

ഇശൽ വൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 40

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 25 print issue 40 December 2024



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Department of Cultural Affairs
Government of Kerala-India
December 2024

ഇശൽ പൈത്യകം

ത്രൈമാസിക

ലക്കം: 40

2024 ഡിസംബർ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

ചീഫ് എഡിറ്റർ

ഡോ. ഹുസൈൻ രണ്ടത്താണി

എഡിറ്റർ

ഡോ. ഷംഷാദ് ഹുസൈൻ. കെ.ടി.

അസോസിയേറ്റ് എഡിറ്റർ

ഡോ. അനീസ് ആലങ്ങാടൻ

എഡിറ്റോറിയൽ ബോർഡ്

ബഷീർ ചുങ്കത്തറ

ഡോ. പി.പി അബ്ദുൽ റസാഖ്

എം.എൻ. കാരശ്ശേരി

സൈദലവി ചീരങ്ങോട്ട്

Ishal Paithrkam

ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

UGC CARE indexed

Quarterly

Bilingual

Issue: 40

Online issue: 25

December: 2024

all rights reserved

Individual Price : Rs.600/-

Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Printed @

LIPI Offset

Malappuram

Publisher

Mahakavi Moyinkutty

Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Kondotty, 673638

Ph: 0483-2711432

പ്രസാധകർ

മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ

മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി

കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638

ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

www.mappilakalaacademy.org

www.ishalpaithrkam.info

ഇശൽ പൈത്യകത്തിൽ പ്രസിദ്ധീകരിക്കുന്ന രചനകളിലെ ആശയങ്ങൾ മാപ്പിളകലാ അക്കാദമിയുടേതോ, സംസ്ഥാന സർക്കാരിന്റേതോ, സാംസ്കാരിക വകുപ്പിന്റേതോ ആയിരിക്കണമെന്നില്ല. - എഡിറ്റർ

copyright rests with the publisher. the authors are responsible for the contents and views expressed.

Beyond the Red Carpet: Unravelling the Socio-Cultural Significance of Film Festivals and its Evolution Post-Pandemic

Anju Maria Sebastian

Film festivals are opportunities to celebrate, enjoy and appreciate the art of cinema. They provide a platform for diverse voices and stories from across countries, cultures, and perspectives. Festivals like the Cannes and Toronto International Film Festivals enable cultural exchange and help in a deeper appreciation and understanding of global cinema. However, the Covid pandemic brought a huge blow to the smooth functioning of film festivals all over the world. Festivals were either postponed or cancelled altogether, leaving the whole film ecosystem disrupted. They resorted to platforms like Google Meet and Zoom for online interaction and discussions. Online streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Videos and Disney+ Hotstar also gained popularity. The hybrid mode of festivals was quickly adopted by the film fraternity as it helped the easy and convenient functioning of festivals without losing much of its essence. This paper is an analysis of the challenging times during COVID, how film festivals thrived, their evolution and what their future might look like.

Keywords: Film festivals, cultural exchange, pandemic, online streaming, hybrid festivals

A film festival is essentially a platform to showcase a diverse array of movies. A rich tapestry of movies spanning various genres, languages and styles take centre stage within a film festival. Often

organised annually or periodically, it brings together filmmakers, professionals, critics and the general movie loving audience. It is a prime occasion to celebrate, honour and appreciate the art and craftsmanship of cinema. It also stands as an expansive forum for creative exchange, fostering the sharing of ideas, concepts, and fresh viewpoints encompassing both timeless classics and emerging trends. For filmmakers, these festivals represent invaluable opportunities for exposure and promotion, acting as pivotal hubs where they can connect with investors, distributors and media representatives. “Beyond such economic and curatorial values, film festivals service a variety of stakeholder interests, ranging from tourism, regional development, and city marketing to policy goals, political ideals, and soft power” (Damien & De Valck, 2023).

Ms. Golda Sellam, film consultant and producer from France, is also the first foreigner to become a curator for the 28th International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK). She comments, “Making a film is based on human relations. It is based on the emotions of love, hate and human desire. Above all, film is a powerful means for transmission [of ideas and perspectives]. Festivals are made to meet people, to share ideas, to develop and bring those ideas to life. It is a part of the process of creation” (G. Sellam, Personal Communication, December 10, 2023).

