, of what it is for. Deciding together. Acting together. Surviving together.

And how should they know? They have only ever lived in a globalised and largely neoliberal world, with precarious labour markets and a future dominated by fear. If I am hardwired, even now, to believe in peace, prosperity, and history bending towards justice, they have grown up expecting the world to be at war and people in power to be short-sighted and greedy. They have also spent their lives constantly connected, irrespective of geographical location. They believe enormously in community, but community to them could be a space in their phones rather than a physical neighbourhood.

The grand narratives of this generation will be about fighting for justice and survival in a world that is indeed unjust and has the odds stacked against them. Some will be fighting for everyone, and some only for their own, insular group. The under 25s also cannot remember a time when nationalist populists, outright fascists, and reactionary terror movements did not have a public voice. Some of them are attracted to those voices.

Another way of framing such a grand narrative is about belonging. Who is allowed to belong? Who counts as fully human? Who will you fight for, or sacrifice for? What are the abstract ideas – a community, a country, Europe, a faith, humanity – that can serve to organise your longing and belonging?
The European feature film industry has struggled with domestic audiences for some time, and a big part of it is all of us struggling to find our footing in this new dance between formats and viewing behaviours, content and audiences. The other big problem is relevance, and there we have failed in particular with the youngest age groups. We have not listened to the audience, and we have not believed in the younger storytellers when they have tried to tell us how their lives and realities are constructed, or about the way they communicate with and around media. We are Victorians marvelling at flappers after the trauma of the Great War. We speak from another century.

If we get this wrong, European cinema will rapidly become a quaint artefact for the nostalgic few. But the opposite outcome is just as possible. Young people still enjoy the feature film format; they love the theatrical experience when they can afford it; and they invest passionately in complex storytelling. Their lives are about distraction from fears in the moment, but also about meaning-making. Like everyone else, they are yearning for stories about society and belonging, about society-building, truth, survival and justice. Just not as dictates, but as conversations.

Johanna Koljonen is a media analyst, broadcaster and experience designer. She is the author of the Göteborg Film Festival's annual Nostradamus Report and lectures internationally on changes in the media sector and on participatory experience design. She serves on the board of the Swedish Film Institute. In 2011, she received the Swedish Grand Journalism Award in the Innovator category. Her latest book is Larp Design: Creating Role-Play Experiences (2019).

Looking at how we did in the last century, it is probably just as well that this generation has mostly lacked grand ideologies and very few institutions were allowed to dictate truths. A more startling realisation is that this also means reality is negotiable. Young adults have not read daily newspapers, or built deep relationships to public service journalism. In a splintered media landscape, everyone must be their own storyteller of the real, and learn – more or less – to navigate claims, sources, rumours, humour, hot takes, and commentary on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis. Not everyone has the capacity, or the skills. I suggest that at least science remains as an arbiter of the real – and am reminded that scientific truth is a process too. Truth is an agreement.

This is why young people are not particularly unsettled by “deep fakes,” algorithmically generated videos that can make anyone’s face convincingly utter anything. To me, deep fakes represent a complex challenge to free speech, journalism and the democratic process. But my younger friends would never automatically assume that a video represents what it claims to – or that it is even, necessarily, a recording of something that has actually occurred in the physical space. Even after a full quarter century of daily and passionate online life, to me, the digital is still somehow an allegory of the real world, conceptually a translation of tangible rooms. The under-25s live in a non-geographical world as fully as in their physical environment, and to them one is not more real or fictional than the other.

If kids’ understanding of reality is more of a process than a binary, then so is their relationship to art. They express appreciation of culture by engaging creatively with the work or with audience communities. Many meaningful media (such as videogames) literally require participation to be completed and legible, and that assumption seems, for this generation, to be as true in other artforms. The work becomes real only as part of the context in which it is enjoyed, reacted to or discussed. All art and all media is, on some level, participatory.

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FROM SURVIVAL TO REVIVAL

Experts and artists reflect on the challenging times of 2020 and look forward to solutions for a re-engineered European film industry for 2021 and beyond.

The coronavirus has been labelled the biggest global crisis for three generations, and like every other industry, the film world has been shaken to its core by the events of 2020.

As we look towards a post-pandemic future, EFA convened some of Europe’s most passionate voices to discuss re-structuring, re-engineering and re-aligning the European film industry in the wake of the pandemic.

The online roundtable – entitled From Survival to Revival: Building the Post-COVID Future – invited filmmakers Mark Cousins, Agnieszka Holland and Thomas Vinterberg to join Kirsten Niehuus, CEO Film Funding, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, to share their experiences of launching films in 2020 and discuss what lies ahead. The discussion was moderated by Wendy Mitchell, journalist and editor of EFA Close-Up.

Some highlights of the discussion are condensed below. The full roundtable will be streamed on 8 Dec at www.europeanfilmawards.eu, kicking off the EFA Close-Up: Agnieszka, you premiered CHARLATAN at the Berlinale, which now seems like the final days of normalcy. What happened to the film since then, and have you had creative energy during the lockdowns?

Agnieszka Holland: In Berlin, which was the last normal big festival, the film had a good response and it was sold to several countries. So far, most of the countries are holding on releasing. It was released in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland – in the Czech Republic (the film is about a Czech faith healer in the 1930s) it was a huge success. It did better than we expected, it hit this middle ground between the two waves of the pandemic. I was quite lucky. The Czech Academy submitted CHARLATAN for the foreign Oscar, which was very generous because I am not Czech.

