

Europa Cinemas Thessaloniki Online Lab, Thursday, 12th November 2020

Report

Europa Cinemas Thessaloniki Online Lab was moderated by **Frank Groot** (Exhibitor, KINO Rotterdam, Netherlands), and co-facilitated by **Maeve Cooke** (Director, Access Cinema, Ireland) and **Ilias Georgiopoulos** (Director, Danaos, Greece) and counted 18 exhibitors from 14 different countries.



After a short introduction and presentation of the project by Fatima Djoumer, Head of International Relations & Events, and a welcome word by Elise Jalladeau, General Director of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, and some logistical rules to get the most of this first Thessaloniki Lab organized online, each participant quickly introduced him/herself. Frank showed a map with the participants' countries and their respective situation regarding opening/closure.

Almost all cinemas in European countries have to deal with a nationwide closure mid-November, some countries impose local closures of cinemas as in Scotland, Spain, Romania, Russia, Denmark, Norway and Switzerland. Nevertheless, a few countries are still open and cinemas can operate as in Estonia, Sweden, Finland, Portugal, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Serbia.

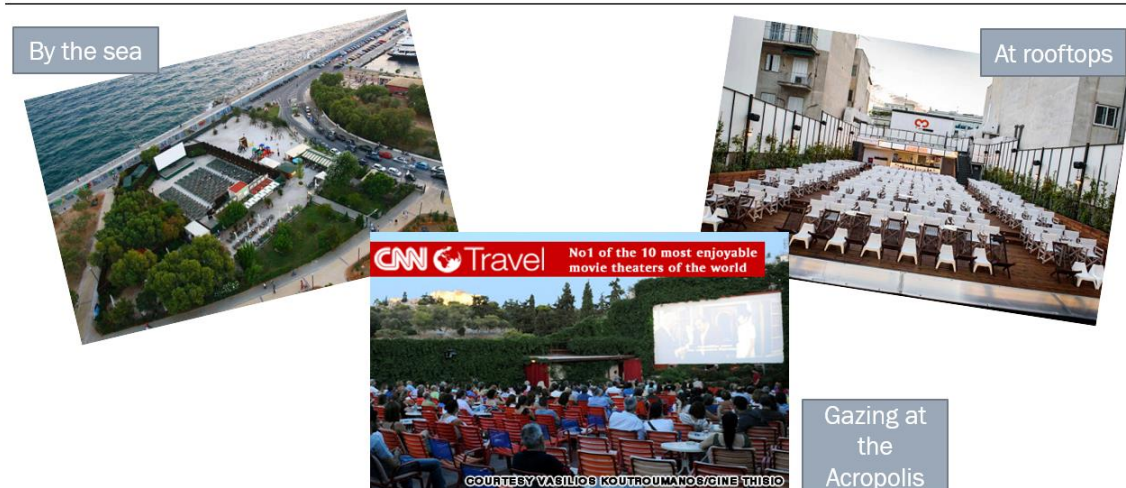
We shared a slide with the main challenges that participating exhibitors are facing. Many participants are worried about the lack of content, that has a strong impact on the possibilities of bringing back the audience to the movies. Some exhibitors seem concerned about how to balance physical and online events and how to create audience engagement online. Other main issues outlined by our member cinemas are assuring safety of staff and audience, keeping employees motivated and dealing with reduced income and uncertainty.

Maeve Cooke, Director of access Cinema, an organisation for regional cultural cinema exhibition in Ireland, proposed a presentation on "Connecting with your communities". Maeve explained that cinemas have different types of communities, that need to be maintained, like cinema, local, cultural, art, network and online communities, stakeholders, staff and work team. Maeve underlined that the current sanitary crisis had a strong impact on the maintenance of relations with these different communities. She elaborated the necessity to update key communities on the current situation, for

instance not just the core audience, but also distributors, stakeholders, funding partners and staff. She showed as well how access Cinema became engaged in other initiatives, having new opportunities that became accessible through their shift online. According to Maeve it is really important to stay connected while closed through social media, digital and outdoor screenings and special initiatives and partnerships, like a three month free MUBI subscription for cinema members.

Ilias Georgiopoulos (Director, Danaos, Greece) made a presentation of the Greek market focusing on one of its particularity: the open-air cinemas (which can be an alternative during cinema closure). As most of the Greek exhibitors beside Danaos (2 screens), Ilias also operates an open air cinema, Anesis, located in the center of Athens. Moreover, Ilias is also a distributor (for 8 to 10 titles per year). First, he underlined the important losses in the Greek market due to the crisis compared to 2019: more than a 90% drop in ticketing sells for the first 2 weeks of October and around 80% from March to September.

