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Transitional Film Festival Experiences: Strategies of Resilience in Light of Technological Transformations

A thesis presented

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ABSTRACT

For the past few decades, film festivals have not only been instrumental in the distribution and promotional process of films; they have also been influential agents in film culture. Festivals function as physical sites for professional and business interactions, and exchanges of knowledge and practices; and they provide films with additional layers of meaning, value, and context, setting trends and agendas that go beyond their role as exhibitors. Nevertheless, recent technological changes, such as digitisation and the increasing availability of films and cinema-like experiences through the provision of different platforms and mediums in our daily life, position festivals on the verge of a crucial point that may determine their future existence. Festivals, therefore, are impelled to acknowledge and prepare for a technological shift that could endanger their current hegemonic and successful position.

I will suggest that these circumstances urge festivals to find ways to adapt, and therefore, to form and develop new strategies that will enable them to sustain their relevance, status, appeal, and the exclusivity of the experiences they offer. What strategies do festivals use in order to maintain the singular experience they offer? And what new kinds of festival experiences does this produce? I will argue that the changing modus operandi of festivals leads, in turn, to the creation of new types of festival experiences. Thus, this thesis endeavours to explore this shift further by discerning the methods that festivals are using to sustain their activities in the digital age, and to analyse the types of experiences that they are consequently moulding.

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Aims

On November 21st 2018, *Roma*, by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón, was released in cinemas in the United States. A little less than a month later, the film also became available for home viewing on the streaming platform Netflix, while simultaneously screening in theatres. In this manner, it challenged the common 90-day window in the United States separating theatrical releases and broadcasts on SVOD platforms.¹ *Roma* had already marked a shift in traditional distribution systems just a few months earlier in a long-publicised dispute between Cannes Film Festival and Netflix: the film was denied participation in Cannes's official competition due to the limitations of French distribution rules.² Despite Cannes's executives repeating requests to include the film in the out-of-competition section, Netflix refused and removed the film from the festival.³ A few months later the film won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival; subsequently it received 10 Academy Award nominations, becoming the first film distributed by a streaming company to be nominated for Best Picture.⁴

For the past few decades, film festivals have not only been instrumental in the distribution and promotional process of films; they have also been influential multi-functional agents in film culture.⁵ Festivals serve as physical sites for professional and business interactions and the exchange of knowledge and practices. Moreover, they provide films additional layers of meaning, value and context, and set trends and agendas that go beyond their role as exhibitors.⁶ Nevertheless, recent technological changes and the emergence of powerful actors as Netflix pose a threat to the status quo by presenting successful alternative

¹ Anthony D'Alessandro, "AMC Theatres & Regal Bar Netflix's 'Roma' From Oscar Best Picture Nom Showcases," *Deadline*, last modified January 22, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/01/netflix-roma-wont-play-amc-1202539240/>.

² According to French rules, films are eligible for the competition only if first distributed in theatres with a three-year window between cinemas and SVOD. Recently, it has been proposed to shorten this window. See: <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/proposals-shorten-windowing-france-unveiled-1202722537/>

³ Zack Sharf, "Alfonso Cuarón at Cannes 2018: Festival 'Continuing to Beg' Netflix to Let 'Roma' Premiere," *IndieWire*, last modified April 13, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/04/alfonso-cuaron-cannes-roma-netflix-ban-1201952422/>.

⁴ Oscar Nominations 2019: 'Roma?', 'The Favourite?' and 'Black Panther?' Break Ground," *Breaking News, World News & Multimedia - The New York Times*, last modified January 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/movies/oscar-nominations-academy-awards.html>.

⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," in *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 88.

⁶ Cindy H. Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen* (Chicago: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 1.

distribution models that oppose those traditionally dominated by major film festivals. The rise of Netflix is only one current example of the challenges festivals are facing due to recent major technological transformations. It signifies not only a possible change in distribution systems, but also the increasing availability of films and cinema-like experiences through the provision of different platforms and mediums in our daily life, thus producing settings that can potentially compete with festivals. It seems, therefore, that festivals are on the verge of a crucial point that may determine their future existence. They are impelled to acknowledge and prepare for a technological shift that could endanger their current hegemonic and successful position.

I will suggest that these circumstances urge festivals to find ways to adapt, and therefore, to form and develop new strategies that will enable them to sustain their relevance, status, appeal, and the exclusivity of the experiences they offer. What strategies do festivals use in order to maintain the singular experience they offer? And what new kinds of festival experiences does this produce? I will argue that the changing *modus operandi* of festivals leads, in turn, to create new types of festival experiences. Thus, this thesis endeavours to explore this shift further by discerning the methods that festivals are using to sustain their activities in the digital age, and to analyse the types of experiences that they are consequently moulding.

Festivals' Rise into the Unknown

According to some estimations, there are approximately 6000 film festivals currently active worldwide.⁷ Rising to the first stage of their cultural recognition in the 1940s and 1950s,⁸ it was during 1960s that festivals developed into an international circuit that had an important role in promoting the European 'auteurs' of the time, such as Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini.⁹ Since the 1980s, and especially since the beginning of the current century, film festivals have developed as a global trend that has spread and evolved quite rapidly. The range of festivals has become immense, from the major, internationally-renowned, traditional film festivals like Cannes, Berlinale, and Venice, to local impromptu one-day

⁷ Skadi Loist, "The Film Festival Circuit, Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke D. Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London: Routledge, 2016), 49.

⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

cinema events. Throughout the 1990s festivals came to fulfil an instrumental role in global distribution systems, becoming crucial in determining the success of films.¹⁰

The significance of festivals, however, goes further than their influential part in the distribution process. Thomas Elsaesser points out that festivals are crucial to almost any kind of cinema that is not part of Hollywood's structure: they are 'the key force and power grid in the film business, with wide-reaching consequences for the respective functioning of the other elements (authorship, production, exhibition, cultural prestige and recognition) pertaining to the cinema and to film culture.'¹¹ To this Marijke de Valck adds: '[f]ilm festivals have become an essential part of global film culture. By studying them, we learn not only about festivals, but about film, film history, industry, and much more.'¹²

According to de Valck, throughout their history festivals have been urged to react and transform because of different social and media changes. With technological changes and the rise in number of film festivals in the 1970s and 1980s, festivals had to find ways to differentiate themselves from each other and maintain their status. De Valck notes that while different festivals react and transform in different ways, they remained successful because of their operation as a network—one concerned not only with their interests in films and filmmakers, but also with its own survival. The network was structured in such way that allowed festivals their stability, but also a certain fluidity.¹³

However, de Valck points out that festivals have not yet managed to create stable financial structures for the films they screen or to account for the success of their filmmakers.¹⁴ These shortcomings and others, she claims, have led to uncertainty as to the potential of the festival network to survive and remain successful. This challenging state of affairs makes it pertinent to further explore the current strategies deployed by festivals, in order to better understand their potential for resilience in the digital age.

¹⁰ Ibid., 91.

¹¹ Ibid., 83.

¹² Marijke D. Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (London, England: Routledge, 2016), 69.

¹³ Marijke D. Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 207.

¹⁴ Ibid., 205.

The Digital Turn and the Relocation of Cinema

The technological transformations at play in this discussion originate from various perspectives. As Giovanna Fossati proposes, film is currently going through an unprecedented change with overreaching implications on array of aspects in film culture, from film industry and its audiences to academia and cultural institutions.¹⁵ This can be seen as an important effect of what she and others have been defined as ‘the digital turn’, marking the shift from film and analogue media to digital forms of production, distribution, and exhibition.¹⁶ The ability to easily produce, duplicate, and distribute digital film copies led the way for the emergence of VCR in the 1980s, DVD in 1990s and most recently SVOD (streaming) platforms. In *The Lumière Galaxy* Francesco Casetti describes how these changes contribute to our daily experiences of cinema:

The cinema is no longer only a strip of film to be passed through a projector aimed at a screen inside a public space; it is also a DVD that I play at home to relax...or content that I download from the internet onto my computer or my tablet...media have ceased to be identified with a particular device or with a single support and now utilize new technologies, change their size, and redefine their functions. Products and services have been interchanged, and they now overlap within “digital platforms” [...]¹⁷

Casetti considers the role technology has in the migration of cinema to different media and platforms, consequently becoming almost ubiquitous in our daily lives. From here, we are led to question the position and function of today’s cinematic experience. Casetti and others (such as David Rodowick) have argued that changes caused by the digital turn have undermined the exclusivity of cinema theatres as the only spaces for watching films, leading, in turn, to alterations of the cinematic experience.¹⁸ According to Casetti, the transition of cinema to new environments and platforms also promotes an experiential transition, leading in turn new kinds of viewing experiences. Casetti calls the emergence of these new circumstances *relocation*; for him, the medium is not only a device, but also a cultural form that is defined by ‘the way in which it puts us in relation with the world and with others, and

¹⁵ Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14

¹⁷ Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 2.

¹⁸ David N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9.

therefore by the type of experience that it activates.¹⁹ From this perspective, if we acknowledge a diminishment in the exclusivity of the cinematic experience, we are thus able to recognise that relocation implicates the festival experience and beckons it to enter a state of transition - this is the main point of departure for the present study. From here, *by looking at the transformation of the festival experience, we are offered a way of analysing and understanding the ways festival can respond and persist through new digital technologies.*

While film festivals have been booming for decades and maintaining a high level of cultural influence, it is only recently that academic study has begun to offer a more comprehensive perspective on festivals as a cultural phenomenon.²⁰ Despite this rise, little research has been offered on the impact of digital and technological changes on festivals. This can be attributed to the fact that some of the transformations described here are rather recent, or can indicate the difficulties in identifying how these changes affect festivals.

It is beyond the scope of this work to provide an analysis investigating all the ramifications of recent technological transformations on film festivals. And neither would it be feasible to systematically point out the direct links between digitisation and festivals' changing practices; there are more factors and different circumstances involved which can be possibly explored here. Instead, the intention is to utilise the new circumstances technological changes produce as a lens through which we can examine how festivals adapt their modus operandi and how this transforms and produces new festival experiences. To narrow this further, this study is focused on the analysis of two case studies of festivals which demonstrate innovative programming and methods, but can nonetheless be seen as indicative of broader trends, because of their globally-significant status.

Finally, it should be mentioned that 'experience' is an evasive term with multiple definition. With an eye to the Merriam-Webster definition of the term—'something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through'²¹ – I use 'experience' to encompass the consolidated view of particular circumstances, situations, and different elements that define the presence (virtual or physical) and the encounter of the visitor with the festival.

¹⁹ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 19.

²⁰ Dina Iordanova, "Film Festival Studies: an overview of a burgeoning field," in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit* (2009), 179-180.

²¹ "Definition of Experience," Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/experience>

Methodology

Analytical Framework

This thesis combines several analytical methods. First, I will employ the concept of the *dispositif* as a central analytical framework throughout this work.²² In ‘screen media’, *dispositif* refers to the configuration of technology, text and spectator in a specific viewing situation.²³ Frank Kessler argues that films are viewed (experienced and understood) differently according to the situation in which they are shown.²⁴ *Dispositif*, therefore, allows us to consider how different types of spatio-temporal conditions implicate the viewing experience. Due to its relational structure, *dispositif* offers a useful lens for discerning the characteristics of the different viewing and festival experiences that emerge as a result of digitisation and the relocation of the cinematic experience. More specifically, it will be used through two perspectives. First, building on the work of Nanna Verhoeff, the *composite dispositif* designates the broad structure of the festival’s space and operation, which will be considered as an arrangement of multiple elements that produce its unique meaning through their work as an assembly.²⁵ Second, *dispositif* is used to analyse viewing experiences, to discern their distinct qualities and elements, and to examine the way they are used in order to attest for the modifications in the festival experience.

A second indispensable concept for this thesis is *relocation*, building upon the work of Francesco Casetti. According to Casetti, with the migration of cinema to various platforms and technological mediums, the cinematic experience is losing its exclusivity not only as a location, but also as an experiential and cultural site of cinema.²⁶ For Casetti, different conditions and circumstances invoke different viewing experiences. Therefore, as new types of cinematic experiences are emerging in other locations and platforms, new and transformed

²² *Dispositif* has been used in different variations in media studies to analyse the relationship between technology, discourse, and the subject, originating from the apparatus theory by Jean-Louis Baudry. See: Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974): xx, doi:10.2307/1211632.

²³ Nanna Verhoeff and Karin van Es, "Dispositif Analysis: How to do a Concept-Driven Dispositif Analysis." Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2017, 1.

²⁴ Frank Kessler, Dominique Chateau and José Moure, "The Screen and the Concept of the Dispositif," in *Screens: from materiality to spectatorship - A historical and Theoretical Reassessment* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 261.

²⁵ Nanna Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens: The Visual Regime of Navigation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 104-108.

²⁶ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 19.

experiential forms are being produced. Similarly, it allows us to discern which exclusive attributes are 'lost' from the so-called 'traditional' experience in the cinema, and what kind of new festival experiences are produced through the relocation of cinema.

As another framework of analysis I draw upon Mieke Bal's approach to *theoretical objects*. According to Bal, the materialistic character of objects allows us to conjure theoretical ideas that go beyond the object's present and singular existence.²⁷ This warrants a micro-analysis view that is useful in discerning the layers composing the adaptive processes festivals are currently going through. By focusing and exploring the visual characteristics of central objects in the festival experience, their different facets will become illuminated as we examine their multiple meanings and functions.

This thesis is also predicated on the seminal work of Marijke de Valck on film festivals. De Valck's research is pertinent to this study as it provides a rich theoretical foundation for the analysis of festivals that incorporates both historical and contemporary perspectives. Of particular significance is her work surveying the effects of media divergence in film festivals.

Case Studies Analysis

In addition to the analytical framework, I will employ two case studies that will attest, validate, and apply the conceptual and theoretical ideas proposed in each chapter by looking at the festivals' approach to technological transformation: Rotterdam International Film Festival (IFFR) and International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA). IFFR and IDFA are both A-list festivals- they are considered among the leading festivals in the world, and the largest and most significant ones taking place in the Netherlands.²⁸ The intention here is not to conduct an extensive survey of both festivals, but to focus on specific elements and methods in their operation. This will allow me, first, to explore the type of viewing experiences becoming available in festivals in the age of digitisation and cinematic relocation. Second, the events in question will be explored as examples of the strategies festivals are using in order to sustain their exclusiveness and their unique function in film culture. To further explore this view, I will also integrate semi-structured interviews with the artistic

²⁷ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4-5.

²⁸ "International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam Policy Plan 2017-2020," accessed August 2, 2019, <https://d25cyov38w4k50.cloudfront.net/downloads/IDFA-Policy-Plan.pdf?mtime=20180612112946>; "IFFR Is..," IFFR, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://iffr.com/en/who-we-are>.

directors of both IDFA and IFFR, as well as a text analysis of the festivals' publications as they appeared on their websites and programmes. Together, these methods can provide a substantial form of examination for the festivals' missions, aims, activities and their changing *modus operandi*.

IDFA and IFFR serve as pertinent choices for this research since, as well as representing the forefront of the film festival circuit, they both have a particularly keen eye for cultural trends and technological innovations. Therefore, the analysis of IFFR and IDFA can provide insight not only into the manner in which festivals are currently shaping due to technological transformations, but also into the ways in which other festivals will further follow and operate.

