

Understanding and developing the audience: the case of the Francophone Film Festival of Greece

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Abstract:

Audience development is a key question to cinema theatres and cinema events today, especially when dealing with the younger generations. Festivals, by their different manner of engaging, constitute events to which people respond differently from the usual cinema-going habit. The local context is another strong correlative to attendance which must be analysed to best answer the audience's expectations. The economic and political contexts, but also the importance of VoD platforms and the level of piracy are aspects and challenges which need addressing in order to understand the role festivals play in a city's cultural life and how they entice their specific audience.

This paper explores the case of the Francophone Film Festival of Greece, organized by the French Institute in Athens/French Embassy in Greece. The event offers a good small-scale example of different initiatives that have been conducted to develop the audience, change the image of the festival and attract the youngest. The aim is to introduce what has been established in terms of ways of engaging the audience with the event and the methodology applied to achieve this. The results could be of help to any festival or event organizer and could also constitute a good start to a more general reflection on best practice in engaging the local population with cultural events.

Keywords: Film festival, audience development, Greece, cultural diplomacy, questionnaires.

Introduction

Audience development is a key question to cinema theatres and cinema events today. Bringing the audience to a venue, especially when dealing with younger generations, has become increasingly challenging because of the increased availability of different formats

and platforms to see films on, and the location and price which can hinder some parts of the public to attend. In addition, when it comes to festivals, the image which the event can carry, the lack of identification, communication about the event and interest in the audience, and competition from other forms of (cheaper and less constraining) entertainment may represent further challenges to engagement.

Even though it refers to the same cultural object, namely, films, the audience of cinemas and of film festivals has however to be considered differently. The conditions of film exhibition indeed differ and are included, with regards to festivals, into a larger form of cultural consumption and of social belonging, and therefore partly relate to a different practice. As Peranson (2002: 24) stresses, festivals are 'events' and, as such, benefit from larger promotional budgets, enjoy greater visibility in the city which they take place in, and attract larger audiences than only local viewers. They address the usual local cinemagoers plus, according to their importance and scope, professionals, and cinemagoers from other regions or even countries. Moreover, De Valck et al. underline the spatio-temporal aspect of festivals when highlighting that, 'festivals take place in the here and now. They invite people to engage with cinema in ways that are uniquely tied in with the space and time of the festival event' (2016: 9). Festivals are one-off and limited in time. They constitute events in the cities where they are located, answer a specific audience, and have to engage it by creating identification and a trend, by offering something else than only the experience of film viewing. As Dayan stresses, 'The festival acquires a collective dimension through a number of devices that provide unity, catalyze community, propose a shared experience' (1997: 42). A festival must provide an experience which goes beyond the film object and which is strong enough to mobilize attendees during a short period of time. To put it in a nutshell, festivals respond in that sense to the need of participating in a (cultural) event, of forging the identity of participants as belonging to a specific cultural sphere or community, and, as mentioned by Peranson, to the need of 'binding' (2002: 24). The festival format is important for the 'event' it represents by itself. The spectator does not go to the movie but attends the festival, as part of a 'club'. By attending a cultural event, the viewer inscribes themselves in a specific social and educated group. This aspect has to be kept in mind to best understand audience's practices and answer their expectations.

This article proposes to investigate the case of the Francophone Film Festival of Greece, organized by the French Institute in Athens/French Embassy in Greece. This event offers a good small-scale example of different initiatives and attempts that have been conducted to develop the audience, change the image of the festival and attract the youngest demographic (children and teenagers). The aim is to provide an insightful vision of and an analytical approach to what has been established and the ways in which festival audience development and engagement have been attempted. Festivals and their audience have rarely been approached from the perspective of practitioners and organizers in order to contemplate what is in situ and put in place to best benefit the public. This contribution, written from a professional and experiential point of view, not only summarises activities and initiatives already set up in festivals, but can also be helpful in providing additional good

practice feedback, new ideas and methodology to any festival or event organizers. Thus, it constitutes a good start to a more general reflection on the manner of engaging people with cultural events.

