



## CHAPTER 3

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# Scarcity, Ubiquity, and the Film Festival After Covid

*Brendan Kredell*

To do so, I begin by considering a pair of distinct yet interrelated pressures confronting film festivals. Festivals must renegotiate the role they play within the broader film industry, I contend, while at the same time navigating a critical moment in the funding of arts and culture organizations. These twin tensions are not without historical precedent, I argue. In the second half of this chapter, I develop a parallel between Covid-era film festivals and newspapers faced with the popularization of the World Wide Web. By tracing some of the impacts of that disruption for daily newspapers, I suggest that we can better understand some of the structural pressures that the festival ecosystem will likely confront in a post-pandemic world. Beginning from the premise that festivals' mass shift to online delivery during the pandemic will ultimately usher in a new normal of hybridity post-Covid, I argue that the skills, competencies, and resources required in order to thrive in such an environment will necessarily cleave the haves from the have-nots to an even greater extent than

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B. Kredell (✉)  
Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA  
e-mail: [kredell@oakland.edu](mailto:kredell@oakland.edu)

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is currently true of film festivals. I conclude the essay with some speculative analysis of the concentration of attention that would attend such a cleaving.

### SCARCITY AND UBIQUITY

But I begin with the observation of a fundamental, theoretical conflict at the root of our discussion of what it means to talk about film festivals in a time of pandemic. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin 1969) was initially published in the same year—1935—that the third edition of the Venice Film Festival ran. That historical coincidence has been significant for the way that festival scholars have sought to unlock a distinct conceptual position for the film festival within the broader media ecosystem through Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay. While films themselves are emblematic of the perfect technological reproducibility of art, the boundedness of festivals—in both time and space—confers a certain authenticity upon the festival screening, a “unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1969, 220) to borrow the famous Benjaminian definition of aura. This boundedness has been a continuity in festival culture; here I follow De Valck (2008) and Odabasi (2016), who employ the term “scarcity,” but others have developed the concept of “event value” to describe a similar idea (Richards 2021). Through the lens of scarcity, we are able to more clearly understand the complex dynamics of the festival ecosystem at work. There is a kind of transfiguration at the root of what film festivals do: they take a ubiquitous cultural object (the film itself) and present it in such a way as to manufacture a scarce cultural experience.

The challenges wrought by Covid-19 force us to again reckon with this tension between the scarce and the ubiquitous; the mass shift to digital delivery has called into question the tenability of festivals’ existing model, and we must confront now what comes after.<sup>1</sup> And indeed it is this

<sup>1</sup>A word here on my use of the singular “festival model”: there are, no doubt, many “festival models.” (Indeed, perhaps there are as many distinct models for holding a festival as there are festivals to be held.) With that said, in this essay, I work from the assumption that there is something ontologically similar about events we call “film festivals,” from the highest-profile international festivals to the most fleeting and ephemeral of small-scale festivals. By corollary, that assertion implies that there is something that makes these events ontologically distinct from other venues in which we may see the same films, be those repertory cinemas or subscription-based streaming platforms. Consequently, then, I use the singular “festival model” here in its most all-encompassing terms, a description for an event-based mode of film exhibition that is constrained in both time and space.

ubiquity—scarcity’s antipode—that is Benjamin’s point of departure in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” He begins with an epigraph from his contemporary Paul Valéry, in an essay entitled “The Conquest of Ubiquity” that was written a few short years prior to “The Work of Art.” In it, Valéry contended that technological change would mean that “works of art will acquire a kind of ubiquity”:

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign. (Valéry 1964, 226)

Valéry’s essay has long circulated via Benjamin’s quotation, but in recent decades scholars have returned to the original because of the uncanny way in which the author seems to imagine today’s internet (White 2003; Friedberg 2004; Vaughan 2019). Elsewhere in it, he observes that the advent of the phonograph and radio broadcasts liberated the audience, who could now listen “when and where we please”:

