11. Steps to a Greener Film Festival Studies: A Multidisciplinary Subfield and the Environmentalist Turn

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Abstract: This chapter sketches out a possible way to green film festival studies, more precisely to seek out a new theoretical framework and accompanying methodologies that may address issues regarding, say, energy use, carbon footprint of related air travel and waste more adequately. Earlier attempts via the "new materialism" scholarship prove useful but require adaptation and the integration of aspects of the growing field of environmental media studies. Our recent experience of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the response to virtualise film festivals prompts questions concerning energy use by digital video streaming platforms and their respective energy sources. The chapter analyses and evaluates possible theoretical approaches offered by environmental media studies with suggestions on moving forward.

Keywords: streaming platforms, film festivals, virtualized film festivals, environmental media studies, greening media

"From technology news to corporate infographics, the vision of the Internet as a green space at once everywhere and nowhere in particular is pervasive." – Allison Carruth (2014)

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In this chapter I address the anticipated legacy of the sweeping virtualization of film festivals, among other types of festivals, throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic,[2] the environmentalist turn in media studies, and how these important tendencies may or ought to intersect one another in the nascent yet vibrant multidisciplinary subfield of film festival studies.[3] My main methodological-disciplinary concern[4] is how to integrate into my research approach an environmentalist aspect. Bringing together the study of festivals and environmentalism at first glance may seem curious bedfellows; however the intersection is timely, as I argue below. The exponential growth in online streaming platforms (and all other internet activity) can no longer be ignored for its high levels of energy consumption. This might be considered a return to and expansion of the "new materialism" of several years ago (Bennett and Joyce 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012).

Those film festivals that were not canceled during the pandemic were recreated in an adapted form online in part or in whole through a process of virtualization with multiple digital technological solutions and combinations (Zielinski 2020b; De Valck and Damiens 2021). The production of a range of virtualized or virtual film festivals centered on online video-file streaming, either synchronous or non-synchronous, suddenly expanded the possible publics well beyond the constraint of their physical locations. However, the exclusive reliance on the media infrastructure of file-streaming platforms now also poses an implicit issue stemming from the consumption of "dirty energy," as our pre-pandemic internet activities were estimated to be equivalent to that of the entire airline industry, which produces 1 percent of all greenhouse gasses[5] (Carruth 2014; Marks 2020c).

As data journalist Claire Jenik notes on the increased virtualization of our activities over the pandemic, "[a] lot can happen in a minute. And even

2 See the FIAPF's special statement to governments of all levels for extraordinary support of film festivals worldwide during the pandemic ("Why Film Festivals Matter? Call to Policy-Makers from 41 International Film Festivals and Trade Associations" 2020).

3 Sections of this chapter draw from my paper "What You Ask (and How You Ask It) Is What You Get: On Disciplinarity in the Multidisciplinary Studies of Film Festivals" (Zielinski 2020a) delivered at the online version of the Contours of Film Festivals Research and Methodologies Conference in September 2020.

4 For an insightful conversation on the related issue of positionality, see Burgess and Kredell 2016.

5 This estimate was originally calculated and proposed by The Shift Project, which has also attempted to create a browser extension and phone app for estimating the user's carbon footprint from online activities ("'Carbonalyser': The Browser Extension Which Reveals the Climate Impact of Internet Navigation' 2019).

