

## 14. Film Festivals in the Time of COVID-19: A Programmer's Perspective

*Jim Kolmar*

**Abstract:** This chapter details the mechanics of orchestrating film festivals, and how those processes evolved and adapted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. As an event-based industry, multiple cancellations meant the festival ecosystem faced near collapse and migration to online platforms. These platforms played a major role in supporting the business and art of film exhibition and curation, including the development of hybrid forms and alternative modes of collaboration and dissemination. Drawing from fifteen years of direct experience in the field, this chapter investigates the stages involved in taking a film from completion to exhibition. It addresses financial considerations, the challenges arising from the pandemic, and confronts common misconceptions and assumptions made about film festivals.

**Keywords:** Festivals, cinema, independent film, curation, film programming, exhibition

As I write this in early 2022, deep into the omicron phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems premature to cast a critical eye over the changes still affecting the film festival landscape. I have worked in the industry for over fifteen years and have seen many shifts in the field, but few have occurred as profoundly and rapidly as those of the last two years. This chapter is my personal attempt to explore and demystify festival practices (primarily

North American) and address how recent changes may affect the future of the field.

In the immediate wake of the devastation wrought on the festival landscape by the onset of COVID-19, difficult decisions had to be made. Major events were canceled, jobs were lost, local economies threatened, and it suddenly seemed as though the entire North American industry sector was built on sand. And what of the filmmakers? A coveted slot at a major festival can launch a career—denied such a valuable platform, filmmakers found themselves navigating an uncertain future, believing the life of their film, and perhaps career, hung in the balance.

In an attempt to mitigate the loss, many of those festivals scrambled to adapt and provide alternative avenues for these bereft filmmakers. South by Southwest (SXSW), for which I have programmed since 2009, was one of the first large events canceled. The organization quickly coordinated a streaming option in concert with Amazon Prime, with titles culled from filmmakers opting-in from the 2020 program. Tribeca Enterprises and YouTube launched “We Are One: A Global Film Festival,” in collaboration with a number of major festivals, including Berlin, Cannes, Toronto, and Venice. This ambitious event consisted of select films from each of the participating festivals, exclusively streaming them for free on YouTube.

Generally, and understandably, the measures took the form of online presentation, either streaming via a bespoke platform, or through agreements with third party platforms; established services such as Cinando and Festival Scope proved vital, with lesser known networking platforms such as BlueJeans and Talque allowing industry professionals to easily meet online, albeit with occasional technical issues. Later, as festivals developed creative approaches, such as drive-in screenings at Portland International Film Festival 2021, these streaming platforms remained foundational to the festival experiences of 2020–21, and even into 2022.

The requirements of the screening, conference, and industry elements of film events have seen a rapid proliferation of video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom. These have become a near-ubiquitous component of the festival and market experience, and it is hard to imagine a full return to in-person communication. It seems that many of these nascent hybrid approaches are here to stay. Why spend all that time, money, and energy on travel and accommodation, with their attendant environmental impact, when you can simply fire up a streaming or video conferencing platform?

Ordinarily, itinerant programmers like me will spend much of their year traveling to festivals and events, scouting films, fomenting and developing relationships, participating in juries, and generally seeking to establish

contact in ways that are difficult to quantify. Concrete results can be hard to distinguish. These experiences share a visceral sense of place, tethered to specific environmental experiences. A meeting venue might have its own smells, sounds, and textures that distinguish each encounter and lend a certain unpredictability and potential that simply isn't present in a flattened video conference environment. This flattening effect means that every group interaction can feel much the same. Names and faces occur on the same plane, with perhaps the only variation being language or time (one of the challenges of this new reality is the juggling of time zones). It could also be argued that the work of building relationships—a cornerstone of the programmer's remit—simply cannot be thoroughly achieved through a conferencing platform. The personal conversations that lead to productive professional outcomes are compromised by distance and isolation, and one can easily imagine how longer term industry goals may be compromised as a result. In fact, given the neurological and social benefits of shared physical space, this seems like an inevitability.