Structure of Argumentation

This thesis is organised around three central perspectives through which I examine festivals' experiential transition due to technological changes: *physical*, *virtual* and *online*. These perspectives frame the focus of this research and also form the structure of this work.

In Chapter 1 (Physical) I approach the festival as an 'event', in order to frame the festival as a spatio-temporal entity with distinct operations, processes, and happenings that are formed as a result of its physical existence in the 'here and now'. Here, I will argue that the event allows festivals to produce unique experiences, with the potential to affirm the exclusivity of the festival.²⁹ Within this, I wish to ask: What is the importance and function of 'the event' for film festivals? How does the event transform in the age of digitisation? What are the distinct characteristics of the festival as an event that contributes to its resilience in the age of digitisation? Central to this chapter are Gilles Deleuze's theory of the event and its potentiality and Janet Harbord's research on the festival's temporal elements. The work of these scholars allows us to acknowledge the potential singularity of the festival-as-event and the sense of contingency that is required for its successful existence. The chapter concludes with the analysis of IFFR Live that demonstrates how this can take form.

Chapter 2 (Virtual) focuses on the phenomenon of VR and the viewing experience of VR in festivals. First, I survey the manner in which VR became a prevalent and a successful exhibitory phenomenon in the festival circuit. Second, drawing on Tom Gunning's work on

²⁹ By 'exclusivity', a term I use continuously in this work, I refer to the conditions, elements or traits which characterises the festival's experience as singular or unique, distinguishing it from any other experiences.

the 'cinema of attractions', I will suggest that the rapid rise of VR in festivals can be seen as part of festivals' gravitation towards novelties and singular events. This is a result of VR's cultural and technological premises: I argue (with reference to Casetti) that because VR is still a rare and mostly inaccessible experience for the audience, festivals remain able to offer an exclusive experience, as well as reinforced relevance and context, through the exhibition of VR works. This leads to the question: Which new types of (viewing) experiences does VR offer? Jonathan Crary's historical perspective on attention aids me in bringing into light some of the distinct traits of VR as a medium for 'enhanced attention'. Finally, by looking at VR through the lens of its dispositif in the case of IDFA's DocLab, it becomes possible to identify the unique characteristics of a new kind of viewing experience in festivals.

Chapter 3 (Online) analyses festivals' use of online streaming platforms. As festivals are seeking for new ways to align themselves with cultural and media trends, as well as to overcome the challenges those trends produce, I foreground festivals' venture to the online domain as an attempt to sustain their relevance and 'expand' the festival experience beyond its physical presences. Studying the use of streaming platforms can therefore function as a way of exploring the existence of festivals beyond their typically singular spatio-temporal existence. With the aim of disclosing which types of viewing experiences emerge through festivals' use of streaming platforms, I will build upon Casetti's views of the relocation of media; and I will also analyse the dispositif of this experience in the cases of IFFR's and IDFA's independent streaming platforms.

Case Study One: Rotterdam International Film Festival (IFFR)

As the biggest film festival in the Netherlands and one of the largest in the world, IFFR annually offers an extensive program of over 500 films, attracting more than 300,000 visitors.³⁰ The festival's focus lies with emerging filmmakers and young talents, with its main sections being devoted to first-time directors of feature films, documentaries, and short films. Nevertheless, as with other festivals of its scale, the festival's activity extends to a wide range of aspects of film: funding (Hubert Bals Fund), promoting co-production and business-related interaction (CineMart) and training (Rotterdam Lab).³¹ Despite its large scale and popularity, IFFR aims to position itself as a festival encouraging independent filmmaking as an alternative to commercial and mainstream approaches.³²

IFFR has been characterised by its innovative and experimental approach to programming, combining cinema with other fields of art, performance, and media.³³ The case study will centre around two elements in IFFR program. The first, IFFR Live, is a cinema event that took place between 2015 and 2018. The event included simultaneous screenings in approximately 40 cities worldwide, allowing the audience to take part in a live Q&A sessions through social media platforms.³⁴ Focusing on that event will enable us to identify several elements that warrant the existence of IFFR Live as a unique event; that enhance the relevance of the festival as a facilitator of exclusive cinematic experiences. The second, IFFR Unleashed, is the festival's streaming platform that presents films previously screened at IFFR. The leading and influential position of IFFR in the international festival circuit can facilitate the diffusion of its models and inspire festivals worldwide. For this reason, it is also a significant example that enables an exploration of the motivation of festivals to expand their operation and the experience they provide into new online domains.

³⁰ "IFFR Is..," IFFR, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://iffr.com/en/who-we-are>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "IFFR Closes 47th Edition," IFFR, last modified May 8, 2018, <https://iffr.com/en/blog/iffr-closes-47th-edition>.

³³ Wong, "Film Festivals", 48.

³⁴ "IFFR Live," IFFR, last modified February 9, 2018, <https://iffr.com/en/iffr-live>.

Case Study Two: International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)

IDFA is the largest documentary film festival in the world. Like IFFR, IDFA is an annual festival that occupies a central place both in the Netherlands and in the global festival circuit. In the last edition of IDFA in 2018, more than 280,000 visitors attended and approximately 300 films were screened.³⁵ Moreover, its organisers state that its main interest lies with ‘creative documentaries’ that represent both visual and artistic vision to convey the story.³⁶ As a result, the festival encourages modes of documentary-making that feature emerging digital technologies, which frequently involve experiments with non-traditional film forms and film experiences.

As with IFFR, the analysis of this case is divided into two elements. My interest with IDFA lies primarily in its programme for digital and interactive media. In 2007 IDFA became one of the first festivals to introduce a separate curated programme—DocLab—for new media works and interactive media. DocLab is one of the leading sites for innovative digital media works within the expanded field of documentary film. It includes a seven-day exhibition, live events, screenings, conferences, and workshops.³⁷ My case study is the DocLab exhibited in November 2018. Within that edition, 34 interactive works were presented, of which ten were VR projects. Part of the VR works were shown at what the festival calls ‘VR Cinema’, in a greenhouse-like structure. This viewing experience has permitted particular conditions that heighten the question of how the experience becomes distinct and differentiated from more ‘conventional’ viewing experiences. The second element of IDFA investigated is its online streaming platform. Presenting more than 700 films, it provides both a tool for professionals and a way for the audience to engage with the festival’s content beyond its physical presence. In the final chapter of this work, the platform will be compared and discussed along with IFFR’s streaming platform mentioned above.

³⁵ "Annual Report 2018 - New Media," Mediacard 2019 - Start, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://publications.idfa.nl/annual-report-2018/new-media/>.

³⁶ "Mission Statement," International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam | IDFA, accessed August 2, 2019, <https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/mission-statement>.

³⁷ "About IDFA DocLab | IDFA DocLab," IDFA DocLab | Exploring Documentary Storytelling in the Age of the Interface, accessed December 8, 2018, <https://www.doclab.org/about/>.

CHAPTER 1 - THE FESTIVAL AS EVENT (THE PHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE)

In *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, Marijke de Valck argues that the attempt to answer the question of what a film festival is with an overarching definition is prone to failure: 'What are needed instead are frames that can be utilized to expose the different mechanisms operating within and through festivals, as well as parameters that allow us to differentiate between them.'³⁸ Following de Valck, my intention is to propose the view of the festival as an *event*, as a lens that can disclose its current qualities and characteristics in light of digitisation and technological changes. I foreground the concept of the event as a useful way of exploring the festival as a spatio-temporal entity with distinct operations, processes, and happenings that are a result of its operation in the 'here and now'. I argue that festivals utilise their unique characteristics as events as a strategy to maintain their resilience, thereby sustaining their exclusivity in light of technological transformations.

Using Casetti and de Valck as a point of departure for this argument, I will first examine the effects of the relocation of the cinematic experience and media convergence in challenging the exclusivity of the experiences offered by festivals. Second, I will consider the multiple functions of the festival badge as a theoretical object that enables us to examine the existence of the festival as a spatio-temporal entity. From there, I will outline the distinctive characteristics of the festival as an event through the philosophical perspectives of Gilles Deleuze and Janet Harbord. Turning to their work leads me to highlight the ways in which multiple divergent processes take place within the festival, in turn promoting the contingent nature of the festival-as-event. Then, building on the conceptual framework advanced by Nanna Verhoeff, the space of the festival will be examined as a *composite dispositif*— an arrangement encompassing different elements and layers such that its meaning is produced through its existence as an assembly.³⁹ Finally, I will examine some distinct traits of the festival-as-event through the case of IFFR Live. I will frame IFFR Live as a type of an 'expanded cinematic experience', functioning as a strategy to sustain the exclusivity of the festival experience.

³⁸ Marijke D. Valck, "Introduction: What is a Film Festival? How to Study Festivals and Why You Should," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke D. Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

³⁹ Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens*, 104-105.

The Flow and Relocation of Media

De Valck uses the term *convergence* to frame some of the recent major technological and cultural transformations. She quotes media scholar Henry Jenkins who defines it as ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment and experiences they want.’⁴⁰ From here we can acknowledge that the growing presence and availability of media leads to an increasing amount of media experiences. This view has been affirmed through what Francesco Casetti calls *relocation*—the idea that cinema no longer exists only within the boundaries of the cinema theatre, but has now wandered to our living room, train, aeroplane, a park or almost anywhere we can get a hold of a screen. For Casetti, every viewing situation invites a different type of experience, characterised by the condition of the surrounding environment and the platform used to access the content.⁴¹ As new experiences are emerging, some of the aspects that used be exclusive to the cinema theatre are subtracted. Similarly, the cinematic experience in the festival is being challenged. Put simply, the question being put forward is: *What makes the (festival’s) cinematic experience different from other experiences becoming available through relocation and the convergence of media?*

These challenging circumstances for festivals originate from their fundamental structure as physical entities. Drawing on the work of economist Chris Anderson, de Valck argues that the economic models film festivals rely on raise the challenge of adapting to the convergence of media. First, this is because they are established on physical settings—what Anderson calls ‘the long tail’ model.⁴² As such, processes that have become highly accessible in recent years, such as the duplication and distribution of media, deliver a challenge for festivals to keep up with the competition. Second, festivals are limited due to their inherent curatorial practices (e.g. providing an alternative to Hollywood’s mainstream industry by presenting films with a lower commercial potential) and dependency on physical attendance of the audience within geographical limitations.⁴³ These risks prompt de Valck to question the

⁴⁰ De Valck, “‘Screening’”, 16.

⁴¹ Casetti, *The Lumiere Galaxy*, 28-32.

⁴² De Valck mentions that Anderson considered the old model of film festivals as ‘poor supply-and-demand matching’ and ‘a market response to inefficient distribution.’ ‘The long tail’ model suggested the transition from media and entertainment based on scarcity to a world of abundance and choice, facilitated by digitisation and the physical storage space that becomes superfluous. See: De Valck, “ ‘Screening’ ,” 18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 19.

current *raison d'être* of film festivals: 'Why wait for a festival to screen the newest horror films from Japan, when you can purchase them online? Why travel to Venice when you can watch a DVD at home? The question, in short, is whether film festivals will become superfluous in a market of abundance?'⁴⁴

In the time since de Valck wrote about the options becoming available through DVD in 2008, an abundance of media platforms (such as streaming, most notably) have emerged,⁴⁵ subsequently, heightening the variety of different media and cinematic experiences. These circumstances of media convergence and the relocation of the cinematic experience foreground festivals' need to 'justify' and substantiate their physical existence. As the core element of festivals is their spatio-temporal character, it becomes vital for them to warrant a meaningful experience through it, one that cannot be experienced elsewhere. From this perspective, it is essential to explore the kind of practices festivals activate in doing so.

Reading Badges

Before moving further to the perspective of the festival-as-event, I would like to explore the use of festival badges as conveying the existence of the festival as a limited spatio-temporal entity. Drawing on the work of Mieke Bal, I study festival badges as *theoretical objects*. Bal suggests that approaching objects in this way allows us to recognise their meaning before perception. In that way, we can look at them in a different light that may raise conflicting ideas, but also bring forward their materialistic character to conjure theoretical ideas that go beyond the object's present existence.⁴⁶ Badges are instrumental here since they function as a singular object that has multiple functions, hence enabling us to go deeper into the festival's ontology. It is through this that the multiplicity of happenings and scenarios taking place in the festival reveals itself, reflecting its spatio-temporal character.

Festival badges can be found almost in every current film festival. They are worn both by the festival staff and by the different players taking part in the festival. Badges can be

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ The mushrooming media experiences in recent years have turned DVD into an almost obsolete format. This is yet another testimony to the rate in which technological changes in viewing habits and distribution modes are occurring, and therefore to the rapid manner in which festivals are urged to respond. It can be argued that DVD's dominance has been replaced (for now) by streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. Their domestic prevalence and popularity, and the type of content they offer, pose a threat much more urgent for festivals than DVD did. The way festivals seek to deal with these challenges will be further explored in chapter three.

⁴⁶ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 4-5.

purchased—for example, in the case of the general audience acquiring an unlimited or a weekly pass for to the festival’s events—but in most cases they are granted, based on a process of accreditation, in which the eligibility of the participants is examined to determine whether they qualify for accreditation and for which type.⁴⁷

In its most basic function the badge *identifies*, carrying the participant’s name and usually a photo of their ‘role’ in the festival. As an event that places a strong emphasis on ‘networking’ and gathering strangers together, the badge functions as a useful tool to determine ‘who’s who’. Furthermore, the badge *classifies*. It helps to define the participants according their role: audience, filmmakers, press, or different types of industry professionals. The badge also *regulates access*, as a pass, from visitors and cinephiles buying unlimited passes to screenings to press and professionals who are often more ‘privileged’ or prioritised, and can take part in exclusive events or screenings that are not open for the general audience.⁴⁸

In that manner, the badge also represents a hierarchy that is formed among the festival participants based on their role or cultural status,⁴⁹ one that resonates with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of power gained through cultural and social capital.⁵⁰ This comes into play also through the *direction of movement* the badge produces. Although it may seem that the audience is free to navigate anywhere, the badge drives crowds to specific locations because of their different levels of access.

But the badge also diffuses different crowds to different locations in the festival because they differ in their interests. Badges can therefore be seen as agents that govern the festival’s seemingly divergent traffic, activity, and structure. Thomas Elsaesser points out that there are ‘[m]any invisible hands [that] steer and administer the chaos of a festival.’⁵¹ By

⁴⁷ See for example the badges division in Berlinale: "Information on Accreditation - EFM Registration for Industry Professionals," Berlinale, accessed April 24, 2019, https://www.berlinale.de/en/branche/akkreditierung/fachbesucher_efm/index.html

⁴⁸ Thomas Elsaesser also mentions festival badges as responsible for creating exclusion with different areas of access leading to ‘a fear of missing out’; see Thomas Elsaesser, "Film Festival Networks: The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: University of St. Andrews, 2013), 95.

⁴⁹ In some festivals, such as Cannes, badges or accreditation are a prerequisite to gain access to the festival as the festival asserts itself as ‘reserved to film industry professionals’. According to Cannes Film Festival “every participant must be granted accreditation to take part in the Festival”. See: "Accreditations," Festival De Cannes 2019, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/participer/accrredit>.

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 37 - 50.

⁵¹ Elsaesser, "The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," 96.

encompassing multiple different functions, the badge both maintains order and balance between the different players taking part in the festival's event, but also enables independent happenings.