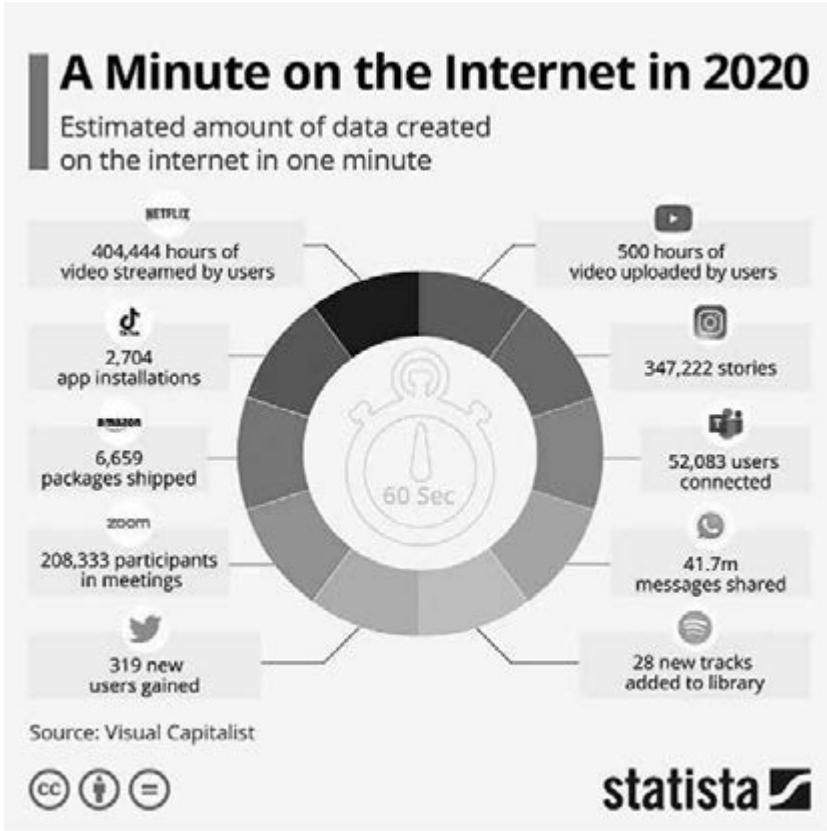

Figure 11.1 "A Minute on the Internet in 2020" (Jenik 2020)

more happened in an internet minute in 2020, the year that made the world change radically. As COVID-19 impacted our lives in a never expected way, many aspects of life – work, education, economy, entertainment, to only cite a few -- moved online." In reference to figure 1, she continues "[…] a single internet minute holds more than 400,000 hours of video streamed on Netflix, 500 hours of video uploaded by users on YouTube and nearly forty-two million messages shared via WhatsApp. That same internet minute also contains more than 6,500 packages shipped by Amazon as well as an incredible 208,333 participants in Zoom meetings" (Jenik 2020).[6] Such statistics make clear the sheer magnitude of our collective internet activities, the comings and goings of various platforms and companies, but also the steady increase in our online activities. I lay out below how film festivals contribute to all

6 Streamed video conferencing has received much attention over the pandemic with a few journalists compiling best practices for users of Zoom and similar platforms (e.g., Suciu 2021).

of this, alongside Netflix, VOD, gaming, among others, but admittedly in their own smaller-scale ways.

This chapter argues that it is time to find a place in the emerging research area of environmental media studies for film festivals, which will require the careful adaptation of recent environmentalist critiques of media infrastructure and materiality (Starosielski 2019; Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020) to film festival studies and the development of new accompanying methodologies. Film festival studies as an emergent subfield itself has always already been highly multidisciplinary, with strong disciplinary divisions between the approaches that stem from anthropology, urban studies, and sociology to film studies and history.[7] In short, I am calling this an *environmentalist turn,* one that will soon be shared across the study of all communications media, with particular regard to not only the levels of consumption, but also the quality of their energy sources and material infrastructures, as their carbon footprints become better known.

While issues related to climate change have been weighing on many of us for years, the sudden arrival of the COVID-19 global pandemic brought to our attention certain technological trends and innovations that had already been in development in an uneven manner for at least a decade. With the sharp halt of international travel, combined with the brutally isolating effect of quarantines and lockdowns, many of our activities became virtualized and shifted online.[8] Although festivals have been experimenting with online platforms, this has been rather slow and unevenly distributed; the global pandemic brought with it the urgent conditions for concerted experimentation and development. Film festivals became virtualized events, as a range of technological strategies was tested out, for those festivals that were not indefinitely postponed. This surge in online activity and dependence on video-file streaming platforms[9] is an appropriate entry point

7 One may trace the emergence of multidisciplinary film festival studies by consulting the Film Festival Research Network's handy online research bibliography (De Valck and Loist 2021).

8 Current terminology favors the use of "virtualization" or "virtualized film festival" to indicate a festival that has at least in part and temporarily been rendered for online digital delivery, while "online film festival" refers to historical film festivals that were created exclusively for online delivery (e.g., Castle 2000). It is reasonable to anticipate that festivals will retain some virtualized component in the post-COVID-19 period and that it will be much more developed than the earlier experimentation.

