

EUROPA CINEMAS INNOVATION DAY LAB GRAZ

- Report -

HOW TO (RE)INVENT THE CINEMA EXPERIENCE AND (RE)CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCES

*Future-oriented strategies for programming, audience development,
collaboration and networking*

TUESDAY, 5 APRIL 2022 (9.45am–17pm)

Diagonale, Grand Hôtel Wiesler (Grieskai 4-8, 8020 Graz)

For the second time, Europa Cinemas collaborated with the Diagonale – Festival of Austrian Film (Graz, April 5–10, 2022) to organise an Audience Development & Innovation Day Lab on Tuesday, April 5, initiated by the Film Department of the Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Public Service and Sports (BMKÖS). The lab was open mainly to exhibitors and professionals of the cinema sector based in Austria.

Co-facilitated by **Metka Dariš** (Director, Kinodvor, Slovenia) and **Raymond Walravens** (Managing Director, Rialto, The Netherlands), this Lab explored forward-thinking strategies to reinvent the cinema experience and regain audience trust. We presented and discussed practical approaches related to audience development, collaboration and networking among cinema exhibitors, digital marketing and programming. Twenty-three Austrian exhibitors, three exhibitors from Slovenia and two observers participated in this one-day workshop.

OPENING & MEETING THE LAB LEADERS GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

Dominik Tschütscher (Diagonale Film Meetings) and Lisa Püscher (Europa Cinemas) opened the Lab by welcoming the participants and introducing the Lab-facilitators. The Labs leaders **Metka Dariš** (Director, Kinodvor, Slovenia) and **Raymond Walravens** (Managing Director, Rialto, The Netherlands) introduced themselves and their cinemas and welcomed the participants.

They gave as well a short overview on the purposes and values of this Lab, which were:

- to focus on cinemas as vital spaces, where audiences want to invest their time in and enjoy a collective visual experience,
- to underline the importance of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with audiences,
- to make the shared in-house experience stand out in a multiplatform environment,
- to devise sustainable programming and marketing strategies (both in-venue and online).

The introductory session ended with the participants' presentation. Each participant introduced herself/himself and its cinema by stating their name, cinema and city and shared in one sentence a positive take away and the biggest challenge they had to face in the last months. Exhibitors pointed out positive aspects of the last few months, for example more time for networking, mutual support and energy to invest in future prospects. The three major issues that have been raised by participants were

the lack of planning security, overflow of events after reopening and getting spectators back in the cinema theatres.

MODULE 1 – Tuesday, 5 April

Raymond Walravens, director of the Rialto cinemas, two arthouse cinemas located in Amsterdam, opened this first session with his presentation “Audience development: individual strength & collaboration”. The Rialto Cinema was created 100 years ago. Last year they have inaugurated a second venue with four screens at the university campus. Raymond’s presentation aimed to get a better understanding of the issues cinemas are currently facing, which seems consequences of the pandemic.



During the lockdown phases in 2020 and 2021, Raymond Walravens and his team set up various inspiring measures. They used this uncertain period for research and surveys to better get to know their audience and enlarge their outreach to potential new target groups. Indeed, in collaboration with the local government and thanks to the online panel of the city council, they managed to reach out to new audience groups, to identify customer expectations and to link and improve their marketing, communication and programming.

According to Raymond, three collaborations (established before the pandemic) helped Rialto to pass through the crisis. Firstly, the Picl model which is a streaming platform that introduces a flexible digital distribution of newly released films in collaboration with distributors and cinemas, whereby different from other VOD platforms – each part of the value chain gains revenue from the online sales. It helped Rialto financially to get through lockdown phases of closure. Secondly, the association of arthouse cinemas in the Netherlands, a fruitful countrywide cooperation between twenty-seven non-profit arthouse cinemas, has been helpful to defend common interests. The network was considered by the national government as one of the most important representative of local cinemas, as Raymond explained. He underlined that this nationwide collaboration is indispensable when it comes to sharing knowledge and lobbying together. Furthermore, their network played a key role in being perceived as an official representative of arthouse cinemas by the ministry of culture and many other official institutions. Thirdly, Rialto uses the membership card Cineville, which enables audiences to attend screenings on a flat rate basis in exchange for a monthly contribution. During the pandemic, spectators had the possibility to watch repertoire movies on a new online platform explicitly created during the crisis. The membership card was not only a tool for Rialto to increase customer loyalty, but was crucial in these uncertain times, as spectators continued paying their contribution, and a part of the benefits went to Rialto cinemas and helped endure the last two years.