Therefore, despite its somewhat dividing character, the badge is also instrumental in *unifying*. At once, a group sometimes consisting of thousands of people turns into a community now defined by their shared location and sense of participation in the festival's activities. The fact that they all share a badge (despite having different characteristics) defines them as one group.

We can therefore view badges as an object that allows the festival to contain multiple processes, happenings, and scenarios.⁵² Badges support independent streams of happenings: they allow participants to experience the festival according to different patterns existing separately, through the division of accessibility and roles; but they also disclose the activity of the festival as one whose meaning is formed through the combination of agents and events, for instance by establishing a temporal community. Badges also represent the festival's operation as a composite dispositif as I will further explain in due course.

Finally, the badge warrants temporality and represents the limited physical space of the festival. While outside of the festival's parameters it is almost meaningless, 'inside' and during the festival it is invaluable. With the changes occurring from one edition to another, the function of the badge is not fixed; rather, it is dependent on the timing and edition of the event.⁵³ This demonstrates that festivals are capable of setting rules and defining meanings that are exclusive to that very happening. Thus, the badge signifies and marks the festival's event temporal, spatial and conceptual boundaries.

Setting the Event

As Elsaesser and de Valck point out, the existence of film festivals as time-and-space-dependent is essential in defining its character;⁵⁴ de Valck writes that '[f]estivals take place in the here and now. They invite people to engage with cinema in ways that are uniquely tied in

⁵² I elaborate further on the use of the term 'scripts' to define the multiple modes of existence the festival permits, followed by Daniel Dayan's analysis. See p. 22.

⁵³ For instance, as the process of accreditation is limited to one edition, ironically, a filmmaker winning the main competition in one festival may not be entitled to a badge the following year.

⁵⁴ Elsaesser, "The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," 95.

with the space and time of the festival event.⁵⁵ Following this, I wish to suggest the view of the festival as an *event*: one that enables festivals to accumulate their exclusive value through their existence in the 'here and now'. Moreover, the event is a useful concept for discerning some of the distinct characteristics of the festival as a spatio-temporal entity.

Gilles Deleuze proposes shifting the focus from thinking in terms of objects and subjects to processes, relations, and happenings.⁵⁶ In his analysis of Deleuze's idea of the event, Stephen Zepke writes that for Deleuze 'the ideal event is entirely determined by the intense and differential rhythms that connect and divide its singularities, these relation forming series that compose an event's "structure". Events, in that sense, are 'jets of singularities,' converging and diverging in reciprocally determined differential relations.'⁵⁷ An event, in that manner, is not one happening taking place on its own, but multiple connections that constitute it. The Deleuzian view of the event as supporting 'multiple processes' suggests that opposing happenings function as a quintessential part of the existence of events.⁵⁸ From here, considering the festival as event through Deleuze enables us to view it as a form that allows for contradictions and diverging scripts.

This may be a result of the innate character of the event, which maintains an internal temporal tension. For Deleuze, the event is neither fixed in time nor limited to one form of existence. It takes place between double dimensions: 'On the one hand the event is actualised [...] within a present whose duration includes a past and future relative to it, while on the other it remains a purely virtual and incorporeal "idea" expressed in an infinitive verb (e.g. to cut) [...] the event is always and at the same something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something which is happening.'⁵⁹ In this manner, we can think of the festival as taking place in the space between its singular character, as something that has just occurred, and the previous editions that form its past exceptions and fuels the current potential for what is going to happen. This creates a state of constant expectation, which is actually useful festivals in order to sustain a sense of anticipation and relevance from one edition to another.

⁵⁵ De Valck, *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, 9.

⁵⁶ The most significant discussion of the event by Deleuze can be seen in *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ Stephen Zepke, "Becoming a citizen of the World: Deleuze Between Allan Kaprow and Adrian Piper," in *Deleuze and Performance*, ed. Laura Cull (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 110-111.

⁵⁸ Charles J. Stivale, "Event," in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2014), 83.

⁵⁹ Zepke, "Becoming a citizen of the World", 110.

For Elsaesser, this is actually how festivals produce meaning. Borrowing a term from Jacques Derrida, he defines the festival-event as characterised by a 'disjunctive singularity' in which meaning 'can only emerge in the space between the iterative and the irruption—the twin poles of a festival's consistency as event, which explains the obsession with new-ness: empty signifier of the compromise struck at any festival between the same and the different, the expected and the unexpected surprise.'⁶⁰ While festivals aspire to be stable and successful, it is their relationship with the 'unknown' and 'unplanned' that enable it to produce meaning and warrants its exclusiveness.

Within the festival happening, one can think about the awards ceremony—an integral part of almost every festival. While the frame of the ceremony is familiar and expected—the prizes categories are known, there will be winners, there will be speeches, and so on—there is still always also a dimension of the unknown that maintains suspense, a thrill from the possible surprise and the accidental: who will win, whether there will be any controversy, embarrassments, how the ceremony will unfold, and so on. This foregrounds the existence of the festival as positioned between the spectrum of a planned and organised event, and one that is fluid, dynamic, and enabling the unknown. The festival then fears the banal and aims to oppose identical patterns. Therefore, it strives for the coincidental to affirm its nature as a singular happening.

This notion is substantiated by film theorist Janet Harbord's work on the festival. Harbord argues that the festival is open to contingencies that promote singular or unexpected events, scandals, or unique affairs that happen in the here and now. According to Harbord, the festival demands the accidental to assure its relevance and importance. Contingencies support the production of singular or unexpected events—scandals or unique affairs—that happen in the here and now and help to define the actuality of the festival. In that manner, the disruption becomes essential for the festival's existence as it distinguishes it from past events.⁶¹

While Harbord posits that disruptiveness is not only not an obstacle for the festival's existence, but an essential virtue, it can still be argued that the festival's structure endeavours to settle the opposing 'jets' within it and to bridge its divergence. The operation of the festival

⁶⁰ Elsaesser, "The New Topographies of Cinema in Europe," 83.

⁶¹ Janet Harbord, "Contingency, time, and event: An archaeological approach to the film festival," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (2013), 78-79.

as a composite dispositif can be seen, therefore, as one that facilitates multiple happenings and bridges contradicting streams. As a space—a cinema complex for instance—the festival allows its visitors to navigate and choose from different happenings, screenings, discussions, and meetings taking place simultaneously. As Verhoeff suggests, the composite dispositif allows each element to function on its own, but it is through their integrated activity that a meaning is formed in a way that is unique for that site.⁶² In the case of the festival, the events and films permit independent meanings and experiences; however, their consolidated existence within the festival's event warrants its unique value and context.

This duality – of 'independent' and 'composed'- was also seen through the festival badge. The view of the different roles and scripts badges permit disclose the character of the festival as an entity containing multiple happenings, but one whose meaning is formed through their composition, reflecting the multiplicitous nature of the festival. Daniel Dayan's seminal analysis of Sundance Film Festival provides a framework for exploring the multiple processes of the festival further. Dayan suggests that festivals form a set of 'collective performances.'⁶³ While festivals follow a 'script', in which every player involved fulfils a certain role, they also allow for a multiplicity of scripts, consequently enabling a different set of experiences for participants and various performances. 'There were forces in the festival that insured coherence. But there were other forces that were discordant.'⁶⁴ In this manner, rather than trying to subdue these contradictions, the festival manages to contain them, thereby reinforcing its richness and appeal. Festivals thrive on multiplicity and their variance is mostly regarded as a virtue. Through the event and the existence of the festival as a composite space, different 'collective performances' can work together to maintain its stability and exclusivity while also existing independently, giving rise to the event's singularity.

To briefly summarise, the importance of the event for our purposes is the manner in which it provides unique values for the festival's physical and temporal activity. The event warrants singular and contingent happenings that are not repeatable, as it produces meaning between the planned and the unplanned. The event facilitates the festival's divergent scripts, providing it its richness and unique value, as seen both through its existence as a composite dispositif and in the function of the festival badge that can permit dissimilarities in a specific

⁶² Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens*, 104.

⁶³ Daniel Dayan, "Looking for Sundance: The Social Construction of a Film Festival" in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: University of St. Andrews, 2013), 47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

time and space. In this way, the event produces exclusivity - the experience that events allow for can only take place through a physical and current presence in the festival. In this age of media convergence and competing digital experiential forms that can be activated almost anywhere, the distinct characteristics of the event play a significant role in making the festival a unique psychical experience. In this manner, the event is both a pertinent framework to investigate the festival's potential resilience to technological transformations, and a useful strategy that festivals can 'activate' in transitional times to reaffirm their existence. To demonstrate how this comes to light in a recent example, I now turn to the case of IFFR Live.

Case study: IFFR and the case of IFFR Live

Approaching Expansion

IFFR Live is by no means a traditional cinema event; it testifies to the nature of IFFR as encouraging experimentation and innovative approaches at the intersection of art, cinema and digital media. In her analysis of IFFR, de Valck mentions that during the 1990s 'technological developments and changes in the film industry already forced the festival to react and adapt.'⁶⁵ In 1996 the festival introduced a program dedicated to the 'future of cinema' (Exploding Cinema), which they defined as to time when 'traditional cinema theatre would no longer be the only place where cinema would manifest itself.'⁶⁶ Therefore, the festival's keenness to keep up with technological transformations, and the manner in which it challenges traditional modes of viewing, can provide us with a framework to examine the way festivals are responding and the strategies they are using in light of the challenges presented by technological developments. In an interview, the artistic director of the festival, Bero Beyer, dismissed the notion of 'traditional' cinematic experiences and affirmed the justification of the festival to present 'expansions' of it:

So we're very much, unlike Cannes, are not insistent on the fact that the only proper way towards cinema is in a five hundred seat theatre with Dolby sound. Fuck it, no. It can be anything...I think increasingly, the relevance of what that cinematic experience actually is becomes detached from the original

⁶⁵ De Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, 201.

⁶⁶ De Valck, "Screening", 17.

medium that it was. To be honest, it would be naïve to think it hasn't been that way for over decades now.⁶⁷

Distinguishing itself from more traditional festivals like Cannes, it seems that Beyer aims to position IFFR as a festival with unconventional and bold programming choices that remain mindful for the significant transformations in cinema. For IFFR, the openness to what can be regarded as the `expansion of cinema` seems to be used as a strategy that aids in defining and framing their activities. From this perspective, IFFR Live should be recognised as one recent example that characterises IFFR's approach in light of technological transformations.

IFFR Live: From Relocation to Expansion

Held annually between 2015 and 2018, IFFR Live was a cinema event that included simultaneous screenings of one film in approximately 40 cities worldwide, while allowing the audience to take part in live Q&A sessions through social media platforms. During the first three editions of IFFR Live the films were screened to more than 20,000 'cinema visitors', 3,402 online viewers, and 246,500 viewers through broadcasting. The festival regarded the event as a success.⁶⁸



Fig. 1: IFFR Live 2018. Image: <https://iffr.com/en/iffr-live>. 2018.

⁶⁷ Bero Beyer, Personal interview, Rotterdam, March 21, 2019.

⁶⁸ "IFFR Live," IFFR, last modified February 9, 2018, <https://iffr.com/en/iffr-live>.

While above I forwarded the concept of the event to characterise the festival as a whole, here I wish to focus on one element in the festival programme by analysing IFFR Live as an event. As discussed above, the event allows us to recognise the festival's distinct features as a spatio-temporal entity. While IFFR Live relies upon the event's characteristics, it also challenges them and deploys them in ways that go beyond a 'limited' traditional physical space and time structure. My intention here is to foreground how IFFR Live as an event permits a sense of an 'enhanced community' that also raises questions on the significance of presence in the festival experience.

Historically, shared experiences fulfilled a fundamental part in the cinematic experience. Casetti suggests that '[c]inema makes us feel like members of a community. The sense of belonging that accompanies the watching of a film is born of the possibility of projecting the same film in the same moment in many places'.⁶⁹ While Casetti refers to the possibility of simultaneous screening mainly in a hypothetical and nostalgic manner, this notion seems to clearly articulate the operation and aims of IFFR Live. With the migration outside of the cinema theatre, the communal experience is a significant element that is becoming absent. The shared experience of watching the same film with 500 viewers in a packed cinema is evidently different than watching it alone in one's living room. Without claiming that cinematic experience is superior than the domestic, this still warrants the loss of shared experiences (among others effects of relocation). With the festival's increasing motivation to affirm its sense of exclusivity, restoring some of its so-called traditional and elements that have become more rare, as communal and shared experience, can be seen as a strategy to provision exclusive experiences in light of technological movements.

How can the concept of the event help us understand how this occurs? First, IFFR Live harnesses the event's ability to include divergent and multiple scripts as mentioned earlier, while simultaneously introducing another domain of activity. By this I mean the combination of the seemingly contradictory aspects of the 'physical' and the 'virtual', the first being reliant upon the other. Physical presence is still important: audiences attending the screenings gain 'proximity' for the event; they see the operation of the event first hand, including the preparations and production efforts; and they absorb a sense of expectation and enjoy the advanced technological conditions of the cinema. That said, the unique element of the event

⁶⁹ Casetti, *The Lumeire Galaxy*, 23-24.

comes forward through its existence in the 'virtual': audiences present in different cinema theatres, at home or on transient locations watching the event on IFFR's streaming platform are also able to experience IFFR from a distance. While every location permits different experiences and various dispositifs, the model in play here brings them all together and promotes a sense of unity in the event: all the audiences watch the same film and they were all able to take part in the online Q&A session despite their diverse locations. In this way, the event's model allowed for variance and richness of experiences, despite the diverging scripts. This was also reflected in IFFR Live publication's text: 'It's all about bringing a film beyond just one cinema theatre. It's turning a single screening and subsequent Q&A into a global event in which anyone can participate [...].'⁷⁰

This brings forward the notion of 'enhanced community' produced by IFFR Live. The 'virtual' functioned as an additional layer for the 'physical', extending the type of experiences available by forming a bigger audience and a larger community that transcend the physical. While the traditional festival event hosts communities in the always-limited circumstance of physical space and presence, the virtual aspect allowed the possibility of elevating this and enhancing its communities to potentiality infinite spaces that can experience the film.⁷¹

IFFR Live can be seen as a clever strategy of fighting the relocation of cinema. Acknowledging the multiplicity and prevalence of platforms and media that can facilitate cinematic experiences, it represents an approach in the spirit of 'if you can't beat them, join them'. In other words, IFFR does not seek to stress the importance of physical presence, (perhaps a strategy we could expect it to take), instead, it recognises the benefits and added values that can emerge from relocation, for the purpose of promoting expanded, richer, and unique experiences. Interestingly, this becomes available through digital technologies. The live and simultaneous broadcasting and streaming to different platforms, as well as the inclusion of popular social media channels, are all recent results of technological developments that allow IFFR Live to take place. Moreover, they fill a central place in its existence, and contribute to its uniqueness because of the innovative aspect they promote.

⁷⁰ "IFFR Live at Sarajevo," IFFR, last modified July 1, 2018, <https://iffr.com/en/iffr-live-at-sarajevo>.