The paper is structured in three sections: the first section presents the context of the investigation - the festival used as a case-study and the local context; the second one details the aims that were set for the festival and the tools at disposal to implement them; and the third section explores the actions put in place and their results. The aims and actions, even if not targeted and defined as such, mostly had attracting more people to the event and reaching a more diversified audience as a final objective.

The case-study – the Francophone Film Festival of Greece

This article focuses on the Francophone Film Festival of Greece (FFF), of which I was the artistic director for four years (2016–2019). The FFF started as a small initiative by the French Institute in Greece and celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2019. It is organized during the springtime. In the last years, it took place across three cinemas in Athens (during nine days) and one in Thessaloniki (with partial programming during seven days). To mark the occasion of the twentieth edition, a couple of screenings were organized in Cyprus as well. The festival offers around forty-five feature films, mostly premieres, and a total of about ninety screenings each year. It gathered around 8000 spectators in the last years prior to COVID-19. Events, masterclasses, discussions with film directors and actors were organized for schools and the audience in general. If we follow the divide proposed by Peranson (2002: 27), the FFF is categorized as an ‘audience festival’ rather than a ‘business festival’, even though some criteria, supposed to demarcate the ‘business’ model, such as the importance of premieres in the programming, fully apply to it as well. The FFF is the only big spring event in the country. It benefits from substantial sponsorships, principally from French companies operating in the country, but also from the City of Athens, through its cultural service Opanda, and from the media at large, making its coverage in the country very important. Another specificity of the FFF is that it is run as an independent film festival and not as an institutional event, with organization and programming piloted by Paris. As such, a precise answer to the local demand, based on a thorough knowledge of the audience and of the local partners can be ensured.

In terms of methodology, studying a small festival, such as the FFF, has the advantage of being easier in terms of data collecting, compilation and analysis. It is also more straightforward to draw conclusions and to usefully extrapolate from them. Moreover, during the years of organising the event, I enjoyed total freedom of action, which helped when experimenting and testing different ideas to develop the audience. The implementation of new actions and the observation of their results nonetheless require time. When starting in a new position, and especially in a different country, the first year mainly consists of resuming what has been done so far, to get acquainted with the context and the event itself; the second year, experiments can take place; but it is only from the third year on that thorough knowledge and observation of previous event results can be

fully applied and turn profitable. This should not, however, minimize the fact that the audience is also constantly changing and sensitive to new developments, and that a programmer should be able to follow these trends and answer them in a timely manner.

The local context and challenges

A crucial correlative to understanding the audience is the local context. What can work or not is highly dependent on the habits and cultural/social/economical specificities of a country. Greece is not 'technologically' advanced when compared to other more 'connected' countries, where IT devices and high-speed internet connections are much more widespread. This means that, despite the acknowledged spread of piracy, traditional modes of film viewing (such as TV and cinema) have been very much in use until recently. Tablets and iPads are not widely used by children and teenagers, and a huge audience cannot thus be expected the same way as in other countries through those devices. Netflix arrived in the country at the beginning of 2017 and included Greek subtitles in the summer of 2018. If its rise was smooth at the beginning, the inclusion of Greek subtitles however created a significant change which had clear and obvious consequences on the attendance in cinema theatres a few months later, according to reports by local film exhibitors.¹ Netflix's offer and the high level of film piracy in the country have been challenges to cope with. Surveys indeed showed that young audiences have a blurred perception of what is free to watch and copyright-free, even though they are aware of anti-piracy warnings before films (Kulyk and Stamatopoulos 2019: 7). Paying to watch a film is for some of them not understandable, given the numerous free resources available online. Moreover, the attendance of cinema theatres in Greece is among the lowest in Europe: the level per capita a year was 0.9 in 2018, among the lowest records with Bulgaria 0.7, Cyprus, 0.9, Romania, 0.7, whereas the EU average is 1.9 and the highest scores reach 3 in France, 2.7 in the UK, 2.1 in Spain and 1.3 in Germany (European Audiovisual Observatory 2019).