Formerly we could not enjoy music at our own time, according to our own mood. We were dependent for our enjoyment on an occasion, a place, a date, and a program. How many coincidences were needed! (Valéry 1964, 227)

It is worth pausing to consider that last phrase: what Valéry describes as “coincidences” are, to the film industry, the fundamental preconditions of a viable economic model, the linchpins of a carefully managed system of production, distribution, and exhibition. The process has changed over time, from the run/zone/clearance system of the classical Hollywood era to the twenty-first century model of release windows (Eliashberg 2005). But cinema has always relied on the “coincidence”—quite literally—of time and space in order to control scarcity in the supply chain. It is certainly true that a decades-long succession of post-cinema technological changes—broadcast (and subsequently cable) television, home video, video-on-demand and streaming, and so on—have steadily eroded the primacy of the appointment viewing model of theatrical exhibition. Yet the argument for film festivals has always been premised on the claim to a kind of auratic experience of technologically reproduced artwork that they present. One could do much worse than Valéry’s phrase—“an occasion, a place, a date, and a program”—as a provisional definition for what a film festival is.

Pre-Covid, a central function of the festival was convocation: film festivals serve to gather together a community of cinemagoers in a defined place and time for a specific program of films. The communal experience here is paramount; indeed, we speak of attending *the festival* rather than *the films we see screened there*. Regular festivalgoers will be well acquainted with the notion of “making your own festival,” that two attendees of the same festival may spend a week together in a city without ever sitting in the same theater together. Our time is short, and the typical festival program contains far more films than any individual viewer could hope to screen. The spectatorial mode of the traditional festival is bound up in this tension between scarcity (of time and of place) and plentitude (the overabundance of films on offer).

Well before the pandemic, however, we came to believe that media should now be accessible “on-demand.”<sup>2</sup> Putting aside the merits, on-demand culture has perhaps reached its apotheosis in the isolation of social distance, and online festivals follow these broader cultural trends. In doing so, they alter the scarcity dynamic I have just discussed by shifting its terms, with significant implications. Like with traditional festivals, our time (or, more precisely, our attention) remains a scarce resource at online festivals. However, it is structured differently. Films are typically released within defined “release windows,” meaning that no two audience members watching the same film are necessarily viewing it in perfect synchrony. The emplacement of the festival, meanwhile, is fundamentally redefined. While time zone and language (and, in some cases, geofencing) impose a loose geographic order on the online festival, the shared sense of place that binds the traditional festival is absent. Toby Lee has observed that what makes the festival experience is “being there” (Lee 2016), but it is no longer so clear where, precisely, the “there” of the festival is.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Again, I acknowledge here that it is inherently problematic to discuss the normative “online festival,” insofar as those norms are very much in flux at present. Broadly speaking, I refer here to the model of online festivals in which attendees purchase tickets or passes that allow on-demand access to films during a defined release window. (Shift72 and Eventive have been leading providers of such services.)

<sup>3</sup>For my purposes here, I am bracketing the various ways by which online film festivals remain bound up in space and time. These merit a separate essay: from decisions about the time zones and language(s) to prioritize for synchronous programming, to the technological restrictions (e.g. geofencing) placed upon that programming, online festivals undertake processes of inclusion and exclusion that echo similar determinations made at traditional festivals. Unpacking the implications of these calculations is outside the scope of what I hope to accomplish here, but it is important to note that so long as their participants are bound in space and time, so too are festivals, whether online or in-person.

Taken together, the spectatorial mode of the online festival is one of ubiquity. The ubiquity of the online festival does not necessarily equate to plentitude; indeed, the programs for such editions are often less packed than their terrestrial antecedents. Rather, ubiquity here signals a way to view films absent the “coincidences” of Valéry’s formulation: within certain brackets, festival participants are now able to watch films at the place (and, to a lesser extent, the time) of their choosing. Festivals are now available to us in ways that they never were before and that prompts a fundamental rethinking of their place within the culture. The question we must confront, then: what does it mean to think of the film festival after the conquest of ubiquity?

