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Virtual Visibility and the Film Festival Circuit

Two options arose for the film festivals of 2020. Across the entire festival circuit, events, screenings, and conferences were either cancelled or went online. In coming to terms with a global freeze on media production, festivals round the world accepted fundamental transformations in regard to distributing festival works. Most festivals amid the pandemic reconfigured the ample exhibition opportunities provided by the circuit itself. The festival resources that were utilized to facilitate urgent measures became especially transparent in establishing virtual festival success.

Prior to COVID-19, festivals with strong and consistent virtual offerings utilized their contingency plans as they continued to program Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), or Artificial Intelligence (AI) based projects. Importantly, certain licensing and online platform strategies forged among larger, more commercial and industry-forward film festivals proved advantageous during the pandemic. Overall, various virtual tactics reflected the rapidly increasing presence of streaming entities already at festivals, with Netflix and Amazon, for instance, offering notably big “marquee” titles through world or North American premieres. Partnerships among streaming giants such as Amazon and festivals like South by Southwest (SXSW) assisted in widespread virtual transitions; in fact, SXSW 2021 will remain exclusively online for its festival in March. Further back in time, during the spring of 2020, the “We Are One: Global Film Festival”—spearheaded by Tribeca Enterprises and more than twenty other festivals including Cannes, the Venice International Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival—ran on YouTube from May 29 to June 7, 2020. Sundance Film Festival, which had a year of pandemic festival planning at its disposal, took place digitally during late January to early February of this year. Through its Sundance-built platform that included a smartphone festival app, it streamed premieres online and held a few physically distanced in-person events. Certain partnerships also tried to expand and fortify programming initiatives. In December 2020, the Executive Director of the Berlin International Film Festival, Mariette Rissenbeek, struggled to reach an extended exhibition deal with various rights owners of titles premiering within Berlinale’s competition categories. The proposed arrangement was intended to allow for the trades, some press, and the public to view festival titles during the proposed “Berlinale Summer” of 2021, long after Berlinale 2021 concluded in February.¹

1. Melanie Goodfellow, “Berlin and EFM to move online in March; no decision yet on how competitions will work,” *Screendaily*, December 18, 2020, www.screendaily.com/news/berlin-and-efm-to-move-online-in-march-no-decision-yet-on-how-competitions-will-work/5155783.article.

Large-scale interdependencies within the film festival circuit were highlighted in the initial months of COVID-19. Widely publicized digital streaming partnerships with certain festivals normalized the expectation that all festivals would go online, regardless of the industry programming and financial support that facilitated their online transitions. But the crucial question remains: who has access to these online distribution and exhibition strategies, and why? In 2020, smaller, independent festivals, which generally focus more on grassroots, community-based mandates and initiatives, in effect mimicked the smoother online portal transitions between exclusively industry-centric festivals and larger streaming entities, yet their transfers were not always as integrated due to logistical matters. There is no doubt that COVID-19 raises massive concerns throughout the festival world about the future of exhibiting festival works with restricted physical interactivity. But economic fragmentation was and will be felt most deeply in community-based and *en plein air* festivals, whose mission statements do not primarily revolve around industry dealings. In light of the massive changes that came with COVID-19, “the festival circuit” as an industry term must reexamine its purpose as the pandemic frames digital exhibition strategies as long-lasting, inevitable elements of film festival operations.

Beyond the financial cushioning of more fortunate festivals, most digital exhibition strategies executed globally by film festivals corresponded to three dramatic online viewing trends that accelerated change during pandemic-era film and media viewership. The first trend witnesses film festivals moving mostly online, with the majority of festival events and industry programming becoming virtual. A handful of drive-in style screening formats and “satellite” socially distanced interactive events were also planned and executed relatively well. The second trend is the virtual cinema concept. As coalitions were created between leading arthouse distributors and theaters, revenue-sharing partnerships were established on a generally accepted 50–50 net revenue split. Distributors offered online, virtual cinema platforms to screen various titles, pending the purchase of a virtual ticket. Films on platforms such as Kino Lorber’s Kino Marquee offered audiences the chance to search and support local theaters while viewing films that would otherwise be in their theatrical release period, or making the festival circuit rounds.² The third dramatic change entails premium video-on-demand arrangements between larger, more mainstream festivals, where headlining titles skipped past theatrical release and went straight to established premium streaming services. As previously noted, SXSW did this with Amazon. Even markedly curated streamers like Curzon Home Cinema converted scheduled theatrical and festival releases into limited online leasing agreements direct to the public. Like many other larger streamers, Curzon Home Cinema as an on-demand platform has adopted the rapidly growing same-day release model, whereby titles offered through theatrical premieres in Curzon (physical) cinemas can be streamed that same day on the Curzon platform.