Aims and tools

The main objectives of the festival could be summarized along three important themes. Firstly, FFF aimed to attract new and younger people as part of its audience. In the changing context, discussed above, the challenge was not so much to increase the public, but to stabilize it and attract new audiences. Increasing the audience would not have been possible, especially in the years after the arrival of Netflix and following the general drop in attendance, due to the long-lasting financial crisis, which resumed in 2018.² Rejuvenating the audience was all the more crucial because up to 2017 mostly elderly people attended the festival. More generally speaking, the event needed to reach what constitutes the public of tomorrow, to change its dynamics and, thus, to develop film education and programmes so as to insuffle the specialised cinema habit. Secondly, it was crucial to change the image of the festival and create an 'FFF-brand'. The FFF had so far been considered an exclusive event, intended for intellectuals, the old and/or snobbish, thus failing to attract more

diverse parts of the potential public. This change consisted of, on the one hand, providing the public with demanding arthouse and niche programming, recognized by the film critics, together with more mainstream titles that the audience was waiting for, and, on the other hand, changing the image of the event both, visually and 'ideologically'. The third aim was to better answer audience tastes and expectations and support local partners. Answering the different expectations of the audience and branding the festival as their event was a key challenge, which was coupled with the need to change the image of the festival as well. Thus, a fair balance had to be found between the two. This aspect also went together with working more hand in hand with local partners, which are very close to the audience their business is dependent on. We tried to entice distributors and exhibitors to uncover the value of the event for making new acquisitions and to support them in the subsequent promotion of French and Francophone films.

To best fulfil these aims, the local audience and the local markets have to be considered as culturally and socially specific entities, so that the programming and events can be adapted to them. Understanding the audience and the way it 'works' is a hard, if not impossible, task to perform. Audiences are changing, versatile and dynamic, depending on variables which are not controllable or predictable. They could be affected by anything from weather patterns, competition from new releases and other social events to changes in the given socio-economic context. Some independent or specialist films happen to be huge, unexpected successes when others, more conventional and shaped to cater to the mass audience, sometimes turn out not to be as successful as expected. However, some key elements and tools can be contemplated and used as a basis when setting up a festival or resuming programming.

First, analysing the local context by studying national statistics, results from the festival's previous editions and from the different cultural activities could prove beneficial. Main figures and information can include, from a macro to a micro perspective: the social context of the city/country the festival is taking place in; the economic context (the financial crisis in Greece, for example, made it important to have free and participative events in order to engage the audience); the sociology of the population (age ranges, favourite activities, density of the population in the city, the way it is distributed, level of education and so on); defining who the public is, where they live/go to work, shop and socialise, what their tastes are, when, for what reasons and with whom they go out (in Greece, for instance, it is interesting to underline that eating out at a restaurant is, in general, cheaper than going to the cinema); studying the film screenings and event statistics of previous festival editions (if extant); seeking a deeper understanding of film practices and tastes by analysing the performance of specific films across different cities in the country; and observing what the other popular cultural/entertainment activities are. Regarding those questions, here are some noteworthy facts which shaped our understanding of specialised film audiences in Greece. The cine-club which we programmed once a month with classic films had previously proved quite successful. We therefore included a thematic classic films section at the festival, including a selection of five films, accompanied by a masterclass which proved as

well-attended as the new film premieres, despite the fact that those screenings were charged (unlike the programme of the monthly cine-club).³ Even a three-hour film, such as *La belle noiseuse/The Beautiful Troublemaker* (1991) by Jacques Rivette, screened in 2016, attracted a significant audience. The study of national statistics together with the results of the previous festivals also helped in giving a direction for the development of FFF. Ticket sales and general interest in specific films pointed towards two types of topics to avoid: films about the French suburbs such as *Bande de filles/Girlhood* (2014) by Céline Sciamma and films about (post-)colonial issues such as *Nos patriotes/Our Patriots* (2017) by Gabriel Le Bomin, which tells the story of a Senegalese infantryman who in 1940 participated in the creation of the first maquis in the Vosges. The topics, foreign to the Greek audience, did not raise the attention they would have deserved based on the formal qualities of the films and their success across other countries. This was further confirmed by the failure of films of similar topics in the country and by the fact that local distributors did not tend to buy the rights for such pictures.