⁷¹ This notion is playfully highlighted in the website's text: "There is nothing like the shared experience of enjoying a film with a room full of people. Oh wait, there is! Because if you go to one of the five IFFR Live shows, you could be joined by thousands of others." See: <https://iffr.com/en/2016/programme/iffr-live>

It seems, therefore, that a fluid interpretation of IFFR for cinematic experiences, and a relatively more experimental approach for programming, allows the festival to explore routes for resilience that have proven successful. In IFFR Live we see an especially intriguing case of seeking resilience and exclusivity in light of relocation and digital technologies, precisely by *using* those challenges to produce an exclusive experience. These became available through what I have called the 'enhanced communities' produced through the expanded existence of the event in a virtual dimension, allowing viewers to take part through different platforms in various locations. IFFR Live has managed to incorporate all those diverse situations into one unique cinematic event. I argued above that physical presence is a crucial condition for experiencing the unique characteristics of the festival; but here, through various means of soliciting the 'virtual', these limitations fade as a new kind of presence emerges. It foregrounds 'presence' as an elusive idea in the age of digitisation and relocation, as the 'physical' and 'virtual' blend together.

Can this imply something about the way future cinematic and festival experiences will look like? In any case, it seems that festivals will have to constantly move forward to adapt. Beyer mentioned his intention to evolve IFFR Live into something else in the next edition of IFFR. 'We do it for four years in a row, it almost "well this is a regular now" but it isn't. We've done this now so we want to do something else and figure out another way of breaking out.'⁷² Therefore, even when successful, festivals have to continually renew, update, and replace programmes, sometimes for the mere sake of change and 'newness', but also in order to follow the pace of technological developments. This gravitation of festivals towards new trends and novelties leads us to the next chapter, which explores the phenomenon of VR exhibition in film festivals.

⁷² Bero Beyer, Personal interview, Rotterdam, March 21, 2019.

CHAPTER 2 – THE EXPERIENCE OF VR IN FESTIVALS (THE VIRTUAL PERSPECTIVE)

In chapter 1 I analysed the festival's character as an event and demonstrated the instrumentality of its spatio-temporal character in its operation. I argued that, due to the relocation of the cinematic experience and its technological transformation, festivals can deploy elements and strategies that are unique to their existence as spatio-temporal events in order to produce a sense of exclusiveness. The previous chapter examined this mainly through the more traditional perspective of the festival as a physical happening. Here I propose festivals' ventures in Virtual Reality (VR) as another perspective to examine the strategies they employ in order to sustain their relevance, appeal, and exclusive experiences in light of technological transformations. How did VR become a prevailing phenomenon within the film festival circuit? What does VR contribute to the festival experience? Which type of viewing experiences does it yield and what are the distinct characteristics of VR in a festival? I approach these questions by first surveying the phenomenon of VR in the film festival circuit and foregrounding its rapid prevalence as an indication of the potential value it has for festivals in the current digital age. Second, by exhibiting VR as a novel phenomenon, I argue that VR allows for new types of viewing experiences as part of the festival, reaffirming their sense of 'events' and 'attractions' and enabling enhanced modes of attention and interest. This will be examined through a dispositif analysis in the case study of IDFA's DocLab, with the aims to disclose the unique characteristics of VR in the festival and its role in shaping festival experiences.

A thorough comparison of film and VR as media is not within this scope of this study; and neither do I wish to posit them as two equivalent media forms, since they differ immensely. Yet, within the shifting experiences offered by festival, it is essential to foreground the central role VR is playing. This, in turn, requires acknowledging that VR adds something to the viewing experience in festivals that was not there before, thereby disclosing the contribution of VR to further analyses of how festivals can adapt and respond to recent digital transformations.

The Virtual Circuit

While there are various types of VR devices and uses, from gaming to scientific research and training purposes, this analysis will be focused on the use of VR in film festivals, primarily as a 'cinematic-like' (narrative or documentary) storytelling platform. This refers to VR in its use as head-mounted device, including a head-mounted display (HMD) that enables the stereoscopic three-dimensional images, motion tracking detectors, and frequently headphones.⁷³

In examining the way VR was developed as a phenomenon in the festival's circuit, I first consider its mushrooming within the scope of a larger movement of art institutions seeking to engage the audience in new ways due to increasing digitisation. Chiel van den Akker and Susan Legêne claim that in the past few decades visitors in museums have gone from being passive observers to participants who are involved in the process of the meaning-making of artefacts.⁷⁴ Others, such as Christian Heath and Dirk vom Lehn, have referred to the growing trend of 'interactivity', suggesting that digital technologies encouraged museums to explore ways they can enhance the experience of visitors.⁷⁵ Though museums and festivals differ in many ways in the kind of experiences they offer, it could be argued that they both struggle to maintain their relevance in the age of commodified experiences, and many other competing forms of leisure and education activities.⁷⁶ Interactivity, therefore, emerged as a desired form that can offer 'enhanced experiences' of allegedly more value. The 'interactive turn' and the flourish of VR in film festivals grew in parallel to each other.

In 2014, only few film festivals were exhibiting VR as part of their regular programming. VR was a novel technology still underdeveloped, presented mainly in professional conferences examining its function through technological perspectives.⁷⁷ By

⁷³ See more on HMD: "Redirecting," Digital Object Identifier System, accessed July 1, 2019, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0141-9382\(02\)00010-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0141-9382(02)00010-0).

⁷⁴ Chiel van den Akker and Susan Legêne, "Introduction Museums in a Digital Culture: How Art and Heritage Become Meaningful," *Museums in a Digital Culture*, 2017, 7-8, doi:10.1515/9789048524808-002.

⁷⁵ Christian Heath and Dirk vom Lehn, "Interactivity and collaboration: new forms of participation in museums, galleries, and science centers," in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. Ross Parry (London: Routledge, 2013), 266.

⁷⁶ Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, "Can Museums be All Things to All People?: Missions, Goals, and Marketing's Role," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 18, no. 3 (2000):266, doi:10.1080/09647770000301803.

⁷⁷ Technologies allowing viewing of 'virtual world' through HMD, already emerged in the late 1960s, and the term was coined by Jaron Lanier in 1989. But the popularity of VR in media culture rose significantly with the development of Oculus Rift HMD in 2012. See: K. Williams and M. Mascioni, "The Drive for Immersion," in *The Out-of-Home Immersive Entertainment Frontier: Expanding Interactive Boundaries in Leisure Facilities* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 79-112; Jonathan Steuer, "Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence," *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 4 (1992): doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00812.x.

2019, however, most of the major festivals, including the three leading ones—Cannes, Berlinale, Venice—have not merely incorporated VR, but also have presented extensive programmes, events and conferences focusing in the medium.⁷⁸ The fact that all three major festivals have acknowledged VR in such capacity and velocity, despite their traditional nature, cumbersome structure and suspicious approach for new trends, can indicate that VR has managed to infiltrate the festival circuit as a phenomenon bound to set a deep impact in the scene. How did VR become such an integral part of the festival circuit?

The view of festivals as an interconnected network with mutual effects, affirmed through the research of Thomas Elsaesser and Marijke de Valck, enables us to see how an embracement of VR by the ‘big three’ encourages its dissemination to other festivals, as in many cases those set the tone for others to follow.⁷⁹ This may also partially explain why other renowned and successful film festivals such as Tribeca, Sundance, IDFA, and South by Southwest (SXSW) regularly dedicate extensive programs to VR as part of their annual program, as smaller festivals follow as well.⁸⁰

The motivation of festivals for presenting discoveries and new trends was demonstrated through the pivotal role they played in the contemporary evolution of VR. After Shari Frilot, director of Sundance’s programme for new media (New Frontier), experienced VR for the first time in 2012, she decided to program the work for the festival; turning Sundance to one of the first major festivals to exhibit VR.⁸¹ For this purpose, a mobile version of a VR headset was developed. This eventually evolved into Oculus Rift, one of the leading VR devices today.⁸² Sundance’s online archive describes this moment as marking the beginning of VR’s major popularity in the technology, gaming, and film industries.⁸³

⁷⁸ In 2017, Cannes initiated a five-day conference (“Next”) dedicated to VR including exhibitions and discussions. See: <https://vrfilmreview.ru/https-vrfilmreview-ru-nextmarchedufilm2017-5c51392b70e6>; In the same year, Venice introduced the first VR competition in an international film festival (“Venice VR”). See: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/cinema/2018/venice-vr>; From 2017 until 2019, Berlinale included a conference (EFM VR NOW Summit) and VR screenings held both as part of the festival’s market (EFM) for professionals, and for the public audience. See also <https://medium.com/@miniflixTV/the-state-of-film-and-virtual-reality-77876bcb1b56>

⁷⁹ Elsaesser, “Film Festival Networks”, 84.

⁸⁰ “New Frontier,” Sundance Institute | Sundance Institute, accessed May 20, 2019, <http://www.sundance.org/programs/new-frontier>; “Tribeca Immersive,” Tribeca, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.tribecafilm.com/immersive>.

⁸¹ “10 Years,” Sundance Institute | Sundance Institute, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://www.sundance.org/newfrontier10?ref=VR>.

⁸² Frilot experienced the documentary project *Hunger in Los Angeles* Nonny de la Peña in the research lab of University of Southern California (USC). For the exhibition in the festivals, one of la Peña’s collaborators, Palmer Luckey, created a mobile version with a headset of the VR film. This later becomes one of the early version of Oculus Rift headset, one of leading platforms for VR, later sold to Facebook for \$2 Billion Dollars. <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/hunger-in-los-angeles/>

⁸³ “10 Years,” Sundance Institute”, <https://www.sundance.org/newfrontier10?ref=VR>.

Another important turning point in the relationship between VR and festivals was in 2017, with Cannes selecting a VR film by Oscar-winning director Alejandro González Iñárritu to present at the festival's official selection. This was the first time a VR work was presented at the traditional French festival.⁸⁴ Cannes's publicity text defined the exhibition of the work as an historically ground-breaking cinematic event: 'A chance to try an experience which some are already comparing to that of the first ever spectators in the history of film.'⁸⁵ Another indication of the work's impact came later that year, when *Carne y Arena* received a Special Achievement Academy Award for 'its visionary and powerful experience in storytelling.'⁸⁶ According to the Academy President John Bailey, *Carne y Arena* 'opened for us new doors of cinematic perception.'⁸⁷ Such remarks are symptomatic of the view that VR is an extension of film or a cinematic equivalent. VR was being indulged by these institutions with the promise of becoming the successor of film in the next part of its evolution.

In less than a half a decade VR emerged as a central phenomenon in the global film festival circuit, turning from a technological gadget in its initial development stages to a prominent visual exhibition form recognised by the most renowned institutions in the film industry. As such, VR has become the most embraced medium by film festivals that is not film. In what follows I argue that exhibiting and embracing VR as a new phenomenon allows festivals to maintain a sense of relevance and actuality, helping to facilitate the existence of festivals as active and up-to-date sites for innovations and discoveries of new types of experience. In the following section I will further demonstrate how this takes place.

In the Event of VR

As we have previously seen, a great deal of the discussion and 'hype' surrounding VR still relates to its potential and premise—'what it will be able to do', whether as a successor of

⁸⁴ *Carne y Arena* (*Virtually Present, Physically Invisible*), was a six-and-a-half minutes-long VR that places the participants together with a group of Mexican migrants crossing the desert between the Mexican and the U.S. border. See <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/05/alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-carne-y-arena-cannes-vr-1201819096/>

⁸⁵ "Event: Virtual Reality Seen by Iñárritu with *Carne Y Arena*," Festival De Cannes 2019, accessed August 2, 2019, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/69-editions/retrospective/2017/actualites/articles/event-virtual-reality-seen-by-inarritu-with-carne-y-arena>.

⁸⁶ "Alejandro Inarritu's 'Carne Y Arena' Awarded a Special Award Oscar at the Academy's 9th Annual Governor's Awards," Accessed August 1, 2019, <https://oscar.go.com/news/winners/alejandro-inarritu-s-carne-y-arena-awarded-a-special-award-oscar-at-the-academy-s-9th-annual-governor-s-awards>.

⁸⁷ Virtual Reality Seen by Iñárritu with *Carne Y Arena*, <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/69-editions/retrospective/2017/actualites/articles/event-virtual-reality-seen-by-inarritu-with-carne-y-arena>.

film or as a new type of experience in development—rather than its current function. This leads us to examine its exhibition in festivals through the lens of their fundamental interest in new phenomena and novelties. In chapter one I established the importance of discoveries for festivals, or what Elsaesser calls ‘the obsession with new-ness.’⁸⁸ The anticipated sense of the event, as well as the fact they have to sustain their relevance annually, can play a role in encouraging festivals to investigate new forms of exhibition and innovative cinematic media.

The fascination with VR’s ‘innovativeness’ echoes what Tom Gunning, in his influential study of early cinema, has called ‘the cinema of attraction’. Gunning highlights the exhibitionist character that was present in early cinema, of one that ‘shows views’, instead of ‘telling stories.’⁸⁹ The point of similarity with VR can be seen in Gunning’s view of cinema as a technological attraction for the audience in its early days. ‘Early audiences went to the exhibition to see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder [...]), rather than to view the films.’⁹⁰ This prompts us to frame the interest of the audience in VR as one that is based less on the content or the aesthetic qualities of VR films, and more on the fact they have the opportunity to witness and experience the new medium in action. From this we recognise that festivals provide an experience that was unknown before and that cannot be experienced almost anywhere else. ‘The cinema of attraction directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.’⁹¹ This prompts the instrumentality of VR in facilitating two conditions that are valuable to festivals’ operation: first, their fundamental interest in discoveries that become available here through the ‘newness’ of VR; and second, the emergence of a singular event, a vital element in the festival’s existence (as discussed in chapter one).

In this way, VR presents a dichotomy (one that is conducive for festivals) between its notion of future potentiality on the one hand, and its already significant contribution to media and culture landscapes, on the other. This recalls the Deleuzian concept of the event discussed above, for the potential of the event is something that is at the same time just happened and about to happen. This view can partially explain the way the interest around

⁸⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, “Film Festival Networks”, 83.

⁸⁹ Tom Gunning, “The cinema of Attractions Early film, Its Spectator and the Avant- Garde,” in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*, ed. Dina Iordanova (2009), 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

VR is being sustained within film festivals in recent years. The novelty of VR as a medium, and the fact its effects are not fully clear or expected, can provide the needed tension for festivals to operate as events: between the planned and expected, and the unknown. As opposed to cinematic experiences, there is still a distinct sense of curiosity towards VR, consequently framing the encounter with it as a unique experience.

In this context, it is pertinent in to consider the ideas of Casetti regarding relocation. As the cinematic experience becomes increasingly accessible in a mundane context, whether domestic or 'in-transit', there could be a growing interest from festivals to incorporate experiences that cannot be simply 'relocated' and remain exclusive to physical sites. Despite its ubiquity in popular culture, VR is still a scarce medium that can still be seen as a relative novelty for a general—and sometimes even professional—public. As a commodified product, VR headsets are still not very accessible due to their high costs, and their domestic use is focused on games rather than 'cinematic' content.⁹² Loren Hammonds, programmer of Tribeca Film Festival's programme for interactive media, illustrates this point: 'We don't have the Netflix "problem" yet of losing audiences to their living rooms, mostly because the majority of people haven't adopted headsets for at-home usage yet. What we're offering are premium experiences that simply can't be duplicated at home...'⁹³

Through Hammonds's view, we are able to recognise the discrepancy between the high interest in VR and the limited amount of people that have experienced it. This presents a unique opportunity for film festivals to align or equate themselves with this medium (and by extension, pioneering future technology) simply through the provision of access. Besides museums which also incorporate VR, and to a lesser extent, festivals function as the main arena for exhibiting the medium. From here, it can be argued that the unique experience that was once reserved for viewing film in the cinema is now channelled to VR, allowing festivals to retain their existence as singular events. Thus, thanks to VR, festivals achieve increased relevance and a rejuvenated sense of appeal and exclusivity.