SUMMER CINEMAS LOCATION



Then he explained why open air-cinemas are so particular in Greece. Called “summer cinemas” (while normal cinemas are called “winter cinemas”) they are a very strong tradition in Greece. There are more than 200 around the country in various locations (by the sea, on rooftops or even near the Acropolis). Summer cinemas can operate from May to October (while winter cinemas close from June to end of August). Ilias underlined the fact that people are going to the summer cinemas especially for the experience (more than for the film itself) as people can eat, drink or smoke during the screening (and the bar revenues can be tripled than those of a winter cinema). As they can only have 2 shows per night, the programming is special and composed mainly of mainstream films.

After a short Q&A and some exchanges on the presentations, the participants were split into three groups, based on the favourite topics of discussion they have selected in the preliminary questionnaire.

The chosen topics were: Rethinking our comms/audience development strategies with specific target groups in mind; Re-designing the customer experience: balancing safety and enjoyment to keep the audience attached; Devising programming strategies: addressing the lack of content and reduced capacity.

Maeve Cooke facilitated the first group focused on rethinking communication and audience development strategies for specific target groups. The group agreed that there are two different target

groups challenging to reach. Greek exhibitors explained that the regular audience (50 years+) requires specific communication strategies, in particular in these unprecedented times to promote cinemas as a safe place. Therefore, exhibitors in Ireland proposed for example “cocoon screenings” open only to audience groups over a certain age to make them feel safer in the screening room. This same target group seems to be open to discover online content, as **Luigi Pepe** from Multisala Astra (Trento, Italy) discovered with the #iorestoinsala initiative initiated by 50 independent cinemas, which consists in offering online screenings to help cinemas bridge lockdown periods. Surprisingly cinema regulars, which are often older audiences, were interested in using this offer, even though they needed technical assistance.

The group had a look at a second target group, which is young audiences. **Altijana Maric** from Obala Meeting Point, Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, underlined that the cinema had successful young audience activities, like school screenings, but the current capacity (60%) does not allow to welcome school groups. Their solution is “hybrid programming” by collaborating with an online platform called Shift72. **Balint Radoczy**, Apolló Mozi in Pécs, confirmed that in Hungary especially youth audience is less educated in art cinema and does not have the habit to come to the cinema on their own. The group concluded that young audiences are “digital natives” and therefore used to benefit from activities online, which can be a first approach to attract this specific target group by keeping in mind a longer term goal of getting them into the cinema. Their attention might not be on the movie itself, but more on the buzz around it, the event, the connections, the network as experienced through “Watch Parties” in Ireland. As the organization of cinema clubs in Hungary showed, the idea is to get in touch with younger audiences and bring them along on the journey. The group underlined as well, that it is important to receive their feedback that are often other channels than the usual ones, by using social media, life discussions or group chats.

Frank Groot facilitated the second group focused on how to re-design the customer experience and balance between safety and enjoyment. Frank exposed how he implemented the safety measures at KINO trying to make it a bit fun for the audience. However, he remarked that younger people are less sensible to respect the distancing measures. He also gave the example of LIFF, which went completely online, still creating an interactive cinema lobby in which people could interact. For **Marta Ban** at Art-Kino (Rijeka, Croatia) it was very important to communicate in person, so they started to introduce every screening and remind people to wear the mask. In Ireland as cinemas opened later, the audience was already used to the measures so it was easier. The only thing is that at Light House they had to put in place the allocated seats. At Cines Renoir (Spain), audiences are already used to allocated seats and **Octavio Alzola** underlined that this is a good way to get higher numbers on online sales. For Octavio the biggest difficulty is dealing with the fluctuating mood of the audience concerning the security depending on the media. He also had to deal with the lack of symmetry in Spain as the measures were depending on each region. Which was a big difficulty for distributors as well. The conversation then shifted to how to reach the audience during this second lockdown. At Art-Kino, they put some inspiring quotes from films instead of posters and organized online screenings for schools: as the pupils cannot come to the cinema anymore, allow them to access the films in class. For Marta this was a great initiative as the platform became national with schools from other counties joining the program. They also tried to do some online workshops. For Marta, the only thing that is important either you are closed or open is to be present. **David Kelly** from Light House Cinema (Dublin) confirmed and shared some things they tried: mood of the day with scenes from the films, watching parties on Twitter or on Zoom (watch together, people can join with a #) with special guests, directors and actors. For David it was more difficult to motivate again during this second lockdown, a downer after the reopening. For Octavio, as the cinemas remained open in Spain, it was very important to have the directors introducing the films in order to motivate people to come.