Secondly, collecting 'live' or direct impressions from the audience is crucial to its understanding. The practice helps to best adapt further programming and better understand the relationship between the viewers and the event. To get this information, in 2018 we developed a dedicated questionnaire. Besides the factual market data and empirical observations, this information would complete our scope on the festival audience and enable us to better grasp it. Crompton and McKay stress the importance of identifying the motives of the audience to attend festivals:

Since program elements may be designed to meet different needs, it is important to identify visitors' needs so a festival's design can be tailored to meet them. Identification of their needs is a prerequisite for effectively developing elements of a festival and marketing them. If those needs are not understood, then the festival element is likely to be presented in a suboptimal way (1997: 426).

The implementation of the questionnaire was, indeed, not only meant to frame those needs and expectations, but also a manner to involve the public, to make it an active actor of the festival and to demonstrate that viewers' opinions are highly valued. This initiative was much appreciated if we consider the amount of feedback we received during the two editions of the festival when the questionnaire was distributed.

This questionnaire was developed in collaboration with Petit Plan, a programme put in place by the association MoovieReel, which was, among others, active in local film education and organized films screenings for schools that were followed by discussions and feedback questionnaires. The questionnaire focused on 1) the general viewing habits of festival attendees and 2) questions related to their experience of FFF. Different questions were asked about the motivations for attending events organised within the festival and feedback on the programming. These questionnaires were available in Greek and French

and distributed to the audience when they entered the screenings of the Panorama section of the festivals (films not bought yet in Greece and not part of the competition). They were picked up at the end of the screening by volunteers. To entice people to participate, a specific trailer was screened before the films of this section and a prize draw was organised at the end of the festival for one of the participants to win DVDs and other film-related presents.

The two editions of the festival enabled us to collect a total of 625 questionnaires. As with any survey, the findings merit some caution as information might be missing, partially filled in or not totally representative of spectator habits. We, for example, noticed a general reluctance to share the mode of viewing practices at home, whereas all other parts of the survey were carefully filled in.⁴ The information which we collected was, nonetheless, very instructive and sometimes unexpected. Indeed, following Cheung's categorization of different funding models of themed films festivals, the FFF would correspond to the category Cheung describes as "home country funding with commercial sponsorship", that is to say a festival backed up by its national government together with local public and commercial sponsorships. This category of festivals answers two objectives: to ensure a form of cultural diplomacy in the host country, by displaying national cinema as a form of soft power, and to provide national citizens, living in the host country, with access to national films (Cheung 2010: 78–79). Whereas we expected our audience to be mainly composed of French or francophone people, the findings pointed to a different outcome. Most of the viewers appeared to be native Greek speakers. More precisely, the audience mostly consisted of women, aged 40–55. Young audiences (people under twenty-five years old) represented 17.6% of the survey respondents. As this category was the one we aimed to develop, we were particularly interested in understanding how they obtained information about the event. The results showed that they learned about the festival and its films mostly through social networks (61.6%) and their friends (57.2%). Other means of communication were far behind in terms of influence. For instance, the newsletter of the French Institute was cited as the main information channel by only 19.8% of the young respondents. Even though these questionnaires did not include a lot of qualitative detail, the findings were particularly significant in helping to sketch more appropriate audience engagement actions and to better answer the festival development goals.

Key actions and results

Rejuvenating the audience

The first aim was to maintain the current audience while also attracting more young people. As a result, we first worked on the programming. Besides a more diverse and specific film selection, we tried to propose new, daring and attractive activities, such as a night of animation, mixing films and a DJ set, experimental screenings, such as *Eschaton*, an animation and live music performance by Athens-based sound artist Panos Alexiadis, and

masterclasses that would raise curiosity (on topics such as “Tattoo and cinema” and “Cinema and fashion”).

