

Online Film Festivals: New Perspectives for Film Festivals on the Internet

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“Online Film Festivals: New Perspectives for Film Festivals on the Internet”

Christel Taillibert

When a new festival logic gradually defined itself from the 1960s, on the sidelines of large international festivals based on the Venice model, it was built around the desire to explore the fringes and those texts overlooked by commercial exploitation and mainstream production. Carried on by the *cinephilie* leaders, often from popolar education sector, new types of festivals began to emerge, gradually replacing the film clubs in their functions and competences[1]. These new events appeared in stark contrast to the international festivals criticizing their “aesthetic and intellectual conformism”[2]. This logic helps explain why this type of festivals since the 60s’ have also been particularly sensitive to alternative production techniques; shortened amateur formats, video, all kinds of digital – and even films shot on mobile phones – have been given preferential access to festivals. This interest given to innovations of all kinds was re-confirmed when the advent of the Internet prompted a radical shift in the way the public came into contact with moving images; bolstered by the peer-to-peer concept, internet users could suddenly exchange films and a variety of moving images outside the realm of cinemas, TV channels, video production companies, and festivals themselves, instead founding virtual communities that highlighted the disintermediation

[1] See about this historical perspective in Christel Taillibert, “La Ligue de l’enseignement et les festivals de cinéma : construction d’un regard sur un nouvel outil au service de l’éducation populaire,” in *La Ligue de l’enseignement et le cinéma. Une histoire de l’éducation- à l’image (1945-1989)*, ed. Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb et al. (Paris: AFRHC, 2016), 311-328.

[2] Guy Allombert and François Chevassu, “Le festival de Cannes“, *Image et son* 113 (juin 1958): 11.

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happening on the web and seemingly questioning the future of traditional authorities in the sector.

In answer to these major changes, the festival sector was quick to rethink its future in the time of *Digital Disruption*[3]. Some festivals experimented with putting some of their sections online, others attempted to collaborate with on-demand video sites to make part of their programme available to internet users, and completely virtual events even started appearing.

This chapter aims to look at these recent phenomena, questioning the future of the traditional festival concept in the context of a dramatic internet-enabled shift in culture consumption habits. Its mode of investigation will follow four steps. First, it will attempt to briefly map online film festivals in order to create a historical record; second, it will question the future of the festival identity when placed online; then, it will look in detail at the intersection between the two concepts of online community and festival habits, before concluding with a few thoughts on the advantages and limitations of online festivals. The methodology employed in the chapter mixes sociology, information and communication sciences, as well as – on a more ad hoc basis – a survey of one of these interfaces' users, to analyse current online festival interfaces. The rare literature available on the topic will of course be taken into consideration, as well.

Mapping Online Film Festivals

The concept of online film festivals was born at the beginning of the 21st century. Among the first few experiements, the Fluxus Festival, created in 2000 by Brazil's Zeta Filmes, described itself as "the space for novel authorial, independent and creative

[3] Here I am using the expression used by Dina Iordanova and Stuart Cunningham in their work *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-line* (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012).

audiovisual on the web,"[4] while the Jameson Notodofilmfest launched by the collective La Fábrica in Spain in 2001 had the objective of "supporting and giving exposure to young audiovisual creators though a new media, the Internet."[5] These first attempts were very successful. The Jameson Notodofilmfest, for example, quickly took on an international dimension, and by 2017, the festival had showcased 13,000 short films from forty-seven countries over fourteen editions and had been seen by fifty-eight million viewers.[6] Like in the latter example, independent short films are also the focus of the Haydenfilms Online Film Festival, launched in 2004 in Pennsylvania by the Haydenfilms Institute. In this case, all kinds of films, including animation, experimental and documentary films, are eligible,[7] and the prizes given at this festival come with true recognition[8]. The *Mobile Film Festival*, created in France in 2005, has a more limited scope, since it only shows less than one-minute-long films shot on mobile phones, but now in its twelfth edition, the event has managed to find support and to acquire a durable place on the international landscape.