I was supposed to be shooting now a new series for Apple TV in France, in Paris, but it was stopped because of the situation. So for the first time I don’t have plans, or a schedule, except for a lot of Zoom meetings!

I have been watching the movies for the EFA selection, but the reality is so new that watching the news is like following a reality show. The pandemic and the Polish presidential elections, the situation with the women’s strike, and the US presidential elections. For me, reality is winning over fiction right now. To follow the news is also to try to understand what it means for the future. Also the future of cinema but more widely the future of our societies and the future of the planet. We are living in a pivotal time.

Mark, you launched a 14-hour project, WOMEN MAKE FILM; is lockdown the best situation to watch it?

Mark Cousins: It’s been shown in Brazil and the UK and Spain; it’s done pretty well, mostly streaming. It was planned to go to cinemas but of course that didn’t happen. But I think people in lockdown felt like they needed to monitor the moment, but also, have a kind of long-form experience as well. It felt like time stretched like mozzarella. The idea of an epic moment of storytelling, in this case 14 hours, became attractive. I’m sitting in my edit suite and we have completed three edits in lockdown, with my editor 50 miles way. We’ve made a film about a great film producer Jeremy Thomas and I’ve made a film about looking … at how we look. So it’s been a fertile time.

Even though you’ve been very productive, have you missed the connection with audiences?

Cousins: The net has been cast wider in some ways. I’ve connected with cinephiles in India, in Russia, in Japan, in Brazil and all over North America and Europe. That common language – that commonality of emotion and desire and longing for cinema – has been quite unifying.

Thomas, how has it felt launching ANOTHER ROUND in such a strange year? You couldn’t go to Toronto or San Sebastian for the screenings there. What’s it like putting out a piece of work remotely?

Vinterberg: It’s highly unusual. And even in my country here (in Denmark), we were very nervous about sending out this movie in times of confinement. A movie about four drunk men, celebrating alcohol, we felt we could go under the radar. It could have felt slightly irrelevant, but somehow it was the opposite. People are storming into the cinema and they come back many times.

With going abroad, we couldn’t go to Cannes, we couldn’t go to San Sebastian. But I found a lot of bravery in these places anyway. It is so super important that they kept going. They kept doing these festivals in a time when we have to remind people that there’s still a cinema somewhere at the end of all of this. Aside from that my life is simple. I’m writing and I’m taking care of my family, so for several private reasons, I can find advantages in not having to travel so much.

Do you think you will keep some of that spirit, even when we can fly around again as much as we did before?

Vinterberg: I think if the pandemic would stop tomorrow, life would be normal again in one and a half years. It takes more than a pandemic to change the world.
The experience of sitting in a cinema and witnessing moments, characters, situations that you’ll never forget, together with other people, and hear a gasp in the room, or laugh in the room – that’s a sensation. We have to be reminded of the grandness of this common experience of sitting in a movie theatre, because it can be quite nice and quite comfortable to sit back home and stream things privately.

**Kirsten, how has Medienboard been managing the crisis, have your funding levels changed? Are you able to help projects who have been in trouble or needed an increased budget this year?**

**Kirsten Niehuus:** With my colleagues in Germany from other funds, we pretty quickly came up with a plan to help the productions, to cover the extra costs because of COVID. All the funds in Germany united and helped them – that might sounds like a small thing to the rest of the world, but with these federal states, and a lot of money in the different regions, it was a great step for us.

Thomas, I hope your vision doesn’t come true regarding the German funds, I think it great if we could stay a bit unusual and be more collective in the future.

Then we had the chance to help the cinemas in the first few weeks of lockdown, we gave awards for the cinemas in the region around Berlin and Brandenburg for artistic and very engaged programmes for the year before. We could triple these awards – it’s cash and you find the check in the mail – it’s probably the least bureaucratic way of helping that we could offer. And I think that helped a lot of cinemas. It’s for arthouse cinemas and cinemas with a programme that is very carefully curated by the cinema directors. I think that was a great help.

When June came, we started to focus on our core business of funding again, and what we can still see is that there were not a lot of cinema films shooting in that period of time. Usually summer, like in many other countries, is the main season for shooting films. Shooting on location wasn’t happening much here, except for TV films, because I think television offered to pay for any financial losses due to COVID. We didn’t have the insurance fund in place at that time. And so the city was much more quiet than before. And a lot of films have been postponed to be shot in 2021.

**What about public funding? I’ve heard one analyst say public funding for the arts could take a huge hit, starting in 2021. Because if you have to build new hospitals, then movies move down the list of priorities. What do you think, can filmmakers adapt if public funding decreases?**

**Holland:** Without public funding, European independent cinema is just dead. It will be even more dead because of the COVID situation, and I’m not as optimistic as Thomas is that it will pass without a really big trace. But it asks us a lot of questions, which actually we’ve been asked for a while. Now is the time to wake up and to figure out how to renovate exactly our approach to the financing of cinema, to distribution, and to the content and creativity of our films in the first place. If we see the collapse of distribution companies and cinemas, the situation becomes worse, because part of the financing for the production actually is coming from those sources, it is a kind of ecosystem.