Raymond Walravens ended his presentation by pointing out the advantage of hiring volunteers: Their motivation, their participation

ASSOCIATION OF ARTHOUSE CINEMAS IN THE NETHERLANDS

- A FRUITFULL COUNTRY WIDE COOPERATION BETWEEN 27 NON-PROFIT ARTHOUSE CINEMAS (ALL MEMBERS OF EUROPA CINEMAS AND CICAÉ)
- WORKING TOGETHER HAS PAYED OFF IN BEING SUCCESFULL IN RECEIVING FUNDING FROM THE DUTCH FILMFUND, DUTCH MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND CREATIVE EUROPE!
- WE SHARE KNOWLEDGE, LOBBY TOGETHER & ARE PERCEIVED AS AN OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF ARTHOUSE CINEMAS BY THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE AND MANY OTHER OFFICIAL INSTTUTIONS (check out vrfn.nl)

in teambuilding and the fact that they are perfect ambassadors for different target groups, can be a great asset.

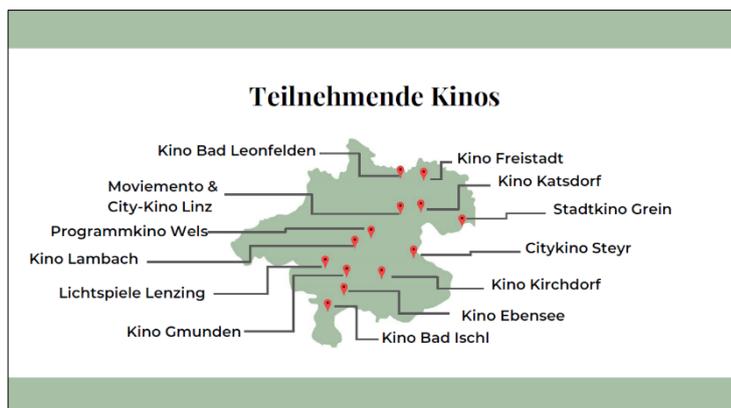
Thomas Pacher from cinematograph-leokino in Innsbruck gave a short presentation on an initiative called "Discovery weeks for 25 years and younger" which was financially supported by BMKÖS. The aim of this initiative was to address the target group (25 years and younger), by letting youngsters visit the cinema for 6 weeks for free, the only requirement was a newsletter registration. The cinema used different communication tools to promote the project. For instance, Instagram and online marketing tools were quite useful, the initiative helped to increase the profile views of the cinema by 60%.

Thomas Pacher explained, that as a result, the cinema was able to attract young audiences. For instance, 2.700 youngsters (which represents 27% of the overall ticket sales) used the initiative. In consequence, the exhibition company successfully created awareness of their cinema and managed to double the number of



newsletter subscriptions. Surprisingly, this target group did not even consider unsubscribing when the project ended. Thomas concluded that it would be interesting to learn more about the diversity of this young target group and if this target group continues to visit the cinema even though they have to buy their tickets now. The cinema is glad about the fact that they have managed to generate a new data set by the increase of newsletter subscriptions. Thomas Pacher underlined the importance of public funding in order to be able to propose this kind of initiative.

Paul Wilfing from Kino Freistadt in Freistadt gave insights about an outstanding collaboration of fourteen cinemas in Upper Austria. Cinemas in Upper Austria meet under the umbrella of an association since 2008 on a regular basis to share common ideas for initiatives, pool resources and not only communicate jointly on events and actions, but also collaborate to represent their joint interests. This initiative was launched by the exhibitor Wolfgang Steininger, who is managing the Movimiento cinema



(Linz) and the Localbühne & Kino Freistadt. Paul Wilfing gave an overview of their joint activities, such as the summer cinema, a collaboration of four cinemas with over 100 screenings, or the last movie of the year, which is a shared activity of eight cinemas for New Year, and film days for kids and youngster, a selection of ten movies to be screened in eight collaborating cinemas. In 2007, this group of cinemas managed as well to

buy a new customized ticketing system, which would have not been affordable for each cinema individually. This ticketing system allows by now online ticketing and is used, not only by the cinemas in Upper Austria, but by 26 cinemas all over Austria. For the cinemas in Upper Austria **collaboration is key!**

These presentations of insights by exhibitors were followed by a short Q&A. Participants of the Lab wanted to learn more about Thomas' project regarding the billing of free tickets, which were actually registered as normal tickets and reimbursed by public funding, which allowed the usual pay back to partners of the industry chain. Raymond recommended keeping the communication tools for youngster for further initiatives.