### CHANGING STRATEGIES OF RISK AVOIDANCE

Framing the question in those terms requires that we reconsider how the basic organizational premises of the film festival embed within it a structural precarity. To do so, I want to focus on two particular tensions we observe in festivals, one internal and one external. Tracing their implications helps to clarify the issues confronting festivals as they face down a post-Covid future. (I should say here that for the purposes of this essay, I focus specifically on the American context, given that certain aspects of its funding model and its relationship to industry are unique. I suspect that some, though not all, of these observations can be generalized.)

The external tension stems from a mismatch between supply and demand in the broader film industry that has been percolating for decades. As I will contend, film festivals proliferated in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s, a time when they also served important functions for the broader industry: as a primary discovery mechanism for new films and new filmmaking talent and as an alternative distribution network for films that did not receive wide releases. Well before Covid-19, that marriage of convenience between festivals and industry had come under some strain, as streaming video services have picked up a lot of the exhibition slack that festivals formerly catered to. As in so many other arenas, we see that in the historical long view, the changes wrought by the pandemic are more properly understood as amplifications or accelerations of long-standing trends.

Put simply, the tension is one of supply and demand. The number of films entering the market has increased—the result, principally, of lower technological and financial barriers to entry—at the same time that distributors and exhibitors have consolidated, with a small number of

blockbuster films earning a greater share of revenues than ever before. A full accounting of these changes is beyond the scope of this essay, but there are several salient points to make here regarding changes to the ways that audiences view films in the two decades leading up to Covid-19.

Looking at American box office revenues over the last twenty years, the size of the theatrical pie has remained roughly the same: theatrical exhibitors took in \$7.3 billion in the US/Canada domestic market in 1999; adjusting for inflation, this amount was unchanged by 2019.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the size of the slices taken by the large firms and the small ones has been consistent across that time. What has changed is how those slices are in turn divided. The largest firms continue to earn more than 90% of box office revenues each year, despite distributing 40% fewer films than they did two decades ago (Fig. 3.1).<sup>5</sup>

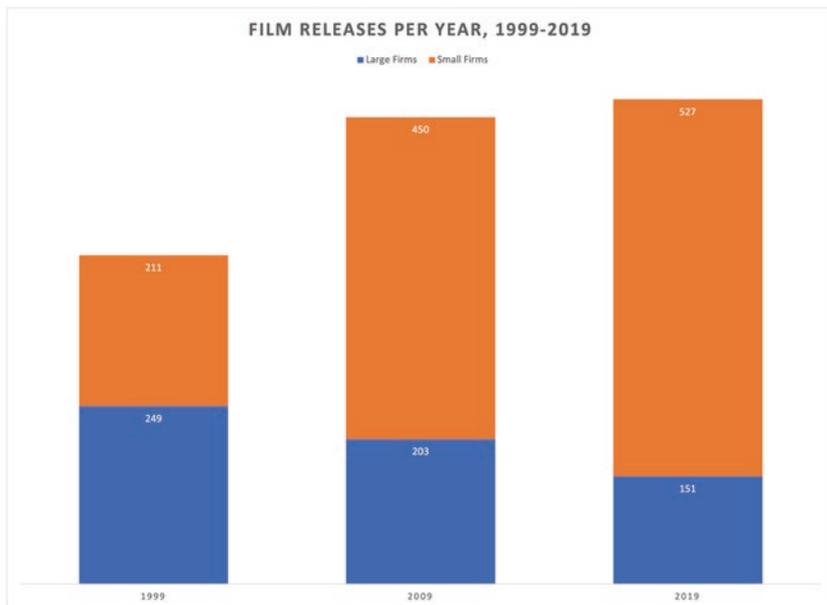
Those numbers paint a stark portrait of consolidation in the movie business more generally: the largest firms were able to capture roughly as much revenue in 2019 as they had in 1999, despite releasing a hundred fewer films. Conversely, smaller firms have increased the number of films they distribute by 150% over the same time period, with little corresponding gain in market share. Of particular note is a structural mismatch between the kinds of films that have dominated Hollywood box office in recent decades—adaptations of existing intellectual property, often taking the form of franchise films and “cinematic universes”—and the kinds of films that predominate in film festival catalogs—which is to say, films produced from original screenplays.<sup>6</sup>

