

PRACTITIONER TALKS

10. Programming under COVID-19: London Film Festival 2020¹

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Abstract: This chapter reflects on a number of programming decisions made during the 2020 London Film Festival. Drawing on data from the BFI, team programming meetings and discussions, and input from the Festival Director as well as four of the festival's programme advisors, the chapter maps the process of what programming for the London Film Festival entailed through a pandemic that shook the world.

Keywords: programming, film audiences, film curating, filmmakers, festivals

If you'd have asked me to discuss programming for the British Film Institute (BFI) London Film Festival before 2020, this would have been a different piece of writing. When I have spoken or written in the past about this work, it's generally in terms of how the core programming team work with a wider group of program advisors, our commitment to view all open submissions that come in, my own programming decisions and the films that I am highlighting,² and how the festival has developed since Adrian Wootton took over as Director in 1996. I usually mention that the BFI London Film

¹ My thanks to my colleagues at the BFI London Film Festival (LFF) for their thoughts and insights, especially Grace Barber-Plentie, Helen de Witt, Sarah Lutton, Leigh Singer, and Tricia Tuttle. Thanks also to film producer and curator Nico Marzano and Joana Granero of the London Spanish Film Festival for broader conversations on film programming.

² See, for example, three examples of the annual features many of the program advisors offer: Delgado (2018), Lutton (2019), and Robey (2016).

Festival, or LFF as it is commonly referred to, is the UK's largest film festival, founded in 1957. It is supported by the British Film Institute or BFI, one of the world's oldest and foremost national bodies for cinema. It's a twelve-day festival, held in early October, screening to audiences in cinemas across London. It usually has UK and international premieres of more than 200 features from around the world, as well as a number of shorts programmes. It has a series of strands—Love, Debate, Laugh, Dare, Thrill, Cult, Journey, Create, Family, Treasures, and Experimental—introduced by the festival's artistic director and Head of Exhibition at the BFI Clare Stewart in 2012 which offer audiences distinct ways of exploring the program (Gant 2017). Each year, the festival has a different graphic which features across all branding, from the printed brochure to the website. The festival has been presented in association with its lead sponsor, American Express, since 2010.

But then, in early 2020, COVID-19 arrived and everything changed. The UK government legally introduced lockdown measures from March 26, later than many other countries in Europe. With the BFI closed, plans to travel to Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival (BAFICI) jettisoned, and the BFI festival team considering how to deliver the planned FLARE! London LGBTIQ+ Film Festival (due to run 17–28 March), the LFF had to be reconsidered. For the first months, it wasn't clear what exactly the 2020 format might look like; nobody knew what COVID-19 might mean even in the short or mid-term or even when the BFI would reopen. Fast forward to September 8, and just seven days after the BFI reopened, the program for the 2020 festival was announced.

So how did we get there? These reflections, drawing on data from the BFI, our team programming meetings and discussions, and input from the Festival Director as well as three of my fellow program advisors, map the process of what programming for the London Film Festival entailed through a pandemic that shook the world.

At the time of writing (2022), I am part of a team of twenty-one program advisors; we work with a festival team that works on the festival all year round: the Director Tricia Tuttle, Senior Programmer Michael Blyth, three other film programmers (Grace Barber-Plentie, Laure Bonville, and Hyun Jin Cho), two other programmers with responsibilities for series and XR (Rowan Woods and Ulrich Schrauth), and four shorts programmers (Nellie Alston, Philip Ilson, Aduke King, and Elaine Wong).³ The festival is a team effort. So, it's all about dialogue—dialogue among us all about what we've

³ There have been some changes to the festival since I wrote this piece in 2022. Kristy Matheson took over as Director of the Festival in 2023; new programmers have entered the core staff and

seen, what we'd like to prioritize and dialogue, and how the films fit into the different program strands. Dialogue with sales agents, producers, directors, national film agencies and film promotion bodies, other festival directors and programming teams. Dialogue.