The success of these early attempts at online film festivals has prompted sector players across the world to consider this type of event as a new strategy. Indeed, the online film festival concept really gained momentum around 2007-2008, with a multitude of events, of various levels of durability, launched around the globe. For example, the Outrate Oneline Short Film Festival, founded in Australia in 2007, only had a short life-span of one edition; the Babelgum Online Film Festival had just two editions (2007 and 2008); the California

[4] Fluxus Festival Facebook page, accessed March 15, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/pg/fluxusfestival/about/?ref=page_internal

[5] " (…) apoyar y servir de escaparate a los jóvenes creadores audiovisuales a través de un nuevo medio, internet ; y que además rompe con las barreras de producción y distribución de películas" (Jameson Notodofilmfest website, accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.jamesonnotodofilmfest.com/que-es/)

[6] Ibid.

[7] Hayden Film Institute website, accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.haydenfilmsinstitute.org/film-festivals/overview

[8] "The film with the most votes takes home the grand prize and $10,000 to help fund its director's future in filmmaking" (Hayden Film Institute website, accessed March 15, 2017 http://www.haydenfilmsinstitute.org/film-festivals/overview)

Online Film Festival online happened once in 2008; the International Online 180 Second Film Festival had three events between 2009 and 2012; and the Iber.Film.America festival just had one edition in 2012. But other festivals managed to anchor themselves into the cinema broadcasting landscape on a much more long-term basis, including the NSI Online Short Film Festival launched in 2008 by Canada's National Screen Institute and *My French Film Festival* created by Unifrance in 2011, whose ever-growing audience broke a new record in 2017, with 6.7 million global views[9].

The map of online film festivals is no different from that of real-life festivals; it is composed of events which, along the years, managed to both find financial support and conquer a regular audience, while in their periphery, numerous other more short-lived and experimental events did not survive more than a couple of editions. The online film festival follows roughly the same editorial niches as real-life festivals, too, favouring – in line with the festival identity – productions that struggle to get distributed via mainstream channels or that are inherently excluded from them. A large emphasis is therefore given to short films and amateur productions, including those with an experimental dimension, in line with the desire to explore the fringes of moving image production. Indeed, the name Márgenes ("Fringes" in Spanish) given to an online festival celebrating independent Spanish and South American cinema is evidence of this strong root. The space given to documentaries in mainstream and specialised festivals derives from that same ambition; the Pointdoc festival, born in France in 2011 and entirely dedicated to the documentary genre, is an example of this, although it is no longer active.

Taking the identity concept further, the same militant affirmation characterising real-life festivals can be found in online film festivals, as it defends independent cinema from the

[9] "Edition record pour MyFrenchFilmFestival ! Et "Le Nouveau" de Rudi Rosenberg doublement primé", February 21, 2017, Accessed March 15, 2017, http://www.myfrenchfilmfestival.com/fr/newsitem?newsitem=14870

industrialisation of content, but also puts cultural diversity forward against the monopoly of US production. Festivals aiming to showcase a national cinematography on a global scale are part of this trend, as evidenced by *Márgenes* in Spain or *My French Film Festival* in France, for example. This activism is sometimes expressed in the defence of a culture in its broadest sense (see for example the SikhNet Youth Online Film Festival, aiming to "create way for Sikh youth to express their questions, answers, inspirations, desperations and everything in between"[10]), as an identity (feminism, as is the case of the short-lived #SheDocs, or Asian American identity as in the CAAMFest Online Film Festival), or as a cause (world peace at The Global Peace Film Festival, or mental health awareness at the MHC Online Film Fest). Other, more extravagant thematics can of course be found in online film festivals – just like, once again, in real-life festivals – such as The Robotic Online Short Film Festival, showing only movies involving robots.

This very brief – and voluntarily non-exhaustive – panorama of online film festivals should really be completed with the various online experiences offered by real-life festivals: understanding that "an online component is going to become an important part of future festivals,"[11] some events have launched "online sections" to extend their activities to the web. That is the case, for example, of New York's Tribeca Film Festival with its online competition category (TOFF – Tribeca Online Film Festival), or of various famous French festivals like the Festival du film d'animation d'Annecy, the Festival International du film d'environnement, or the Cinéma du réel festival. One specific platform, Festival Scope, was created to showcase, through multiple partnerships with large festivals around the world, the films that make up these prestigious programmes. Festival Scope works as a *Reader's Digest*

[10] Sikhnet Youth Online Film Festival website, accessed March 16, 2017, http://www.sikhnet.com/filmfestival/about/