With the Federation of European Film Directors (FERA) and EFA, we are fighting for the implementation of the new laws about streaming platforms and new incomes for filmmakers. This trend didn’t start with COVID, it’s been visible for several years already that the [platforms] are growing in place of [traditional] distribution and production, so we have to figure out what to do about it; and how we have to defend what is our homeland, the theatrical releases of our films.

**“PUBLIC FUNDING ALLOWS US TO BE ON THIN ICE, ALLOW US TO BE ARTISTS AND ALLOWS US TO MAKE PERSONAL MOVIES, WHICH I THINK PEOPLE ARE YEARNING FOR.”**

Thomas Vinterberg

**Mark, how are you feeling about public support for film?**

**The UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak infamously suggested artists retrain for other jobs.**

**Cousins:** Public funding comes because of market failure. If the market delivered everything we wouldn’t need it. But as we know, it doesn’t. For me, it’s a kind of public health issue or a social health issue. We see societies that don’t have any public sector funding for their cinema, like the US, and we can see all the weakness that comes from that lack of understanding of your own society. Ousmane Sembène, the great Senegalese filmmaker, said “a nation without cinema is like a house without mirrors.” This public funding – which isn’t a lot of money – helps us as individuals, and as a society, to recharge our batteries. We’re all feeling a bit depleted, I think, the battery level is going down and died because of the pandemic, and we’re drawing on our inner reserves to stay positive and stay connected. Public funding can actually help us recharge our batteries. The case for public funding is stronger than it has ever been in my lifetime.

**Thomas, do you feel like Denmark is looking after its creatives well with public funding?**

**Vinterberg:** A movie about child abuse (THE HUNT) or a celebration of alcohol (ANOTHER ROUND), would never have existed, obviously, without public funding. Public funding allows us to be on thin ice, allow us to be artists and allows us to make personal movies, which I think people are yearning for.

But the real pandemic in our business started before the pandemic. The real pandemic started with the streaming platforms and the algorithms of the internet. And without public funding, there’s no chance that we, and all the others of our comrades, can make personal artistic challenging movies to withstand that. I think what happens on these streaming services is the sneaking laziness of the audience. That’s a cultural pandemic that we should take seriously.

**Niehuus:** Of course, we as funds are strategically and politically trying to get in position, because, we are also expecting that the state budgets will be rearranged in 2022, after hopefully the pandemic is over. It costs so very much money in any country that has had the pandemic. This money has to be sort of re-earned, or cut back in the coming budgets, so we can already start lobbying for that.

**Vinterberg:** Everyone knows Churchill’s famous words from the Second World War, where he was asked if he was going to cut back on cultural subsidies because of the war, and his reply was simple: “Then what are we fighting for?”

**“NOW IS THE TIME TO WAKE UP AND TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO RENOVATE EXACTLY OUR APPROACH TO THE FINANCING OF CINEMA, TO DISTRIBUTION, AND TO THE CONTENT AND CREATIVITY OF OF OUR FILMS IN THE FIRST PLACE.”**

Agnieszka Holland
Let’s talk about the big platforms. As all of you have said, the platforms started changing the film business years ago, not just during the pandemic. Can Netflix and Amazon co-exist with the traditional European arthouse funding model, the release model, traditional windows? Can we thrive together?

**Holland:** It started way before COVID, but COVID has reinforced this tendency, especially among the younger generation. We started losing the younger generation a long time ago. The internet is their main connection to reality and other people … If the habits are changing so deeply, it will be very difficult to convince them again of that desire to be together in the theatres. The platforms anticipated this tendency and started to produce a lot of the content that cinemas are not giving audiences. Netflix is really interested to do content for young adults.

We will be colonised as Europeans if we don’t create the platform that responds to our cultural needs. To influence the market you need to produce the content and you need to have enough money and power to impose yourselves to be really attractive for the wider audience, and we don’t have that in Europe.

**“WE WILL BE COLONISED AS EUROPEANS IF WE DON’T CREATE THE PLATFORM THAT RESPONDS TO OUR CULTURAL NEEDS. TO INFLUENCE THE MARKET YOU NEED TO PRODUCE THE CONTENT AND YOU NEED TO HAVE ENOUGH MONEY AND POWER TO IMPOSE YOURSELVES TO BE REALLY ATTRACTIVE FOR THE WIDER AUDIENCE, AND WE DON’T HAVE THAT IN EUROPE.”**

Agnieszka Holland

We have to make better movies. When you watch what we are doing in Europe, we are doing a lot of decent movies, we are doing a lot of okay movies, we are only doing a few great movies. We’re not attracting people to come to the theatre with mediocre films. We have to come out from our comfort zone, to be more courageous, to be more connected to what’s going on in people’s lives deeply, not only on the surface. To be artistically more courageous. That we can do.

