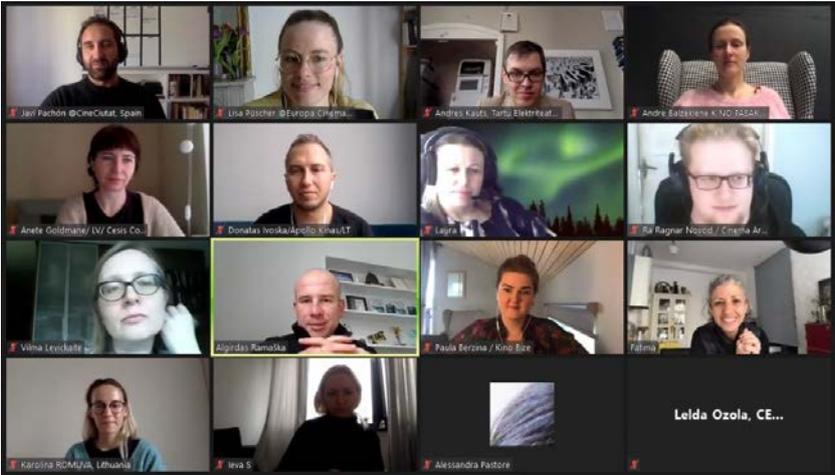


Europa Cinemas Vilnius Online Lab, Tuesday, April 13th, 2021

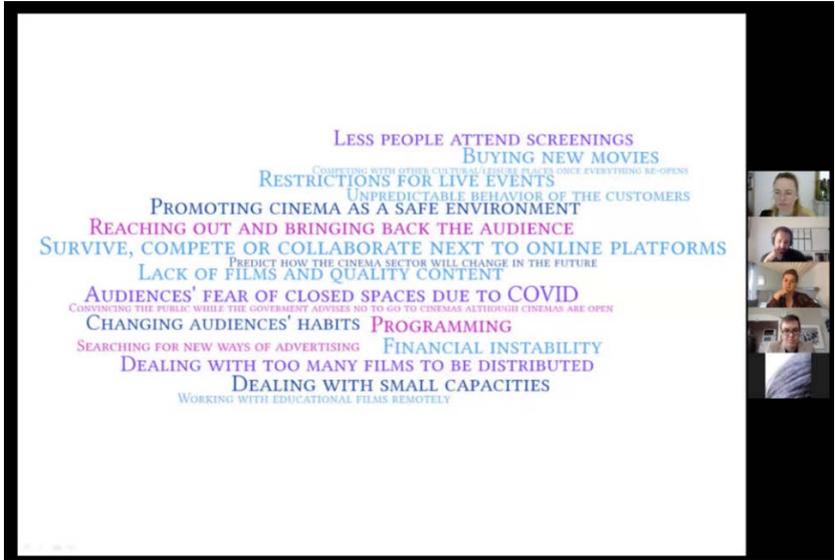
Report

Europa Cinemas was joining forces for the first time with the Vilnius International Film Festival (March 18th to April 4th 2021) to organize an “Audience Development & Innovation” Online Lab on Tuesday, April 13th, from 2pm-5pm (Eastern Europe Time). The online event was part of E-Meeting Point Vilnius (April 14th to 16th 2021) and open to Baltic exhibitors and professionals. This first edition of the Europa Cinemas Vilnius Online Lab was moderated by **Javier Pachón** (President of CineCiutat and Vice-president of PROMIO, Spain), **Paula Bērziņa** (Cinema and VOD platform manager / film distributor, Kino Bize, Latvia) and **Andres Kauts** (General manager, Tartu Elekriteater, Estonia).

15 professionals from the Baltic countries, 11 exhibitors and 4 distributors, participated in this meeting.