[11] Christina Warren, "How Tribeca Is Changing the Way We Think About Online Film Festivals," Mashable.com, March 21, 2011, accessed May 12, 2013 http://mashable.com/2011/03/21/tribeca-online-film-festival-2011/

of international festivals, allowing internet users to discover films shown at festivals as diverse as the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, the Cartagena International Film Festival, the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, and others from one website.[12] Finally, some real-life festivals have decided to move to an exclusively digital format, such as the Mexico International Film Festival, which announced in 2013 that "the festival has transitioned from a traditional film festival format to an online awards competition that serves as a platform to provide exceptional films and filmmakers with recognition for their filmmaking and screenwriting achievements. Films will not be screened for the public"[13].

Turning Old into New? The Festival Identity, Challenged by the Internet

The mapping with which this chapter introduced the concept of online film festivals tells nothing about what makes these events different from the overwhelming quantity of moving images offered on the web on VOD platforms, catch-up television, peer-to-peer sites, and more, which give users very broad access – legal or not – to a multitude of cinematic and audiovisual work. What, then, differentiates those that describe themselves as "festivals" and how is the festival identity, strong of over eighty years of history, perpetuated in these new players ?

The "Event" Angle

The first attribute can be found in the notion of an *event*, the basis of the festival concept. Online festivals, just like their real-life counterparts, present themselves as "events" in a

[12] We could also note, in the same spirit, the Eye on Films platform, developed by Wide, a leading independent sales company, though its partnerships are not exclusively with festivals but also with other sector professionals such as distributors, operators, media, institutions, and VOD platforms.

[13] Mexico Film Festival website, accessed May 12, 2013 http://www.mexicofilmfestival.com/General_Info.aspx

limited time frame. This allows them to get media exposure, but more importantly to grab users' attention, in the context of an "attention economy"[14] that has been dramatically challenged by the web's overwhelming quantitative offering.[15] The feeling of urgency and exclusivity created by a limited-time offering works as an incitation to diligence among users. However, time frames differ widely between festivals. Most have adopted an annual frequency, but their length varies greatly: from seven days for the Reel Time International Online Film Festival to forty-five days for the Online New England Film Festival. Overall though, online film festivals tend to last longer than real-life ones. Mahalia Frizon, one of the founders of the Point Doc festival, explains that in the first place, she and her co-founders "copied the schedule of a festival, where you run from screening to screening" but that they quickly resolved to make films available for a month because "watching two films a day when you work is not possible; people were getting frustrated and so were we. A month is more comfortable."[16] Furthermore, a few festivals have given up on the classic annual frequency to adopt a more regular format, including a few monthly festivals such as the Monthly Online Film Festival, the Digital Griffix Online Film Festival or the #TOFF festival. The relationship with the users is then more regular, even is in the same time the event nature is tending to crumble.

Competitions

[14] The concept was formalised by Michael H. Goldhaber ["The Attention Economy and the Net", *First Monday*, 2.4 (7 April 1997) accessed May 12, 2013, http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/519] and Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck [*The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (New-York: Harvard Business School Press, 2001)].

[15] Let's note that this process was copied by certain VOD platforms to make their offerings more "event-like," such as MUBI, a pioneer in the field, which has since been followed by others, such as Universciné in France. See Christel Taillibert, "Vidéo à la demande cinéphile et stratégies entrepreneuriales : l'exemple de MUBI," in *L'économie de la cinéphilie*, ed. Christel Taillibert et al. (Paris: L'Harmattan, Cahiers de champs visuels, 2017), 99-154.

[16] Marion Quillard, "Le réel en vingt clics," *XXI* (January 28, 2013), accessed May 12, 2013 http://www.revue21.fr/Le-reel-en-vingt-clics

The organisation of competitions, another strong component of the festival identity, also forms part of this "event" essence, by creating a climax within the time frame known as the prize ceremony. The desire to draw a symbolic rating of the work submitted is expressed in a very traditional way in online film festivals, by gathering an often prestigious jury of professionals who allocate prizes defined by the organisers. Some of these are purely honorary, aiming to help with the subsequent promotion and broadcast of the film, but others come with significant financial, material or service contributions. The Nikon Festival, for example, which since 2010 has been showcasing less than 140-second-long films around a theme that changes every year, rewards its winners with substantial prizes. The jury's Grand Prize, for instance, comes with €6,000, including €3,000 in Nikon equipment and €3,000 in cash, as well as one broadcast in France's MK2 movie theatres, one broadcast on TV channel Canal+, one on Dailymotion and a broadcast and professional pass at the Arcs European Film Festivals.[17]