Regarding the online screening experience, it is a strange phenomenon to present a film to an invisible audience, where room dynamics are lost, and the energy of massed people is strikingly absent. The oft-cited assertion that a film is completed by its audience seems especially poignant in this context. Nevertheless, the pursuit of festival exposure continues unabated. Anecdotally, submission numbers still run high and curation continues regardless. Filmmakers still seek that coveted festival slot and the red-carpet experience that often accompanies it. What the pandemic has *not* changed is the sheer difficulty of emerging from the selection process to see your film garner a festival slot. Many of the filmmakers I talk to still regard the festival world as something mysterious, arcane, and ultimately stacked against them, a glass wall standing in their way. In some senses this is true—the reality of larger festivals is that submission numbers can run into the thousands, with perhaps only a hundred or so feature film slots. So, despite the seemingly improved access afforded by the hybrid model, festivals do still appear to function as a gatekeeper to the emerging filmmaker. It is difficult to combat such an entrenched belief, but there are measures that may be taken. A move towards greater clarity and transparency would be a powerful move forward, both curatorially and in a broader industry sense. A key part of the intimidation factor implicit in boarding the festival carousel stems from a belief that filmmakers are removed from the machinations of the selection process. This is a reasonable assumption—curation tends to take place behind closed doors. Filmmakers are not privy to the process, but it would be helpful to understand how the process works.

Here I will address festivals with a large number of open submissions, primarily drawing from my personal experience with SXSW. Many of these observations will also apply to smaller, curated events. A typical festival season begins with an open call for entries, months before the event. A fee will usually be required, which can be substantial, to submit the film for review. Those fees can stack up quite dramatically, and function as another bar to entry. There is much discussion within the festival world around the availability and ethics of fee waivers, and complicated questions around who gets to make films and tell their stories in the first place. The economic burden of filmmaking shows no signs of abating. There is no easy solution, but, at least under normal, pre-pandemic circumstances, I would suggest that a reasonable line item in a film's budget should be allocated for festival submission expenses, something that is not always a foremost concern in the early stages of development/pre-production.

One of the questions I receive most frequently from filmmakers is some variation of "do you need to know someone on the inside?" The question is cynical, but understandable. How does one get past the gatekeepers? I would suggest that the only actionable advantage in having a personal connection with a festival insider is placing your film on a programmer's personal radar. In my experience, there are few situations where a film has managed to traverse and conquer the selection gauntlet purely on the basis of nepotism. That's not to say it doesn't happen, as it might in any industry. It surely does. The problem for emerging filmmakers is the tendency to assume a disadvantage that, in its most damaging incarnation, might lead them to self-cancel and avoid the submission process entirely.

Once submitted, films will typically be watched multiple times by a committee of screeners (the number varies by festival). This committee is ideally composed of a diverse range of people, typically with an industry background, but certainly not exclusively. The aim is to solicit a plurality of opinions that can serve as a filter for the huge volume of films submitted. Meanwhile, festival programmers will also be screening at high volume, and a programmer at a large event will consider hundreds of titles over the course of the submission period. There are systems in place to organize submissions, usually a widely used submission platform such as FilmFreeway, or using a bespoke system built by the festival itself. Either way, there is an attempt to systematize the process, with a corresponding scoring and reviewing system.

Recognizing the potential for this to translate as a cold, mechanical process, I should emphasize a key factor that filmmakers tend to overlook. Programmers, being fundamentally human, have particular tastes,

idiosyncrasies, neuroses, biases, triggers, and passions. Of course there are certain parameters particular to each festival that must be honored, but there is still a curiosity at the heart of the process, and no clear way to predict how a film might connect. There is a mercurial quality to the process that cannot be regimented. Ultimately, a film only needs to connect with one person, and that one person may well be contrarian or obscure in their tastes. It is part of the programmer's job to find those under-the-radar titles that might inspire them to advocacy.

At some point in the process, a filmmaker might encounter some variant of "we loved the film but it's not for us." It sounds disingenuous, but this is actually one of the trickier aspects of programming. With limited slots, decisions will often come down to the elusive concept of "fit." Put simply, this explores the question of whether a film is appropriate for a festival, as opposed to simply "good enough." Conversely, a film that we might fall in love with may be completely outside the wheelhouse of a particular festival, and will need to find a home elsewhere.