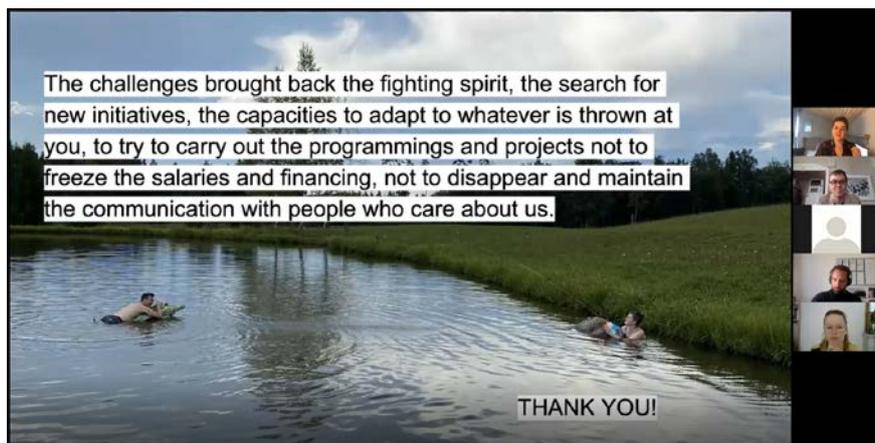
After a short introduction by Fatima Djoumer, Head of International Relations at Europa Cinemas, and Alessandra Pastore, Head of Industry at Meeting-Point Vilnius, Javier Pachón, the moderator of the session, quickly explained the housekeeping rules of an e-meeting. He highlighted the major concerns and challenges faced by cinema operators when redesigning the collective cinema experience during the extended closure and towards a reopening. The three main issues that have emerged were: reconnecting with the audience and making the spectators feel safe, financial sustainability in the current situation and dealing with the available film content.



Javier Pachón underlined that despite the common idea, Netflix and other VOD platforms have not driven cinemas out of the movie sector, cinema operators still have a strong importance for people, as VOD platforms do not offer the “communal experience” that cinemas do make possible, they do not offer shared emotions. In that sense, Javier proposed that VOD platforms should be considered as an opportunity to make cinema survive these long periods of closure.

The introduction finished with a virtual round table: each participant stated their name, cinema and city - and shared in one sentence a positive take away (if any) from the last couple of months.

Paula Bērziņa, Cinema and VOD platform manager/film distributor from Kino Bize in Latvia, proposed a short presentation on: Can a cinema theater be uploaded online? She had always wanted to create a VOD platform to extend the life of films she handled, but never had the time for it. The first lockdown was the best opportunity for her to create it. Despite the investments and adjustments needed for the collaboration with distributors and a growing demand, the results were not comparable to the in-house screenings. Paula underlined that the experience and the engagement with the audience were not the same, but still, it was an interesting way to maintain relationships with the cinema community. Nevertheless, her cinema didn’t have the capacity to manage both the physical cinema and the VOD platform and as soon as the cinema reopened views dropped by 80%. Nevertheless, Kino Bize worked on maintaining the link with their audience during the second lockdown by transposing their bimonthly *Children’s morning* for schools to online workshops and lectures about specific topics and debates around movies. In conclusion, her own experience confirmed Javier Pachón’s idea: the VOD platform didn’t put her cinema in danger, it has even helped Kino Bize in being known across the country and was a mean to engage the audience even though the cinema was closed.



Andres Kauts gave a short talk on how to choose movies for the reopening and spending time in a lockdown cinema. He presented a short general overview on the consequences of the pandemic on Estonian cinemas: cinemas registered 50% loss in 2020, compared to 2019; two out of five cinemas in his city Tartu were actually closed. However, the lockdown allowed him to take care of adjustments that couldn’t have been done during a “normal” operating year. His hope was, that the cinema would be more efficient for the eagerly awaited reopening and would have developed programs with schools that could be successful. He initiated as well drive-in cinemas instead of reopening the indoor cinemas. This was a popular initiative in the beginning, and even successfully sold out, but drive-in cinemas have still some notable drawbacks. Indeed, despite the obvious success of the approach, Andres wanted to highlight the differences with indoor cinemas. For instance, subtitled screenings are not feasible, nor are documentary screenings quite welcome, it’s also more difficult to keep people’s attention during the movie, and there are still less interactions between spectators. Andres concluded by underlining the inevitable concerns, that exhibitors face when it comes to the selection of movies for the reopening: there will be more movies available than slots and exhibitors will be forced to choose which movies to screen.

After a short Q&A on the presentations, the participants were split into three groups, based on the favorite topics of discussion they had selected in the preliminary questionnaire.