Often screening films from different countries, cultures and perspectives, film festivals provide a platform for voices and stories that may not always receive mainstream attention. Through this exposure to a myriad of films, festivals foster cultural interchange, provoke insights, and question prevailing stereotypes. Filmmakers weave their distinctive ethnic heritage and its nuances into their works, employing diverse storytelling techniques and traditions. Consequently, audiences are treated to a mosaic of perspectives, narrative journeys, and artistic visions when they engage with these films. Festivals also bring people together, reminding us about the power of a collective, big screen cinema experience (Han, 2021).

The Cannes Film Festival is considered the most prestigious in the world. Film enthusiasts from different corners of the world

come together at Cannes to watch various movies and share their knowledge and experiences. The Toronto International Film Festival, Berlin International Film Festival are two other important festivals around the world. These festivals help to bring to the forefront, the voices of the marginalised and underprivileged sections. They encourage cross-cultural dialogues and innovative alternate perspectives; and help in a deeper appreciation and understanding of global cinema and its emerging trends. Most of these festivals have panel discussions which enable the interaction and exchange of ideas beyond the screen. In addition to major international festivals, other regional or national festivals are also held periodically in different parts of the world.

But the Covid pandemic brought a huge blow to the smooth functioning of film festivals all over the world. The disruption of normal day-to-day functions and the risk in health stopped people from gathering and going to theatres. Festivals were either postponed or cancelled altogether. This led to major economic and cultural shifts and ripples in the society. The whole film ecosystem was disrupted (Damians & De Valck, 2023).

The pandemic forced the authorities to get creative and experiment with digital technologies. Online festivals and virtual participation were encouraged. It had its own challenges but the situation forced things to adapt and evolve. They resorted to alternative methods and the whole scene of film festivals was deconstructed and restructured. Some of these changes were temporary adaptations but some others stayed on through the post-pandemic years too. The uncertainty of the situation and frequently revised lockdown protocols made things harder for the authorities to reach a solid decision. Travel regulations and strict control in theatre capacity only helped complicate things further (Loist, 2023).

Even though festivals are highly people-centric, the global health challenge forced festivals to function with least possible public interactions and more online engagements. Platforms like Google Meet and Zoom gained much popularity as channels for people to meet, interact and exchange their ideas. They provided a chance for the

audience to have a shared experience in the safety of their homes. The live Q&A sessions and panel discussions with experts of the industry through these online platforms helped the authorities to recreate and replicate the interactive environment of traditional festivals. They thus helped bridge the gap created by the pandemic to an extent.

The situation in India was not any different. Film production and related activities were suspended. The theatres were closed. Film shooting was stopped abruptly. New releases were postponed causing huge financial losses for the producers. Press conferences, interviews and film campaigns became online engagements. The closure of theatres greatly affected the movie lovers. As a result, Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms like Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar and Amazon Prime Video gained much popularity in India. More people signed up to these platforms and the country also saw the mushrooming of many new streaming platforms funded by private agencies. Several factors influenced the rapidly gaining popularity of these platforms. Travel restrictions forced people to stay indoors and thus they found streaming platforms as the most convenient and safe option for family entertainment. Binge watching TV shows became a trend among youngsters as it was easily accessible on TVs, laptops and on smartphones. The audience was offered an endless list of movies, documentaries and shows belonging to various genres, languages and cultures. Easy access to international content which were otherwise expensive and impossible to watch, made OTT platforms quickly popular among the masses. This huge variety of choice was new to the audience. It also offered a new flexibility in the viewing experience for the audience.

Streaming media could not be more simple. Users follow a link like any other Internet link, but instead of retrieving more text or static images, the link brings moving images to the screen. . . With streaming media, users can view the streams when it suits them and they can structure the experience according to their interests. . . Streaming media will enhance this interactive potential with the rich visual content often associated with television. (Garrison, 2001)

An example of how the film fraternity adapted to the new reality with innovation was the Malayalam movie *C U Soon*. Written and directed by Mahesh Narayanan, it was a thriller movie starring Fahadh Fasil, Roshan Mathew and Darshana Rajendran in the lead roles. It was directly streamed on Amazon Prime in September 2020, without a theatre release. It adopted an innovative storytelling technique called computer screen film. Also known as screenlife movies, the events of such movies happen mainly on laptop and phone screens. “Screenlife films explore how our digital personas differ from who we are offscreen, the ways casual cruelty can be enabled through the distance created by posts and avatars, and the visual claustrophobia of crowded Zooms and chatrooms. They turn familiar online landscapes like Instagram and Skype into canvasses for storytelling.” (Rindner, 2021) Shot on an iPhone, the story of *C U Soon* unfolds through digital interactions like video calls and screen recordings. The movie loving community in Kerala welcomed the new trend of screenlife movies and online streaming with much delight. But this ready acceptance of OTT platforms by the cinephile audience badly affected theatres financially. Several Bollywood films were also released on streaming platforms. The dark comedy-drama *Ludo*, directed by Anurag Basu was released on Netflix on 12 November 2020. Starring Abhishek Bachchan, Aditya Roy Kapur and others in lead roles, the movie was able to gain positive reviews from the audience. *The White Tiger*, an adaptation of Aravind Adiga’s novel of the same title was another Hindi movie that was released on Netflix. It premiered at Las Vegas and was screened in a few theatres in the US before being released online. The film was also widely accepted by the audience and was a success.