**“WE HAVE TO SING IN A DIFFERENT VOICE THAT STIRS THE IMAGE, WE HAVE TO DO THINGS THAT MAKE PEOPLE WANT TO GO TO THE CINEMA, BECAUSE THEY’RE SEEING SOMETHING ELSE. AND THAT KIND OF CHALLENGE WILL ALWAYS BE HEALTHY. IT’S DIFFICULT, BUT IT’S HEALTHY.”**

Thomas Vinterberg

Vinterberg: I have to agree with Agnieszka’s great point. The only way to attack this huge challenge we have in front of us is to consider the challenge. We’ve been singing with a certain voice for a while in the arthouse business. Even at the finest festivals in the world, you can find a sense of a recipe. We have to sing in a different voice that stirs the image, we have to do things that make people want to go to the cinema, because they’re seeing something else. And that kind of challenge will always be healthy. It’s difficult, but it’s healthy.

It is possible to get young people to the cinema. I find it incredibly important to reverse this into a challenge and not an oppressive sense of film depression. There are so many great filmmakers in Europe, and all over the world, who would be capable of doing what Agnieszka calls leaving their comfort zones. It’s exactly the same when we ask our actors to go out there where the ice is thin. That’s going to create curiosity and that’s going to make people want to go back to the cinema.
Mark, EFA is giving you a new award for innovation in storytelling. Do you see enough filmmakers taking risks, as Thomas said, skating on that thin ice?

Cousins: Around the world, there are people reinventing cinema a lot. LEVIATHAN used GoPro cameras on fish. Wow! Look at what an Apichatpong Weerasethakul is doing in Thailand. SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE was one of the most innovative films that I’ve seen. There are filmmakers like Lucile Hadžihalilović, Radu Jude, Roy Andersson – around the world there are loads of innovative filmmakers. The question is, how many do we need? How do we make sure that they don’t get lost, how do we teach the values of that? It’s film school, and teaching film in school, teaching the excitement of cinema to 10-year-olds, so that they get the lust for the desire for cinema.

**FILM SCHOOL, AND TEACHING FILM IN SCHOOL, TEACHING THE EXCITEMENT OF CINEMA TO 10-YEAR-OLDS, SO THAT THEY GET THE LUST FOR THE DESIRE FOR CINEMA.**

Mark Cousins

Part of this conversation could have been discussed in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood. It’s always been a struggle between the formulaic and the conventional, and the original and the innovative, and the ice skaters out of their comfort zone.

I don’t blame Netflix and Amazon – I’m grateful to Amazon Prime, because I can see Indian films of the ‘50s there that I would not see anywhere else. We can love cinema in all sorts of ways. In the religion of Islam, you have your prayer mat to use when you worship, but then you have your Friday mosque, when you go and worship with 1,000 other people, and we as movie lovers, can have our prayer mat, which is our home way of seeing cinema, and also the Friday mosque.

**Let’s talk about that mosque. Cinemas have hugely struggled in 2020. What can we do to save cinema culture?**

Niehuus: As we’ve seen in many developments in the past years in many ways, things change, and the situation of cinema will not stay the same. I would totally agree I like that image of the prayer mat that Mark just introduced. I think that’s about the mix, and I think people should have the freedom to decide whether they want to go to the cinema, or whether they want to watch something at home.

“I THINK PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THE FREEDOM TO DECIDE WHETHER THEY WANT TO GO TO THE CINEMA, OR WHETHER THEY WANT TO WATCH SOME SOMETHING AT HOME. I DON’T WANT TO BE FORCED OR TO DO ONE OR THE OTHER. I THINK REGARDING CINEMAS, AT LEAST FOR THE ARTHOUSE FILMS AND ARTHOUSE CINEMAS, WE HAVE TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION TO FUND THEM LIKE WE DO WITH OPERA HOUSES OR WITH THEATRES.”

Kirsten Niehuus

I don’t want to be forced or to do one or the other. I think regarding cinemas, at least for the arthouse films and arthouse cinemas, we have to take into consideration to fund them like we do with opera houses or with theatres. Then we will have a fully subsidised product from beginning to end. Meaning production, distribution, into the cinemas and to provide the cinemas with the money they need to be ready for the audience. Why not? We do it with theatre. Why not with cinema if we consider cinema as an art?

The arrival of platforms and platform productions has given chances to many people in the film industry, young directors, young actors who would never had the chance to work with a big budget before. I think the appearance on the market of Netflix, Amazon, and the others, opened a Pandora’s box in many ways, but also in some good ways.

Vinterberg: The platforms themselves are not the problem, those are just grocery stores where you can buy the product. The problem is a creative laziness by the audience and those who make the movies. You have to educate people to want to see interesting, great movies, challenging movies. Those platforms have given space to a lot of very, very interesting hours of material. They have supported young filmmakers, I agree. So, it’s the current under the platforms that we have to talk about and what has been revealed by these platforms: conservatism, mediocrity, artistic laziness. That’s what we have to challenge. There’s a comfortable way of leaning back into a certain arthouse way of looking at life. And I totally agree that that has to be shaken and stirred.

**Do you see TV as a threat to cinema culture, or is it just another great place to tell stories?**

Vinterberg: I thought it was a great cinematic experience watching BABYLON BERLIN, which happened to be on television. It’s not that simple. It’s a complicated question, How will we save the cinemas? Some of the most visionary cinema people have appeared on television, which will now also be platforms. It’s all a bit confusing. The most problematic thing is the algorithms which sell and support the laziness of a population. It’s very, very difficult to pinpoint.

