



## Utopian Film Festivals: Space, Content and Business Matters in Early Online Film Festivals

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If one is to Google the term “online film festival” a number of websites and organizations that promote themselves as online film festivals will appear. Closer inspection, however, reveals that they vary wildly in their goals, setup, and presence, indicating that the format of an online film festival is far from uniform and well-established. I would argue that one reason for this is that the term ‘online film festival’ in itself is oxymoronic, because a ‘festival’ implies the presence of a geographically grounded site where people come together to collectively experience the events the festival in question has to offer, while the word “online” marks the absence of a physical site. This ontological upset about the object in combination with its limited impact within the film festival network (De Valck 2007) as a whole are the main reasons the online film festival has never been taken up as a serious object of study. This paper will be a first attempt to systematically analyze the implications of locating a film festival online and simultaneously present the historical development of this phenomenon.

While this definition can be contested, for the sake of this paper I will define an online film festival as an online platform that presents itself as an online film festival, exhibits films online, and includes elements, in whatever form, that are also present in regular film festivals (e.g. a limited time-span or handing out awards). By now, such platforms have been around for over a decade and since then have functioned as distribution platforms for films that have not been able to attain mainstream circulation. As they are the result of translating offline into online practices, technological progress, and optimism about the potential of the internet in the late 1990s, they are perfectly suitable objects of research for media studies, and more specifically the emerging field of film festival studies. They can serve as a starting point to think about the advantages and disadvantages the online realm has to offer, how it is connected with the offline world, the way it has influenced the film festival landscape’s traditional

distribution mechanisms, and how the internet may or may not transform viewing habits and audience experiences. In this essay I will outline the emergence of the first online film festivals in light of these issues. Using the FIFI Festival, Sync Online Film Festival and the SeNeF Festival as main sources for investigation<sup>1</sup>, I will show how the issues of virtual location, content, and business matters have been the most significant distinguishing factors for online film festivals. I will end by relating these issues to a more contemporary case (My French Film Festival) in order to speculate about how these factors have changed over time.

### **Virtual space**

In her dissertation about webfilm, Simone Kurtzke (2007) explains that the web was initially completely text-based. In 1993, when the Mosaic browser was launched, multimedia started to appear on the web. In 1998, when software and bandwidth restrictions became less of an issue, websites such as iFilm and AtomFilm emerged as platforms for webfilm exhibition (I will come back to the issue of webfilm later), meaning that moving images could be found more frequently on the internet. From here it is a small step to the appearance of platforms that could brand themselves as online film festivals. I contend, however, that new inventions such as the online film festival are never only the result of technological progress, but depend on an interplay between technology, on the one hand, and social, cultural, and historical circumstances, on the other.

In order to resolve the confusion around the paradoxical term online film festival that I referred to above, it seems sensible to look at debates about the concept of “virtual geography”. Rather than opposing the virtual and geography, the term suggests that ‘computer mediated technologies generate an entirely new dimension to geography’ (Batty 1997: 339): virtual geography. This idea can have a wide range of implications,<sup>2</sup> but as the subject of this article is online film festivals, I believe it is

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there were surely a wide variety of other online film festivals to be found in the same period, but information and written accounts about other early online film festivals is very scarce.

<sup>2</sup> Stephan Graham, for example, regards digital surveillance technologies in light of their increasing control over urban life (Graham 1999), while Jennifer S. Light advocates for the opportunities the virtual has to offer for activism in urban life (Light 1999).

important to look at the way in which these virtual geographies are inhabited by people.

In Tom Boellstorff's book, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), we find a very detailed history (or rather, multiple histories) of the concept of the virtual which shows that the history of the virtual is not strictly bound to the internet. He argues that the idea of a space distinct from the real world was already present in Plato's allegory of the cave and that the invention of the printing press and the stereoscope contributed to an intensification of ideas of virtual worlds. Digital technologies such as video games and virtual reality made this distinction even wider. Important for the scope of this research, however, is that Boellstorff acknowledges that early communication systems on the internet such as IRCs (Internet Relay Chat) and BBSs (Bulletin Board System) are virtual worlds too, "albeit primarily asynchronic" since we do not inhabit these places at the same time (50). Among the many BBSs, the best-known example is The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), an online community founded in 1985 and still active to this day. Howard Rheingold has written an extensive study called *The Virtual Community* (1994) about life within The WELL. In this book, Rheingold defines virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (5). Thus, in a way they are alternatives to a public sphere, a place where everyone can have their say and create meaningful connections with others that have an internet connection too. Ultimately, Rheingold is not unequivocally positive about the possibilities of virtual communities, but he nevertheless points out the importance of scrutinizing such new technologies in order to build stronger, more humane communities.