Another phenomenon that developed during the pandemic was a new-found popularity of collaboration of festivals with already existing streaming platforms meant for documentary presentations. DAFilms was founded as part of the joint effort of seven documentary festivals in Europe in 2008. DAFilms was a VOD streaming platform funded by the European Union and Czech public institutions. Its catalogue now has over 2500 documentaries and experimental films. When pandemic hit in 2020, DAFilms had a readily functioning

infrastructure for online screening and offered to help various film festivals as streaming partners. It successfully served many movie loving audiences too. But then arised a tension between the national and international scope of the platform that affected it badly. There were also issues because the platform dealt with seven different languages and confusions arised about positioning them in different domains on Google. Sadly, these technological challenges and constraints in turn led to limiting the popularity of the platform. DAFilms thus was partially successful in emerging as a platform for online screening during the pandemic. Tënk, another similar initiative developed by the French festival États généraux du film documentaire, was also a pre-existing platform during Covid. Several film festivals collaborated with Tënk. The number of subscribers of Tënk increased by 30% from 8000 to 11,000 by the end of 2020. The requests for collaboration from filmmakers was also huge. In spite of this sudden influx of requests to include movies from various genres, they were forced to decline several offers and stick to their identity as documentary presenters, as the core purpose of the platform got diluted and questioned. Thus, DAFilms and Tënk played a crucial role in their collaborative efforts with film festivals during the pandemic, though they also faced challenges and setbacks (Vallejo and Taillibert 2023).

A slight relaxation in the pandemic situation saw the rise of hybrid festivals and open-air screenings of movies. The International Film Festival of India (IFFI) held its first hybrid festival in January 2021. Other festivals like Kolkata International Film Festival, the International Children's Film Festival, the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), and the Chennai International Film Festival were postponed in 2020, but held hybrid events in early 2021. But the case with smaller festivals was not the same. With little or no financial backing, these festivals struggled to find funds to continue their work. They went completely online to stay relevant and to maintain connections with their sponsors. Delhi International Film Festival (DIFF), the independent/grassroots Madurai Film Festival, and KASHISH Queer Film Festival in Mumbai were some of those few (Karlekar, 2023).

Encompassing a wide array of visual content extending from films to documentaries and web-series, OTT has significantly altered the choices and preferences of the movie loving audience. It is thus crucial for film festivals to evolve and adapt. Festivals should re-evaluate their content categories and incorporate OTT offerings as one way of addressing the changing scenario. Festivals can maintain their relevance and also broaden their participation by embracing such diversity. Expanding their avenues to immersive experiences like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) is another possibility which will enable film festivals to enhance viewer participation. These new integrations will attract more viewers and also bring about a shift in perspectives and preferences. Growing beyond the traditional walls of cinemas, the nature of film festivals must evolve in response to this broader definition of visual media. By offering a mix of content that reflects the rich tapestry of visual culture, festivals can enhance their role as cultural touchstones of artistic expression.

The future of film festivals will be one of significant transformations and inclusions. Combining in-person and virtual screenings, the hybrid model has become the norm in most festivals. The renewed focus on VR, AR and innovative interactive installations will open new trajectories in visual storytelling. An increased focus on inclusivity is also necessary in the field. By fostering an environment that amplifies underrepresented narratives such as race, gender, and socio-economic status, festivals can become the catalysts of a broader cultural movement. Sustainability is another pressing concern that needs to be addressed. Festivals can thus appeal to a socially conscious audience while setting an industry standard for responsible event management.