At root, Hollywood studios are in the business of risk mitigation: films are expensive to produce, and not all of them earn back their initial investment.

<sup>4</sup>Several notes here: all figures herein are cited in US dollars. Public sources of box office data vary somewhat, and so for the sake of consistency, I am referring here to data from Nash Information Services ([the-numbers.com](http://the-numbers.com)) unless otherwise mentioned. I have cross-referenced these figures with Box Office Mojo and ComScore (via NATO) to ensure reliability. Finally, in nominal dollars, US domestic box office was reported at \$7.3 billion for 1999 and \$11.3 billion in 2019.

<sup>5</sup>It is common within industry discourse to refer to subdivide these firms in terms of “major studios,” their subsidiary units (or “specialty units”), and “mini-majors,” referring to the largest of the independent distributors. Here I’m adopting a simpler—and arbitrary—dividing line between “large” and “small” firms: a distributor counts as “large” if it earned at least 1% of total theatrical market share in a given year. Over time, the number of large firms has remained consistent at 10–12. Box office data via The Numbers.

<sup>6</sup>For the interested reader, Tino Balio’s study of the consolidation of Hollywood in the twenty-first century provides important analysis here (Balio 2013).



**Fig. 3.1** “The largest firms continue dominating the American film market with fewer films.” (Data compiled from Nash Information Services)

Film festivals have historically represented one important strategy of risk avoidance, so much so that Michael Z. Newman refers to the 1990s American independent cinema as the “Sundance-Miramax era” to signal the importance of a small handful of film festivals to the broader operations of the movie business. During a time when Hollywood studios gradually reduced costly, and risky, investments in film production, those festivals emerged to play a critical market-making role. Peter Biskind’s book on this era opens with an anecdote about Steven Soderbergh’s arrival in Utah for the 1989 premiere of *sex, lies, and videotape* at Sundance, with the author arguing that it was that event that established a new paradigm for the Hollywood-film festival nexus (Biskind 2004). The set of festivals that could stake a claim to tangible impact on the industry itself was very small—perhaps less than a half-dozen at any given time. But festivals like Sundance and Toronto, and later SXSW and Tribeca, thrived in no small part because they rest atop a much larger ecosystem of festivals with which they enjoy mutually beneficial relationships. These ties are both direct and indirect. Programmers at regional

festivals often attend high-profile festivals to make decisions about which films to pursue for their own festivals. Filmmakers travel the circuit of regional festivals, hoping to gain attention and exposure while also networking with fellow filmmakers. It may be that Sundance exists, as we know it, because Hollywood needed for it to be so. But its success also helped support a much broader network of festivals around the country.

However, over time we can see the risk-avoidance strategies of studios shifting. The turn to festivals represented a way to vet finished films and assess their commercial viability. But by 2005—fifteen years from the release of *sex, lies*—films produced from original screenplays in the United States represented only 35% of the total box office (Follows 2015). The dawn of the modern franchise era ensured their further long-term erosion; by 2015, original films accounted for less than one-fifth of total receipts. This shift was both qualitative and quantitative; not only did the kinds of movies Hollywood make change, but the scale on which they made them changed to follow. In movies, as with banking, studios shifted to a strategy of producing films that were too big to fail, with production budgets soaring in the 2000s to historically unprecedented levels.<sup>7</sup> As studios shifted resources into fewer films with larger budgets, their investment in “mid-sized movies” (Scott 2005) waned. All of this places festivals, historically the breeding grounds for prestige cinema, in a precarious position.