Michaela Coel’s I MAY DESTROY YOU, not commissioned by an algorithm, was some of the most interesting storytelling I saw this year – braver than most films I watched. So I agree it can be hard to say, ‘This is all bad. This is all good.’

Holland: Visually innovative TV series came out of the mediocrity of the movies. In the ‘90s cinema became very lazy somehow. And, also the star system maybe made it very expensive and afraid of risk. And independent cinema deserted the audience … It was a vacuum, and television came and filled this vacuum with really innovative, storytelling and innovative stories. Americans had series like THE WIRE and THE SOPRANOS, Europe was behind and only had isolated cases [THE DECALOGUE, HEIMAT, THE KINGDOM, some Israeli and Scandinavian TV]. America built their success, they took artistic and commercial risks and they succeeded. Only now do we start to do interesting series like BABYLON BERLIN, years later. Our cinema is paying for that as well … for cinema to travel it needs the popularity of the actors. When you look at Europe today, you see our European film stars are in their 60s, 70s, or 80s … or dead. If they are well known it’s for acting in an American TV series.

Part of this conversation could have been discussed in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood. It’s always been a struggle between the formulaic and the conventional, and the original and the innovative, and the ice skaters out of their comfort zone.

I don’t blame Netflix and Amazon – I’m grateful to Amazon Prime, because I can see Indian films of the ‘50s there that I would not see anywhere else. We can love cinema in all sorts of ways. In the religion of Islam, you have your prayer mat to use when you worship, but then you have your Friday mosque, when you go and worship with 1,000 other people, and we as movie lovers, can have our prayer mat, which is our home way of seeing cinema, and also the Friday mosque.

**Let’s talk about that mosque. Cinemas have hugely struggled in 2020. What can we do to save cinema culture?**

Niehuus: As we’ve seen in many developments in the past years in many ways, things change, and the situation of cinema will not stay the same. I would totally agree I like that image of the prayer mat that Mark just introduced. I think that’s about the mix, and I think people should have the freedom to decide whether they want to go to the cinema, or whether they want to watch some something at home.

“I THINK PEOPLE SHOULD HAVE THE FREEDOM TO DECIDE WHETHER THEY WANT TO GO TO THE CINEMA, OR WHETHER THEY WANT TO WATCH SOME SOMETHING AT HOME. I DON’T WANT TO BE FORCED OR TO DO ONE OR THE OTHER. I THINK REGARDING CINEMAS, AT LEAST FOR THE ARTHOUSE FILMS AND ARTHOUSE CINEMAS, WE HAVE TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION TO FUND THEM LIKE WE DO WITH OPERA HOUSES OR WITH THEATRES.”

Kirsten Niehuus
“I THINK I’M A DIFFERENT PERSON WHEN I GO TO THE CINEMA. WHEN I GO TO THE CINEMA IT’S CLOSER TO GOING DANCING OR SWIMMING OR CLIMBING A HILL. IT’S A SURRENDER TO THE EXPERIENCE ENTIRELY. I SAY TO THE FILMMAKER, ‘HERE ARE TWO HOURS OF MY TIME, DO SOMETHING WITH IT, I’D GIVE IT ENTIRELY TO YOU.’ AT HOME I DON’T DO THAT.”

Mark Cousins

Cousins: I think I’m a different person when I go to the cinema. When I go to the cinema it’s closer to going dancing or swimming or climbing a hill. It’s a surrender to the experience entirely. I say to the filmmaker, “Here are two hours of my time, do something with it, I’d give it entirely to you.” At home I don’t do that. I’m the boss, I’m in charge so I can stop it and rewind it and watch it tomorrow.

Why I’m more optimistic is that I think that we human beings have it deep in us to want to submit to lose control, to be out of ourselves, not to be in charge, not to be in our domestic environment all the time. That’s why I think the idea of cinema which addressed that precociously 120 or 130 years ago will survive because we as human beings and especially under COVID and lockdown, we need to lose ourselves and cinema does that. It’s more immersive than anything else.

Vinterberg: The life of the uncontrollable is something people don’t understand anymore. They forgot that getting an idea is something we get from somewhere, it’s not something that we can buy on the internet. So I support your fight for the uncontrollable.

Niehuus: I totally agree that the product that is displayed in the cinema – the films – needs to be attractive. For a long time we were in a situation where filmmakers felt that they had a birthright to be there, and it was always the same prayer that’s been repeated. But that didn’t suffice because we knew that there was better storytelling somewhere else, for instance, on the platforms. I think people still have the urge to go to the cinema, and I don’t doubt that cinema will survive, but maybe not every cinema and not every film.

We certainly can’t turn back the clock. But like Agnieszka said, we can really try hard to provide the audience with more interesting storytelling … it’s about diversity, it’s about different characters.

I am going to try to force a happy ending here. What gives you hope or excitement for the next few years? For me, it’s seeing the world open up to more non-English-language content, more voices from previously marginalized communities. And less of that mediocre stuff in the middle.

Vinterberg: The arthouse scenes will survive this Darwinistic turn of times in moviemaking, we have to adapt and have to change. And hopefully we’ll land on the other side with strength, curiosity, with a sense of aggression towards great stories and great storytelling. I hope and believe so.

