

Europa Cinemas Online Lab Tuesday 7th – Thursday 9th July 2020

Report

The first session of this edition of the Europa Cinemas Online Lab was moderated by **Madeleine Probst** (Watershed, UK), together with **Metka Daris** (Kinodvor, Slovenia) and **Simon Blaas** (Cinemas Middelburg, The Netherlands).

For the second session, on Wednesday 8th, Madeleine Probst was accompanied by **Ewa Kujawska** (Director, Kino Palacowe, Poland) and **Mustafa El Mesaoudi** (Director, Cinema and Rex Filmtheater, Germany).

Finally, **Javier Pachon** (President, Cineciutat, Spain) and **Wiktorja Pelzer** (Programmer, Stadtkino im Künstlerhaus, Austria) joined Madeleine for the third session on Thursday, July 9th.

13 exhibitors from 11 different countries participated in the first session, there were 14 exhibitors from 11 countries on the second one and 11 exhibitors from 5 countries at the third one.



After a short opening and some logistical rules to get the most of this first official Zoom Lab, each participant quickly introduced him/herself. Madeleine showed a map with the participants' countries and their respective official reopening dates. Most of the countries have already set a cinema reopening date, although not all venues in these countries have reopened yet, due to the current uncertain situation. For example, in the UK the official reopening date is the 4th July but only a handful of venues are already open. Serbia is considering the 20th of July as the possible reopening date, whereas in Romania no date is scheduled whatsoever.

We shared a slide with the main challenges that participating exhibitors are facing. Many were worried by the lack of films, strongly affecting their programming in a period when it is necessary to have driving films to attract the audience. A little happy few estimated that things were gradually going back

to normal in their cinemas, but most of the exhibitors feared the autumn season would be challenging, as the audience might not be fully back before long.

Another main challenge was the safety measures that venues have to apply, which can be very limiting and frightening for their audience. Given that arthouse cinemas' audience is mainly composed by elderly people, which are the most sensitive group for the Coronavirus, bringing them back to the cinema is also a quite challenging task.



Metka Daris presented the reopening strategy of Kinodvor, which decided to reopen on the 1st June, two weeks after the official date, in order to be well prepared for the new context and put into place all necessary measures to make the audience and the staff feel comfortable. Kinodvor's main message for the audience was that it was safe and comfortable to return to the cinema, shifting the focus from the programme to the cinema-going experience. They set up some visual guidelines to help the audience understand more clearly the new safety rules, although the government's instructions were quite contradictory as to which rules cinemas had to apply. Kinodvor launched a promotional cinema-going campaign and the audience's response was enthusiastic. However it still remains very difficult to attract a larger audience with one hall out of two, a maximum of 40-60 people per screening, 2-3 screenings per day (instead of 10 before the crisis)

and no special events or children programmes. In June Kinodvor gathered 34% of the admissions as compared to June 2019. For this reason they are rethinking their way of working and their audience approach in this unpredictable scenario, trying to rely only on their own resources.

Simon Blaas shared his experience as director of Cinema Middelburg, which remained closed from 16th March to 1st June. During the closure they tried to stay in contact with their audience offering a quality film programming through Picl (nationwide VOD platform sharing income and supporting Dutch cinemas) and they sent personalised postcards to their most loyal viewers, showing a personal touch and affection in this difficult times. Cinema Middelburg reopened with a local Dutch film, premiering with the director and film crew welcoming the audience, as ambassadors of the return to the cinema. Press screenings also worked quite well. They were able to experiment new marketing and programming methods with online sales only, no printed brochures but online campaigns, a looser programming and new deals with distributors, which were more flexible to negotiate.

Mustafa El Mesaoudi, on Wednesday, explained how he launched -together with six other cinemas- a networked campaign stressed on the importance of a cinema within its local community. Their main communication channels were the social networks where emotional or humorous posts on their venues were published. They also produced a teaser and a longer trailer spread throughout all channels. Putting forward different cinema each day, the aim was to reach out towards the audience and make them realise how essential the cinema is in the cultural life of every city and not taking for granted it would be always there.

Ewa Kujawinska feared that the cure might be worse than the disease, as she questioned the efficiency of some of the measures taken from the cinemas during the lockdown, especially concerning the cinema promoted VOD and online screening rooms. Her cinema, instead, organised its own campaign on its own social networks – a funny merchandising, Parasite poster remake from the cinema crew, online debates... Fearing the lack of audience, the cinema reopened two weeks after the national reopening authorisation. Once a regularly full house, the audience is now reluctant to come back to the venue. Kino Palacowe chose to not be part of the national arthouse VOD platform “mojeekino.pl” which was launched during the lockdown. Iwona Bartnicka, whose cinema, Kino 60 Krzesel is part of the project, explained us the functioning of the scheme.