In parallel, we strengthened our offer to schools, according to different age ranges, and organised more activities aimed towards young children. Specific thematic workshops and screenings were organized. For example, in 2019, we held a dubbed screening of *Ernest & Célestine, La collection/Ernest and Celestine, The Collection* (2017) by Jean-Christophe Roger and Julien Chheng for children aged six and over. Workshops were proposed in relation to this screening by the recently established Athens International Children’s Film Festival, with which we collaborated. This initiative sold out and was a great success.

The students of the festival's long-time partner high school, Lycée Franco-Hellenic Eugène Delacroix, were also more intensively included into the festival’s activities. Results from the questionnaires, stressing the importance of word of mouth (friends’ recommendations) as one of the two main conveyors of information for young people, confirmed the need to go in this direction as well. The high-school was one of our prime targets for attracting a younger audience. Most of the students there are fluent French-speakers, with French family or ties to French culture and were thus more likely to be interested in the programming. However, they confronted manifold obstacles in order to attend the festival. There was an issue with ease of access to the cinema venues, since the school is out of the city-centre. Hence, this pointed towards the issues of location and schedule. There were also financial preoccupations linked to attending the screenings (even though many passes and free tickets were given away). Finally, there wasn’t always interest in the programme. To answer these challenges, we changed one of the venues – as will be discussed in the next section – we organized competitions every day to allow students to win free tickets, in addition to the concession tickets generally available, and we tried to be receptive to what they may like, what they are fans of and to adapt the programme accordingly. For example, we invited popular young French rap singer Sadek, to introduce *Tour de France* by Rachid Djaïdani (2016), in which he stars, creating additional buzz in the teenager community. We also experimented with different genres, programming, for example, *Seuls/Alone* (2017) by David Moreau, based on the famous comics by Fabien Vehlmann and Bruno Gazzotti. As previously mentioned, we organized masterclasses and meetings that could be of interest to the students, such as one in 2017 about tattoos and punk/hard rock music, which included a screening of the film *Compte tes blessures/A Taste of Ink* (2017) by Morgan Simon. The event was scheduled in the late afternoon, to ensure accessibility, and featured a Q&A with the director and a famous Greek tattoo artist to create further publicity and visibility. We worked very closely with the dedicated team of teachers to enhance the scope of our student programme and promote the engagement of students. The students were active as reporters during the festival, animating the high-school radio with stories about the festival, as well as publishing film reviews and interviews with the guests whom they could meet in the student newspaper and the social media accounts of the high-school. The students also participated in the preparation of the festival by editing together a compilation of the trailers of the main films selected for the press

conference. This ensured that they were included in the organisation of the festival early on, before the opening ceremony. By learning about the dynamics of the event and secret details about the film selection, they gained a sense of ownership over it and turned into informal festival ambassadors. Finally, the students were given the opportunity to direct a short documentary film on backstage work and the organisation of the festival which was screened at the closing ceremony. The young authors were able to attend the screening, together with their friends and families, thus highlighting their work and their strong involvement. Special effort was put into engaging these students in order to motivate their continued support and involvement. This would then reflect not only on their general motivation at school, as reported by their teachers, but also on the appetite of their classmates to attend the festival. In that sense, the student involved in the festival represented the category of the “enthusiast”, as defined by Baez and Devesa, that is to say people who are not necessarily initially film-lovers but who become deeply committed and enthusiastic about all facets of a given film-related event (2014: 106, 109). From an organizer’s point of view, working with them was highly beneficial. They increased the sense of engagement and feedback from young people, provided for the general positive dynamic of creative collaboration, and gave us a sense of self-satisfaction, seeing young minds motivated by an event, which we are organising, and exploring a new world of artistic possibilities. Being supportive and encouraging to them was thus crucial.

Changing the image of the festival and creating an ‘FFF-brand’

The second aim was to change the image of the festival. This challenge related not only to the visual aspects of the communication materials, but also to the programming, location, and the partnerships we established.