Holland: I am very much about diversity. I believe in women’s voices, which have been practically muted – only 6-8% of films made by women and we are half of humanity – that is not right. I see more and more consciousness about it. I see the openness of women to communicate, and the same with LGBT communities and different minorities. Also, for example, Asian cinema. It felt very important to me to see PARASITE win the Oscar. The appetite is not just politically correct, it is a real curiosity, which can be encouraged by the quality of the storytelling. That’s my optimism.

Niehuus: I totally believe in creativity. And I don’t think that the algorithms will rule the world, I think they will will part of the world but not all the world. I believe in diversity in society and also in how we consume content, films and series. I believe we’re about to turn over a lot of regulations that have been set in stone in the past, and this stone is crumbling and that’s a great chance.

Cousins: I think as we’re talking today, there will be people who are born with a natural, visual expressive talent, and if they were born 50 years ago they would probably have been excluded from the film industry because they were the ‘wrong’ class or gender or continent. Now they’re less likely to be excluded. And these future citizens of cinema can tell us about the mountaintop and the Valley of Tears and everything in between.

“I DON’T THINK THAT THE ALGORITHMS WILL RULE THE WORLD. I BELIEVE IN DIVERSITY IN SOCIETY AND ALSO IN HOW WE CONSUME FILMS AND SERIES. I BELIEVE WE’RE ABOUT TO TURN OVER A LOT OF REGULATIONS THAT HAVE BEEN SET IN STONE IN THE PAST, AND THIS STONE IS CRUMBLING AND THAT’S A GREAT CHANCE.”

Kirsten Niehuus
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 Giona A. Nazzaro, the recently appointed Locarno Film Festival Artistic Director. It would be easy to say the same about the Cannes Film Festival.

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 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.”

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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 calendar 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.

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.”

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 Frémaux 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. I would say the mission of film festivals today is to be there for the whole industry, the creative community of filmmakers, and try to save jobs. 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.”

“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 no longer is enough. Action is needed.”

Fischer argues that festivals will have to change with the times to serve the needs of filmmakers. “There has been a tendency to get stuck in the status quo of what a festival is and what mission it should serve. The international world of festivals has historically been centred around the ‘selection’ and on the discovery, promotion and protection of ‘quality’ films, quality as the gatekeeper. It’s still relevant. In a world with data-driven streamers, we need curation more than ever.”

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Polymath Kaleem Aftab is a writer, festival strategist and film programmer based in London. Sometimes, he even produces too.
The film marketplace is very different today to what it was 12 months ago. The speed of change may be mind-boggling as a business that was organised around people meeting in person suddenly had to go digital.

“At first, the question was, can digital replace the physical interaction at all?” says Sten-Kristian Saluveer, Head of Programming NEXT at Marche du Film Cannes. “Do we have the technologies and so forth? Are there stable technologies to make this transition?”

He adds, “In the case of Cannes, we realised there was quite a big technological challenge to replicate the Cannes experience online. You had to deal with workflows, people’s habits and finding the right technologies and integrating them in a semi-workable package.”

The Cannes team put on more than 400 events involving about 10,000 people. Industry events such as Cannes Marche or CPH:DOX (where Saluveer is also an advisor) demonstrated that a virtual or hybrid format could work. It also had other advantages. “Virtual Cannes was quite democratising; people came to ‘Cannes’ who don’t usually participate for monetary reasons.”

But that was six months ago. “Right now we are in a situation where being constantly online is the new normal,” adds Saluveer. “It was the luck of Cannes and CPH:DOX that the audience was racing to events. People don’t behave the same anymore. Where we are at now in the discussion is that online is not enough.”

Mart van den Elshout, Head, IFFR PRO and Cinemart at Rotterdam, and Dennis Ruh, the new head of Berlin’s European Film Market, are now planning their events, bearing in mind the limitations of online. However, as Ruh acknowledges, it’s not always a choice as rules and regulations change on a daily basis. “One of the major lessons of the pandemic has been: it’s always good to have different plans,” he says.

Given the situation, van den Elshout saw certainty as the advantage of online and more stable technologies. “The advantages, according to Ruh, have been, “Online markets are missing the buzz about new arthouse films, which is considered an absolute prerequisite to sell those films. It transpired that online markets mostly worked for films more suited for home entertainment. Sales agents have been missing the feeling of competition against each other and the distributors. Buyers have been very selective and cautious when it comes to minimum guarantees and we have seen a marked downturn in sales volume.”

These are problems that need addressing as no festival plans to ditch digital entirely in the future, ensuring hybrid markets are here to stay. Throw in competition from streamers, new platforms and arguments over release patterns, and the questions go beyond where and how to deliver festivals.

“There needs to be a new understanding, compromise and consensus on the value chain,” suggests Saluveer. “We are in a position like between 2007 and 2009 where DCP replaced 35mm, and it was a no man’s land.”

Markets have to deliver on their core value, whether it’s a digital or physical event. “The core of the film festival market is surely the sales business,” says Ruh. “Markets are also a driving force for the film industry. We need to talk about the future of film production and distribution, especially in these challenging times. Markets should also be a place of networking that give newcomers the chance to get a foot in the door and provide platforms for cutting-edge topics and trends.”

Such thinking is at the heart of van den Elshout’s plans in Rotterdam, which will run its IFFR Pro Days online in early February: “Our goal is to make filmmakers feel connected to the audience and industry. What’s possible with a smaller event, with less films, is that we will be able to deliver that kind of personal approach.”