Between March and June 2020 with COVID-19 raging and no idea of when the government lockdown would end, we were looking at a very different festival model, but it was still ultimately about dialogue. Meetings with the core programming team—the advisory programmers meet the core team both on an individual basis and in monthly meetings—ensured we shared information gleaned from producers, directors, and sales agents who had films ready for viewing or in post-production. Continuing to view films in a purely online format, we continued to discuss what the priorities would be with discussions in May and June already identifying a programming strategy that would present around fifty as opposed to 200 plus UK premieres, all screening in a virtual form, with each film presented with the introduction and/or Q&A, and frequently both at a specified time. A range of free events including an international short film programme, Screen Talks, roundtable discussions, and a new Virtual Exhibition of XR and Immersive Art was also planned. The expansion to a greater focus on VR had been scheduled with the appointment of Ulrich Schrauth, the director of Hamburg's VRHAM! Virtual Reality & Arts Festival in March 2020. Schrauth's plans for a physical installation had to be shifted to an online format in line with much of the festival delivery, but it marked a development towards a new focus on bringing immersive audience activities into the core festival programme. Anticipating plans for some cinemas to reopen from August 14, the LFF also partnered with exhibitors in the BFI Audience Network and twelve cinemas in the UK to present around twelve previews that would also feature on BFI Southbank, shifting the festival's focus outside of London to a greater degree than in previous years—Mike Leigh's *Peterloo* (2018) had premiered outside London at HOME Manchester in 2018 as part of that year's London Film Festival. With an audience jury replacing the official jury for the festival's competitions, the 2020 festival was going to look very different to any previous LFF edition.

On July 2 the BFI announced the new format for the festival in an official press release—the official program was announced on September 8. Countdown had begun. Selection was harder than in any previous year; we had to reduce the usual number of invites as the program was 72 percent smaller than what we usually featured—fifty-nine films as opposed to

Matheson has restructured the team of advisors to create a selection committee. I joined the selection committee for the 2024 Festival.

229 in 2019. Decisions felt tough, as there was so much strong work that we just couldn't invite. There were difficult conversations with filmmakers, producers, and sales agents about films we loved but that couldn't make it into the festival. I've been acutely aware of the challenges that filmmakers, producers, and sales companies have had in trying to find spaces for their work in 2020 and I've felt a strong responsibility during 2020 and into 2021 to pass on recommendations to other UK festivals, sharing films that delighted, impressed, troubled, and challenged me with other programmers, in the hope that audiences in other fora can engage with them.

Selecting films was also a different process. We had monthly Zoom meetings but as my colleague Leigh Singer, the program strand advisor for Laugh, commented, "To view new films on a small laptop screen, alone at home, and largely forgo the group discussions and connections to a wider programme, felt very isolating" (2021). We were also very aware of the broader context in which we were working. COVID-19 was everywhere, reshaping our understanding of the world, providing a new perspective on the dangers of environmental exploitation, requiring a new way of thinking through relationships to community. "Last year's devastating events," Singer continues, "challenged far more than film festival programming, but within that remit, it brought home to me more than ever how much cinema—as productions, as festivals, and as audiences—thrives and depends on being a communal endeavor and entity" (2021). It is perhaps no surprise that Pedro Almodóvar, whose *The Human Voice* we featured as one of our preview screenings as part of the 2020 Festival, noted the importance of the cinematic experience on the film's Venice premiere (Roxborough 2020).

Audiences are key to LFF. The way I write copy is always thinking about potential spectators. The Q&As that follow our screenings are spaces for audiences to engage with what they have seen, share views, ask questions of the filmmaker and/or other members of the creative team, request clarification, and listen to how others are responding to what they have just viewed (and indeed experienced). In late August and early September 2020, I had to record introductions to the films and Q&As with filmmakers without sharing that space, without the festival audiences that make festivals, to quote my colleague, Experimenta's co-curator Helen de Witt, "the rock and roll of cinema" (2021). One of my favorite things about the LFF is engaging with audiences in the moment of having seen the film; it feels unique and important. It's a point echoed by Sarah Lutton, the Festival's Nordic Program Advisor who sees programming as "also very much about audiences. I learn a huge amount from being part of and observing audiences...I know how much filmmakers get from sharing their films in person, hearing reactions