Ilias Georgiopoulos facilitated the third group focused on programming strategies and on how to address the lack of content and the reduced capacity. He asked each participant of the group to describe briefly the situation in their countries regarding the programming and reduced capacity. **Maarten Alexander** from Zebra Cinema mentioned that together with all the partners of the mobile cinema they decided to postpone all screenings in January 2021. Zebra Cinema is organising screenings in a region where there are no arthouse cinemas, only multiplexes (around 10 locations: multiplexes, cultural centres or small local cinemas). Zebra does not have infrastructure, the aim is to use the screens that exist to screen arthouse films. As most of them are big venues, even with the measures (30% occupancy limit), they still managed to have a quite good occupancy. The main problem was that their core audience is mainly 40 - 60, which is the risk group. **Jannik Rakusa** pointed out that after the first lockdown Top Kino was one of the first cinemas to reopen in Vienna. The programming consisted in films running when the lockdown arrived and among those, some big titles that worked very well: *Little Women, 1917, The Gentleman*. The main problem was that Top Kino is a small cinema (100 and 50 seats) and usually they screen films in the 3rd week of programming. With the crisis, the competition with the multiplexes was stronger as without the blockbusters, multiplexes play the films they usually screen. In Portugal, one of the countries where the cinemas are still open, despite no new releases, the admissions were fine at Cinema Trindade (Porto) thanks to the special screenings of two festivals: French and Italian. Nevertheless, **Cristina Mota** was worried of how it will be after the new measure consisting in a curfew. As they are also a distributor, they were able to feed their cinema programming with the films they have in their catalogue and propose cycles. For Cristina the most important is to organise special screenings with the directors on every possible occasion. At the end, she underlined the lack of Cannes or Berlin releases and was hoping for the new Woody Allen film release in December. For **Andrea Stosiek**, as a small cinema in Berlin (3 screens - all together around 100 seats) it was very difficult and not profitable to run with the safety measures of 1.5m distance (meaning 27 seats only for the biggest room). Nevertheless, cinemas in Germany received support from the government. In addition, Sputnik received support from the audience (donations in form of vouchers reaching almost 2000 euros). She also mentioned that the cinemas in Berlin joined forces and launched a crowdfunding campaign. If before the crisis, Andrea and exhibitors in Germany were totally against the online screenings, she confessed now that some films can attract people online, raise awareness about watching films and still support cinemas by donations (this was the case with the festival of human rights). Russia is another country where the cinemas are open and this after a very long lockdown (from mid-March to mid-September). For **Stanislav Ershov** the reduced capacity is not affecting that much his cinema, as in general the average use of the seats is 45-50%. With one screen, Cinema Anleterre is only screening independent films. If one film is very popular, they adapt and add supplementary screenings. He stressed that despite several proposals from online platforms, for him the most important is the emotion, the cinema experience more than the film itself. He was looking forward for the new releases and especially *Dear Comrades* that premiered at the Venice Film Festival. **Rachel Hayward** came back on their closure in March when at HOME (Manchester) they were running an important festival. Finally, this turned up to be an advantage for the reopening, as they were able to reschedule the films of the festival and knew that it was going to work. It is clear that curated programs and festivals are making the difference. Especially in the UK where too many films are released each week. Rachel explained that in UK it was possible to receive funding through the art council or the BFI (depending on the type of the venue). In the end, when discussing about online platforms, Maarten mentioned the Picl model that exists in Netherlands. Picl is a VOD platform that works in collaboration with the cinemas (for each ticket the distributor and exhibitor share the revenue, only a small percentage goes to the platform). Maarten is willing to implement the same model in Belgium. Nevertheless, Ilias stressed that with the online, a cinema loses revenues from the bar and advertising.

The group highlighted among the key takeaways the importance of connecting to younger and older audiences. Taking inspiration by looking at other industries might be a possibility to improve communication. The session concluded by stating that the main goals during closure and the organization of online events are curation and the creation of the atmosphere around it by organizing discussions, Q&As or watch parties, as the audience is still eager to watch interesting and good movies.

Lisa Püscher

Adrian Preda