Paul Wilfing explained that one of the biggest challenges for collaborations between cinemas is of course to find a common ground. Meetings are time consuming, but **collaboration makes exhibitors gain energy and time for the implementation of projects that would not exist without this association.**

MODULE 2 – Tuesday, 5 April

Metka Dariš, Director of Kinodvor in Ljubljana, Slovenia, opened the afternoon session of the workshop with her presentation “Living with Cinema: Rebuilding Cinema Community”, an overview of new initiatives and activities since 2020. She and her team decided not to reduce the price of their tickets to attract more spectators, as paying a certain amount reminds the viewer that there are people to pay behind a film and that going to the cinema is a valuable and therefore high quality experience. Her team tried to connect with the audience via social networks. Metka mentioned a few measures, that helped the cinema to create awareness during lockdown periods, such as The Kino-on-demand model (the use of the small hall for accommodating smaller groups of visitors), and the Kinoplayground programme (a young audience online content for exploring, playing and creating with film). Finally yet importantly, the cinema successfully managed to keep the team together in a context, where working conditions were uncertain.

Lessons were learned: The cinema realized that the business-model, which successfully ran Kinodvor since it opened in 2008, was not appropriate anymore. Since the industry had to deal with the sanitary crisis, the cinema had to deal with smaller audience and uncertain results, even though the workload did not reduce. To face this paradigm, Metka listed new goals for her cinema, which she summarized in the following advice: “We have to preserve the magic of cinema: cinema experience is our key value, building a strong cinema community is our goal! Don't do anything that might endanger the cinema experience and its magic, examine anything that can be used to cinema's advantage and maintain communication with audiences.”

facts:	
We cannot avoid the "new normal": the physical and the digital world will co-exist, therefore we (cinemas) have to be actively involved in shaping this co-existence so it suits us best.	It is ok not getting it right everytime: many cinemas feel that they are starting from scratch. There should be less pressure that everything has to be a total succes. One can learn from mistakes or failure, too.
goals:	
New Ideas offer various opportunities: think strategically – don't do anything that might endanger or replace cinema experience. Examine anything that can be used to cinema's advantage.	Constant communication with audiences: our visitors should be viewed as our allies, partners, ambassadors, friends. They are vital for the future of cinema.
We have to preserve the magic of cinema: cinema experience is our key value, building a strong cinema community is our goal!	

To conclude, Metka focused on young audiences by presenting one of the most successful and time consuming programs, which was set up by her cinema, the Kinotrip Festival. This event is organised by all the youth film clubs in the area, which work with great autonomy, but are still coordinated by the Kinodvor team. This festival, a collaboration with young audiences, allows Kinodvor to reach an objective that is all the even more vital as the cinema is shaken by the sanitary crisis: to perpetuate the magic of the cinema, not only for tomorrow but also in the long run.

Matthias Pfeiffer, from the Cineplexx group gave a short talk about digital marketing strategies for their reopening. After several lockdown periods, the cinema group has launched a marketing campaign in three steps: market research and data analysis, re-establish the relevant setting of cinemas by using databased activities (teaser and awareness campaign) and recreation of an emotional need for cinema. For instance, they represented cinemas as contemplative venues that make the audience enjoy culture and conveyed a positive, cosy pleasant image of the cinema experience.



Matthias gave also insights on their collaboration with schools. He observed clearly a need for schools to come back to the cinemas to make the school day for kids more varied. In his opinion, the target group of teachers is still easy to handle, as they are mostly film buffs and motivated to integrate the cinema experience in a normal school day.

Barbara Brunner gave an overview of the programming strategies of the cinema KIZ RoyalKino in Graz, which was founded in 1973 in a key moment where alternative cinema concepts emerged in Austria. The KIZ RoyalKino is focusing on Arthouse film, Austrian and European cinema, which are screened in original language with German subtitles. The cinema defends subtitling as an inclusive strategy. KIZ RoyalKino manages to attract international students, as its movies are screened in original language. Barbara gave an overview of different strategies to attract audiences after several lockdown phases, they changed their motto to: “Without the envelope, you can never send the letter” inspired by Jean-Luc Godard. Another initiative was “Popcorn to go”, spectators could pass and get take away popcorn, which created attention for the cinema among different target groups.



The ensuing discussion was focused mainly on school screenings. Matthias confirmed, that distributors can propose screenings for teachers at the Cineplex group. Cineplex uses newsletters to address specific target groups, but they do not use micro targeting, as this personalized approach is time consuming and demands a lot of effort.