An insightful first-hand example of community formation within BBSs is poet and essayist John Perry Barlow's account of his experience in THE WELL (Barlow 1996). Initially he felt that he had "found the new locale of human community." He recounts how after being part of the community for a while, his enthusiasm waned and he began to feel that the disembodied experiences on the web lacked the essential emotional and physical aspects that are experienced in real life. However, when someone close to him died he found solace in the online community after receiving

over a megabyte of emails with heartfelt condolences and messages so personal that they most likely could not have been uttered offline.

This personal account supports sociologist Barry Wellman's general claim that in the mid-1990s, "the internet was seen as a bright light, shining above everyday concerns. It was a technological marvel, thought to be bringing a new Enlightenment to transform the world" (2004: 124). The internet transformed personal and institutional forms of communication by transposing traditional forms of communication to the digital realm. With the internet as communication tool, everyone was supposedly able to connect to everyone else without boundaries of time and space. The internet was perceived as utopian, with egalitarian qualities and a globe-spanning reach. Richard Rogers, who describes himself as a "web etymologist", talks about how different visualizations of the internet in different times show how understandings of the web change throughout its history (2010: 90). He claims that in the early days of the World Wide Web, it was envisioned as a cyberspace, a cosmos that was completely unrelated to geographical location (again, a virtual geography) that was connected through hyperlinks. This implies the World Wide Web's disconnect of restrictions of time and place, emphasizing the globe-spanning quality of the internet: everyone could connect to everyone.

After these observations, the question that imposes itself in the context of this article is: what are the implications of such an idea about the virtual for online film festivals? If the virtual is perceived as a space that can create unprecedented connections and communities around shared interest, and the importance of film festivals lies largely in the collective immersion and physical gathering that is created during these events (De Valck 2010: 5), it is tempting to argue that online film festivals could and should harvest cyberspace's capacity to create online communities of cinephiles. However, looking at the websites of the early online film festivals and the texts that are written about them, there is no indication to assume that such communities were indeed formed around online film festivals.<sup>3</sup> Watching the programmed film was the only

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<sup>3</sup> Of all of the websites for online film festivals I have visited, only one, The Haydenfilms Film Festival, included crew, production and resource databases. Filmmakers, investors, actors and other industry professionals were able to meet up and discuss future projects on the site. See: <http://www.haydenfilms.com/Connections> (last visited March 2014). As this space

action in which an audience member could partake. Perhaps the general optimism about the internet led to the belief that its virtual location would automatically form such connections. However, as José van Dijck points out in *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), creating connections in an online environment is not an inherent quality of the web's technological architecture, but informed by "automated technologies that direct human sociality" (13). What this means practically is that the way platforms are structured directs community experiences. As Van Dijck puts it, "sociality is not simply 'rendered technological' by moving to an online space; rather, coded structures are profoundly altering the nature of our connections, creations, and interactions" (20). It is the "coded structures," or in other words, the way that websites are built and structured technologically and on an interface level, that have the potential to influence our experience of an online community. If the community building aspect is not catered for, it will not form automatically.

Besides the idea of community formation, there are other implications of moving the film festival location to the virtual realm. Because an internet connection makes it possible to disperse images all over the globe at a pace that far exceeds analogue transport, the French FIFI festival,<sup>4</sup> for example, primarily utilized its online locale by exhibiting a broad, international program. The FIFI Festival's 2002 website brags that nine hundred entries were submitted in four years from over twenty countries and nearly all continents. Without having to make qualitative comparisons with offline film festivals it should be clear that this is not necessarily a new practice, since film festivals have always shown an international selection of films. However, not only is this newness questionable, it can even be argued that this emphasis on international releases is problematic in an online environment. The lack of contextualization, which we find in regular film festivals by means of program guides and its cinephile atmosphere in general, can make it more problematic to interpret a certain film that relies heavily on specific, idiosyncratic characteristics. In other words, if there is no contextualization for the films, as I have found is the case on the old FIFI websites, the program will likely feel random and incoherent.