2. Jeremy Kay, “Screen Talks: ‘Virtual Cinema’ could be viable model after Covid-19,” *Screendaily*, April 24, 2020, www.screendaily.com/news/screen-talks-virtual-cinema-could-be-viable-new-model-after-covid-19/5149309.article.



IMAGE 1. Still from *Agence* (2020, directed by Pietro Gagliano); © 2020 Transitional Forms/National Film Board of Canada.

From a distribution perspective, the virtual conversions of the 2020 festival circuit mostly arose for content already scheduled for release at a festival or in theaters. Many titles were in effect simply rerouted to online platforms. But what else was highlighted in the physical distancing protocols of 2020's festival circuit? Although *Agence* (2020, directed by Pietro Gagliano) possessed a distribution deal secured through its funding partner, the National Film Board of Canada, its associate producer and community manager Erin Ray admitted she missed "that physical connection" in reflecting on her time at the digital iteration of the 2020 Venice International Film Festival, where *Agence* had its world premiere.³ Ray, like many other festival lovers, understands that Janet Harbord's idea of the "transborder flow"⁴ of people is a key essence of the film festival. Fortunately, Venice in particular executed some creative and collaborative strategies outside of orchestrating an online festival portal, which accommodated the necessary changes and health measures that came with COVID-19.

Agence happened to be quite compatible with these strategies. A joint venture among funding partners and the studio lab Transitional Forms, Ray explained that *Agence* is a "dynamic storytelling project with a focus on artificial learning and machine learning." It "brings in AI to help guide stories," stated Ray, who also clarified that the project's plot revolves around the interactive control of a small world of little creatures as they react to created storylines "based off of a three-way authorship." Ray went on to explain:

3. All quotations by Erin Ray are from an interview by the author via phone, September 23, 2020.

4. Janet Harbord, "Contingency, Time, and Event: An Archaeological Approach to the Film Festival," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (New York: Routledge, 2016), 69.

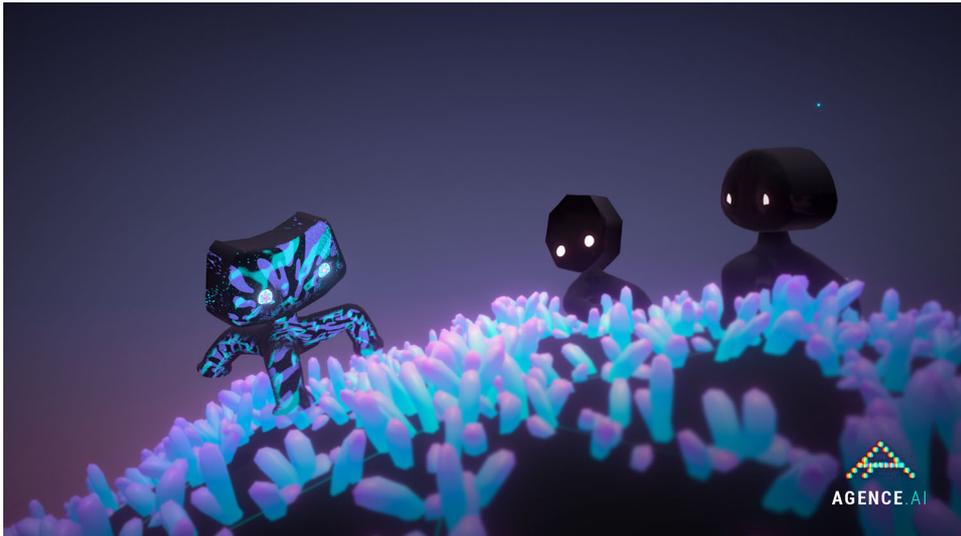


IMAGE 2. Still from *Agence* (2020, directed by Pietro Gagliano); © 2020 Transitional Forms/National Film Board of Canada.

this authorship consists of director Pietro Gagliano’s specifically created narrative, a narrative in effect perpetuated by the creatures themselves via their built-in artificial intelligence and specific AI reinforcement learning, and the narrative that audience participants offer through their own creative agency as they engage with the project through a VR headset.

Ray continued that *Agence* in effect plays with “behaviors of consumption which [might be] heightened, [which] also allow for the stories created to be different.”