Javier Pachón on Thursday presented his cinema’s reopening strategies. CineCiutat has had a strong communication before the crisis already. Their newsletters had from 38 to 42% opening rate. With the lockdown, the crew redefined their own role in the cinema: Support the community, Support the film industry and Keep going the cinema... They adapted their newsletter to become a Quarantine Diary, they doubled the quantity of text and content and the opening rate raised to levels from 48 to 54%. The structure of their newsletter was centred on general news, volunteers’ film picks, free educational toolkits, crowdfunding news, industry news and support to SMEs. The community was asked about what would they would do when things are over and the response on social media was significant. When the lockdown approached to its end, the crew prepared for re-starting, teasing films to come in the newsletter, counting down the days to reopening. Javier detailed also the relaunch of their crowdfunding campaign – only a year after finishing their first one, which was aimed at saving the cinema. This one now was aimed at financing the refurbishment of the building, some works having become urgent and mandatory. It started a month before the lockdown and was prolonged due to the lockdown. The campaign was a great success and the funding goals were entirely reached.

Wiktorija Pelzer from Stadtkino im Künstlerhaus in Austria spoke about her cinema’s recent communication strategy. They launched the Curtainrace challenge on social networks – a timer is ticking on the cinema screen, while the curtains are opening to the white screen. The challenge was a great success, highly followed and relayed, connecting many cinemas and their audiences around Europe. Stadtkino also organised a crowdfunding campaign with several goals: pre-sell some tickets for the reopening, Share the cinema’s enthusiasm about NGO and other institutions crucial in the

COVID crisis period and make the cinema's films and programmes better known. The campaign connected the film offer to NGOs related to the film's content, by giving away part of the collected sums to these NGOs. The outcome was positive but in terms of image and press coverage, however costly in terms of time and human resources. For the reopening, which took place the 18th of June, the cinema reinforced the use of card payment and online booking. Willing to profit from the new skill and easiness of use towards Zoom and Skype internationally and being also a distributor, the cinema organised online debates and meetings, as a common event with other cinemas, on the same film.

#kinoliebe
#welcomeback
#bettertogether

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you



After a few questions and exchanges on the presentations, the participants were split each day into three groups, based on the favourite topics of discussion they 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 for reopening, balancing safety and enjoyment; Devising programming strategies for reopening, addressing the lack of content and reduced capacity.

The first group on Tuesday, on communication and audience development was facilitated by Madeleine Probst. The group agreed that the results of this first period depend on the context you are in, some films can fail in some countries and be a success in others. Another tip is not to have very high expectations about the reopening, but aim at a soft opening rather than a huge event. Maybe audience doesn't worry as much as exhibitors about the lack of films, because they are willing to watch a large range of contents. Communication and graphics about the new rules are very important, it could be useful to have access to open resources with graphic material for reopening venues. It is important to think how to communicate with target groups or minorities that haven't returned yet to the cinema. Getting feedback from your audience is key, either talking to them directly or sending a survey.

Mustafa El Messaoudi, facilitated the group discussion on the same topic on Wednesday. Sylvie Da Rocha from Lumière, Lyon, explained they have a segmented approach towards the audience all year long, thanks to their customer database and partners' cooperation, except since the lockdown, the cinema crew hasn't had the time to gather and organise an event. Sylva Deborah from cinema Charlot, Portugal, uses different mailing lists according to the audience they target. Silke Bomberna from Sphinx, Ghent, has a very efficient target reach towards the elderly audience, but quite a lower one when it comes to young audience. Sylvie Da Rocha also experiences difficulties with the young

audience, especially teenagers, which would choose the cinema theatre if they could afford it more often. The efficiency of social networks communication was discussed. It appeared that successful posts and campaigns do not always succeed in bringing the audience to the cinema. Finally, the issue narrows down to having appealing titles to screen and efficient targeted communication.

Javier Pachón led this conversation on the Thursday's session. The discussion was axed on the two main subjects of the exhibition: how to access the young audience and how to reach new groups of audience to the venue. Maria Poliviou, from Olympion in Thessaloniki, considers that the current crisis is an opportunity to try out on a wider scale all solutions that were usually implemented on an experimental level. The particular age group of 20-25+ was discussed, as it appears the most difficult one. It came out the best way to do this is to create an event outside the cinema, or converting the cinema experience into a club. The concept of letting the young audience in control of a specific event, also has its supporters. Ryan Hewitt from Curzon UK suggested that, instead of trying to bring the audience to any of the current film offer, it would be a better approach first to define the target group and the relevant communication, then only choose the right film to offer.

Metka Daris facilitated on Tuesday the group focused on customer experience and audience perception of safety rules, trying to find a balance between making them feel safe but also in a cosy and welcoming place. Both in Slovenia and the Netherlands some viewers were critical about the distances, new hygiene restrictions and masks because they didn't feel comfortable. Information for the audience should be clear and given in advance, humour can help make the content understood without being too strict. It is not worth to spend time and energy to persuade people that are afraid of the spread of the virus and haven't returned to the cinema, better to give more attention to the audience that is willing to return. In Greece Ifigeneia Vlachogianni from Cine Star has noticed that young audience has returned to the cinema already, whereas older audience is more afraid to gather in a larger group.