The festivals held in India and abroad share the common goal of promoting cinema as an art and enhancing cultural exchange. Yet there are differences in the ideological and structural functioning of each. The politics behind the selection of movies in the Indian festivals is one of concern. The curation process often involves not only artistic considerations but also political motivations. The power structures are often reinforced and the underrepresented voices and narratives continue to be ignored or negated, unfortunately. Even though there

are changes and advancements, racial and gender inclusivity needs to be addressed in Indian festivals. Curators should become increasingly attentive to films that not only entertain but also provoke thoughts and discussions around these critical topics.

Conclusion

National Award winning director and a film festival enthusiast, Mr. Joshy Mathew recollects his memories of being part of IFFK ever since its inception. “Festivals are about celebration and fellowship. It has brought together like-minded people under one roof from a long time. The years of the pandemic definitely made temporary changes and uncertainties. Movie lovers resorted to online streaming platforms because of its sudden popularity and accessibility. But that has not posed a threat to major festivals like IFFK, I would say. The 28th IFFK is proof for the same. Surrounded by cheerful and high-spirited individuals, the festival witnessed active participation of people from all ages and walks of life. The theatres were crowded and films were welcomed with much vigour and anticipation. The spirit of the festival remains the same, then and now” (J.Mathew, Personal Communication, December 10, 2023).

Indian film festivals have evolved to reflect the national cultural diversity and embracing global perspectives. Focus on the national and international socio-cultural contexts allows exchange of trends and narratives. By bringing the spotlight on universal issues such as human rights, migration and identity crisis, festivals spark global conversations.

Films need festivals and festivals need films (Tsai, 2023). It is more or less an accepted universal truth, applicable to every part of the world. Hence the fear of film festivals being extinct or reaching a complete halt is out of question. The new mode of hybrid festivals helped create a new audience. This new audience was dispersed across nations and regions. The online mode helped the otherwise closed film community to reach farther places across boundaries. It was indeed a silver lining during the challenging times. Physical offline film festivals serve a lot of functions. They give a feeling of collectiveness, help exchange cultural values and provide filmmakers

an opportunity to showcase their talent. All these functions are successfully met at least to an extent, by online and hybrid festivals as well. Thus the future ahead is definitely hybrid, a vibrant integration of live experiences and in-person screenings along with providing opportunities for remote access. Ms.Sellam says, “Covid has had drastic effects on festival and film industries. It did slow down the market and stimulated the use of digital platforms. Covid indeed limited the production of films, but not the development of ideas” (G. Sellam, Personal Communication, December 11, 2023). Enhanced and influenced by the lessons learned during the pandemic, new technologies and approaches will continue to shape the future of film festivals.

Works Cited

- Damiens, A., & Valck, M. de. (2023). What Happens When Festivals Can't Happen? In A. Damiens & M. de Valck (Eds.), *Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After* (pp. 1–13). essay, Springer Nature.
- Garrison W (2001) Video streaming into the mainstream. *Journal of Audiovisual Media in Medicine* 24(4): 174–178.
- Han, G. (2021, July 29). *Are hybrid film festivals actually accessible?*. Hyperallergic. <https://hyperallergic.com/665786/are-hybrid-film-festivals-actually-accessible/>
- Karlekar, T. (2023). Precarity, Innovation, and Survival in the Indian Film Festival Sector . In A. Damiens & M. de Valck (Eds.), *Rethinking film festivals in the pandemic era and after* (pp. 231–254). essay, Springer Nature.
- Loist, S. (2023). Stopping the Flow: Film Circulation in the Festival Ecosystem at a Moment of Disruption. In A. Damiens & M. Valck (Eds.), *Rethinking film festivals in the pandemic era and after* (pp. 17–34). essay, Springer Nature.
- Rindner, G. (2021, June 25). *The History of Screenlife Films: 10 Key Movies in An Exciting New Genre*. GQ. <http://www.gq.com/story/history-of-screenfilms-searching-host-unfriended>
- Tsai, B. (2023). Film Festivals in Taiwan: Lurking on the Periphery . In A. Damiens & M. de Valck (Eds.), *Rethinking film festivals in the pandemic era and after* (pp. 211–230). essay, Springer Nature.
- Vallejo , A., & Taillibert, C. (2023). Finding Allies in Pandemic Times: Documentary Film Festivals and Streaming Platforms. In A. Damiens & M. de Valck (Eds.), *Rethinking film festivals in the pandemic era and after* (pp. 101–127). essay, Springer Nature.

Anju Maria Sebastian

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Rajagiri College of Management and Applied Sciences

Rajagiri

Pin: 682039

India

Ph +91 9746091454

Email: anjumariasebastian@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0009-0307-0454