Group 1, facilitated by **Andres Kauts** worked on developing strategies after long closure to bring back the audiences. **Ra Ragnar Novod** from Cinema Artis in Estonia explained that, after he reopened in June, spectators, who have been worried about the sanitary restrictions and safety measures, didn't come back immediately. Therefore, the group agreed on the importance of communicating with the audience: cinemas need to communicate clearly about their reopening and make sure that the audience feels safe and is willing to come as soon as the cinemas reopen. Efforts in communication and marketing are important to bring people back and feel comfortable in indoor cinemas, even though open-air screenings are tempting and maybe less restrictive. The group also concurred on the success of special programs, but highlighted as well the risks of losing the audiences' interest by organizing too many of them. The group finally discussed the difficulty to plan events ahead or even to deal with the risk of actually buying a new movie without being able to make it profitable. The already raised issue of having to refuse movies from distributors for the reopening remained open to discussion

Group 2 on finding allies with other exhibitors and/or other partners during closure and reopening, was facilitated by **Javier Pachón** from CineCiutat. The main objective for those who attended this workshop was to learn how to cooperate with customers and other actors and to make ideas rise from everyone's initiatives. **Elli Kalju** from Kino Sõprus, Tallinn, Estonia, explained how contact with schools and exchanges with teachers helped them going through this second closure period. Distant learning being already settled; it was not a problem to extend the existing partnership with the cinema. It was even easier since they did not need to create their own VOD platform; they simply build up a partnership with the telecom company that already had developed one. Javier, presented initiatives he implemented in his cinema, emphasized the success of special programs and showed how his team created direct or indirect promotion through its participants. His cinema initiated for example monthly events where guests or volunteers were invited to select a 2001 movie and present it. Another program, he introduced, relied on the relation between journalism – a very strong ally and support to the cinema industry - and the cinema itself. Javier Pachón also created an association in collaboration with over twenty other Spanish cinemas during the second lockdown, called PROMIO. The aim was to be represented in the ministry of culture to fight for cinemas' interests. This association now planned to create their own VOD platform. When marketing campaigns initiated by public institutions came up for discussion, two different point of views were debated. Javier Pachón underlined the lack of clear communication from the government's side despite initiatives to make people come back to the cinemas. However, **Mara Cebere** from Cinema Auseklis in Latvia was rather optimistic and confident in the way the government could use its visibility to help cinemas and to make a clear communication, as they did for other cultural institutions, like museums. To cope with this lack of public support, Javier Pachón invited exhibitors to organize strong communication campaigns through media, such as national TV or other large-scale media. He finally invited the participants to explore partnerships with their own audiences, even though Elli Kalju pointed out the difficulties and frustration audience engagement might imply and how challenging it might be to respond to their requests.

Group 3, facilitated by **Paula Bērziņa** from Kino Bize worked on how to keep up motivation, good spirit and creativity in a team. Since management is always delicate and especially these days, there were no real conclusions on that topic, but many advices and examples from exhibitors' experiences. It seemed very important to maintain the relations within the team by talking among colleagues about work, but also other topics, and to keep staff motivated by creating projects and gather them around common purposes. Another idea that came up was to create routine check-in calls to keep in touch with other team members and make sure everyone would feel involved in ongoing projects despite

the uncertain situation. A question that still remained unsolved is how to cope with anticipation and the absence of timing in these unpredictable days.

The wrap-up of this session, led by **Javier Pachón**, concluded this lab on a really positive note. He emphasized the importance of staying inspired and not leaving the lab frustrated. He emphasized that turning frustration into inspiration is key for these workshops. He reminded the lab participants that, despite closure, it is still possible to engage with the audience. He underlined how important it is to adapt to the current situation and encouraged each participant to have the audacity to try and test new things. He explained that maintaining the link with teams, communicating despite distance thanks to today's technologies and various platforms, whether it is for work or a chat with your colleagues, are primordial attitudes to keep things going. Last but not least, relationships between distributors and exhibitors should be maintained to collaborate and find solutions. Javier Pachón concluded this session by introducing the funding scheme "Collaborate to Innovate", that has been launched by Europa Cinemas on April 8th, 2020. Javier underlined that this initiative precisely would intend to make people work together to create and reinvent the cinema experience, because the pandemic has shown that cinema is definitely needed and essential.

Léa Nucciarelli

Lisa Püscher