Regarding "fit," it is worth noting the unique characteristics of individual festivals—it is never simply a question of selecting the "best" or "favorite" films. Rather, festival programming must be considered holistically. What is a festival trying to say with its films? Who is it trying to reach? In some cases this is clear cut—genre festivals, for example, cater to horror, fantasy, action, and science fiction fans, and as such provide fertile territory for filmmakers working in those sectors. Those same filmmakers may not fare as well in a regional arthouse festival catering to an older audience, or at a festival devoted to experimental work (though clearly there is the potential for crossover).

Furthermore, a new festival in a crowded market must decide how best to stand out. Such a festival might choose to address an underserved market, such as a particular demographic, or a niche genre. This must then be weighed against the needs of the audience, and whether that audience can justify the event. An avant garde dance festival in New York City, for example, would make sense, but it may struggle in a festival located in a remote rural community, or in a city with a limited population of dance connoisseurs.

Premiere status is another element of the process, and a potentially thorny one. Many festivals, such as Cannes and Venice, have strict premiere policies, including world premiere requirements. Outside of these rules, things get more complicated. Is a regional premiere enough? Does a non-premiere film beloved by the festival trump a less popular world premiere? The pandemic period has rendered things even more complex by blurring the definition of what constitutes a premiere, as so many screenings are forced online,

no longer bound by physical geography. Festivals may find they need to be much more flexible in the future. It is worth pointing out that not all festivals rely on open submissions, instead focusing on curatorial work. This kind of curated programming relies on outreach, research, and working with industry contacts and other professionals to secure titles. It can be complex, often involving international travel and its attendant logistical problems.

In some ways the restrictions of the pandemic have simplified things, as festivals are made more accessible as a consequence of reduced travel. Festivals that may have been impossible to attend, for reasons of economy, distance, or timing, may now be attended virtually, with screenings made available via an online platform. This is particularly important in the case of festivals like Berlinale and Cannes, with their associated film markets (EFM and Marché Du Film, respectively). Programmers previously unable to attend for the reasons outlined above are now able to take advantage of the industry presence at such events, extending their reach, and opening up new professional opportunities. Accreditation fees can also be considerably lower than in in-person events, further democratizing the process. It also cannot be underestimated how valuable these new paradigms are in allowing enhanced accessibility for disabled and immunocompromised industry professionals, though there is a case to be made for reviewing fee structures for those literally unable to attend through “normal,” pre-pandemic circumstances.

It is now possible for festivals to reach broader audiences than ever by presenting films online, removing the need for travel. For example Berlinale has successfully presented many of its titles in recent editions via their online platform. Typically these screenings would be restricted to certain time windows, a limited number of streams, and in some cases geography (by geo-blocking, a means of confining a film’s availability by state, city, or even postal code). However, this also means that programmers are at the mercy of technology, which can be glitchy and frustrating as festivals struggle to adapt. There is also more of the flattening effect mentioned above, and one could argue that the resulting fatigue and frustration could ultimately impact decision making.

It is tempting to try and predict the future of festivals. In 2022, still in the grip of a pandemic, it’s hard to imagine how the festival landscape will evolve. While many events are returning to something like “normal” operations, it would seem that a version of the hybrid model is here to stay. For example, the 2022 edition of the Berlinale took place in-person for screenings, while all industry and market events (EFM—the European Film Market) migrated to a purely online experience. Still, there is no clear consensus on how a festival might consistently balance virtual and in-person

events. They might opt to present a full virtual program of titles, with an accompanying program of drive-in screenings, or other socially-distanced outdoor events. Naturally, a key factor is budget, and it's reasonable to assume a festival might use the opportunity to save money. Other factors such as venue availability, audience composition (many events rely on visiting audiences rather than local), and availability of filmmakers and personnel must be taken into account.