9 It is useful to note that in the history of networked media music streaming has always led the way, while video followed closely behind.

to start to analyze film festivals critically, in relation to an environmental media studies framework.[10]

While environmentalism, environmental studies, and environmental science are not new, environmentalism has entered media studies not only as a movement to be studied but as a series of positions and approaches, concepts and research methods. Two important new international academic journals, dedicated to the emergent subfield of environmental media studies, are published in English and take on respective editorial positions of their own. *Media+Environment*'s first issue was published in 2019, while the *Journal of Environmental Media* made its debut in 2020, which I detail below in order to uncover a place for the study of film festival in the discourse. It is useful to know the limits and presuppositions of the subfield as well as how we may find ways to draw from and contribute to it.

In the first edition of the journal *Media+Environment* in 2019 Nicole Starosielski lays out the impressive breadth of approaches to environmental media studies under "elemental analysis," when she writes, "[o]ver the past decade, media studies has become elemental. By this, I mean that the field has become attuned to constituent parts, especially to the substances and substrates that compose media" (Starosielski 2019). By elemental she means material elements of any communications media, e.g., the minerals used in making the circuits in digital devices, ecological matter, or the limits on vision in light design. She understands the study of the material elements of media or "elemental analysis" as the "investigation of media's material and conditioning substrates," and claims that "from an elemental perspective, for example, the internet is not merely an array of computers and cables controlled by companies, but a phenomenon composed through water and water's regulation and through air-conditioning systems and thermocultural practices. In such a vision, all media becomes environmental media, and all media studies becomes environmental media studies," while media's elements are "processual, dynamic, and intra-active" (Starosielski 2019). Doubtless such an elemental analysis of the media of film festivals would involve a multiperspectival approach well beyond what is hitherto conventionally expected. A scholar taking this approach in its fullest sense would have to determine the expansive boundaries of the particular cultural manifestation and its many material parts and their consequences, not only including travel to and fro and

10 In a separate but related text that I co-authored with Marjike de Valck, we address the carbon footprint from (air) travel as well as that from video streaming platforms (De Valck and Zielinski 2023).

online streaming, but also the production of texts by the festival, flow of communication from the festival, the physical sites of the festival, and their energy infrastructure, and so forth.

Meryl Shriver-Rice and Hunter Vaughan, the editors of the *Journal of Environmental Media,* sketch out a broad sense of environmental media studies in their first issue, when positing that "emerging interdisciplinary nexus of environmental media studies encompasses and where it falls in the contemporary landscape of scholarship, theory and applied study across various disciplines and their recent subfields committed to studies of the digital era" (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 3). For these scholars, environmental media studies "refers to applied academic studies motivated by the need to address problems at the overlapping spheres of environmental issues and the production and use of *new media*."[11] The emphasis here is clearly on digital media and infrastructure over old media or other communications media. Moreover, the editors understand, reasonably enough, that "[e]nvironmental media studies is an interdisciplinary response to the dramatic escalation, over the past two decades, in the role of digital media in our personal and political lives, and in the direness and awareness of environmental threats and challenges of the Anthropocene" (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 4). Moreover, the scholars posit five guiding principles in their definition of environmental media studies (Shriver-Rice and Vaughan 2020, 4–5), namely:

(1) "the term 'media' in this context refers to the study of digital screen culture widely, defining the digital as all that is created by the binary code of 0's and 1's and is transmitted electronically."
(2) "the term 'media' is limited so as to avoid a number of neologisms and analogical terms that, in our opinion, have the potential to obfuscate the objects of inquiry within environmental media studies; an example of this is 'elemental media.'"
(3) "the term 'environmental' [evokes] the interdisciplinary purview and range of topics that make up environmental studies; as is often the practice of academic environmental studies, environmental media studies should provide recommendations for action when possible and contextualize conclusions […]."
(4) "studies of environmental media treat the digital as material rather than virtual: the Internet and its infrastructures exist in real spaces that use resources in measurable and destructive ways."