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was designed solely for industry participants, this means that for audiences there was still no place to form a community.

<sup>4</sup> The festival was founded in 1998 and in existence until 2003 (Kurtzke 2007: 185).

Film festivals usually have a different time span, or operational cycle, than online film festivals. For traditional film festivals, a limited time span can increase the exclusivity and prestige of the event. In an online environment with small scale festivals, prestige is less of an issue. Additionally, the difference between organizing an online event that lasts two weeks or two months is negligible compared to a regular film festival, as the logistical costs for keeping the online festival running are low. It is the creation of the website that costs the most money; keeping it online is not expensive. Therefore, online film festivals can benefit from extending the activities for weeks, renewing them every month, or even extending them indefinitely, as was the case with The Sync Online Film Festival. Hence, in most cases they do not follow the same structure as regular festivals.

Due to odd operational cycles and the general uncertainty about what an online film festival is, mixed responses have followed. In 1998, a reviewer in *DETAILS* magazine wrote of the Sync Festival, “the promise that ‘this festival never ends’ could be taken as either a threat or a hopeful sign” (quote found on Sync Festival website). The author of *The Film Festival Guide for Dummies* (2001), Chris Gore, remarks that this divergent operational cycle of early online film festivals combined with their affiliation with daily content providers, gave the festivals the appearance of scammers that trick filmmakers into providing free content. Gore argues that despite the fact that these festivals position themselves as legitimate events, they cannot be called real film festivals. Such a conclusion is a matter of how one defines an online film festival, but the unusual temporal dimensions of the online film festival indeed increases the reluctance filmmakers have over submitting their films.<sup>5</sup>

In a 2008 article, media scholar Marijke de Valck pointed out the importance of the physical space of a film festival for three seasons. First, “events taking place in space and time are more capable of creating a festive atmosphere” because of the prestige that comes from the locations (21). Second, festivals need rituals and ceremonies in order to attract media attention. Finally, it is important that people can meet face-to-face at festivals. According to her, all of these factors create an

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<sup>5</sup> I have also experienced this recently in conversation with a Danish filmmaker who was approached by an online film festival to submit his film, but felt unsure whether he could trust the website and whether he would benefit from submitting his film.

immersive and exclusive sociocultural experience that cannot be achieved online. It is for this reason that she points out two online film festivals—the American Media That Matters Film Festival and the Japanese CON-CAN Movie Festival—that use real-life events in order to attract media attention and generate some sort of prestige for the festival. CON-CAN arranges a festival award ceremony in Tokyo, whereas Media That Matters hosts a festive event in New York that functions as kick-off for the festival. It is these events that attract attention and the subsequent visitors.

Looking at the South Korean Seoul Net Festival (SeNeF),<sup>6</sup> we see that a similar strategy had been employed to take advantage of its location in cyberspace. In this case the distinction between online and offline was not as clear-cut as with the FIFI festival, for example. SeNeF consisted of a virtual component, but simultaneously had an offline counterpart called the Seoul Film Festival. This combination of an online and offline event changes the radical gesture of creating an online only event and implicitly indicates that an online event in itself will not be a feasible operation. Instead, SeNeF's move shows that the online and offline symbiotically support each other. On the one hand, the offline event supports the online component in the sense that it provides credibility for the online event. It shows that there is a trustworthy organization behind the events, therefore reducing the reluctance of filmmakers to release their films online, and audiences know that because there is an offline event it can be expected that the quality of the programme is at least decent. On the other hand, the online event helps the offline event in that it provides an alternative exhibition space that is, potentially, able to reach worldwide audiences which in the case of SeNeF was encouraged by making the online screenings free for every visitor. When De Valck therefore prompts the question whether online festivals depend on real-time events (2008: 21), I would argue that they do, but add that at the same time real-time events also benefit from online events.