The event climax that is the prize ceremony can take place virtually on one of the festival's platforms, or in a real-life event often organised in prestigious cultural venues – an option that brings the festival to life and stages this important time in festival folklore. But even when the festival's palmares is announced virtually, it is amusing to note how much the organisers want to convey the atmosphere of a prize ceremony, if only through words. For example, the iber.film.america festival announced the palmares of its only edition on its website in 2012, with wording that called upon the collective imagination around film festivals, in order to *materialise* the event : "And now, the moment you have all been waiting for, the revelation of the critics' palmares, as well as yours, the audience award. Drumroll… (…) As to the audience award (…) your votes went to… (drumroll 2) : *Contracorriente*, by Javier Fuentes

[17] Nikon Festival website, accessed March 16, 2017 http://www.festivalnikon.fr/films

León (…) It is now time to close the curtain on our iber.film.america…"[18]. Through this rhetorical game, this anecdote tells us of the way online film festivals are looking for a foothold in the classic film festival apparatus, as if to build its own legitimacy.

Authoritative Work

Another great characteristic of festivals is their authoritative identity, having long been recognised by cinephile authorities amongst specialised publications, cinema programmers, and cineclubs in their time. In the context of the overabundant choices that make up the cultural offerings on the web, this authoritative function becomes crucial. As early as 2007, the web was considered as a "giant hard drive"[19] in terms of cinema, and it has since seen the proliferation of all kinds of audiovisual documents, free to access from any computer across the globe. Their digitisation, and as a consequence, separation from their support medium, made them 'non-exclusive,' 'non-rival,' and therefore overabundant."[20] In this "age of access," as defined by Jeremy Rifkin,[21] the multitude of films available on the web becomes almost impossible to navigate. Thus, online film festivals also attempt to build itineraries and trace paths into this oversized supermarket.

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[18] "Pero ahora lo que todos estáis esperando, conocer el palmarés, el de la crítica y el vuestro, el del público. Redoble de tambores… (…) En cuanto al premio del público, el que habéis dado todos los espectadores con vuestros votos a través de nuestro Facebook, ha sido muy, muy reñido aunque finalmente la balanza de votos se ha decantado por…(redoble de tambores 2) para: Contracorriente de Javier Fuentes León (…) Ahora sí, bajamos el telón de nuestro iber.film.america (…)" (iber.film.america Festival website, accessed October 3, 2012, http://www.filmotech.com/iberfilmamerica/IFA_Noticias.aspx?Id=04)

[19] Centre national de la cinématographie, *Les nouvelles formes de consommation des images : TNT, TVIP, VOD, sites de partage, piraterie…* (Paris: CNC, November 2007), 13.

[20] Alain Busso and Olivier Landau, "L'interactivité et transformation de la chaîne de valeur de l'audiovisuel," in *La richesse des réseaux numériques*, ed. Serge Agostinelli et al.. (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2012), 274.

[21] Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life is a Paid-for Experience* (New York: Tacher, 2001).

This situation, though confirming the authoritative function pursued by festivals in their online versions, marks a shift from the role played by real-life festivals in the sense that these festivals find their purpose mainly in their ability to offer viewers a broad range of cinematographic and audiovisual documents, breaking with the mainstream culture of mono cinema screenings focused quasi-exclusively on one format (the feature film), one genre (fiction), and recurring nationalities (the national cinema / US cinema duo). In this context, festivals bring about pluralism, differentiating themselves through their ability to present the public with unreleased, otherwise unaccessible, and clearly different films from the products usually sold by cultural industries. Online festivals, in contrast, use a completely different logic, in effect restricting choices, limiting the offering, in order to make it manageable and acceptable.[22] The idea, in short, goes back to the "programming" concept: historically, the cinema field have been based – in cinemas, in cineclubs, on television - on this idea of seeing a film in a given location (or channel) and at a given date. Online film festivals seem to propose a way to reintroduce this concept into the notion of "open access" that gradually affirmed itself through the publication of films, first on VHS and DVD, then online.[23] Perhaps the effort to reintroduce programming to the online world can be likened to a broader mediation effort, in response to the disintermediation logic introduced by the Internet.