11 Emphasis added.

(5) "we borrow from digital anthropology's assertion that 'humanity is not one iota more mediated by the rise of the digital' – it is our definition of being human that mediates what technology is for each of us, not the other way around. [...] This current way of living is increasingly digital, and digital media is increasingly predominant in science and environmental communication – and it is our aim in the *Journal of Environmental Media* (JEM) to explore how this change is affecting our perceptions of and responses to environmental problems.

The editors' very restricted view of media as only digital (1's and 0's) (in principle 1) would surely limit any approach to film festivals to their online video-file and live streaming options. There is a polemic against elemental media (in principle 2) that rests on a fear of obfuscation and works to distinguish one journal's position from another, whereas "environmental" is left quite expansive in its purview (principle 3). In principle 4 we can certainly agree that the increased virtualization of festivals has material consequences. Finally, principle 5 is a polemic against the post-humanist tendency persisting in digital media discourse. As film festival researchers we would have to make the case for studying the larger institution, its media infrastructure, and material demands, which strictly-speaking could not be covered by the editors' five principles above very neatly.

While we are witnessing here two academic journals striving to distinguish themselves from one another as their subfield itself matures, how might environmental media studies contribute to our research and accompanying methods on film festivals and the questions we might ask? In light of the expansiveness of contemporary media studies one would anticipate a more open or pragmatic approach to studying not only digital media technologies themselves but also analogue media, media and film institutions and cultural formations, such as film festivals, the study of which fall into a nascent multidisciplinary area of its own. An analysis of the environmental impact of a film festival, to be sure, would include more than its online streaming or number of light bulbs used in its theaters. How would a researcher compare the carbon footprint of conventional cinema-going to watching films online, and where would such research find a place in the discourse?

Media scholar Laura Marks has initiated an important research project on the carbon footprint of file sharing and video streaming (Marks 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d). This work clearly intersects with the study of film festivals, particularly in view of their recent virtualization to reach their

audiences via online platforms during the global pandemic.[12] Environmental media studies calls the bluff that we have created for ourselves in thinking that digital media is far superior to analogue media and remains "virtual" without any material consequences. If we have become digital since the boosterism of the early advocates (e.g., Negroponte 1995), then now is our reckoning with the materiality and material consequences of our brave new media. The pre-pandemic estimation was that our total internet activities created a carbon footprint roughly equal to that of the entire airline industry. Evidently, the latter industry has taken a hit but has returned to its robust levels as COVID-19 has been brought further under control worldwide; on the other hand, so many of our activities have been swiftly virtualized, abruptly transforming "going to work" into "working from home," wherever possible, which has led to a significant increase in our internet carbon footprint (De Valck and Zielinski 2023).

Marks and her team of researchers released their final report titled *Tackling the Carbon Footprint of Streaming Media* (Marks et al. 2021). The research project's multidisciplinary team of experts consisted of Marks as the principal investigator with a humanities background; Stephen Makoni, a professional engineer; Radek Przedpelski, a new media artist postdoctoral fellow; and Alejandro Rodriguez-Silva, an engineering master's student. It is doubtful that the project could have been accomplished without that combination of humanities or social scientific and engineer expertise and respective research methods. The project's aim only intersects in part with those of film festival researchers. I will select a few of the most salient findings from the report to discuss below. Importantly, the team "corroborate[s] The Shift Project's analysis that streaming video is responsible for over 1 percent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide," which has been debated in the ICT (information and communications technology) engineering community. Curiously, the team discovered that "[s]treaming video epitomizes the rebound effect, whereby increased energy efficiency leads to greater consumption of a resource [...] Streaming video exists within a market-driven feedback loop of infrastructural expansion and consumer demand," that continues to spiral upwards. Increased energy supply is afforded when demand is anticipated, which is known as, "[r]edundancy, or the doubling of power supplies for data centers and networks in anticipation of spikes in demand, is one of the foundations of ICT's disproportionate carbon footprint." Energy is doubled-up to keep the infrastructure operating at

12 For discussion of the innovative Small File Media Festival (https://smallfile.ca/) associated with Marks's research project, see (De Valck and Zielinski 2022, 2023; Zielinski 2020b).

peak demand. The report summary also advises people on how take action into their own hands to curb internet activities, "[i]ndividual best practices include streaming less; streaming at lower resolution; watching physical media and TV instead of streaming; and keeping your phone for three years or more." Digital devices of all sorts have components that require immense energy expenditure, so slowing our impulse to upgrade would make a difference collectively. Moreover, the report argues that "energy efficiency cannot be the only solution: an absolute decrease in energy consumption is necessary," which needs to be considered in an overall calculation of energy use when comparing alternative modes of delivery.