At the turn of the millennium, there was a strain of utopianism, perhaps best associated with Chris Anderson’s “long tail” thesis, that technological change would have democratizing, centrifugal impacts on the media industries (Anderson 2006). The data twenty years on seem to suggest just the opposite: while there are two and a half times as many independent films in the theatrical market as there were twenty years earlier, the cumulative revenues earned by those films have barely changed. The same is true of movie theaters themselves—there are 1500 fewer of them in the United States today compared with 1999, but the number of screens inside those theaters has actually increased by 10% over the same time period, enabling exhibitors to screen the latest blockbusters with much greater frequency than in the past. Taken together, the net effect is that

<sup>7</sup> Moreso even than box office figures, trying to compare production budgets is a notoriously difficult process. Producers have strong incentives to keep these numbers secret, since compensation packages for talent are often tied to film profits. With the acknowledgment that we should take public reporting on budgets with a heaping dose of salt, then, I would point the interested reader to the list of most expensive film productions maintained by Wikipedia. Of the fifty most expensive films (adjusted for inflation), only one was produced before 1995—*Cleopatra* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1963).

Anderson appears to have had it exactly backward when he subtitled his book “Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More.” At least when it comes to watching movies in theaters, the opposite is now true: the largest distributors earn more money from fewer films than ever before.

Among the many consequences for international and American independent cinema have been a long-term trend toward the casualization of exhibition. At the same time that the digital cinema revolution has democratized the production of motion pictures and made the process of getting a film to market cheaper than ever before, the consolidation of theatrical exhibition means that the kinds of films that once played across a national network of independent theaters now find their audiences via video-on-demand and streaming services. The only time these films will play in theaters, increasingly, is via festival distribution. Indeed, this is a presumptive explanation for why the number of independent films released each year continues to grow in seeming defiance of the laws of economic gravity: as a business proposition, theatrical release is a loss leader, a way to position the film for higher revenues in downstream windows like VOD. A recent Sundance Institute report polled industry participants across a range of firms on issues in film distribution, with remarks from executives at Entertainment One representative of the big-picture trends. (eOne is a Canadian firm, though it distributes films in the US market through its Momentum Pictures subsidiary.)

Obviously much of the conversation nowadays is focused on new forms of distribution and consumer viewing habits. Looking for material that can have life on digital, VOD, SVOD, AVOD is very important to us because it’s harder to capture an audience’s attention than ever. (Manashil and Green 2019)

Given this change in emphasis, we should not be surprised to find that film festivals have expanded to fill the breach left by theatrical exhibition over the last two decades. In the United States today, the scope of the festival sector is staggering: as of this writing, FilmFreeway lists more than 4800 active festivals. In other words, there are approximately as many film festivals in the United States today as there are film theaters.<sup>8</sup> As the bottleneck of traditional theatrical exhibition has increasingly been closed off to most independent and international cinema in the United States, film festivals have taken on an ever more important role within American film culture.

<sup>8</sup>FilmFreeway is the leading platform for managing the festival submission process and thus a kind of de facto clearinghouse of information on festivals.

## LOOKING TO THE PAST (OF NEWSPAPERS) TO SEE THE FUTURE (OF FESTIVALS)

In the previous section I focused on the ways that external pressures from the broader film industry have affected festivals in the run-up to Covid. But as I suggested at the outset, festivals confront internal tensions as well, which are also amplified by and underscore the depth of the challenge posed by the Covid-19 crisis. Selling badges or tickets to filmgoers (“earned revenue”) is rarely the sole or even the predominant source of funding for festivals. Instead, festivals typically draw a majority of their funding from what arts administrators call “contributed revenue”—donations, grants, foundation support, and other sources of funding. Arts and culture organizations in the United States typically draw half of their revenues from contributed revenue. At 60% of total budgets, arthouse movie theaters are even more reliant on contributed revenue, but film festivals exceed even that. According to an analysis performed for the trade group Arthouse Convergence, the average film festival counts on contributed revenue for 63% of its total budget (SMU DataArts 2019). Relying on contributed revenue to such a large extent means negotiating the interests of a complex network of stakeholders, each with differing interests in promoting the ongoing operations of the festival. In his recent book on queer festivals, Stuart James Richards seizes on this when describing festivals as “social enterprises,” caught in the “double bind” of programming for “both the community and potential stakeholders” (Richards 2016, 100).