As *Agence* creates intersections between the entertainment industry and technology industries, it also fits well with the virtual reality “chat” installation that Venice asked each VR project participating in the 2020 festival to create. Ray explained that the installation was accessible to the public, meaning participants could be accredited or non-accredited, so long as they had access to a PC and a VR headset at home. Ray also clarified that her general experience with online chat platforms are in their own right “world-making,” because you can create an avatar, “play in virtual worlds, [and use VR chat] as a virtual hub where you can hang out with friends.” Venice had also offered support of satellite locations, allowing anyone from around the world to apply to hold “in real life” socially distanced panels and other events. As a Canadian production, *Agence* was installed at the satellite location of the Phi Centre in Montréal, an arts and culture venue where people could go to interact with *Agence* if they didn’t have a VR headset at home.

Projects like *Agence* are quite nimble in their use of AI, using adaptations of artificial and machine learning to merge the world-making of interactive game play and the emotional, sometimes cathartic investment of linear storytelling. This overall approach



IMAGE 3. Regent Park Film Festival 2020 Festival Poster (2020) by Sama Al-Zanoon.

to platform management and project awareness creates an adaptability factor that serves media distribution and exhibition strategies, even during the pandemic festival circuit. But this virtual adaptability is perhaps not equally relevant to all film festivals. *Agence*, like most other VR installations of Venice 2020, requires access to a VR headset. Integrating VR into a festival like Toronto's Regent Park Film Festival (RPFF) might seem antithetical to the festival's guiding intention. RPFF in particular does not have

a sustained history with AI, nor does it currently witness a strong, specific calling within the communities it serves toward media that integrates AI. Like many community-based festivals, RPF is quite literally defined by its physical coordinates, and for good reason. It is “the sole community festival in Canada’s largest and oldest public housing neighbourhood.”⁵

In general, the fortuitous corporate sponsorships and preexisting ownership or distribution deals between major, more commercial festivals and streaming entities helped cushion the lack of synergy and “flow” during the 2020 festival circuit by facilitating many digital and virtual festival transfers. This proved that there is unexpected value to be leveraged through the inclusion of streamers in the festival circuit. Equally relevant, however, is the reality that vital, in-person community gatherings of independent festivals had either partially or completely disappeared during the pandemic, with little space for a contingency plan. Big questions about the real-time, physical presence and economic recuperation of festival proceedings were suspended in order to hasten online screenings, forums, and conferences. At pre-COVID city- or community-based festivals, streets or outdoor venues were filled with people. Recurring and first-time attendees alike felt the energy of public screenings and events. When a film festival like RPF moves online, how does it retain this dynamic, open access? If it does so successfully, does it retain this access by merely *being* a source of exhibition? In the online festival space, programming becomes the primary framework, and when a festival does not have some level of ownership over an easily maneuverable interface with reasonable internet speed, programming becomes compromised or buried altogether. In fact, with physical connection at the very core of the normal operations of community-based and *en plein air* festivals, and there are many of these, physical distance becomes economic fragmentation, even if a festival is not so concerned with business proceedings of the international media market. In addition, a community-based festival on average may not have the resources to dedicate an entire team to online adaptation.

From early Spring 2020, many festivals defined by grassroots outreach since their inception adopted a simple transfer from in-person to online film schedules, facilitated through various third-party applications. Curatorial intention often lessened merely due to logistical issues. Festivals of varying sizes are still negotiating this transition. As RPF centers BIPOC experience through open-access events and various community screenings, it revolves around large gatherings outdoors. Craig Palmer, the festival’s manager of operations, recently noted that the primary dilemma of RPF’s virtual presence for its November 2020 festival was “first, how do we make this [programming] interactive and in one place?”⁶ In the quest for the right interface and streaming distribution of RPF programming, Palmer “started doing [his] research, and once we heard what festivals like TIFF were doing, we ended up doing something similar with CineSend,” a cloud storage, conversion, and delivery platform used by the film and television industry. “The good thing is, we could have it all on our website, but there

5. “Mission,” *Regent Park Film Festival*, accessed December 5th, 2020, <http://regentparkfilmfestival.com/about>.