⁹² Why is VR Failing to Take Off (Again)? - 2018," Tech.co, last modified August 30, 2018, <https://tech.co/news/why-is-vr-failing-to-take-off-again-2018-08>.

⁹³ Wired Staff, "Film Festivals Like Tribeca Move to Make Virtual Reality a Marquee Event," WIRED, last modified April 24, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/film-festivals-move-to-make-vr-marquee-events/>.

Absorbed Attention

Perhaps one of the most common ways VR is being described in the media and popular culture is as 'immersive.'⁹⁴ For a lack of a better definition, 'immersion' came to be an umbrella term that encompasses a set of feelings and sensations relating to the 'aliveness' of VR.⁹⁵ Andrew Murphie posits that VR creates a 'total enough world [which] overwhelms present perceptive thresholds.'⁹⁶ This notion of VR as an experience that surpasses our cognitive and physical capacity is also implied through Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of VR: 'a computer-generated three-dimensional landscape in which we would experience an *expansion* (my emphasis) of our physical and sensory powers.'⁹⁷

To extend this line of thought, Sarah Rubidge mentions the difficulty of describing immersive installations. Nevertheless, she defines them as 'primarily multi-sensory experiential environments, designed to be inhabited rather than viewed as an artefact. Because the viewers are responsible for generating and/or processing imagery in real time, each material manifestation of these installations is unique, a never-to-be-repeated event.'⁹⁸ In this way, we can recognise that immersive happenings not only revive the sense of the event as discussed above, but also engage the visitors in a strong sensual experience. Rubidge further argues that focus of the installation is not to be seen or heard, but rather to absorb the viewers/participants in a sense of 'being' or 'becoming' through deeper physiological responses creating experiential events.⁹⁹ The sense of 'being' or 'becoming' can be likened to the 'absorption' of visitors in the experience of such events, and can be foregrounded as part of festivals' struggle for the viewer's attention nowadays.

⁹⁴ The Wikipedia entry about VR provides an example of how intertwined these terms are, as they appear as one entry: 'Immersion (virtual reality)'. Interestingly, although the word 'immersion' has existed since long before VR, the interconnectivity between the terms implied by the Wikipedia entry suggests that immersion *only* exists through VR. See: "Immersion (virtual Reality)," Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, last modified August 1, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immersion_\(virtual_reality\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immersion_(virtual_reality)).

⁹⁵ Erkki Huhtamo provides a useful historical perspective for the search for cinematic immersive experiences. See Erkki Huhtamo, "Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

⁹⁶ Andrew Murphie, "Putting the virtual back into VR," in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (London: Routledge, 2005), 197.

⁹⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2015), 97.

⁹⁸ Sarah Rubidge, "Sensuous Geographies and Other Installations: Interfacing the Body and Technology," in *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity*, ed. Sarah Broadhurst and Josephine Machon (Basingstoke: Springer, 2006), 112.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

As discussed in chapter one, the convergence of media taking place in the last two decades promotes an overflow of technological and media stimuli that diffuses the viewer's attention. The increasing 'flow' of media platforms and content raises a challenge for festivals to obtain the viewer's attention. This 'absorption' of the viewer can thus be seen as a strategy for festivals to produce a viewing experience with increased attentivity.

To understand this better, it is useful to refer to Jonathan Crary's historical analysis of attention. In *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Crary postulates that since the middle of the nineteenth-century attention has been in a state of a crisis. This state of affairs arose as an effect of industrialisation, urbanisation, and the logics of capitalism that encourage a constant stream of new products, stimulations and information that pose perceptual difficulties for the individual. Therefore, according to Crary, these processes of modernisation and new technologies, have forced us to adapt to the unnatural condition of focusing on a limited number of stimuli.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Vivian Sobchack has argued that technological developments are not neutral; they should be considered within a set of social, economic, and political interests.¹⁰¹ Attention, in that manner, can be seen at the centre of a battle by platforms and mediums aiming to police our attention in order to capitalise on it.

Following this line of thought, the rising prevalence of VR in festivals should be considered within the context of digitisation and abundance of distractions in the current age. As Casetti's ideas on relocation and the ubiquity of the cinematic experience also suggest, our daily lives and experiences now constantly blend with cinema in its different forms and platforms: on a mobile phone 'on the go', in a flight, or perhaps in a tablet in the kitchen while we cook dinner.¹⁰² Outside of the isolated walls of the theatre, the experience of cinema becomes diffused, running in parallel to multiple external stimuli and different actions we perform daily. As such, cinema is no longer a medium that we become fully 'devoted' to.

This type of diffused viewing evidently divides our attention and affects our viewing experience. Casetti mentions that media studies (unsurprisingly) show that viewers who watch films on different types of non-cinematic screens are more likely to engage in multitasking activities, consequently leading their attention to the film to decrease: '[t]hey

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 12-14.

¹⁰¹ Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen", 3.

¹⁰² Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 35.

work through a process of sampling rather than trying to grasp everything that is presented to them; they mix images of reality with more abstract information'.¹⁰³

From this it can be argued that the VR exhibition is a response to two significant transformations that compromise our attention. First, as seen through Crary's analysis, festivals are in a state of confrontation with competing mediums that aim to police our attention, a confrontation whose stakes have been recently raised due to rapid technological developments in digital media. Second, the relocation of cinema has compromised the directed attention of viewers, as they have become accustomed to 'multitask viewing'. Here, the festival suggests a 'resolution' to the problem of attention through VR that warrants an experience of undivided attention. As mentioned, VR is a useful medium to capture one's attention because it suggests 'absorption', through which viewers lose contact with their external environment. As I will further demonstrate, this is facilitated through the potential of VR to capture one's vision and sound in ways that only a small number of other media are capable of. Moreover, as I will further emphasise, the process of experiencing VR in festivals is preceded by a series of procedures and actions that requires us to 'commit', thus enhancing our attention when the experience is set in motion.

Case Study: VR Dispositif in IDFA

In the following section I analyse the dispositif of VR in DocLab at the 2018 edition of IDFA. I demonstrate how this conveys some of the distinct characteristics of VR mentioned above, as well as a strategy for maintaining relevance and appeal. The analysis is divided into four sub-sections, each at a different 'scale', so as to permit a comprehensive view of the approaches to VR and its dispositif at IDFA. First I explore IDFA's programming approach to VR as a novel phenomenon. I then move closer to analyse its reservation process as conducive in developing a sense of 'eventness' and contingency. Thirdly, I approach the space VR is exhibited in at IDFA as a theoretical object in order to analyse its viewing experience and IDFA's framing of VR. Finally I reach the micro-level of the experience, exploring the manner in which VR is able to produce an enhanced level of attention.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 30-31.

Novel Approaches

IDFA's DocLab has been presenting new media projects since 2007, and in 2014 it became one of the first festivals to exhibit VR using the Oculus Rift.¹⁰⁴ Since then, approximately one third of its program is dedicated to VR every year.¹⁰⁵ As suggested above, festivals utilise the attraction and 'buzz' VR raises in order to position themselves as relevant sites of discovery and innovation. How does this come to light in the experience IDFA is offering?

In an interview in 2017 Caspar Sonnen, IDFA's head of DocLab, stated: 'I think last year was peak VR...it's just the thing that everybody sees or looks for...over the last two years, in the new media space, we have been slightly unable to keep our eyes off VR...Is this balloon going to grow? Will it pop?'¹⁰⁶ In Sonnen's words we can recognise the allure VR holds as a new phenomenon, an experience that is not yet understandable and that drives a curiosity of both the audience and the professional industry. IDFA's artistic director, Orwa Nyrabia, has suggested that most of the audience still experiences VR as 'something they do not understand.'¹⁰⁷ This promotes the view conveyed through Gunning's notion of the cinema of attraction discussed earlier. From this perspective we might understand the motivation of the audience to attend the festival as founded on a curiosity about new technologies and new inventions. In one of IDFA's reviews of VR projects in 2014, journalist Thomas Ricker wrote: 'Using the Oculus Rift can easily overwhelm first time users. The experience is so different from anything before that you can't help but lose your shit; mouth agape, bent into childlike wonder as you reach out to grasp at polygons that don't exist.'¹⁰⁸ This echoes Gunning's idea that the focus of early cinema first lay with 'showing views', instead of 'telling stories'.¹⁰⁹ The viewer's motivation seems to be directed here to the *form* of VR and its novelty, rather than its content.

The website publication text presents the mission of DocLab as to 'showcase interactive documentaries and other new digital artforms that successfully push the

¹⁰⁴ "IDFA Program Guide 2014," Issuu, accessed August 3, 2019, https://issuu.com/idfa/docs/idfa_program_guide_2014., program guide, 107

¹⁰⁵ "About IDFA DocLab," IDFA DocLab | Exploring Documentary Storytelling in the Age of the Interface, accessed August 2, 2019, <https://www.doclab.org/about/>.

¹⁰⁶ Damon Wise, "IDFA DocLab's Caspar Sonnen: 'We Can No Longer Just Blame Technology For Everything?'," Variety, last modified November 19, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/idfa-doclab-caspar-sonnen-we-can-no-longer-just-blame-technology-everything-1202618786/>.

¹⁰⁷ Orwa Nyrabia, Personal interview, Amsterdam, January 17, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Ricker, "I Hate Video Games but I Love the Oculus Rift," The Verge, last modified December 4, 2014, <https://www.theverge.com/2014/12/4/7326017/i-love-the-oculus-rift-but-i-hate-video-games>.

¹⁰⁹ Gunning, "The cinema of Attractions Early film", 58.

boundaries of documentary storytelling in the age of the interface.¹¹⁰ This frames the interest of DocLab in novel phenomena as a core element of its mission. The programme is thus defined by its ability to provide technological and cinematic discoveries and innovations. As long as VR remains a prevalent phenomenon in the festival circuit and media culture that stimulate curiosity and potential, the exhibition of VR in DocLab allows IDFA to position itself as one of the leading and pioneering forces behind it. The attempt to try answer the question of the direction VR is going ('will it grow?' or 'will it pop?') implies that the modus operandi of DocLab impels it to remain alert to new phenomena, trends, and 'the next best thing'.

Between the Planned and Unplanned

The VR cinema discussed earlier exhibited four VR films and operated during the entire duration of DocLab, between 09:00 and 23:00 each day. On the one hand, this timeframe allowed for an increased availability. At IDFA films are usually screened between one and five times during the festival, whereas the VR films were 'screened' dozens of times a day. Additionally, they were short—between 7 and 14 minutes—thus facilitating a larger number of screenings and exchanges of viewers.¹¹¹ On the other hand, because of the limited availability of seats and technological restrictions, these projects required reservation in advance for a specific date and time. The reservation could only be done 'on site' and on the same day, thus requiring the visitor to be present in the festival and commit to the screening time beforehand. This puts the visitor to an awkward conflicting position: s/he is required plan choices in advance, but can only do so on site, leading to extensive time gaps between one film and another (based on availability) which the visitor cannot foresee in advance.

The impossibility of formulating a planned schedule for the visit to the festival, and the gaps that are formed between the reservation of the films can actually encourage a spontaneous festival experience. As stated in chapter one, through the perspective of Janet Harbord, the festival-as-event requires contingency to sustain the relevance of its singular occurring, providing room for different 'scripts' for the 'unexpected'. Here, in the gaps that are formed between the VR slots, the visitor deals with a 'uninhabited' timeframe that is more fluid, thereby increasing the visitor's agency in the festival's space. Within this time, visitors

¹¹⁰ "About IDFA DocLab", <https://www.doclab.org/about/>.

¹¹¹ "Projects," IDFA DocLab | Exploring Documentary Storytelling in the Age of the Interface, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.doclab.org/category/projects/>.

may explore other elements of DocLab's program that take place continuously: they can take part in conversations, meetings, films, or events they did not plan to attend. Whether or not this is an intentional strategy of IDFA, in this way VR both 'grounds' the visitors to the festival's physical space and time by making their presence essential for the experience, and also encourages them to engage more with the festival's content. The high numbers of visitors to DocLab and the popularity of the programme can indicate a successful operation despite these limitations.¹¹²

Inside The Greenhouse

In 2018 the primary location for the exhibition of VR films was a greenhouse-like structure situated in a garden next to the Brakke Grond building, where the main DocLab exhibition was housed (see fig. 2). While production limitations and various reasons could influence the use of the greenhouse as the location of VR films, this unusual choice of placing a technologically innovative platform within a three-hundred-year-old agricultural invention calls for further analyses of its implication as a theoretical object. This view is not only indicative of IDFA's approach to VR; it also allows us to differentiate it from other forms of viewing experience in film festivals while underscoring the characteristic visual elements of a greenhouse.

IDFA has referred to the greenhouse as a 'VR cinema'. However, as the space differs greatly from a cinema, it enables us to discern the distinct qualities of VR's viewing experience in festivals. For instance, one of the most notable elements of a cinema was lacking from the space— a screen. Casetti argues that the presence of the big screen defines a space as being 'for' cinema: 'the screen does not simply occupy a space; rather, it constitutes space.'¹¹³ Without a screen, therefore, the space does not transform into a cinema. The greenhouse then reveals itself as a liminal space: on the one hand, we are still able to recognise it as a greenhouse (for instance, plants and flowerpots were present in the space); but on the other hand, we acknowledge its presence as a space that features and facilitates VR 'screenings'—it consists of 'VR stands' with chairs and headsets, and therefore is marked as a space for screenings, but not a space for cinema in any traditional sense of the term.

¹¹² Approximately 13,000 visitors in 2018. See "Annual Report 2018 - New Media," Mediacard 2019 - Start, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://publications.idfa.nl/annual-report-2018/new-media/>

¹¹³ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 132.

This foregrounds a significant characteristic of VR, as the fact that it does not constitute cinematic space allows us to recognise its mobility. While VR still requires digital modes of display, its presence is mobilized through the use of the headset that, in a sense, replaces the screen. As a platform, it can be activated in an array of locations, both indoors and outdoors, domestically or publicly. While in cinema, the theatre offers conditions that are technologically far superior to the viewing experience anywhere else (a high-resolution large screen and projection systems, a high-quality screening copy, Dolby surround sound system, and so on), the experience of VR at home or elsewhere is not so different from the technological point of view. In this context, the fundamental nature of the greenhouse as transparent is telling for the fact that VR does not require the same isolation of cinema, enabling protection from external conditions such as light exposure that can compromise the viewing. As I will further foreground, VR headset performs this action inherently.



Fig. 2: DocLab VR Cinema. 2019. Image: Niv Fux

This highlights the fact that what festivals are adding to the experience of VR is less technological dimensions and more social, contextual, curatorial, and ‘eventful’ factors. Festivals are essentially attempting to provide a quasi-cinematic space for a platform that does not require one. This space then is not used for technological reasons, but more as tool for festivals to literally frame it, both physically and conceptually, within the festival’s context.¹¹⁴

The greenhouse, then, bears a sense of ‘unusualness’, and brings the visitor to a state of unfamiliarity. It is not a space that s/he can easily compare to other common spaces of exhibition of media or film. In this manner, despite its definition as a cinema, it is difficult to relate it to a one. This can signify an intention to provide the VR Cinema with an independent and incomparable character, marking VR as a unique form of experience that aims to be distinguished from film or other media and to become a medium of its own. Nevertheless, the location does inform our experience—entering a greenhouse is clearly not the same as entering the cinema. While we view/experience VR, we can still feel the cold breezes of November in Amsterdam (blankets were offered to visitors), and thus we are reminded that we are not in a cinema, but in a film festival.