Firstly, special attention was paid to distinct communication so as to strengthen the festival identity, to give a more dynamic and modern vision and cut with the official and somewhat classical template used so far (for example, utilising promotional material colors based on the French flag). We also engaged young directors (such as Thanassis Neofotistos in 2019), whose artistic vision was in contrast to standard aesthetics, to direct the trailer of the festival.⁵

Secondly, we enriched the programming with unusual titles, which would provide the festival with a strong curating and daring image and get the acknowledgement of both the public and the film critics (whose support is crucial in Greece). *P’tit Quinquin/Li’l Quinquin* (2014) by Bruno Dumont, a film serial of four episodes, was, for example, programmed in 2019; and *Laissez bronzer les cadavres/Let the Corpses Tan* (2017), an experimental film by Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzan, screened in 2018. Moreover, guests and jury members were chosen to contribute to the building of a strong festival identity and engage different audiences. We invited for instance Monika, a young popular singer, together with Alexis Stamatis, a famous and recognized writer, Petros Petropoulos, a well-known documentary director, and Daphnée Patakia, a young rising actress, to be part of the

jury in 2018, and Effie Falida, a journalist specializing in fashion, because of her links to the thematic section on fashion that year.

One of the first things which we also changed was one of the cinema venues in Athens. The previous one was located in an affluent area of the city with no immediate access to transportation. We moved to the city centre in a smaller but more modern and alternative cinema theatre, located right at the exit of a metro station. This localisation was especially important as it made it easier for people to commute to the place, attracting especially young people, most of whom live otherwise far from the city centre.

New partnerships were also put in place with well-established and prestigious actors, to gain not only visibility, but also different expertise and creative dynamics. For instance, we organised a masterclass about film and fashion and invited the Deputy General Secretary of Dior's Museum to talk about the link between Dior and cinema. We entrusted La Quinzaine des réalisateurs/ The Directors' Fortnight with our 'carte blanche' to provide a five-premiere programme in 2019, and we collaborated locally with the International Animation Film Festival Animasyros for a "kaleidoscope" of animation with a DJ set from 6 pm until 2 am in a popular venue in Athens.

As Simmonds states, "The success of film festival programming clearly depends on the capacity to establish connections within the context and identity of the festival itself" (2018: 78). These changes proved to meet the needs and expectations of the diverse audiences we targeted, as the attendance figures of the festival maintained stability at the same time as we observed a more eclectic public in the venues.

Answering audience tastes and expectations, and supporting local partners

These goals partly overlap with actions taken both to attract a younger audience and change the image of the festival. Adapting the programme was key to maintaining attendance numbers, which was, as we have seen, threatened by the arrival of Netflix and by the many years of ongoing economic crisis. The questionnaires, which we distributed and then analyzed, also greatly helped in understanding what was important for the audience to find at the festival. The main motivation for attending by far was the quality of the films curated. The second most important factor was the opportunity to attend discussions with the directors and/or actors after the screenings. Special attention had thus been paid to quality and interactivity. For example, the screening of *Le grand Bain/Sink or Swim* (2018) by Gilles Lellouche, in 2019, which had been a hit in France a couple of months before, was very much anticipated by the local audience. We collaborated with the distributor of this film in Greece, Spentzos Films, and invited the female lead, Virginie Efira, to introduce it to the public. The event was a great success. In addition, we attempted to respond to the local financial crisis context by introducing discounted tickets for a larger number of people, even providing free entry to the unemployed.

Besides utilising audience feedback on films, collected through the questionnaires, in the last years of running the festival we also tried to create a small 'industry node', in the words of Iordanova.⁶ On a very small scale, we tried to create additional promotion for the

curated films by highlighting their performance at the festival to local distributors. In 2016 and 2017, a couple of the films, which we screened, and the adaptation rights of a book, discussed during the thematic session 'From writing to screen', were bought by, respectively, local distributors and an editor. To further entice professional interest, we introduced a scale of evaluation for the films selected in the Panorama section (about 20 films not bought for distribution in Greece yet). Spectators could rate the different titles and the collated results were announced at the closing ceremony. Following the festival, a special email was sent out to local distributors to provide them with more detailed information about the films which the audience had preferred and to propose contacts with the respective sales agents. This initiative was only properly established during the last year of running the festival but it was appreciated by local professionals who did not always have the time or the opportunity to come and see many films during the festival. This initiative benefited from the general support of film distributors and helped shed light on their new upcoming releases. Around twelve films, bought for distribution in Greece, were selected for the Competition section of the festival. The Jury prize consisted of promotional support, worth €10,000, provided by one of the main sponsors (in the last years, this was the TV channel NOVA) and the City of Athens. The Audience prize consisted of € 5,000, offered by Fischer for promotional activities upon the release of the film. Besides, we also invited film talent to offer the largest visibility possible for these films in the press and the media, and thus favour their release in cinema theatres in the months following the festival.