Festivals seek and receive output-oriented funding precisely because much of their value to the culture at large can only be measured in externalities. The admissions office at my university sponsors a festival my students program each year, in large part because they believe it serves as an effective recruitment tool for potential new students to the university. Local and state government agencies provide funding to multiple festivals in my city each year, with an eye toward the benefits, tangible and intangible, that the city realizes from having more and larger festivals happening here each year. The value proposition of festivals for these and other stakeholders is very much bound up in both space and time. Each attendee at a film festival represents another diner in the city’s restaurants, another guest in the city’s hotels, another shopper in the city’s stores.<sup>9</sup> At a more abstract level, the festival is also an opportunity to build the cultural capital

<sup>9</sup>In the most recent report from Americans for the Arts (2016), the average direct expenditure for each audience member at \$31.47, exclusive of the price paid for admission.

of the city. The economic benefits that this cultural capital generates aren't directly realized by the festival; indeed, these positive externalities are a large part of the reason why governments, foundations, individual donors, and corporate sponsors fund the ongoing operations of festivals. But the Covid crisis forces us to consider how this model of economic sponsorship is tied to the spatio-temporality of festivals—and what fate awaits festivals in the event that this disruption to the established order proves longer lasting.

Festivals in the wake of Covid face a two-headed problem, then. On the one hand, the indirect economic model I have just described depends on a carefully managed production of scarcity: the event value of the festival depends on its ephemerality. On the other, as detailed in the previous section, the system of American independent cinema historically has relied upon festivals as a kind of circulatory network: not only for the films themselves, but also for the filmmakers who make them, the firms that finance them, the media that cover them, and the audiences who view them. Covid has thrown festivals into a liminal state of hybridity: at a moment's notice, organizers were forced to imagine what their festivals would look like in a mostly or completely online environment.

But as we contemplate a future in which hybridity becomes the norm and not the exception, we should pause to recognize that such a system is not particularly well situated to endure in the event of severe stress. Consider, by way of analogy, the crisis that newspapers found themselves in with the rise of the Internet. Like festivals, newspapers are immensely important actors, with disproportionate impact within their cultural ecosystems, and yet they too have historically been caught in a “double bind”: direct revenue from readers has historically paid for only a small fraction of the cultural work of the paper (reporting the news), with money generated through other means—most notably, by selling advertisements—funding ongoing operations.

The existential crisis for newspapers was the advent of the World Wide Web, which fundamentally challenged the spatio-temporal boundaries of the newspaper and unsettled the order of an industry in profound ways. At the outset of the 1990s, the major metropolitan dailies of the United States were lucrative ventures. Decades of market consolidation meant that most cities had become one-newspaper towns, and the papers that survived this consolidation were able to exert monopoly control over local advertising. Swelling advertising revenue was not only good for the papers' bottom lines, but it enabled a major expansion of domestic and