Enhanced Attention

One cannot simply ‘begin’ a VR experience in festivals; it requires preliminary actions, which are necessary for the operation of the ‘screening’. Upon entering the VR Cinema in DocLab, the operator helps the visitors to ‘connect’: first s/he sits on a spinning chair (to allow 360-degree vision), then she is required to wear the headset and headphones. The headphones have to be adjusted, the headset has to be adapted to user’s head, and finally the VR is activated. This process can take several minutes, depending also on the visitor’s level of acquaintance with VR. Interestingly, this electronic configuration binds the viewer to the site and experience. His/her movement is limited due to the connection to the headphones and the VR headset. After the connection has been made, one cannot simply leave, because that

¹¹⁴ Interestingly, despite VR does not require the same protection and isolation as cinema, it was situated in a space whose function is to provide care for the elements in it. Therefore, VR can also be analogised here to a plant that requires cultivation in a protected, external, and safe environment; it is a space where VR can be nurtured, developed and explored. This attests to the relative novelty of VR, its status as a medium that is still in development.

will require a reversed process of 'disconnecting'. These cumbersome processes are useful in making the viewer committed to the experience even before it has started. S/he is led to a process of anticipation that produces a certain tension. In this way, his/her attention becomes more attuned to the VR experience.

This is reinforced by the 'absorption' of the viewer in the experience mentioned earlier. VR is able to 'encapsulate' the viewer as s/he is not able to view or hear anything else that is outside of VR world.¹¹⁵ VR is not something we can merely 'take our eyes from'. Once viewers are 'inside the experience' they are led to another domain, completely dominated by the experience of VR film. In this way, it annuls the distraction that usually characterises the domestic viewing of cinema, or even a cinema screening in a theatre, when we are sometimes distracted by the light of a neighbour's mobile's phone. There are also no other ways of performing multitasking viewing or consuming other types of media as we occasionally do in other types of viewing. The encapsulation and isolation, then, promote our total concentration and involvement.

Sustaining Exclusivity

To conclude, within the festivals' attempts to maintain their exclusivity in the reshaping of reality by digitisation and the ubiquity of the cinematic experience, VR can be recognised as a central strategic tool. Its rapidly-growing popularity and interest in media culture has allowed festivals to align themselves with a global phenomenon that holds a great deal of promise for the way it could change film culture. Through the case of DocLab, we have also seen how its mission to constantly exhibit new digital phenomena, warrants novelty as a central aspect in the way VR is programmed and framed in festivals.

Despite the high level of interest in it, VR is still considered a rare type of experience because of the limited access that the general public has to it. This has contributed to the position of festivals as sites of discovery and attraction to technological novelties, giving rise to a beneficial tension between the 'known' and the 'unknown' aspects of VR. Consequently, the sense of anticipation and curiosity permits the encounter with VR to be a distinct experience that is time-and-space-dependent throughout the festival. As I have argued, with

¹¹⁵ The use of the term 'encapsulation' is inspired by Erkki Huhtamo in his discussion on encapsulation of bodies in motion simulators. See Erkki Huhtamo, "Encapsulated Bodies in Motion: Simulators and the Quest for Total Immersion," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 166-186.

the viewer's increasingly divergent modes of attention due to relocation and the abundance of media stimuli in the digital age, VR permits 'enhanced' mode of attention through the encapsulation and 'absorption' of the viewer in ways that other cinematic media cannot produce. In the case of IDFA's DocLab, the limitations and 'commitment' the VR experience permits, were seen as useful to create a more general increased engagement and interest with the festival as a spatio-temporal entity. Finally, IDFA's exceptional choice to place VR films in a greenhouse-like structure, demonstrated its motivation to frame VR within the festival's unique context, and to provide the medium an independent character that is incomparable to other cinematic media.

CHAPTER 3 – STREAMING PLATFORMS OF FESTIVALS (THE ONLINE PERSPECTIVE)

In recent years both IFFR and IDFA have established independent online streaming platforms (SVOD): IFFR Unleashed (<https://www.iffrunleashed.com/>) and IDFA Watch Online (<https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/watch-films-online>). Online streaming platforms recently emerged as a growing trend among festivals that aim to affiliate themselves with the increasing popularity of streaming in media culture. Through their online existence the platforms function as a year-long continuous activity that complements the usually singular happening of the festival. Therefore, we can consider the platforms as an extension of the festival's physical activity—one that expands and transforms the 'traditional' type of experience it provides in its regular spatio-temporal existence. This warrants a new type of a (virtual-online) festival dispositif: the viewer is still exposed to content suggested, programmed, and facilitated by the festival, yet the films can be streamed almost from anywhere and at any time. Hence, we are introduced to a new kind of festival experience that 'extends' the traditional, physical festival experience. I will argue that the use of festivals use in streaming platforms can be seen as a strategy to affirm their relevance in the age of digitisation, and to align their model with recent trends in viewing behaviour such as the prevalence of domestic streaming platforms like Netflix. Such platforms are characterised by a wide variety of content, in which the viewer gains interactivity and a great deal of independence in selecting when, what, and how to view the content.

I will first approach online platforms as theoretical objects whose virtuality is integral to omnipresence festival experiences. Second, I will briefly survey the development of streaming platforms and streaming as a prominent mode of viewing in order to foreground the manner in which festivals are using streaming as a strategy for resilience in the digital age. I will then analyse the possible motivations and implications of streaming platforms for festivals. Finally, using both the IDFA and IFFR platforms as the case studies, I will analyse the particular viewing situations streaming platforms permit through a dispositif analysis. Within this, I will build on the concept of 'relocation' of the cinematic experience, as forwarded by Francesco Casetti, in order to examine the distinct characteristics of streaming as a type of viewing situation.

Virtual Objects

In the previous chapters of this work I discerned central objects from the festival's event and approached them as theoretical objects. This approach was informed by the work of Mieke Bal; it relies on the physical actuality of the objects while also accounting for the ideas or views that transcend their current existence.¹¹⁶ Here, I wish to consider online platforms as theoretical, precisely because their virtuality and ubiquitous nature turns them into challenging objects for analysis. Though their view as such run the risk of becoming evasive, I wish to focus on their visible attributes, interface and design, in order to bring to light some of the distinct qualities of the viewing experience of festivals' streaming platforms.

The IFFR Unleashed platform has a domain, a URL, which is perhaps the equivalent of an indication for a location in the web and hence also called a 'website address'. We, as viewers-visitors, can access the platform through our online browser and view the content it presents. It has a unique design that we can associate with the branding of IFFR, though it slightly differs from it thanks to a dominant black background, echoing a cinematic experience (see fig. 3). We can (virtually) navigate through the platform and flip through its pages. In this way the platform operates like an online catalogue. One of its dominant characteristics is its diversity and richness of colours, texts, and pictures of films and directors. However, and perhaps more importantly, the platform does not have a clear a starting or ending. Moreover, there are no clear figures suggesting the number of titles or directors presented, which makes it more difficult for us to comprehend the virtual dimension of the platforms. Hence the attributes of the object are malleable.

Despite the platform being visible and accessible to us through a screen and an internet browser, we cannot fully grasp it. Physically, there is nothing to hold onto. The screen or the computer is only a manifestation of the platform, a projection of its contents, but the platform itself lacks materiality. Conceptually, the way the platform functions, or the manner in which we perceive those images, is not necessarily understandable and visible to the average viewer. It is much less traceable, for example, than the way moving images are projected on the cinema screen. Likewise, the origin of the content is unknown. Most likely, the content is distributed over digital files and data that are stored on computer servers that

¹¹⁶ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 4-5.

could be anywhere in the world. However, the location does serve a particular meaning for the purpose of understanding the function and experience that the platform enables.

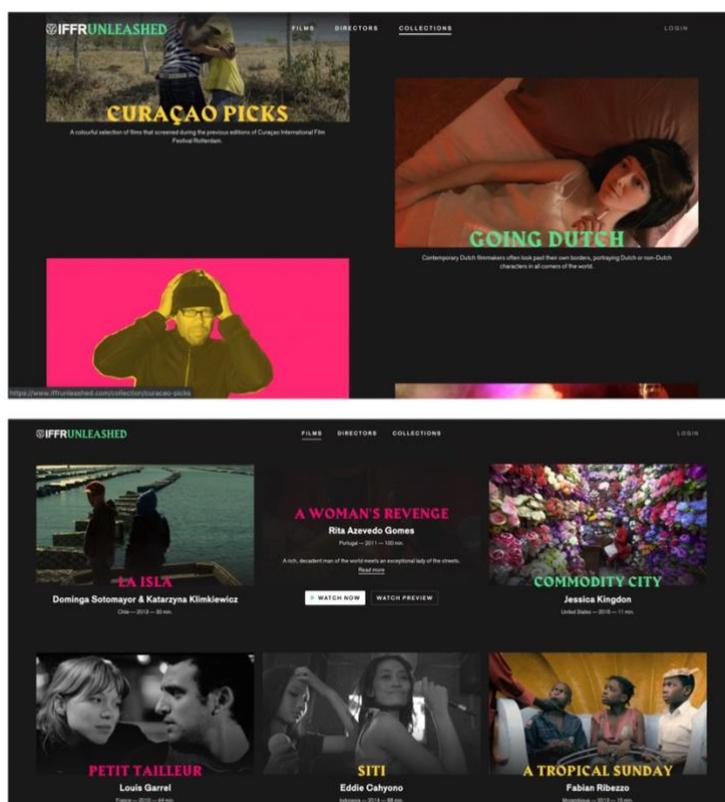


Fig. 3: Screenshots from IFFR Unleashed website. 2019. Image: <https://www.iffrunleashed.com/films/1>

Thus, quite differently from the event of the festival, the physical location of IFFR Unleashed (if it can even be defined) is not crucial in determining the experience. Its virtual existence is what defines its function and the type of experiences it activates. Hence, we can consider IFFR's streaming platform as a *virtual object*. Nevertheless, physicality still plays an important role here: the physical location and the conditions in which we view the content is essential to the type of experience we encounter. The virtuality is what enables the experience to exist within endless locations—essentially anywhere with a screen and an internet connection.

A defining character of a streaming platform as a virtual object ties it to other domains. On the one hand, it functions as a portal or a passage to the infinite landscape of the web, of myriad connections and exchanges to different types of media and experiences. Its virtual existence allows us to elevate from the physical and limited structure of the festival to uncharted domains that produce an experience seemingly boundless. The content being watched on the platform exists within the context of the vast web. On the other hand, the

platform provides access to the festivals and allows users to experience the festivals from a distance without the need to be physical present. In this way, the platform functions as a 'bridge for experiences', facilitating the transformation of experiences, moments, visuals, and films from one end to another. We can thus view the platform as enabling an extension of the festival experience. The fact that the festival is able, through the use of viewing platforms, to 'broadcast' its program to endless domains allows it to extend its activity in ways not yet charted. Before I discuss this further, it will be necessary to briefly survey the rise to dominance of streaming platforms and streaming as a prevalent form of viewing.

The Rise of Streaming

Streaming first emerged as a technology permitting the online viewing of videos. The launch of YouTube in 2005 was an important catalyst in allowing streaming to become a prevalent and leading media platform. A little more than a year after it was launched, YouTube was responsible for more than 100 million videos being watched per day.¹¹⁷ In 2007, software developments enabled embedding video more easily in web browsers.¹¹⁸ In the same year, Netflix announced that they will expand what was then their main service—DVD rentals—to video rental through streaming.¹¹⁹ When streaming video to TV became possible a few years later, the road for streaming as a primary form of domestic viewing was paved. In 2013 a study found that almost 80 percent of adults in the US with internet access watch TV through subscription on-demand services such as Netflix, Hulu or Amazon.¹²⁰ In 2018 it was estimated that Netflix had 137 million users;¹²¹ 2018 was also the first year that streaming video subscribers trumped cable television.¹²² There is a great deal of further data suggesting the

¹¹⁷ "YouTube Serves Up 100 Million Videos a Day Online," USA TODAY: Latest World and US News - USATODAY.com, last modified 16, 2006, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-07-16-youtube-views_x.htm.

¹¹⁸ "The History of Online Video: the State of the Art and How We Got There," Streamroot Blog, last modified May 17, 2019, <https://blog.streamroot.io/history-of-online-video/>.

¹¹⁹ Miguel Helft, "Netflix to Deliver Movies to the PC," The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia, last modified January 16, 2007,

¹²⁰ Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski, eds., *The Age of Netflix: Critical Essays on Streaming Media, Digital Delivery and Instant Access* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017), 2, 19.

¹²¹ "Netflix Revenue and Usage Statistics (2018)," Business of Apps, last modified February 27, 2019, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/netflix-statistics/>.

¹²² Andrew Liptak, "The MPAA Says Streaming Video Has Surpassed Cable Subscriptions Worldwide," The Verge, last modified March 21, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/21/18275670/mpaa-report-streaming-video-cable-subscription-worldwide>.

growing dominance of streaming services, Netflix being the leading force behind it.¹²³ However, the significance of streaming services goes far beyond their existence as central platforms for content. Cory Barker and Myc Wiatrowski suggest that 'Netflix has fundamentally altered the ways in which we watch, discuss, and generally consume media...Netflix is the central force in the contemporary experience of media consumption. The company has an equally notable impact on how television and film is produced, distributed, and marketed.'¹²⁴

It is no wonder, therefore, that film festivals follow those changes with interest and concern. The power and increasing prominence of giants such as Netflix became especially portentous to festivals, when the company began making visible actions to expand its influence in the festival circuit. This was first clearly demonstrated when *Okja* by Bong Joon-ho and *The Meyerowitz Stories* by Noah Baumbach became the first Netflix films to take part in the official competition of Cannes Film Festival in 2017. The participation of the films in Cannes set up a lively public debate about the legitimacy of these films to be presented at the French Festival if they skip theatrical release.¹²⁵ Cannes, in response, announced it will not further include films that will not be distributed in French cinemas. As strict French rules allow films to be presented on streaming platforms only 36 months after the theatrical release, this significantly challenged Netflix's model.¹²⁶ This was the starting point for a struggle between that two giants, which is still ongoing. Netflix has since garnered critical acclaim for the films it produced and distributed by leading directors, and which made notable appearances in other A-list festivals.¹²⁷ The trend marking Netflix's increasing influence in the festival circuit reached its recent peak with *Roma* by Alfonso Cuarón, with Netflix as the powerful agent setting the terms. Netflix declined Cannes's proposal to take part in the out-of-competition

¹²³ See for example Barker and Wiatrowski, *The Age of Netflix*, 1-10.

¹²⁴ Barker and Wiatrowski, *The Age of Netflix*, 2.

¹²⁵ Audiences booed when Netflix logo appeared on the screen in the premiere of *Okja*. See:

<https://www.theverge.com/2017/5/19/15662542/netflix-cannes-film-festival-booed-okja-premiere>

¹²⁶ In most cases, Netflix's model supports limited theatrical release. The films are streamed in the platform simultaneously to their screenings in theatres, or in some cases shortly after, as with *Roma*. The French distribution rules therefore contradicts this model. See: Anthony D'Alessandro, "AMC Theatres & Regal Bar Netflix's 'Roma' From Oscar Best Picture Nom Showcases," *Deadline*, last modified January 22, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/01/netflix-roma-wont-play-amc-1202539240/>.