But is being a sales facilitator and market driver too much to ask in these uncertain times? Saluveer says, “That fact that a festival is suddenly responsible for providing the highest security standards, doing all the marketing, doing all the audience engagement, bringing in all the money to the stakeholders is a bit ridiculous.”

Saluveer points out that markets need to re-establish their importance in the value chain. Questions have to be asked about, “What are the different scenarios of consensus that might happen.” Once we have some idea, “We need to get all these different players together and find solutions. Then we need to be good matchmakers to make those deals happen.”
THE FUTURE OF AUDIENCES

What effect has the disruption of 2020 had on the attitudes of audiences? Will cinemas be able to regain confidence to entice the public back into theatres, following a prolonged period when the ever-increasing reach of streaming services?

Close-Up’s Michael Rosser spoke to three key European experts representing cinemas, streaming platforms and young audiences to take the temperature of the current situation and look ahead to what the future might hold for audiences.

MARGRET ALBERS: “CINEMAS RUN THE RISK OF DISAPPEARING OFF THE RADAR FOR CHILDREN”
By Michael Rosser

Margret Albers is president of the ECFA (European Children’s Film Association), an ambassador for films aimed at young people which aims to provide access to a wider variety of European cinema for children worldwide.

ECFA has around 130 members comprising companies and organisations from 40 different countries, including filmmakers, producers, promoters, distributors, exhibitors, TV programmers, festival organisers and film educators.

What impact has the virus crisis had on how young audiences approach watching film?
As a result of the pandemic, cinemas in Europe were closed for most of the year and the impact on young audiences in particular should not be underestimated. Children are explorers and, of course, they explore the places and platforms where they can find content interesting for them. Cinemas run the risk of disappearing off the radar of children’s film reception.

How do you see both platforms and cinemas serving audiences in future?
The sheer mass of films and series available is already immense and with the multitude of streaming services it will undoubtedly continue to grow. It will be very exciting to see how audiences behave. Will streaming fatigue set in if people spend more and more time selecting and not actually watching? This can be a chance for cinemas, because they curate their programme.

Do you think platforms and cinemas can find better ways to work together, or at least coexist?
Currently, the situation is very unsatisfactory. Large studios release films intended for the big screen on their own platforms, while streaming services use short theatrical releases to gain access to certain funding, festivals or awards. Unfortunately, this has little to do with content and does not take adequately into account the audiences or the platform-specific experience. In order to coexist successfully and even work better together, it would be necessary to take the latter in particular (audiences and platform-specific experience) more into account from the development to the distribution of films.

What do you think the industry tends to get wrong about how we think about audiences today?
Unfortunately, the industry is still very much in the 20th Century. The current approach to development, marketing and distribution is based on the experience of a generation that did not have the variety of freely accessible AV material and interactive media that is available to the young audience today. Not only do cinema, television, streaming services and free online offers compete for the “media time” of children, but also social media, the games industry and, last but not least, the book market.

I have the impression that the industry is not sufficiently aware of the complex media environment in which young viewers operate and, moreover, does not take their needs, wishes and abilities seriously enough.

Do you think the pandemic will have a long-term impact on audience behaviour?
The trend to consume films at home sitting on the sofa was certainly reinforced by the pandemic. I believe in the cinema as a special place for special film experiences - but I am familiar with it. The longer cinemas remain closed, the more difficult it will be to put cinema back on the radar of young audiences.

What excites you about the future of film distribution and exhibition?
The amount of content is immense. This “white media noise” leads to frustration (also) among children. How and where can you find good content? For content providers, this means the reverse: it is becoming more difficult to be found.

I very much hope that the crisis will encourage distributors, exhibitors and funders to try out new, target group-specific and perhaps also unorthodox marketing approaches such as co-creation, community building, and enforcing cooperation with institutions and companies outside the industry.
Christian Bräuer is president of the board of the CICAE (International Confederation of Arthouse Cinemas), a non-profit association aiming at promoting cultural diversity in cinemas and festivals. CICAE brings together more than 4,000 screens via 11 national and regional structures, 40 independent cinemas as single members, and 22 festivals in 49 countries.

Bräuer is also the CEO of the Yorck Cinema Group, consisting of 11 cinemas and an open-air cinema in Berlin. He is president of the German Arthouse Association AG Kino – Gilde and represents the interests of cinemas on the executive board of the German Film Board FFA; he is also on their board for European and international projects.

**How do you see cinemas and streaming platforms serving audiences in future?**

Streaming is ever-present right now, yet I am very optimistic about the future of cinema. The cultural venue of a movie theatre is a simultaneous experience in a shared, analogue space. And even though we can stream films or video chat with friends, we all feel how deeply we miss personal encounters and shared experiences right now.

The demand and feedback from our audiences post-lockdown has clearly proven that they don’t think of streaming as a replacement for the moviegoing experience. I think, for cinemas, one important shift is that much more planning and booking is happening online and in advance, so an increased digital presence will be more important than ever. Cinemas also remain of outstanding importance for the film industry and film cultural diversity.