international newsgathering efforts (Franklin 2008; Pew Research Center 2021). However, the rise of the web precipitated a two-fold crisis for local newspapers. The first was an abrupt economic change: low-cost competitors arose for scarce advertising dollars, shrinking the total amount of ad revenues each newspaper could bring in. In the United States, we might call this the “Craigslis effect,” after the eponymous web-based classified advertising service started by Craig Newmark in 1996. Its low-to-no cost advertisements helped it grow quickly to market dominance, in an early example of web-based “disruption” of existing business models.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, a long-term demand shift began, as readers began to become unbound from their local paper. The papers that have thrived in this era—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and so on—have expanded their readership dramatically, doubling or tripling their peak print circulation. This has come at the expense of local and regional papers, many of which have literally disappeared in the ensuing years. Penelope Abernathy describes this phenomenon as “the expanding news desert” (Abernathy 2020): according to her research, 2100 newspapers have closed in the United States in the past fifteen years, leaving large swaths of the country with no local source of news. Consequently, fewer than half as many people are employed in newsrooms today as were twenty years ago. Summing up the state of affairs in American journalism earlier this year, Emily Bell wrote that “winners taking it all are a feature, not a bug, of the current technocracy” (Bell 2020).

## THE POST-COVID OUTLOOK

A shock to the established order of things—in this case, the rise of a new technology—has in a relatively short period of time upended the entire system of newspapers in the United States. This shock has prompted a redistribution of the existing newspaper readership, one that has skewed heavily toward a few national news organizations at the expense of smaller papers around the country. With audiences consolidating in the hands of a few major players, the consequences have knock-on effects through the community in ways that are both obvious and not.

I don’t think we have to squint too hard to see a future in which we look back at Covid-19 as a closing of the chapter of a certain era in film

<sup>10</sup>Newmark, for his part, reinvested some of the profits he earned from Craigslist into supporting local journalism (Harris 2006).

festival history, one that could be described in roughly parallel terms by the historians of the future. Just as the advent of the web forced the newspaper industry to seek out a new equilibrium in order to continue operations, so too for the future of film festivals.

I mentioned before the staggering breadth of the festival landscape in America today, but of course, not all film festivals are created equal. Beyond the small upper echelon of industry-focused festivals that stand out in boldface each year is a massive and well-traveled circuit of smaller but significant festivals: the kinds of festivals where emerging filmmakers gather each year to show their work off and where important connections are made that help careers progress, in cities like New Orleans and Santa Fe and Indianapolis and Wilmington, North Carolina. These are festivals without much in the way of a Hollywood presence and ones that do not often attract attention in the scholarly literature. But they have earned audience- and filmmaker-friendly reputations after years of putting on successful programs, and those festivals have proved crucial in the development of the ecosystem of American independent cinema.

Michael Forstein's invaluable Film Festival Database (Forstein 2021) aspires to bring some order to this chaotic landscape for independent filmmakers; at present, his database highlights approximately 1000 festivals—primarily, though not exclusively, American—for special recognition. Inclusion on these lists is critical to the success of smaller festivals in the United States; it is not uncommon to hear festival organizers tout such recognition or to hear filmmakers plotting their festival strategy by consulting Forstein's database. With small budgets to pay entry fees and high opportunity costs—filmmakers cannot afford to travel to support their films at many festivals—it is especially important to independent filmmakers that they maximize efficiency and return on investment by seeking out festivals that will confer prestige and offer ample opportunity for networking with other filmmakers. Likewise, for a festival that depends on the revenue brought in by entry fees to help pay for its costs, the implicit seal of approval that Forstein's database, or *MovieMaker Magazine*, confers goes a long way toward ensuring filmmakers will submit to future editions of their festival. Each one of the festivals in this database has its own unique constellation of audiences, films, missions, and circumstances, but all share one thing in common: they must balance their books at the end of the fiscal year. The cacophonous ecosystem of film festivals that we know today is a function of a decentralized system in which local stakeholders have vested interests in ensuring the continued survival of each individual

festival. As I detailed above, most American film festivals are largely dependent on contributions and donations to make their annual budgets. By providing critical financial support, local stakeholders have supported the development of a system of literally thousands of small- and mid-sized festivals across the United States.