¹²⁷ For example *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* by Coen Brothers that won Best Screenplay Award in Venice Film Festival in 2018 and *Private Life* by Tamara Jenkins that won an award at Sundance the same year. See: <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/01/coen-brothers-buster-scruggs-oscar-nom-adapted-screenplay-not-original-1202037160/> and: <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/01/sundance-2018-private-life-tamara-jenkins-netflix-1201918180/>.

section, and a few months later won the top prize in the Venice Film Festival.¹²⁸ Shortly after *Roma* became the first film distributed by a streaming service to be nominated for the Best Picture prize at the Academy Awards.¹²⁹ With Netflix's powerful resources and successful strategies, it seems reasonable to assume that its dominance (as well as that of streaming services more broadly) would only increase.

Persisting Through Streaming

IDFA's artistic director, Orwa Nyrabia, has opposed the claim that festivals should fear for their position in light of the rise of streaming platforms like Netflix. He suggested that the fact that Netflix is so interested in gaining acclaim and appreciation in the film festival circuit is actually indicative of the safe position of film festivals.¹³⁰ Nyrabia dismissed the popular voices that eulogise cinema because of streaming, arguing that we are witnessing a common phenomenon with new technologies: one medium threatens to replace the other as its successor, but eventually both of them persist in parallel. Instead, he believes, the rise of Netflix should lead festivals to investigate the new possibilities offered by the platform—to question current assumptions, and not necessarily steer away from it. 'There are new big boys in town with big guns and a lot of money...Do we give them what we want? Do we submit or do we impose? Do we boycott or do we negotiate?'¹³¹

Yet Nyrabia's answers still imply that festivals cannot remain oblivious to the changes caused by Netflix and other such platforms. The view that I propose here is that the streaming platforms that were established by the festivals serve as a useful strategy to maintain their resilience and relevancy in this turbulent age of technological transformations for a number of reasons. First, as I have foregrounded above, streaming has recently become a prominent mode of viewing whose popularity is constantly increasing. It not only became the most common way to watch today's media, but also a technological trend that we follow with great curiosity and expectation. Therefore it still holds a great promise to further develop. Festivals,

¹²⁸ Zack Sharf, "Alfonso Cuarón at Cannes 2018: Festival 'Continuing to Beg' Netflix to Let 'Roma' Premiere," IndieWire, last modified April 13, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/04/alfonso-cuaron-cannes-roma-netflix-ban-1201952422/>.

¹²⁹ Oscar Nominations 2019: 'Roma?', 'The Favourite?' and 'Black Panther?' Break Ground," Breaking News, World News & Multimedia - The New York Times, last modified January 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/movies/oscar-nominations-academy-awards.html>.

¹³⁰ Orwa Nyrabia, Personal interview, Amsterdam, January 17, 2019.

¹³¹ Ibid.

in their constant chase after innovations, developments and discoveries, must equate with these processes if they wish to remain relevant. The text in IFFR Unleashed states that 'Digital distribution is the future' as VOD users worldwide will increase yearly.¹³² Independent Streaming platforms can therefore be seen as one of the approaches of festivals to prepare and adjust for the changes that the future of cinema and media will bring.

Second, the embracement of streaming can be explained through festivals' motivation to play against Netflix and others 'on the same field'. If Netflix is widening its activities to the physical territories of the festival circuit, the utilisation of streaming by festivals may represent an attempt to fight back by claiming a portion of the online landscape. While the 'streaming scene' may be dominated by Netflix, Amazon or Hulu, there are other rising contenders imposing a considerable challenge as well; streaming services as Mubi or the recently established Criterion Collection, for example, are focused on classics and art-house cinema.¹³³ To a certain degree, these niche services form an even larger threat to festivals than Netflix, despite operating on a much smaller scale. This is because their selection shares traits with the curatorial impetus of festivals, from the digitally-restored classics that festivals often present, to experimental cinema and independent and emerging filmmakers who represent an alternative to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters. This foregrounds the growing need for festivals take part in this trend.¹³⁴

The permeant availability of the content suggested through the online platforms of festivals is therefore an opportunity for festivals to expand beyond singular happenings to a year-long activity, facilitating a certain continuation that festivals often miss due to their limited temporal structure. This is important because, through the persistence of films, the festival experience endures as well. Of course, this is a different experience from the physical one: as argued in chapter one, the festival's unique spatio-temporal conditions, its atmosphere, and its occurrence as an event are central to its existence, especially in the age of digitisation. Yet, extending its operation both temporally and virtually can allow its visitors

¹³²"5 Reasons to Join," IFFR, last modified May 16, 2018, <https://iffr.com/en/5-reasons-to-join>.

¹³³ Criterion Collection is DVD and Blu-Ray company focused to the publication of classics and art-house films. Its transition to streaming is yet another reflection of the growing 'streaming trend'.

¹³⁴ Despite the obstacles streaming platforms present for festivals, it can be argued that festivals also benefit from the appearance of platforms as Mubi and Criterion Collection. In this way, the circulation of works usually catered for by festivals increases, consequently affirming the value of the programme and the exposure that their films receive. This may be another reason that festivals have chosen to incorporate their selection in streaming platforms such as Festival Scope that regularly present selection of festivals.

to immerse themselves in the festival's programme, unique character, and the different content it presents. While the content currently presented at both IDFA and IFFR is still limited mainly to films, we can easily envision the potential such year-long platforms have to produce an experience whose value and meaning are derived from the vast domains of the web.¹³⁵

This expansion of the experience should be considered within the context of the relocation of cinema as conceptualised by Francesco Casetti. As previously discussed, Casetti argues that the cinematic experience migrated to other domains outside of the cinema theatre, consequently informing new types of experience that build on the type of platforms and conditions it operates in.¹³⁶ With this in mind, the operation of festivals through online platforms can be recognised as the festivals' acknowledgment of the phenomenon of relocation. Instead of struggling to maintain the 'aura' of the cinematic screening on the big screen, festivals are actually accepting the increasing variety of cinematic experiences.¹³⁷ This also reflects a recognition in the transforming digitised nature of film as a medium that can be easily copied and distributed in multiple media forms. In this manner, the turn to online platforms is another sign of festivals adapting their operations to transitional times. At this point festivals assume that online platforms function more as an extension of their activities, rather than a replacement. Casetti suggests that the new media that become enabled through relocation do not 'represent a betrayal, but rather an opportunity: it gives the previous media the chance to survive elsewhere.'¹³⁸ This seems to echo the manner in which festivals perceive streaming as a platform that can facilitate the existence of the festival's films in different locations and situations. Is there a better location for films to endure than the infinite virtual spaces of the web? As my case studies demonstrate, this is one of the ways festivals have begun to channel their content through new technologies. Through this, festivals persist. To explore the manner in which this becomes apparent and the specific types

¹³⁵ For instance, IFFR Live presented the films in IFFR Unleashed, combining online and physical experiences. See: "Chris the Swiss - LIVE," IFFR Unleashed, accessed August 1, 2019, <http://iffrunleashed.com/film/chris-the-swiss-live>.

¹³⁶ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 29.

¹³⁷ The festival's event can be seen as warranting the rejuvenation of the artwork's 'aura' – famously theorised by Walter Benjamin- because of its unique context and the kind of encounter it enables the visitor with the artwork through face-to-face meetings and sessions with the filmmakers. The shift to online existence proposes an alternative for this. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Boston: HMH, 1968).

¹³⁸ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 28.

of viewing experience these platforms produce, I will proceed to analyse the dispositif of festivals' streaming platforms.

Case Study: IFFR & IDFA - Dispositifs of Streaming Platforms

Through Casetti's framework we are able to identify that streaming platforms import distinct characteristics, and specific viewing conditions to the different types of migrated festival experience.¹³⁹ To analyse those, I will explore the dispositif of IFFR's and IDFA's streaming platforms, IFFR Unleashed and IDFA Watch Online.

Framing Streaming

First I will look at the way the streaming experience is framed by both festivals. The tagline of IFFR Unleashed is 'not your everyday films' (see fig. 4). Through this the festival aims to distinguish the platforms' online operation from a mundane existence. When we go to the cinema or to a festival, the experience is clearly marked by the physical boundaries we cross—we enter a place that is detached from our daily reality. More particularly, we enter a dark room completely isolated from the external environment that frames and defines the viewing experience. Therefore, the division between everyday and cinematic experiences happens physically and naturally. However, when we are watching films in our domestic space, or on the train on the way to work, this experience runs the risk of blending into our everyday space and circumstances. The context that highlights the festival screening as a unique happening is obviously lacking in that case. We have already seen how the event of the festival demands singularity and contingency, thereby distinguishing it from the quotidian. Therefore, IFFR's tagline can be seen as an attempt to apply the same exclusivity reserved for the physical event to the experience of streaming platforms. The tagline 'not your everyday films' aims to highlight the fact that the festival's unique curatorial choices are pertinent to streaming no less than for the regular activity of the festival. IFFR Unleashed also seeks to engage the visitors in the festival's unique experience through the attractive videos presented on the homepage. Quickly replacing one another, the videos incorporate short excerpts from IFFR films and visuals documenting the festival: large IFFR flags blowing in the wind in the festival

¹³⁹ Ibid., 31.

main square, packed screenings, masterclasses, and so on. All of this aims to immerse the viewer in the festival experience and to frame the potential viewing within that happening, making him/her *feel* present without *being* present.

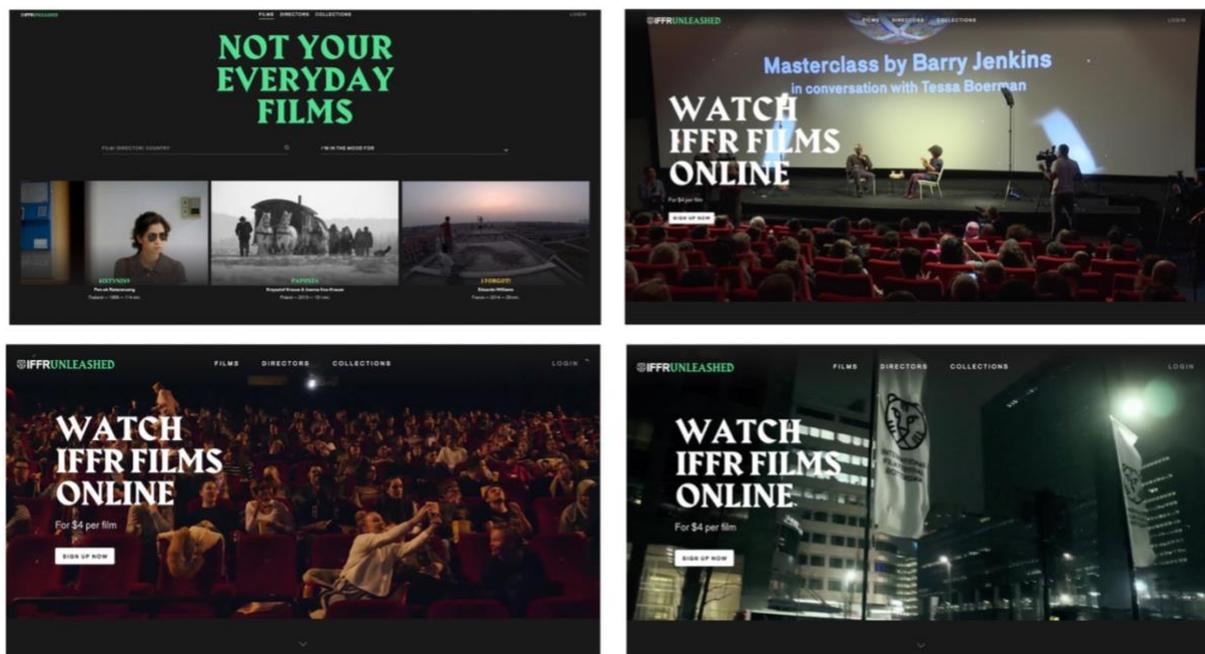


Fig. 4: Screenshots from IFFR Unleashed website. 2019. Image: <https://www.iffrunleashed.com/films/1>

By contrast, IDFA’s platform presents a more moderate approach in the types of stimuli it presents the viewer. It also has a ‘cleaner’ design (see fig. 5). The tagline is simple and pragmatic: ‘watch films online’. There is one constant image from a film. There are only two options presented to the viewer: ‘watch films for free’ or ‘watch film for a small fee’, which immediately directs us to the viewing itself. When we click on the options we are presented with a list of films that we can filter and search through using different categories (such as subject, length, and section). In IFFR the search bar is reached only through pressing a button that is not very visible. The field search is titled ‘I’m in the mood for’ which allows choosing from a diverse list of genres, countries and ‘flavours’. Thus, IFFR aims to nurture an experience that originates in the festival’s physical experience, with more options, a lively visual design, and alternatives mode of searching.¹⁴⁰ IDFA, on the other hand, place more emphasis on ‘practicality’ and efficiency than the experience. It is easier to find a film, if one knows what to look for; therefore it seems to better cater to a professional rather than a public audience.

¹⁴⁰ While IFFR Unleashed has a separate domain and an independent structure, IDFA’s platform is embedded within IDFA’s general website, which can partially account for its simpler design and interface.

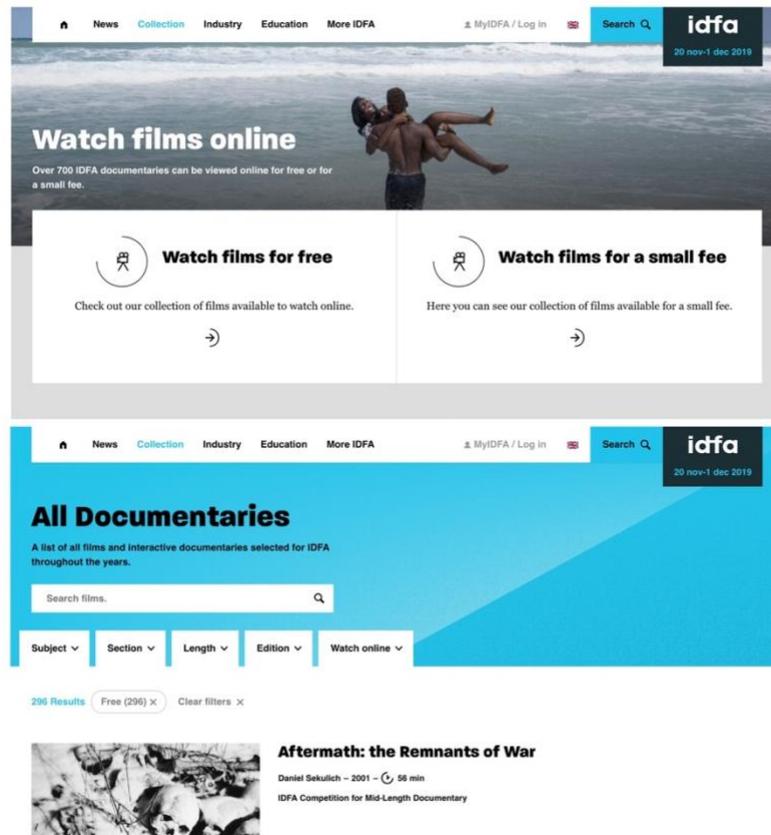


Fig. 5: Screenshots from IDFA Watch Online website. 2019. Image: <https://www.idfa.nl/en/info/watch-films-online>

Increased and Diminished Authorships

One of the most attractive aspects of streaming platforms is the boundless availability and accessibility of the content, liberating it from the chains of space and time. Provided that the user has internet access and a platform with a screen, content can be streamed everywhere and anywhere. As I argued above with reference to Casetti, recent technological transformations have created exemptions from the dependence on the materiality of film. From being limited to DVD or Blu-rays, or even content that has to be downloaded to our devices in order to be viewed, we approach a kind of a 'floating' manner of content, free from physical binding. This also annuls the consideration of duplication and concerns with the limited availability of film copies. While this has overarching consequences for distribution models that are evidently changing through the emergence of Netflix as an influential distributing agent, this also implicates our experience in a particular way.