and getting questions from a public audience. So often this is only one of the few times filmmakers actually meet the people who buy tickets for their films" (2021). The virtual screenings involved rethinking how to engage with audiences. What does it mean to host a Q&A when you are not in the room with the audience, you can't hear their responses to the film and observe their engagement as you begin the dialogue with the filmmaker? The festival films were scheduled to premiere at a particular time to ensure this sense of an event remains, but this proved new territory for us all, especially with filmmakers who we may not have met before or coming to the LFF for the first time. We were all aware of the fact that whatever we could do, it wasn't the same as a live experience. "To conduct a Filmmaker Q&A via Zoom, with no audience present," Singer discerned, "seemed like a poor facsimile of the true moviegoing and festival experience" (2021). Lutton additionally noted the importance of her prior relationship with the filmmakers she interviewed on Zoom for the introductions and Q&As:

Although it was a strange experience to film the introductions and Q&As remotely, I felt we already had a connection and a sense of trust with one another, as I had met the filmmaking teams in person on other occasions, and had presented and hosted Q&As with both sets of filmmakers at previous LFFs. I think that made a huge difference to the way we were able to speak with each other, especially in terms of the questions I felt able to ask and the candor of the filmmakers' responses. The filmmakers knew I genuinely valued their body of work, and that I had been a passionate advocate for their creativity. I think it would have been much harder to conduct an online Q&A with a filmmaker I had never met, as there was very limited time before the recording to attempt to build any new rapport (2021).

In rethinking how audience participation might work for the 2020 festival, audiences were invited to take the place of the Festival's official juries—the festival has a best feature film competition, a best documentary feature (Grierson) competition, and a best first film (Sunderland) competition. London is primarily recognized as an audience festival rather than a competition festival,⁴ but these awards are important in providing a means through which films might secure wider exposure and distribution in what is seen as a difficult market

⁴ For further contextual information on the London Film Festival's position within the broader festival ecosystem and its development as an audience festival, see Diestro-Dópido 2021, 141–93.

for non-English-language exhibition.⁵ Carla Simón's *Estiu 1993/Summer 1993*, first seen at the Berlin Film Festival in 2017, is a good example here—with a Special Mention for the Sutherland Competition in 2017 and distribution with New Wave Films following in 2018.⁶ Viewers who attended the Virtual London Film Festival were invited to vote on Audience Awards in four categories: Best Fiction Feature, Best Documentary Feature, Best Short Film, and Best XR.

When announcing the 2020 format, Festival Director Tricia Tuttle mentioned the importance of getting “back to cinemas”; the decision to work with independent and cultural venues across the UK is about taking the festival out across the UK to a new level, ensuring also that safety is prioritized for audiences and cinema staff (BFI Press Release 2020a). The seventeen cinematic premieres presented in collaboration with cinemas, together with the fifty-four virtual premieres reached audiences of 141,253. The festival opened with *Mangrove*, part of Steve McQueen's Small Axe BBC series, presented as a free screening in thirteen UK cinemas, an important contribution to wider discussions about black histories in Britain in a year where Black Lives Matter had highlighted historical and structural injustices, and widespread racist practices, calling for widespread change, including changes to film industry practices.⁷ The closing-night film, Francis Lee's *Ammonite* was presented through the Festival's partnership with distributor Lionsgate, not just at BFI Southbank but in over 350 participating cinemas on October 17, reaching 14,000 admissions that day—the highest grossing film on that date (BFI Press Release 2020b). The events, masterclasses, and talks program reached 174,285 (BFI Press Release 2020). In comparison, the 2019 Festival saw 178,789 for screenings and events—with 17,730 of these press and industry screenings. Forty-one countries were represented in the 2020 program with 39.6 percent of the films directed by women. The Virtual Audience Awards (out in place for the 2020 Festival only) were won by: Thomas Vinterberg's *Druk/Another Round* (Denmark 2020, Best Film); Benjamin Ree's *The Painter and the Thief* (Norway 2020, Best Documentary), Tommy Gillard's

5 The annual BFI statistical Yearbook, published by the BFI's Research and Statistics Unit, lists exhibition figures for the UK. The most recent Yearbook at the time of writing can be found here: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/industry-data-insights/statistical-yearbook>.