However, Covid-19 has amplified existing forces acting upon that festival system and in some cases mobilized new ones. Many festivals pivoted to online and hybrid modes of delivery as a survival tactic in 2020, but it is increasingly common to hear sentiments such as those expressed by Tiina Lokk, festival director of the Tallinn Black Nights Festival in Estonia:

We're hybrid for good. It's been a long-standing plan to be more online and reach beyond our previous borders, expanding our footprint beyond mainly one city in November. Going online in 2020 was an opportunity to build for the future, designing infrastructure for the years ahead. (Blaney 2021)

The sentiment here is an admirable one, and the argument that festivals should develop new initiatives to serve audiences beyond their immediate geographic footprint is a powerful one. But the example of the newspaper industry cited above is a cautionary tale. Hybridity, I fear, is the instigation for a technological arms race, in which only the most clever—or well-resourced—festivals can survive. “Designing infrastructure” is a costly undertaking and one that will require competencies and capital that are in scarce supply and hot demand. Raising the technological—and financial—barriers to entry for festivals will likely result in an outcome familiar to journalism onlookers: just as many newspapers failed to effectively make a transition into a world of online newsgathering and publication, so too should we expect the same of film festivals.

Compounding matters are the broader distribution trends referenced earlier in this chapter, wherein the kinds of films playing at festivals increasingly find their audiences on streaming services. What role do film festivals play in the film culture post-Covid? And to put that question more pointedly, *which* festivals will still have a role? For the highest-profile festivals, an uneasy kind of truce has developed with streamers: as the distribution slates of traditional studios get smaller with each passing year, Netflix, Amazon, and their competitors have stepped into the breach to acquire the rights to the kinds of festival films that used to define the “Sundance-Miramax era.” Twenty years ago, Piers Handling of the Toronto International Film Festival described the festival ecosystem writ large as an “alternative distribution network” (Turan 2002, 8). But today, streaming

services have increasingly taken on that role, with the major festivals serving as nodal points on that network by virtue of their markets and their ability to focus attention on the films they showcase. The role that smaller and mid-sized festivals play within this evolving network is more difficult to ascertain.

In the newspaper world, we watched as the switch from paper to digital left large swaths of an industry behind. The introduction of new technology precipitated changes in consumption habits that have been permanent and profound. Looking out at the world of festivals, I cannot help but fear that we're looking at a replay of the same phenomenon. A series of tenuous balancing acts have propped up the festival ecosystem as we know it: emerging filmmakers benefit from the reflected star power of established talent at A-list festivals, as the attention drawn to their films instigates a powerful discovery mechanism for critics and industry participants alike. Programmers of smaller festivals attend those same large festivals so that they can preview films and make decisions about which to invite; the screening fees their festivals pay represent an important revenue stream for emerging filmmakers whose films haven't received theatrical distribution. Funders underwrite the costs of those smaller festivals when audiences alone cannot cover the costs. All of these counterbalancing forces are dependent on the existing spatial and temporal order that structures the world of festivals. Once that foundation has been disturbed, though, the carefully balanced culture built atop it is at risk of tumbling.

The largest festivals will still succeed in a post-Covid world—indeed, I suspect they'll be even better off. Just as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have poured resources into digital technology, widening the gulf between themselves and their former competitors, we can imagine a world in which festivals like TIFF and SXSW can build sustainable digital footprints for themselves that in turn lock in ever larger audiences. Until now these festivals have been constrained by space and time—their audience can only be as big as the number of seats they have in theaters across the duration of the festival. But in a post-pandemic world, we can now imagine what would previously have seemed a contradiction in terms: the ubiquitous festival. The turn to hybridity represents the first step toward an opportunity for the world's largest festivals to transcend their spatio-temporal boundaries and re-imagine what a film festival of the twenty-first century could be.

Doing so, however, would risk the long-term viability of mid-sized festivals, whose role within the broader film culture is at once difficult to describe and yet impossible to ignore. The cost to our film culture of

losing large numbers of mid-sized festivals will be incalculable and irrevocable, as the window closes on the next generation of emerging filmmakers. Our film culture is built around our festivals, and now more than ever, we need them.

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