Towards an Educational Objective

The creation of a guided viewing itinerary, along a cinema offering that is both marked and stamped with artistic approval, constitutes a "mediation situation," an expression first

[22] Marijke De Valck pointed to this shift in her 2012 article "Convergence, Digitisation and the Future of Film Festivals," in *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-line*, ed. Dina Iordanova et al. (St Andrews: Film Studies, 2012), 117–129.

[23] See Bruno Cailler and Christel Taillibert, "De l'accessibilité à la programmation événementielle : les nouvelles stratégies des acteurs de la mise à disposition dans les domaines cinématographique et audiovisuel," *Les Enjeux de l'Information et de la Communication*, 17.3A (2016): 49-59, Accessed July 21, 2016 http://lesenjeux.u-grenoble3.fr/2016-supplementA/03-Cailler-Taillibert/

articulated by Jean Davallon.[24] "Mediation in art implies influences on assessment by someone or something other than the beholder,"[25] wrote Wesley Shrum in 1996. This is the role played by online film festivals, which once again, is a function undoubtedly shared with real-life festivals. In the cinema world, the idea of "mediation" comes with a broadcasting purpose, but also an educational one, particularly in cases where public authorities value image-based education, as is the case of France. The desire to educate through film is expressed in various initiatives that go beyond the mere suggestion of an artistic intinerary. The idea is to accompany festival-goers as they build a cinematographic culture, by providing them with certain answers, analysis tools and support documents that help them take their thought process further. As such, some online film festivals offer directories, fact sheets, educational documents, and articles related to the films or themes at hand on their platform. These are the digital equivalents to the complementary information given as part of real-life festivals.

Furthermore, the idea of creation, of looking back at the creative process, is particularly highlighted in film-based education, and most frequently articulated around the presence of technical and artistic crew members at real-life festivals, where they are invited to talk to viewers about the genesis of the films they came to present. In online film festivals, the same kind of effort can be found, with online interviews of directors talking about their project and the ups and downs of the directing process. *My French Film Festival*, for example, is particularly partial to this type of extra content. Certain events even try to copy the interactive dimension of real-life festival discussions with the crew, by organising online chats with the film's creators, so internet users can ask specific questions. For example, the

[24] Jean Davallon, *L'exposition à l'œuvre, Stratégies de communication et médiation symbolique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).
[25] Wesley Monroe Jr. Shrum, *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art* (Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 27.

December 2016 edition of the Plein(s) écran(s*)* online festival offered multiple chat opportunities on its Facebook page, with the directors of the short films shown every day.[26]

The Community Angle of Festivals

The support effort brought to the fore in the above section disregards the community dimension of mediation work. Bernadette Dufrêne and Michèle Gellereau suggest approaching mediation as "based on two metaphors: that of 'transmission' and that of 'social bond.'"[27] While the concept of transmission is well and truly present in the system described above, what about the social bond, the idea of the links uniting the individuals that are part of a same social group, which could, in this instance, be defined as the online event's "audience?" This is clearly the trouble spot of festival events' digitisation as described up to this point. While it seems utterly achievable to place the idea of a guided artistic offering online, what does that entail for the basis of festivals' very identity, the community dimension derived from watching films together in a festive and friendly atmosphere conducive to discussion? While it is possible to move the many organisational aspects of festivals online, how can the notion of "audience," without which these events amount to nothing, be handled online? Can online festival-goers be considered a community? In 1955, Georges A. Hillery defined community as "a group of people experiencing social interactions and common interests, between each other and with other members of the group, and sharing, at least at a given time, a space."[28] So what happens to the three elements brought forward by Hillery in the context of an online film festival ?

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[26] https://www.facebook.com/pleinsecrans/?fref=ts

[27] Bernadette Dufrêne and Michèle Gellereau, "La médiation culturelle. Enjeux professionnels et politiques", *Hermès, La Revue* 38 (2004), 199.