All these initiatives are related to activities which proved successful. However, there were, of course, also attempts that were less successful. The second screening of experimental cinema, for example, did not have a strong enough promotion, and the results in attendance were disappointing for such a setup (a music band come from France and created a special performance specifically for the purposes of the event). Financial limitations and the parallel increasing costs of film rentals for festivals were also issues that weighed upon other activities, especially with the new practice of having to pay for a film's screening rights, in addition to an extra €100-150 for the lab providing the Key Delivery Message (KDM) needed to unlock the digital copy for screening. Moreover, the question of subtitles was also an important line in the budget. As a small linguistic area (not even eleven million inhabitants) with Greek language only spoken in Greece (and partially in Cyprus), the full charge of subtitling the films in competition was to be supported through the festival budget or by local distributors. Given their high fees, recouping one's costs would have been impossible if not for the support of the sponsors. Despite these challenges, the main goals were fulfilled as admission numbers were maintained, a younger and more diverse audience attended the festival and the programming was recognized by them and film critics as increasing in quality over the years. Many other aspects could have been analysed in relation to those results, to give a more comprehensive background to the event, but this falls beyond the scope of the present article.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that there is no single recipe to make a festival successful and the experiences related herewith apply to the audience in Greece. The results and what was created required careful and systematic research into the local context and audience. Gaining a thorough knowledge of the audience and its specificity is necessary to contemplate precise actions and programming, but it requires time, as you need to implement those actions, test them and possibly correct them to win the audience over in the long-term. The main creative decisions rely on a very good understanding of the public and of its motivations for attending the festival, as well as of the films on offer, and a faculty/possibility to re-imagine from year to year the programming and the events in order to adapt to these observations. In that sense, flexibility is crucial to the development of a festival.

At this stage, and given the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, which de-stabilized festivals around the world, further actions could include the development and extension of such local festivals on VoD platforms, a topic that has been experimented at the occasion of the FFF 2021 edition, following also the broader festival questionnaire results. Young audiences favor digital consumption because of its spatial and temporal advantage, so festivals need to find ways to engage them and provide an incentive to come and watch films in cinema theatres. Festivals also need to be innovative and position themselves in relation to current trends in film distribution and consumption and, thus, answer the digital challenge by participating in this dynamic field, including the debate about viewing habits and the rise of VoD platforms. The pandemic urged festivals and distributors to resort to innovative manners of digital film delivery and, thus, to reconsider the chronology of media in its globality, as well as the current situation and future of film consumption. This shift in perspective should neither be minimized nor neglected in the future approach to film festival events.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ Netflix users in Greece rose exponentially, with 34000 active memberships in 2017, 65300 in 2018, 105800 in 2019 and 156000 in 2021 (Statista, n.d.).

² This drop in attendance first started in 2009, when admissions reached 12.29 million. The figures fell under ten million from 2013 onwards, temporally increased in 2016 and 2017, before falling under ten again in 2018 (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2014 & 2019).

³ The themes were “From writing to screen in 2016”, “French film music composers in 2017”, “Cinema and fashion in 2018” and “Cinema and perfume in 2019”.

⁴ The survey listed no options to indicate that the respondent watched pirated or free-to-view content online which is perhaps why younger participants could not recognise themselves in any of the multiple-choice answers and left the question blank.

⁵ The end result can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3wAsbamNBU>.

⁶ Iordanova defines today’s film festivals as industry nodes insofar as they do not only endorse a role of films exhibitors, but also of films’ conception, financing, development, production, and circulation (2015: 7).