Physical events are returning, but cautiously, and with caveats. Programs are not yet at full capacity, affording fewer slots, and fewer screenings for individual films. The use of online screenings means that festivals are also faced with a time-shifting element. There is precedent for this in the form of industry viewing libraries and platforms like Festival Scope that allow on-demand viewing of upcoming and catalog titles, but for a more public audience, the sense of occasion and *festivity* of a time-locked, site-specific event is compromised.

Safety will need to be even more carefully enforced at live events, and those requirements will vary dramatically between different countries, states, and municipalities; political actors are already interfering with the way festivals emerge from the pandemic. For example, some US states, at the time of writing, restrict or prohibit the administration of certain public health mandates, such as vaccine or mask requirements. This could result in particular issues for festivals working with both private and public entities, creating inconsistencies and contradictions, requiring further nuance in an already nebulous, complex situation. For example, SXSW, a for-profit company, may find its internal policies vary from those of regional government, requiring careful negotiation between concerned parties. Much of this can be addressed by improving clarity and transparency in festival policy, but the shifting sands of public health and safety guidelines mean that these policies can change rapidly and suddenly.

Festivals on the scale of SXSW and Sundance also have significant economic responsibilities that cannot be met with online experiences. Smaller regional festivals such as the Portland International Film Festival that serve as vital events connecting otherwise disparate communities (not to mention stimulating economic activity) find themselves struggling to maintain their position in the festival landscape. There is far more at stake here than filmmaker advancement and professional development. A 2019 report<sup>1</sup> by Greyhill Advisors estimated that SXSW had created an

1 <https://www.sxsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Press-Release-SXSW-Economic-Impact-2019.pdf>

economic impact of nearly \$356 million for that year—a number that had been trending upwards year on year. While SXSW is unusual in that it embodies multiple events under one umbrella, these are clearly not small numbers. Inevitably, that event's 2020 pandemic-induced cancellation led to a significant knock-on effect for local businesses that continues to resonate nearly two years later. For example, the same report indicates a total of 12,800 separate hotel bookings over the course of the event. The impact on the hospitality industry in particular, has proven particularly devastating, though the physical event scheduled for 2022 seeks to redress the balance, at least to an extent.

More subtly, it seems clear that without live events the intimacy of personal connection and capacity to nurture relationships is harder to achieve. Many festivals have a particular, often beloved physical location that serves as the epicenter of the event, at least from an industry perspective. For example, International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) has long used the historic Arti and Amicitiae arts space as a hub for its meetings and networking activities. Such a location may also be a conference room, a cafe or restaurant, or even a pop-up venue. Perhaps the true value of these locations is not found in business cards exchanged, or in deals signed. I've come to believe that it is the electricity of human connection that connotes the most dramatic loss to strike the festival world. Like many programmers, particularly the itinerant ones, some of my most meaningful friendships have developed with people I encounter only rarely, but with whom I form fast bonds. I know that any time I go to smaller scale events like Mexico's *Ambulante*, or Belgium's intimate CONNeXT, I will surely run into old friends, deepening our relationships even as we remember that this may be our only meeting for another year or two. The work of industry and personal relationships is ongoing, and can only be enhanced by physical proximity. A great loss and an irony in the age of social distancing.

Writing this in early 2022, we are again confronted with a wave of in-person festival cancellations, and a future that seemed navigable is again in a state of rapid flux and uncertainty. Festivals and related events will need to be nimble enough to adapt and thrive, providing a vital platform for moving image artists of all stripes, without losing sight of the creative vision that underpins their continued existence. Finally, if we are to assume that human connection represents a bedrock of this peculiar industry, a fundamental aspect of our profession has been compromised by the pandemic in ways that far transcend the purely practical. The glass wall seems even more starkly apparent in a world where people are separated from each other by the literal glass of monitor screens. For now, the hope is that, as we

creep tentatively towards an ideal of live interpersonal interaction, perhaps festivals can again serve as a precious locus for true connection, community, and creativity. It will simply require patience and tenacity.

### About the Author

Originally from Wales, **Jim Kolmar** is a Texas-based independent film curator whose resumé includes South by Southwest Film & TV Festival, Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, and Portland Film Festival. He has mentored for the #Startwith8 initiative and London Film School, and is a regular participant on international festival juries and panels.