[28] Georges A. Hillery, as quoted by Cédric Ghetty in: "Communautés Virtuelles : genèse, définitions et fonctionnement", in *Les forums de discussion, agoras du XXIe siècle ? : théories, enjeux et pratiques discursives*, ed. Eléonore Yasri-Labrique (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), 92.

The first aspect, of "common interests," is the easiest one to move to an online platform, as it merely builds on one of the main sociological effects of the development of the Web 2.0, as the "aggregation of structured exchange communities representing as many niches and micromarkets."[29] Highlighting the emotional aspects of the phenomenon, Bernard and Véronique Cova point out that "the common denominator of postmodern tribes is the community of emotion or passion."[30] Placing this theory in a cinema-specific context, the notion of community is built around cinephile passion, with the Internet becoming the setting for "new cinephile habits,"[31] in that it enables the large-scale circulation of films, references and viewing advice. You could even talk about the democratisation of cinephilia, since geographic constraints around access to films are entirely removed thanks to web navigation. This doesn't mean all films are available on the net, but those that are can be shared and offered for viewing to fans all over the world. In the same line of thought, participating in an online cinema event allows the user to feel a sense of belonging to an interest-based community around cinema in general, but more frequently around the specific type of film showcased by the chosen festival. This type of event, then, forms part of a desire for "differentiation, for social branding"[32] around common tastes. One could even argue that, in line with the festival spirit, they express a desire for social "debranding" through the rejection of mainstream culture's generalising and reductive scope.

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The second element, the geographic context inherent to the notion of community, leads us to look at the nature of the virtual space of the festival -- the interface proposed to users on their computer screen, as a shared space. Participation in real-life festivals plays a lot

[29] Pierre-Jean Benghozi and Françoise Benhamou, "Longue traîne : levier numérique de la diversité culturelle ?" *Culture / Prospective* 1, (October 2008): 2-3.
[30] Bernard Cova and Véronique Cova, "Tribal Marketing: The Tribalisation of Society and Its Impact on the Conduct of Marketing," *European Journal of Marketing*, 36.5/6 (2002), 596.
[31] Christel Taillibert, "Les nouveaux festivaliers "on line" – Une étude quantitative du public de My French Film Festival," in *Les nouvelles pratiques cinéphiles*, ed. Christel Taillibert et al. (Paris: L'Harmattan, Les Cahiers de Champs visuel, 2015), 123-182.
[32] Josiane Jouët, "Retour critique sur la sociologie des usages", *Réseaux* 18.100 (2000): 505.

on the wandering theme, as festival-goers move from one screen to another, from the bar to the waiting line, hovering in the lobbies and common areas. How can one reproduce this wandering on the Web? By leisurely going from section to section, reading a few support documents before starting a viewing, maybe, but this light analogy lacks the essence of the festival identity, the third element of the community concept: interaction. How do people interact in an online film festival? On a seemingly very limited basis: no chatting with your neighbour in the queue before entering a screen, no sharing first impressions when the lights come back on, no debating in the cinema lobby or at the bar. Still, as many other internet uses prove, digital habits have created new ways to socialise, which are "forming, before our eyes, a significant social logic"[33] as "the consumption of cultural goods (motivated by feelings and emotions) […] relies on the appropriation of an experience, which must become personal and intimate, yet be shared, in order to build identity."[34]

But, again, how can one share an experience when the other "cyber festival-goers" are neither identifiable nor reachable? Is it possible to talk about the participants in such festivals as a "virtual community?" Howard Rheingold, who coined the expression "virtual communities,"[35] insists that these are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."[36] How, then, can online festival creators and organisers work towards creating user networks gathering people from all over the world?

Various processes have been tried to facilitate interactions between users and festival organisers, as well as among users themselves, in order to turn a group of heterogeneous users

[33] Françoise Paquienséguy, "L'usager, consommateur producteur de richesse," in *La richesse des réseaux numériques* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2012), 233.
[34] *Ibid.*, 236.
[35] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000 [1993]).
[36] *Ibid.*

into something more like an online community. As a reminder, this isn't an entirely new phenomenon in the history of Internet-enabled bonding over cinema: Web forums and newsgroups were created very early on, offering members direct download links to films and other audiovisual documents, and these were clearly built on a strong sense of community.