The same topic was discussed on Thursday's session moderated by Wiktorja Pelzer. The balance between safety and enjoyment is big concern for everyone, notably the obligations relative to the wearing of masks. The rules and regulations are different for every country, and change very often. For example, in Poland you have to wear a mask during the whole screening, which creates a staff problem – who would check this, and how, if the film is on. The mask is also an obstacle to communication inside the crews, therefore brings an efficiency issue. The mask creates also an additional revenue loss for the cinemas, as food and drinks cannot be consumed. Classic barriers are also a problem waiting for solution, as they are usually not designed for social distancing. The distancing, however, is a lesser problem for the moment, simply because the cinemas are much less attended than usual. Nevertheless, in Romania the rules are very strict and even open air cinemas have difficulties to operate. For this reason, Romania is the last country in Europe where theatre haven't reopened yet.

The safety rules bring a great lot of logistics, including for the programmers, who have to take into account the time necessary to fulfil the obligations when defining the programme. All of this is burden to staff members, who also need to be taken care of. It is important for the managers to try and ease their approach to the crew, to lighten the instructions. Layla Barron from Watershed, UK, stressed on the need to talk with the staff, including before reopening – how they feel about going back to cinema, or simply stay in touch and include them in the process of reopening.

Tuesday's group on programming and lack of content was facilitated by Simon Blaas. Among the main suggestions that came up in this group there were to try to be unique with unreleased films, niche films and offering exceptional experiences like drive-ins. Some partnerships with NGOs for the

promotion of specific films like *For Sama* turned out to be very successful. Audience was very keen on helping and financially support the cinema, like Nina Selig from Endstation in Germany reported.

Ewa Kujawinska's group discussed on Wednesday the Developing hybrid models; balancing in-venue and/or online activities possibilities. Not a defined thing, might be a short term solution, opportunity to enlarge the audience, wider community support, online discussions... Many exhibitors jumped in to hybrid models during the lockdown, but the experience is still very new and no one is able to draw conclusions.

Madeleine's Wednesday group discussed the topic of redesigning customer experience for the reopening – open air – a good way to link back the audience with the cinema brand. The key is to link all communication to the cinema itself, not to the programme. And if you don't know exactly how, ask the customers for the best idea. Thus, a support message received from a customer became on social media the backbone of a recent campaign at Watershed, Bristol. The diversity of reactions from staff, as well as from audiences, were highlighted as another problem to deal with. Since the exhibitor cannot please everyone, dealing with the complaints is most essential. Supporting the staff in being nice with customers is an important task to do.

Same topic, Thursday's group discussed the possibility of addressing teenagers through a more generic campaign rather than film by film advertisement – it might be cheaper and more efficient. Working with partners on events and festivals may also bring new audience, expand the brand's notoriety. The key in addressing this audience is asking ourselves what do young people expect from us? Socially relevant topics as unemployment, health, anxiety... They might be needing a different experience than film – a place to meet and socialize. Focus groups of young people are a good way to test a campaign. The experience has to be narrowed to its most efficient components – focusing for example on one single school partnership, instead of all schools in the area. Birthday party bookings still work well despite health restrictions.

The wrap-up sessions brought up that cinemas should invite the press for the first day of reopening to interview the first viewers because they will be the strongest promoters of the cinema. Test screening with test audience (for example staff or volunteers) is a good idea to check if people feel comfortable and safe and if the new measures are effective and practical.

Monica Naldi from Cinema Beltrade, Italy reflected that a joint network/coordination among independent cinemas that are working well with their audience could be a good solution to promote cinema-going, especially when the institutions don't promote the return to cinemas and give contradictory messages.

In Greece there is a nationwide campaign promoted by the national cinema association with a clear and strong message: "Cinema is waiting for you". It has been shared by distributors, cinemas and hung at bus stops and everywhere in the towns.

Silke Bomberna from Sphinx in Ghent was surprised since reopening that the numbers were nearly as good as before – lots of regulars, fewer elderly people but more families and friends' groups. Joanna Galhardas from Ideal, Lisbon, reopened with the last film they had before the lockdown. It was a fair success, given the social distancing rules that need to be observed. Jelena enjoyed the children's and their parents' reaction. The children were really excited to be in the cinema and meet their friends there. The issue of ever changing safety rules, different for each country, was put forward from many exhibitors, which makes the functioning of the cinema and the related campaigns much less controllable. The main learning out of this conversation was: Instead of trying to control everything, we should better focus on what we can control and keep the instructions clear and short.

All sessions ended on a positive note and some participants remained connected for an informal chat online.

Sonia Ragone

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