The emphasis here on streaming is important but not everything. In brief, any analysis of the carbon footprint of a particular film festival would likely depend crucially on its size and extent, since the immense resources consumed at, say, Cannes could hardly be compared to a small regional festival in terms of the travel of guests, journalists, and audience members, but also the use of their virtualized components. In such cases, Cannes, among other IFFs, would always leave a considerably larger carbon footprint. Further research should lead us to a set of best practices for the design, structure, and running of festivals, as well as to a series of policy recommendations for various levels of government and the regulation of energy sources and industry. Important research has already been done by tourism studies scholar Rachel Dodds, which has been integrated into a very practical website for festival organizers in Canada ("Green Festivals: A Guide to Greening Your Festival or Event"; Dodds 2018), but the strategies detailed would apply elsewhere in the world. The guide is not restricted to film festivals but any type of festival or event. In January 2021, Marijke de Valck and I organized an international roundtable on greening film festivals, at which not only researchers Rachel Dodds and Laura Marks took part, but also festival organizers Amaia Serrulla (San Sebastian) and Fabienne Merlet (Locarno) (see the revised proceedings in De Valck and Zielinski 2022).[13] Each participant expanded on their own projects. Amaia Serrulla addressed the steps taken by the San Sebastian International Film Festival in its plan for festival directors on how improve the design and running of festivals (San Sebastian Festival News 2021).[14] The festival itself, for example, commissioned an external study of its environmental impact according

13 Both San Sebastian and Locarno are members of FIAPF and fall under the category of competitive film festivals, alongside the likes of Berlin, Cannes, and Venice.

14 I thank journalist and scholar Antonio Peláez Barceló for bringing this development to my attention.

to the categories of mobility (all levels of transportation), waste (printed ephemera and single-use items), contracts (with green clauses), energy consumption of the screenings and event, and commitment. The summary report states that mobility accounted for 75 percent of all emissions due to the air travel of international guests. 76 percent of the paper products were recycled, while 9 percent were reused. The summary restricts energy consumption to the physical location of the event with its screenings, parties, and the everyday running of the festival; however, it lacks any analysis of the virtual components of the festival, their energy consumption and energy sources. Nevertheless, the initiative is impressive and will very likely serve as a practical model for other film festivals to follow. Similarly, Fabienne Merlet described the greening process at the Locarno International Film Festival ("Locarno Film Festival Sustainability Report 2019–20" 2020). As festival researchers, we should take note of this important new tendency in the direction of festivals. Moreover, in an area of research that rarely gains access to sensitive documents such as annual budgets, among others, qualitative approaches to the estimations will prove useful, but we will have to leave such work for a future publication.

Conclusion

As the pandemic experience has reminded us, film festivals are not merely the sum of their films, but rather a valued event that requires expenditure and creates a wide range of cultural and economic benefits. Borrowing here the last line of Janet Harbord's essay on the film festival as event, she writes "[i]t is possible to read about it later, or the following day, or watch it on the news or catch-up channel, but to experience the actuality of the event with all of the historical resonance of that term, the festival demands that you are there within the fold of its moment" (Harbord 2016, 80). The moment of the festival is undeniable. The aim of bringing methods from environmental media studies into our research is not to condemn or deny our cherished festivals but rather to bring awareness of their environmental impact and seek out ways of reducing it.[15]

With our still-fresh experiences of the COVID-19 global pandemic, our intersection with environmental media studies seems not only timely but urgent. The initiatives at the Small Media File Festival as well as at the

15 Apprehensions over the anticipated uses and abuses of carbon footprint metrics and reliance on streaming platforms are addressed in (De Valck and Zielinski 2022, 2023).

San Sebastian and Locarno festivals, among a growing list of others, are promising signs for not simply the festivals but also the research to come. Film festival studies is still a nascent multidisciplinary area of research and ought to remain open to approaches that afford the most sophisticated questions to be posed and pursued.

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