GROUP TASK – Tuesday, 5 April

The workshop continued with a group task, lab participants were split in four groups to work on the following topics with lab leaders standing by for support: How to deal with program planning (lack and abundance of films)? How to maintain and rebuild your team? How to attract three different challenging target groups? What data would you like to collect?

The first group worked on program planning. The group reaffirmed the importance of knowing their target groups on the one hand and considering the link between programming and the corresponding schedule. They recommended the use of surveys conducted by the cinema or other institutional structures. The group concluded by underlining the importance of promoting the unique outstanding position of cinemas, as venues that make movies available on the big screen. The workshop leader Raymond stressed the need to negotiate with platforms to obtain a viewing window. In Holland, cinemas have two weeks of screening for many films. He said that if it is worthwhile, the film should be screened, but it is important to realize that this is not always the case. However, this configuration can be problematic according to the lab participants. If movies are available online just one or two weeks after their theatrical release, the spectators will not visit cinemas anymore.

The group agreed on saying that it is no longer a question of showing all the movies available, but of sharing the distribution with the platforms and questioning the relevance of each film for the big screen. This lack of exclusivity is not a problem in itself. 10.000 films are produced each year, Raymond reminded us. While not all Lab members agreed on the method for doing so, all emphasized the importance of involving the audience in the development of programming.

The second group tried to find out how to maintain and rebuild a cinema’s team. They agreed on the fact that motivating the team is a challenging task, but really important, as they are in contact with

customers on a daily basis. The group underlined the importance of a good atmosphere at work, as well as team building, meetings and transparency, but explained as well that the financial situation has an impact on these aspects. They also addressed the need to seek for talents of individual employees. Working with volunteers can be a relevant add on, as they seem to be the best ambassadors, but it represents as well a great danger for dumping salaries and for creating social insecurity. The lab participants agreed on the fact that professional performance should be paid and compensated, but they underlined as well that voluntary commitment should not be curbed and that teenagers and seniors seemed less affected by the question of salary.

The third group focused on audience development. Their task was to choose three different target groups and explain which strategies they would use to attract them. For the first target (age 14-19), the group underlined that it is quite challenging to get them to the cinema, but as they represent a peer group, it is essential to get them on board. The group suggested to pick them up where they are the most interest in, let them produce videos themselves, for example on TikTok, propose ticket reductions and try to promote events through influencers and youth centres. The second target group (60+) seemed as well difficult to reach as the exhibitors were not that certain about their capability to navigate in the digital world. It was suggested to reach them with partnerships in cafés or private message groups on Telegram, for example. For the third target group (3-6 years) the working group proposed to create short programs for about 30-40 min, rather than proposing short movies, only dim the light and give the possibility to react on what is shown on the screen. This goes a long with a close contact to their parents, who might be reached via Facebook. Another possibility is to promote cinematographic events in parents & child centres or to get “mum” influencers on board to reach a larger audience.

Data collection was the subject of the fourth group, who developed a survey to find out what the audience did during the pandemic and which strategies exhibitors can apply to bring them back to the cinemas. Proposed questions include: Which cultural activity did you miss the most? What did you appreciate the most (new habits)? How many times did you visit cinemas before the sanitary crisis? Do you think you go to cinemas more often than before the pandemic? What do you miss the most when going to the movies?

The group agreed, that in the last two years customers’ habits changed a lot, that’s all the more reason to find out in a survey what the audience might miss or what might have changed. Raymond Walravens also reminded, that these surveys should also be made on a national level for the whole cultural sector, to remind how important culture and cinema is for the economical and social life of a city. The economy of art and culture plays an important role for the vividness and attractiveness of a city.

WRAP UP: HIGHLIGHTS & CONCLUSIONS – Tuesday, 5 April

The workshop leaders Metka Dariš and Raymond Walravens underlined how important it is for cinemas to exchange and work together, to grow as a sector and to be strong when confronted with other competitors. Their advice: **exhibitors can work hand in hand** when it comes to audience development, for example, but can still compete on programming. And **exhibitors should trust themselves, to find new strategies for their unique and specific audiences.**



Housed within a film festival that brings Austrian Filmmakers and their work in the spotlight, this practical Lab offered exhibitors opportunities to discuss important topics with specific target groups in mind and to share their hardships and concerns with colleagues and use hands-on approaches to solve specific problems, and think of new ways to develop and expand their audiences. Exhibitors were invited to bring their ideas and issues to the Lab, to step back from the day-to-day and spend time with peers to reflect on their own approaches, share expertise and find practical solutions through new inputs.

Arnaud Duthilleul, Lisa Püscher