But the festival experience, through the promises derived from its syntactic anchoring, undeniably favours the user's desire to interact with the event and other participants. Of course, the shift from the founding notion of "audience" towards that of "users," and from the notion of "festival community" towards the uncertain "virtual community," stirs up a fear defined by Dominique Wolton as "interactive loneliness,"[37] even at a time when all sociological observations converge on the expression of a need to re-establish the social bond.[38]

In looking at the way online festivals attempt to offer an answer to the community dimension that forms their identity, I will rely on the result of a survey conducted in March-April 2013 among the audience of My French Film Festival. The quantitative study was conducted online in four languages (French, English, Spanish and Portuguese), among the totality of participants to the event. It gathered answers from 2,539 users from sixty different countries.[39] This French festival's desire to work on the community concept is first apparent in the attribution of an audience award: by being able to vote for their favourite film, in perfect continuity with the social recommendation principles that are so widespread on the Web, internet users feel more involved in the event, playing a role in the festival instead of just observing it. Votes were updated in real time and visible by all, thus becoming recommendations on the films festival-goers should prioritise. The survey shows that half of

[37] Dominique Wolton, *Internet et après ? : une théorie critique des nouveaux médias* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 106.
[38] See Roger Sue, *Renouer le lien social. Liberté, égalité, association* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001).
[39] The global results of this survey were published in Christel Taillibert, "Les nouveaux festivaliers "on line" – Une étude quantitative du public de My French Film Festival", op. cit., 123-182.

users voted in the audience award, with young users clearly enjoying the option more than older ones. The percentage of Internet users who report having been involved in this vote rises from 36,8 % for fifty-year-old and older, to 46,1% for the 35-49 age group, to 57,9% for the 26-34 age group, and to 59,2% for those under twenty-five-year-olds.

In understanding the way internet users approached online voting, it is worth noting that only a quarter of the festival-goers that voted in the audience award took the initiative of consulting the results at the end of the festival. It seems, therefore, that the recommendation function is much more important than the idea of rewarding a deserving film for users. The voting practice seems to be viewed mainly as a way to interact, even in an indirect and unilateral way, with other festival-goers.

Among the other, more interactive options trialled by the audience of My French Film Festival is an online forum; for each film on the programme, a corresponding forum was opened to allow internet users to react, share ideas and continue the debate with each viewing – a substitute for the debates and informal exchanges that mark the identity of real-life festivals. The survey shows that by the end of the 2013 edition, only 12% of users had posted comments on the films, while over half of the respondents (51.2%) had read the comments posted on forums. This active minority mirrors the reality observed in real-life festivals, for example in the case of post-screening discussions, as not all viewers stay in the room to attend them, many of them leave as soon as the lights come back on, and furthermore, not all the ones who stay actually participate in the debate, the majority of them preferring to simply listen.

In order to facilitate interactions between users, My French Film Festival also created a Facebook page just a few days before the opening of its third edition in 2013. The initiative undoubtedly resonated amongts participants, as 44.2% of them had visited the page by the end

of the event, and 72.5% of those who visited also subscribed to it – suggesting a bright future for social networks in building a sense of identity among the users of such online events.

Are these three systems enough to talk about the online festival audience as a "community?" The survey included a few questions to investigate this issue. For example, 6.9% of users said they had formed bonds with other participants, through the forum, by the end of the event. These bonds often went further than anonymous post-sharing, with 58% of the above group having made direct contact with new acquaintances outside of the forum interface, and 59.1% having added them to their social networks. Of course, these results only reflect a minority of users, but let's remember that in real-life festivals, only a minority of audience members really take advantage of the event to meet new people. Still, these numbers confirm a real expectation on the part of these new web services' users to utilise them not only to discover otherwise unavailable films, but also to create bonds with people who share the same passion around the world – in the case of the My French Film Festival users, French cinema lovers across the globe. This is also confirmed by the fact that 71.1% of survey respondents said they would like the MFFF community to live on beyond the festival's confines. These elements seem to show that the very usage of the word "festival" to refer to online events promoting cinema broadcasting creates within users an expectation for more human bonding. Of course, in this case it can only be screen-based socialising, a strictly electronic social bond which obviously doesn't replace face-to-face socialising but which can offer, as a complement, a space for unexpected and promising cultural exchanges.