Huw D. Jones (2017, 153–57) summarizes the UK market position for 2013 from an EU survey where the UK is positioned as having the smallest market share for foreign-language films, with only 5 percent of audiences stating they had seen “many” foreign-language films on any platform (TV, DVD, VoD, streaming, or in the cinema) as opposed to 19 percent in Lithuania and 18 percent in Spain. The UK's 5 percent represents half of the European average.

6 Simón's second feature *Alcarràs* (2022) won the Golden Bear at the 2022 Berlin Film Festival and was picked up for distribution in the UK by Mubi. It was part of the 2022 BFI London Film Festival.

7 See, for example, Steve McQueen's experiences presented in Thorpe and O'Hagan (2020) and Esquire Editors (2020).

Shuttlecock (UK 2020, Best Short Film), and Anna West and David Callanan's *To Miss the Ending* (UK 2020, Best XR/Immersive Art).

In terms of Spanish and Latin American work, we had six films and a Screen Talk with Michel Franco following the UK virtual premiere of *Nuevo orden/New Order* (2020)—which had had its world premiere at Venice where it won the Grand Jury Prize—reaching audiences of 1,929.⁸ I was particularly keen to feature *New Order* because its political stance seemed to embody something of the extremes of the current moment—it felt resonant and timely, a prescient reminder of the horrors of the inequalities that COVID-19 had brutally exposed. *Un crimen común/A Common Crime* (2020) by Argentine director Francisco Márquez, similarly exposed social injustices and the dangers of a bystander culture that resonated in ways that recalled the work of Lucrecia Martel. These felt important urgent films that I wanted UK audiences to engage with.

Reflecting on the Festival's Nordic program for 2020, Sarah Lutton observes that:

Because of the significantly reduced number of titles we could show in LFF 2020, I ended up with only two Nordic titles selected for the programme.... The two Nordic titles *Another Round* and *The Painter and the Thief* were both films which I knew would resonate with audiences in a very personal way.... In many ways LFF 2020 was a great year for Nordic work as both *Another Round* and *The Painter and the Thief* scooped the festival's audience awards for Best Fiction and Best Documentary respectively. I think the very personal and intimate nature of both films lent itself well to online viewing. (And, of course *Another Round* went on to win the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, so in many ways LFF audiences could feel gratified that they had been given the opportunity in this unusual year to see the "Best" international film). (2021)

We all programmed, I would argue, with a heightened awareness of the temper of the times and this did have real implications for particular strands. "Let's be honest," Leigh Singer recognizes, "laughs, and comedy in general, seemed far thinner on the ground, which didn't make 2020 programming any easier" (2021). 2020 forced programmers to rethink how they work. For LFF we were only able to program about 28 percent of our usual number of films. There was so much good work that we saw but couldn't fit into the program. It

⁸ The accessible version of the Screen Talk with Michel Franco is available on the BFI's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqR1oUmJvJ8>.

was hard to have conversations with filmmakers, producers, and sales agents about films we loved but that didn't make the final cut—although this played out differently across the festival. Lutton notes that: "The pandemic affected the availability of a significant number of films I had anticipated being able to watch and select for LFF. Many were either re-scheduled for future release, delayed in production or production was postponed (in the end several of these films were completed/made available for consideration for LFF 2021" (2021). De Witt observes that "submissions were fewer as films had not been finished. Added to that, some filmmakers withdrew as it was important for them to have their films on a cinema screen. This we understood. In the end, although the program was reduced, we felt it still retained the mix, balance and texture of what Experimenta has come to be" (2021).