6. All quotations from Craig Palmer are from an interview by the author via phone, September 23, 2020.



IMAGE 4. Screenshot of Regent Park Film Festival's Being Black in Toronto (virtual) Panel, 2020. Top left to right: Ismaila Alfa, Yasmin Evering-Kerr, Ngardy Conteh George; Bottom left to right: Omolola Ajao, Sharine Taylor, Adrian Wallace.

was a lot of external work,” Palmer added, highlighting challenges to the RPFJ executive team’s centralized management. Accessibility can be argued as the one small victory achievable during pandemic film festival readjustments, but as accessibility increases through home viewership, it is met with various digital roadblocks. First and foremost, do all virtual festival attendees have reliable internet? For RPFJ’s COVID-adapted “Under the Stars” outdoor event in May 2020, Palmer had to stream that evening’s movie from his home, making his personal internet access hugely important to the event’s success. With various events taking place during RPFJ’s November festival, Palmer noted that streaming access for “any people speaking, so guest speakers and filmmakers, let alone the internet access of the people viewing the films that are being streamed [during our festival], had to be addressed. There [were] many different levels of access that needed to be taken into account.”

Fortunately, RPFJ maintains its sponsorships, festival supporters, and public funders. As Palmer stated, RPFJ 2020 “made it work.” In August, RPFJ hosted a drive-in event in partnership with the City of Toronto, and the festival continues to engage patron and fundraising initiatives to support its programming. But Palmer raised another crucial point when discussing RPFJ’s online adaptation: the festival often screens widely popular, Hollywood titles in outdoor settings, and “could never screen these through an online server” due to rights issues. In highlighting another concern related to online festival presence, it is important to ask if a film festival offering free, community-based screenings must resign to the fact that, in essence, its lack of licensing or simply leasing agreements between streaming services or massive entertainment companies will greatly impact its online programming initiatives. As previously mentioned, coalitions were formed between distributors and exhibitors to keep both entities alive and operational during COVID. But can partial or seasonal streaming deals of lessened revenue be forged between streaming giants and independent

community festivals, easing the pressure for these festivals to create an entirely new online platform?

Streaming entities such as Amazon and Netflix are technically referred to as v-MVPDs, or virtual Multichannel Video Programming Distributors, which in effect conflate production and distribution under one service. They operate as the newest and most heavily capitalized versions of traditional broadcasters. Certain broadcasters and telecommunications entities have sponsored film festivals through corporate sponsorships many times before, including Bell Canada, which operates in a promotional arrangement as the lead sponsor of TIFF. In fact, Bell offered assistance to TIFF 2020 through its digital streaming platform Bell Fibe. As v-MVPDs cultivate a greater presence as part of larger, more commercial film festivals, they become better poised to offer virtual contingencies for smaller, independent festivals, perhaps acting as the “glue” in a newer, comprehensive definition of the festival circuit. Massive streamers also possess a widening control over discoverability, which is the quality describing a platform’s capability to be found via search engine, and its incorporation of user experience design to allow viewers to easily navigate its interfaces. It might be worthwhile to consider the outreach and philanthropic expectations of streaming giants, especially considering the growing presence of these streamers *at* film festivals. Streaming entities could in essence be held accountable to a more inclusive definition of the festival circuit, which encompasses the presence of festivals that do not offer dedicated industry programming, or that do not focus as a whole on the procurement of distribution and exhibition deals.

Stranger things have happened. In fact, what *could* happen under unavoidable confinement and pressure became what simply *had* to happen during the first film festivals of COVID-19. Although streaming entities wish to conduct large-scale conquest through the global rights acquisitions of content, they are capable of waiving this arrangement for the sake of seasonal or even “theatrical release” titles, which entails leasing content for roughly sixty to ninety days. In fact, the revenue-sharing model previously mentioned between arthouse distributors and theaters often followed this timeline. Smaller, independent festivals could provide temporary leasing of festival titles or even recorded panel discussions, which, in the process, could see greater viewing traction under festival-specific categories on major streaming sites, and more streamlined viewing experiences. Pending COVID restrictions, streamers could also grant temporary trial viewing periods for community or *en plein air* festivalgoers at socially distanced satellite locations, to create what would be in effect festival “galleries” for viewers with compromised internet access, or who simply miss the in-person festival flow.

As global uncertainty continues, businesses, community initiatives, and arts organizations continue to scramble for long-term strategies. With this in mind, perhaps streamers can offer greater virtual accessibility for independent film festival offerings, even as a more altruistic response to “decision fatigue,” which is a rising phenomenon experienced by audiences of streaming entities who are offered a plethora of streaming

content.⁷ In fact, streamers might be best suited to reach out beyond the virtual screen and into the physical world to do some good during unprecedented times. ■

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7. Kim Lyons, "Netflix is testing a linear channel in France that should help with decision fatigue," *The Verge*, November 7, 2020, www.theverge.com/2020/11/7/21553998/netflix-linear-channel-france-streaming-cable-tv. article.