Streaming platforms allows festivals to maintain a certain duality. On the one hand, the films are constantly available to us. This enables us to return to the content over and over. We can look again for narrative elements overlooked in our first view, or to revisit aesthetic achievements. These elements were already familiar to us from VHS and DVD, but they have yet to become available through the content of festivals, usually more scarce and limited. On the other hand, we do not gain any ownership on the films. As mentioned, streaming lacks a physical manifestation. Hence, festivals are always able to change the program and control access to the content without visitors being aware of it. This protects festivals from losing the exclusivity of their activities and content in the endless virtual spheres that can also result in piracy. In this way, the films appear as available to the visitors, yet the curatorial and technical authorship of the festival as an exhibitor remains. Therefore, not only does the festival experience persists, but also the role of festivals as exclusive curatorial agents.

On the other hand, the festival loses its authorship over the way the experience is designed and configured. In the experience of streaming, the attention of the viewer is another modified element, as it becomes divided between other occupations while the film is viewed. As previously mentioned, Casetti argues for the diffusion of attention that non-cinematic screens permit.¹⁴¹ This enables us to acknowledge that the viewing experience of streaming platforms allows for a multiplicity of viewing forms. With this, the experience becomes interactive as the viewer becomes the agent who gains independence and control in determining when, where, and how the film will be watched. The viewer is able to design the conditions in a manner that allows more fluidity than a regular cinema. Casetti mentions a blog that conducted a comparison between the 'best places to watch a film'. In first place is 'in bed', followed by 'at the theatre', and then 'at the drive-in', 'in the train', as so on.¹⁴² This foregrounds how other types of experience became so prevalent and appreciated that their so-called 'inferiority' does not necessarily play an important role in the way they can be enjoyed. The appeal of these experiences therefore comes to light through the diversity of the viewing situations they support in a way that best accommodating the needs of the viewer. Thus, the expansion of the festival experience becomes available through the multiple experiences that streaming platforms provide.

¹⁴¹ Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy*, 30-31.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 35.

Sites of Preservation or Innovation

The mobility of the content also gives rise to various types of viewing conditions that move away from the traditional cinematic experiences. One could argue that this means inferior viewing conditions: a smaller screen and lower quality of sound and picture. Therefore, the fact that festivals are now supporting these types of experiences is somewhat paradoxical. Traditionally, festivals have been recognised as institutions that present the cinematic experience in its 'traditional' and 'purest' form (using large packed halls, advanced projection technologies, premiers and red carpets), awing its audiences with the ideal and most respectful forms of screenings in its fullest glory. Hence, festivals can be considered as gatekeepers of the so-called traditional cinematic experience. The position of Cannes in the battle with Netflix represents the role of festivals as such. For this reason the tendency to allow experiences that deviate from this is a point we should pay attention to, as it is telling not only of the transformation festivals are undergoing, but also of a certain sacrifice they are willing to make in order to remain relevant. To illustrate this point simply: What would the reaction of IDFA's and IFFR's artistic directors be if they found out their winning films would only be viewed on mobile screens? But the opposing argument can also be made: festivals' streaming platforms support the types of viewing that are becoming available in any case, and therefore the choice they have is whether to join this trend or stay out. Nevertheless, it seems that festivals are comfortable with the 'streaming trend' as long as it is being done in addition to the festival's regular physical activities. Despite the variety IDFA and IFFR offer, both in content and experience, it does not seem that their platforms aim to compete, or replace, the physical experience.

Embarking on the Future

To conclude, the emergence of streaming as a popular technology—one that permits types of viewing and cultural experience that in turn shape distribution models and the way media is consumed and viewed—leads festivals to partake in this trend. I have demonstrated how festivals use their own streaming platforms as a strategy that is not only useful for maintaining their resilience in this age, but also equips them with new possibilities. In particular, I have shown how the festival experience becomes expanded through the festivals' streaming platforms. As opposed to the limits of the physical world, the virtuality of the platforms plays an instrumental role in activating the experience in a manner that reflects the richness and

infinite possibilities that exist in the virtual domain. Moreover, the mobility and availability of the content that the platforms present permit new kinds of experience that the physical festival is unable to suggest. Although some of the conditions may be considered technologically inferior, the experiences at play can be recognized as richer, since viewers gain more independence with the privilege of choosing their preferred mode of viewing, the space and time in which they will view the films, and the way they will design the experience (social, individual, romantic, and so on). Thus, a large number of diverse festival experiences becomes available. In this way, it is not only the festival's films that persist through new platforms and modes of viewing; it is also the festivals themselves that manage to replenish their model and existence by adapting it to the digital age, and prepare for the transformations yet to come.

CONCLUSIONS

The current status of festivals seems somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, they enjoy greater popularity than ever. Both of the festivals examined in this work, IFFR and IDFA, have reached their peak audience turnout in the past few years, and there are more festivals taking place every year than ever¹⁴³. On the other hand, there are several factors that work to threaten the current successful status of festivals in film culture. While processes such as the digitisation of film have been taking place for decades, more recent transformations, including the migration of the cinematic experiences to various platforms, locations and situations outside of the cinema theatre, or the rise of Netflix and other streaming platforms as potential alternative agents of distribution, pose an urgent challenge for festivals.

Through the perspectives of physical, virtual, and online existence of festivals, this work sought to explore some of the measures festivals are taking to respond to these transformations. These have led to new types of unique festival experience that aim to retain the festival's exclusivity. The three perspectives—physical, virtual, and online—allowed to us discern the distinct characteristics of these experiences and disclosed the activity of festivals in three different domains currently in a state of flux as a result of technological transformations.

In regards to the physical festival, I have demonstrated the pertinence of the concept of 'the event' in examining the manner in which the festival can gain exclusivity through its spatio-temporal operation. I have argued that with the growing convergence of media and the prevalence of cinema-like content in daily environments, the importance of the physical elements in the festivals' activity increases in efforts to distinguish the experiences it facilitates. Moreover, with its temporal structure, the festival seeks contingency and unplanned happenings which are able to provide it with unique meanings that are exclusive to that festival edition. While I suggested the event as a fundamental element in the activity of festivals and not as a recent response to technological transformations, I have used this perspective in order to foreground the possible tools and strategies festivals can try to incorporate in order to persist through their inherently spatio-temporal existence. The

¹⁴³IFFR Annual Report 2019 | International Film Festival Rotterdam, accessed August 5, 2019, https://iffr.com/sites/default/files/19_iffr_annualreport2019_dig_lowres.pdf;
IDFA Annual Report 2018, <https://publications.idfa.nl/annual-report-2018/new-media/>;

example of IFFR Live demonstrated innovative approaches to the concept of the event. Combining activities with either physical (simultaneous audience presence in multiple cinema theatres) and virtual (online and mobile presence through streaming) aspects, IFFR Live deployed the ability of the event to incorporate divergent and multiple performances in order to produce an enhanced sense of a communal experience in the festival. This foregrounded IFFR's approach to digitisation and relocation as fertile and original, as the festival has managed to turn the challenges brought by technological transformations to the advantage and the benefit of IFFR as a whole. It did so by creating unique, innovative, and 'expanded' experiences that go beyond the limits of the cinema theatre, psychically and conceptually. However, IFFR's approach demonstrates that the physical presence of the audience remains important even while presenting alternative ways of experiencing the festival. Through this integration, the festival developed and expanded into new domains of operation.

The strive for 'expansion' to new mediums and cinematic experiences was also apparent in the other two perspectives. In the virtual, I proposed that the exhibition of VR in festivals originates from their fundamental interest in novelties. The need of festivals to remain relevant and provide singularity to each edition guided their motivation in functioning as sites of discovery and innovation and presenting new phenomena in film culture. In popular media and culture, VR attained the promise of replacing film. This seemed to play a role in the rapidity with which VR was incorporated within the festival circuit, as festivals were keen to include VR in order to align themselves with the new and promising medium. This seemed to enable them to keep up with the fast-changing arena of film due to technological developments. I have suggested this also had implications for the way VR was framed and experienced in festivals. The audience's generally limited access and lack of familiarity with VR on the one hand, and their expectations and curiosity for it on the other, equipped the experience with a sense of a singular event that cannot be achieved elsewhere. Moreover, the ability of VR to encapsulate the viewer, isolating it from external stimuli, seemed to facilitate enhanced modes of attention for the viewer. These factors, combined with the fact that festivals became the main sites for presenting VR, had the potential to contribute to festivals' efforts in retaining their exclusivity. Through the case of DocLab I explored the disposition of VR in festivals and recognised the 'commitment' VR requires from its audience as a successful method to better engage the visitor with the festival's physical activity. While VR seems to add meaningful and pertinent values for festivals, it is difficult to assess whether it

is an ephemeral trend or if it will persist among festivals and develop into a core element of their programme. The potentially transient nature of VR in festivals seems to represent the challenging position of festivals as agents of constant novelties and discoveries. DocLab has positioned itself as an exhibitor of new and innovative cinematic and digital trends, consequently situating itself in the position of persistent and continuous endeavour for 'the next thing', but also in a constant state of alert for movements and shifts in digital film culture.

The last perspective, online, examined the use of festivals in the online streaming platforms they established to present their selection. This demonstrated another effort of festivals to adapt their model to recent cultural and media trends. Two main interconnected factors played a role here. First, the prevalence of streaming as a current dominant form of viewing film and media; and second, the emergence of Netflix as a powerful media agent that has recently expanded its activity to the festival circuit, consequently threatening festival's supremacy by suggesting alternative and opposing distribution models. This was affirmed by the process of relocation of cinema, as seen clearly through Netflix and other streaming platforms that suggest other types of popular and attractive cinematic experiences outside of the theatre. I argued that this has led festivals to expand their activities to the online domain of streaming. Though their operation in the online sphere should be seen more as an addition rather than a replacement of their physical activity, it nonetheless represents the festivals' acknowledgment of the phenomenon of relocation, and marked the festivals' motivation to move beyond their limited physical activity. Within their online operation it appears that festivals are less interested in exclusivity and singularity, as they were in the virtual and physical perspectives, and more interested in extended activities through non-provisional access of time and space. Instead of a singular event in a specific location, festivals utilise their streaming platforms to present their content all year long on platforms available almost anywhere. This brings forward the notion of 'extended' festival experiences as festivals find ways to immerse the viewer in the festival's content without requiring his/her presence, and by allowing a greater sense of independence and interactivity with designing the settings and the 'right' festival experience for every user-visitor. Perhaps once more identified with their interest in preserving the cinematic experience in its glorified 'traditional' form, now festivals such as IFFR and IDFA are more open to featuring their works in non-cinematic conditions, with the aim to make the festival experience persist. This can represent the process festivals are undergoing, from physical limited activities to online ubiquitous existences. The

consolidated view of the three perspectives allows us to recognize a possible linear trajectory that can testify to the potential of festivals to develop and evolve, from physical to virtual and to online existences.

Interestingly, one of the characteristics common to the three perspectives is the deployment of technological devices and platforms as strategies for festivals to 'protect' themselves from technological developments. All these had played a role in creating what I have been calling expanded types of festival experiences. IFFR has introduced IFFR Live as an event that incorporates advanced technologies of broadcasting and streaming in order to move from the physical to the virtual; festivals' use of VR as in the case of IDFA, suggested the employment of technological novelties with the aim of proposing enhanced modes of attention in viewing experiences; and the inclusion of streaming platforms by both IFFR and IDFA allowed the festival experience to expand beyond the limitation of spatio-temporal activities.

These put forward the *modus operandi* of festivals as capable of at least partly adapting to the *zeitgeist* and the challenges it brings: technological developments, shifts and trends, the digitisation of film and the relocation of the cinematic experience. It is by no means my intention to claim that festivals have exhibited solutions that guarantee their successful operation in light of all of those. However, the strategies that were explored here demonstrated the festivals' awareness and recognition in those, as well as the steps they are willing to take to respond. These have attested to the festivals' character as alert entities, capable of adjusting their models. That said, the changes performed did not demonstrate revolutionary or extreme reactions corroding traditional models of operation; rather, they are more of an expansion to the existing ones that builds on the benefits of their models. Following Marijke de Valck's 2007 prognosis, it is still difficult to foresee the future of festivals and their potential in persisting through challenges.¹⁴⁴ However, it seems that in order to succeed and remain relevant, they are bound to constantly follow methods combining prompt absorption and swift responses. Their central role in film culture as sites of novelties and discoveries binds them to that role.

At this point it also important to mention again that the purpose of this research was not to point out an overreaching conclusion concerning the potential of festivals to persist

¹⁴⁴ De Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, 205.

through technological transformations—this is a task that exceeds the scope of this study. Rather, I aimed to provide insight into some of strategies festivals apply in light of the turbulent age of technological transformation and relocation of cinema, thus contributing to our understanding of festivals' changing modus operandi and the unique experiences they provide to their visitors. Moreover, the three perspectives used are by no means inclusive or exclusive; they were chosen as pertinent views, but of course many more are possible.

As for further limitations of this research, the question of the implications of technological developments in this era is immense and unquantifiable. While, as mentioned, the aim was not to permit an inclusive answer that will answer this topic with overreaching conclusions, it nonetheless served as a challenge because of the topic's infinite links and consequences. Hence the difficulty of discerning the pertinent elements within digitisation and technological transformation that implicate the festival experience: there are evidently many more factors that could be taken into consideration, such as economic dynamics or closer analyses of the festivals' programmes. Moreover, IFFR and IDFA were able to permit an outlook on the way leading and innovative festivals deal with the transformation that is also convertible to smaller festivals; however, a more diverse choice of cases, of different sizes, status, and countries could have further contributed to this research. Finally, and not less important, 'experience'—one of the central terms of this study—is, as stated, an evasive term with multiple meanings and interpretations. The broad possibilities this term provides also represents various directions that can be further explored. For instance, further research could include an analysis of different experiences within the context of the festival circuit, providing a broader perspective for the study.

That said, through the three perspectives that comprise this study, we were able not only to recognise some of the significant transformation festival are currently undergoing, but also to understand more about the core values, methods, processes, and narratives that characterise their existence as complex and sometimes contradicting entities. We have come to see that maintaining exclusivity is not necessarily the manner in which festivals are developing resilience. They do so, rather, through the development of strategies that allow for flexibility and fluidity when they seek to expand to new domains of activity. Whether or not this is what will enable them to thrive and persist remains unclear. But from here, as we have come to see the rich and varied strategies and methods they are able to deploy, their potential is clearly vast.

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