**Do you think cinemas and platforms can find better ways to work together, or at least coexist?**

I do think both can and already do coexist well. We have heard a lot of noise regarding the strategy of a single global SVOD platform over the past few years, but, in general, platforms know the value of a theatrical release. A well-prepared theatrical release leads to films performing well across all subsequent distribution channels, whether it’s streaming, television or something else.

The role of cinema as a curator and brand will become crucial as the content overflow online leads more and more to the feeling of ‘analysis paralysis’ – the feeling of scrolling through your feed. This is a great opportunity for cinemas in our challenging metier, which is increasingly dominated by global giants.

**What do you think the industry tends to get wrong about how we think about audiences today?**

Seeing young audiences as a lost cause for cinema because they are on their phones a lot. There is an entire generation growing up on TikTok, a platform that demands proper writing, editing and directing skills from its creators. It’s actually not that difficult getting them excited for the art of cinema and I see many innovative approaches to young audience development. But in general, we don’t have enough films and programmes to keep them engaged on a regular basis.

**Do you think the pandemic will have a long-term impact on audience behaviour?**

I think most trends that feel like changes from the pandemic would have happened anyway, but have only been accelerated due to the pandemic. A lively neighbourhood with diverse cultural venues will certainly increase in peoples’ appreciation. Once all of this is over, people will not only be excited to finally go out again, they will expect an especially great experience when going to the cinema that is worth their time and money, from a great film to great service. That’s not a new trend, by far, but I think people will be much more unforgiving when they feel disappointed.

**What excites you about the future of film distribution and exhibition?**

There is a new generation of digital film enthusiasts. Seeing how fandoms are formed on platforms like Letterboxd around films like PARASITE, SYSTEM CRASHER, THE FAVOURITE, PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE or CALL ME BY YOUR NAME is thrilling and proof that cinema is alive and kicking. The seventh art form offers so many incredible artistic and technical possibilities for telling stories.

People love stories that are told with talent and sensibility – and with the unique and maximal impact from the theatrical experience. It is hard to forget what a global sensation PARASITE was and the shared effort of festivals, distributors and cinemas played such a crucial road for that. I’m excited to see what comes next.
Jon Barrenechea is vice president of marketing at MUBI, the curated SVOD service that is available in 195 countries around the world. MUBI also provides its members with weekly cinema tickets to select new releases with MUBI GO and access to its international film criticism and news publication on Notebook. MUBI also produces and theatrically distributes ambitious films by both emerging and renowned filmmakers, which members can watch exclusively on its service.

Barrenechea was previously deputy director of marketing at Picturehouse Cinemas and both executive produced and distributed the 2015 documentary HAND GESTURES.

How do you see cinemas and platforms such as MUBI serving audiences in future?

MUBI sees a close partnership with the exhibition sector as key. MUBI GO, our cinema-going app that sends MUBI members to cinemas in the UK, Ireland and India, is the real-life application of that partnership.

I think both independent cinemas and MUBI share the same goal: to bring amazing films from all over the world to audiences everywhere and ensure there is a rich film culture beyond the studio blockbuster.

How people reach this content is changing – but the social experience of a cinema screening will always be with us, as long as we’re able to congregate. There was a huge appetite to watch films in cinemas before the pandemic and that will return once it’s safe to do so.

Do you think platforms and cinemas can find better ways to work together, or at least coexist?

MUBI GO is our way of working closely with exhibition (and distribution), and the success of the app in the UK, Ireland and India means we are now planning launches in the US and Germany in 2021. At the beginning of the pandemic, we partnered with over 500 cinemas across the world to offer their members and customers access to MUBI while cinemas were closed.

In addition, we are planning to continue releasing films in cinemas, with a slate of titles coming in 2021. We see the theatrical experience as a fundamental part of the value chain and essential for any healthy film market. Our work with film festivals continues as well, both virtual and physical, and we expect to continue to grow that collaboration.

Whatever the state of the industry at the end of this global crisis, we hope to continue supporting the exhibition sector and deepening our ties.

What do you think the industry tends to get wrong about how we think about audiences today?

We know there is a huge appetite for high quality, diverse, independent content. Some parts of the industry aren’t serving that audience by relying almost entirely on large scale tentpole product instead. We see big opportunities for independent films, both in cinemas and at home.

Do you think the pandemic will have a long-term impact on audience behaviour?

The rate and pace of changes in consumer behaviour were already at full speed before the pandemic, and the crisis has only accelerated those changes. It remains to be seen what further changes are ahead of us.

But as I say, cinemas are here to stay. Once people feel safe to return, the appetite for a social viewing experience will return as well. We’re excited about re-launching MUBI GO and putting films in cinemas again. That said, many people have discovered MUBI during this period and that growth will continue – but we don’t think this growth needs to come at the expense of other parts of the industry.

What excites you about the future of film distribution and exhibition?

We’re really looking forward to releasing our titles in cinemas again. We’ve been experimenting with distribution for some time now, trying different models, and we think that the future will require flexibility, agility and imagination.

Whilst the pandemic has had negative impacts on the industry, it will create more opportunities in the future for independent film, with a sudden gap in mainstream content and audiences hungry for new films. They’ve been discovering films they may not have even considered before.

Michael Rosser is a London-based writer and editor specialising in the UK and international film industry. He regularly contributes to Screen International, previously worked at IMDb and Broadcast, and moderates at screenings, events and film festivals.