The smaller festival for 2020 led me to reflect what this might mean for filmmakers in terms of more limited spaces for physical exhibition of their films. Of course, Mubi, Amazon Prime, Netflix, and other digital platforms are buying work for exhibition across streaming platforms but will they buy some of the smaller, more adventurous films we programme? I remember in 2017, programming a small Brazilian film directed by João Dumans and Affonso Uchôa called *Arabia/Araby*. Argentine filmmaker Martín Rejtman had recommended the film to me when he'd seen it at BAFICI that year, a poetic, tender road movie that sought to give form to the life of a nomadic individual whose life might have so easily been rendered invisible. Seen at LFF by a buyer of films for airlines, a deal was struck for exhibition across a group of airlines making a real difference for a small independent production company who had made the film on a shoestring budget. I worry that such films might fall between the cracks or quite simply that we will inevitably be able to program less work with implications for the filmmakers that might have made it into the program in previous years.

In addition, we know many films have been delayed in post-production because of the challenges COVID-19 has brought. A number of Latin American filmmakers I was in touch with during 2020, undertaking post-production work in a different country to that which they are based in, faced travel restrictions and the closure of labs. As one filmmaker dealing with delays to their post-production process mentioned to me, the next few years are going to bring a fair number of challenges. And challenges to filmmakers are going to produce challenges to programmers and film festivals as films take longer to be completed. This is likely to disproportionately affect countries in the Global South which don't have highly developed film industries with strong or long-established levels of state support.

As programmers we can't disaggregate our curatorial work from film production. We are all part of the same ecosystem. A number of producers and sales agents sought to wait before sharing their films with programmers during 2020, to see what the exhibition landscape might look like in 2021 because they needed to consider their presence at festivals alongside broader exhibition and distribution plans within Europe, North America, Latin America, and further beyond. My own conversations with Spanish and Latin American filmmakers identified specific trends shaping their plans, including delayed shoots and postponed post-production plans. A number of filmmakers commented that the delay to shoots as well as post-production disruption led to a focus on the writing of new scripts or refining scripts in development, although they recognized that they had no idea when and how these scripts would eventually be made into films. I feel as programmers, we will need to remain alert to ongoing developments as the filmmaking, exhibition, and distribution adapts to a post-COVID-19 world. Films in production are reflecting the unsettling nature of these times; a number of the films I saw for the 2021 festival, although made pre-COVID-19, had an apocalyptic quality that feels resonant and timely.⁹

Audiences responded well to the 2020 festival, as our figures demonstrate, but the future will necessitate agility as we navigate, negotiate, and attempt to change this world in crisis. When I first drafted this chapter, we were completing the program for 2021's festival which featured a new partnership with the Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall—a neighbouring institution to the BFI's Southbank venues where the opening and closing night films as well as further galas and screenings were held. The 2021 Festival has now come and gone. We retained an enhanced digital presence with special events and Screen Talks recorded and also available to audiences outside the UK, and a digital program presented, as in 2020, via BFI Player, the BFI's screening portal. Physical screenings were also hosted at ten venues across the UK, building on the initiatives undertaken for 2020.

On the eve of the Festival opening, journalist Lanre Bakare interviewed Tuttle with the latter reflecting on LFF as "a symbol of resistance for an industry that has been 'absolutely battered' by the COVID-19 crisis" (Bankare

⁹ This feels even more the case in 2022 with films reflecting very directly on both COVID-19 lockdown cultures—as with El Pampero's productions, *La edad media /The Middle Ages* (dir. Alejo Moguillansky 2022) and *Clementina* (dir. Constanza Feldman and Agustín Mendiáharzu 2022)—or featuring broader references to COVID-19 in the characters' behavior and mask-wearing—for example *Tenéis que venir a verla/You Have To Come and See It* (Jonás Trueba 2022).