Conclusion : The Advantages, Limitations and Future Directions of the Online Film Festival

The arguments outlined above lead us to more generally question the relevance of dematerialising and moving the festival concept online, which came from the need, on the part of non-commercial cinema broadcasters, to adapt to technological advancements, just like commercial broadcasters did with the massive development of VOD services observed recently. This evolution appears to be dictated by the attention given to practices, at a time when the Internet has become a preferred space for audiovisial consumption, particularly for younger generations. As shown in a recent study by France's Centre National de la Cinématographie, 42.6% of young people use social networks to get information on film releases, 44.4% of them use video-sharing websites, and 52.5% of students have published at least one film review online.[40] Furthermore, while cinema screens undeniably remain the best way to discover a film in their opinion, this preference has been cleary and consistenly diminishing, in favour of the Internet, which is now the second-favourite medium, ahead of television or video – whether materialised or dematerialised[41].

It is therefore natural for cinephile mediation players to take these evolutions into consideration and to measure their advantages, in order first not to be disconnected from new generations, and in their effort complement the real-life festival offering. These new opportunities appear to offer improved exposure, breaking geographic boundaries and opening greater horizons for festivals. All online festival organisers agree on how using the Internet as a platform tremendously broadened their audience. The Toronto Online Film Festival declares "The World is Watching" on its homepage, expressing the jubilation felt by online festivals as liberated from the physical and geographic constraints of real-life festivals.[42]

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[40] Benoît Danard, *Les mutations des pratiques cinéphiles en France depuis dix ans* (Paris: CNC, march 2017), 32-33.
[41] Ibid, 34.
[42] Toronto Online Film Festival website, accessed March 22, 2017 http://www.torontoonlinefilmfestival.com/

The exponential growth of audiences enjoying the programmes of these events seems to work in favour of the democratisation of access to more challenging cinema pieces, therefore continuing the cultural democratisation effort pursued by real-life festivals. Beyond simply making these films accessible to a broad audience, this effort also implies economic aspects: most online festivals are free of charge, a practice much more widespread than in their real-life counterparts, since the logistics involved with the creation of an online downloading platform bear much lower costs than the organisation of a real-life event. This economic situation is crucial in terms of cultural democratisation, at a time when – even illegally – many films are free to access online.

This new showcase of world cinema also works in favour of cultural diversity, given that commercial exploitation cinemas focus very largely on Hollywood cinema and, to a smaller extent, on national cinema, leaving a ridiculously small amount of space for other cinematograpies. Online film festivals can therefore act as broadcasting and discovery tools for atypical and varied cinema types, whether in terms of nationalities, genres or formats, thus becoming wonderful windows into the diversity of global production.

However, one of the limits of such a broadened broadcasting project can be observed in the practices adopted by online festivals, which are choosing to give only limited access to the films on their programmes – reproducing the constraints of cinema screens and their limited seating. That is the case of the ArteKino, festival for example, which works on the basis of 50,000 "seats" made available to the European audience,[43] or of Festival Scope, which announces : "Once you have created your Festival Scope account*, you will be able to reserve virtual tickets for screenings of the films. Tickets are limited and in demand, so hurry up if you want a front seat when our most exciting titles hit the screen!"[44] The fact that online

[43] *ArteKino festival press kit* (Paris: ArteFrance, 2016), 3.
[44] Festival Scope website, accessed March 21, 2017, https://www.festivalscope.com/all/page/about-festival-scope

festivals are depriving themselves of their undeniable strong point, the potentially unlimited growth of their cyber-audience in a free-of-charge model, sheds a light on the limits of implementation of a non-commercial model, the logic of which is largely prominent in real-life festivals, in the new reality of online broadcasting; as a matter of fact, it is the problem of the payment of rights-holders that enforces in this case a limited number of viewing.

These fairly recent changes show that we are still in the development phase of a very experimental concept, which is trying to find its way between the desire for a broad cultural democratisation and the inevitable financial constraints that link it with copyright owners who, while happy to benefit from extra promotional tools, are concerned that free, unlimited availability would gradually devaluate their products. A non-commercial economic model based on financial participation by the user, allowing redistribution to the copyright owners, is likely to develop, following the practices used by real-life festivals, as soon as online festivals become more established, larger-scale payers of cinephile cinema diffusion.

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