2020).¹⁰ In further considering the partner venues outside London that formed part of the LFF in 2020, Tuttle went on to note that:

If I am going to venture some sort of prediction for the future, I think we could see a second rise of the importance of local independent cinemas and what role they play culturally within local communities. (Tuttle, quoted in Bankare 2020)

For the programming team, in 2021 we built on what we learned from working through 2020 and the focus on a broader national remit, as well as new modes of working—this included regular fortnightly catch ups with the core program team which made a difference in really building in new structures for very regular communication to address the challenges of not being able to watch films together and comment post-screenings on what we have seen. There were some physical screenings arranged for selection viewing but the vast majority of what we watched for the 2021 festival remained online. Physical attendance at the 2021 festival was 139,400, down 26.6 percent on the in-person attendance for the 2019 festival but there were fewer films featured than in 2019—161 feature films against 229 for 2019 (Dalton 2021b). Tuttle noted the importance of bringing audiences and filmmakers together: “it was great to feel and hear how much it meant to filmmakers, artists, audiences and the industry to be out in force with real vibrancy and a sense of major occasion” (Dalton 2021b). It is this “live” element—the sense of being in a space to experience the film with others and then to be part of that process of engagement between audiences and members of the creative team—that felt so important in 2021.

The 2020 Festival allowed audiences across the UK to engage with the program through its digital hybrid format. 2021 saw the LFF continue with a presence outside London and the Festival is likely to retain this UK wide presence moving forward. Reflecting with Singer, Lutton, and de Witt on lessons learned from 2020, we all agreed that our modes of working shifted as we attempted to think through what a festival needs to be during a pandemic. “To produce any kind of festival at all in such testing circumstances,” Singer concurs “was admirable. But the core LFF

¹⁰ On job losses through COVID-19 to the film industry in the weeks leading up to the 2020 London Film Festival, see Jolly (2020). Dalton (2021a) summarizes the findings of a Creative UK Group report that articulates, as of July 2021, a loss of £2.6bn in GVA during the pandemic. Richards and Pacella (2022) offer useful reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on a range of stakeholders working across Australian film festivals that provides some points of intersection with the reflections in this chapter.

programmers have also been clear about learning some tough lessons from 2020, and I believe there's a real determination to take a greater team-oriented working relationship into future editions, especially if ever again forced to work remotely. That already feels reflected in 2021's dynamic; long may it continue" (2021). Lutton noted significant changes to modes of working that has shifted how we engage with distributors, sales agents, and producers:

Programming is very much about the relationships you build with filmmakers, companies and organizations. I am regularly making new relationships and seeing existent relationships evolve. It is challenging to make new relationships from online-only meetings. I would not like this to continue. However, I have felt more in touch with many existent contacts as we now use Zoom to meet and we have spoken many more times than usual during the LFF selection process. We are no longer reliant on meeting only at physical film festivals and markets. This is a very positive change. (2021)

De Witt too observes that COVID-19 has changed festivals definitively:

They are live events where you never know what will happen—what the playlist will be, and who you will see. Everything is an exciting surprise. You can discover that you actually love the cinema of Albania, you can find yourself standing next to Benicio del Toro at the bar, you can learn how artists' films reveal unexpected visions of ourselves and the world around us. Importantly, festival-going creates new filmmakers. It is the place of intense cinematic pleasures and life changing inspiration. This, COVID took from us in 2020, and changed things forever. Some, like returning to the cinemas, will come back as they were; some will be great improvements in digital access for previously excluded audiences, but some may never be the same, as health and environmental concerns are not going to go away. (2021)

Mass vaccination programs have signaled a return of sorts for the festival culture that formed such an important part of our film viewing experiences pre-COVID-19. The BFI circulated information for festivalgoers on what it was doing to keep audiences, staff, and guests safe for the 2021 Festival—this included enhanced cleaning, BFI staff wearing masks, and the expectation that audience members (with the exception of those who were exempt) would also do so (see Anon 2021). Programmers and program advisors

wore masks on/and offstage, removing them only for the duration of the onstage interview with the filmmaker. Some press coverage commented on identified cases of COVID-19 contracted at the festival (Dalton 2021b; Hipes 2021) but I am struck, in completing this chapter, on the enthusiasm of audiences for being back in the cinema engaging with the filmmakers who came to present work at the 2021 Festival—the thrill of the live. This is what I will carry with me as the lasting memory of LFF 2021—audiences wanting to talk about what they had seen and what it meant to them. The landscape continues to feel uncertain and unstable, but I am consistently reminded of the possibilities festivals offer for encountering works that challenge and inspire audiences—both physical and virtual—to forge a sense of cinematic community.

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