In light of these observations, the common assertion during the establishment of online film festivals that online screenings will make offline screenings obsolete

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<sup>6</sup> This festival ran annually from 15 to 20 August from 2000 until approximately 2008. Finding exact dates about this festival is rather difficult, as documentation seems to be sparse, but this link indicates that the event has taken place in 2008: [http://www.filmfestivals.com/festival/seoul\\_film\\_festival\\_senef](http://www.filmfestivals.com/festival/seoul_film_festival_senef) (last visited March 2014).

seems nonsensical. Reporter Kim Mi-Hui, for example, asked in relation to the SeNeF festival: “With the market for online movies only expected to grow, the question is, is there any danger that Friday-night trips to the local theatre may one day be a thing of the past?” (2000). Considering that online movies reside in the virtual realm, a realm that can be accessed from the comfort of our home, this seems like a reasonable fear. However, judging from the persistent success of movie theatre attendance, for which the immersive experience it offers is the most feasible explanation (Casetti 2011), it can be argued that attending the local movie theatre is still worth the travel (Casetti 2011). SeNeF organizer Kim therefore shrugged off Kim Mi-Hui’s question by replying that, “we realize that computers can never completely replace theatres. It’s best to think of this as just an alternative movie-making and movie-watching experience” (2000).

### **Webfilm**

If moving to the virtual realm for connectivity reasons is not convincing enough to move the film festival format online, other reasons must be found. In the following paragraphs I will argue that the emergence of film on the internet and its supplementary genre (or medium) of webfilm provided a major reason for the establishment of online film festivals.

In *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007), where David Rodowick examines the implications of digitization for film as a medium and moving image culture in general, he argues that “it is difficult to envision what kinds of aesthetic experiences computational processes will innovate once they have unleashed themselves from the cinematic metaphor and begin to explore their autonomous creative powers, if indeed they eventually do so” (Rodowick 97-8). In other words, Rodowick questions whether digitally captured or digitally generated images, as opposed to analogue film, will be able to form a creative language that is distinct from the cinematic form. In order to address this issue Haidee Wasson (2007) argues that it is important to regard the distinct qualities of film on the internet. For her, integrating the material network of cinema is crucial for sharpening every discussion within media and film studies. Her argument is that materiality, and more specifically screens, have an impact on our perception of the images, aesthetic qualities and cinematic practices in general.



Consider for example how 16mm and 8mm changed the portability and marketability of film. Because of their different material qualities, these films could be sent to places outside the movie theatre, therefore allowing them to be seen on different and a wider variety of screens and finally allowing them to be adopted by a number of institutions that are not necessarily perceived as cinematic (e.g. home-screenings, classrooms, etc.) (77-78). Her discussion about QuickTime, or webfilm more generally, follows the same kind of logic, but rather than portability it is the low quality and dependence on factors such as bandwidth, server speed and other traffic on the web, that determine their functioning. QuickTime movies inherently announce variation and unpredictability: “Streaming cinema offers moving images that are themselves constantly changing because of the fitful networks of which they are part and on which they wholly depend” (81). For this reason, they subvert the traditional realist conventions of cinema and it also means that they can be regarded as “an emergent configuration of cinematic institutions which includes websites, but also browsers and servers that offer distinct rearticulations of cinema” (82). They are an expansion of our traditional notion of what cinema is and includes the many different options that digital tools and the internet allow cinema to be.

However, Simone Kurtzke, also writing in 2007, argues that

“[w]ebfilms as a unique and discrete new form of media, only existed for a short period. The concept of webfilm as a revolution in filmmaking was largely discursively constructed. Claims about its newness were mostly influenced by the discourse of the new that permeated early new media discourse. The ‘revolutionary potential’ of webfilms for alternative, non-hierarchical filmmaking was greatly limited by prescriptions of powerful technological, and later, economical agents” (285).

I will not go into detail about the agents that hindered the revolutionary potential of webfilm, but instead it is important to note that the discursive construction of this revolution in filmmaking coincided with the establishment of online film festivals. The language used by the early online film festivals reveals this idea of the newness of webfilm. The French FIFI festival for example explicitly aimed to provide a platform for internet film, rather than taking regular film to the online realm. The organization defines internet film as “all visual and scripted work that has a URL address and that makes use of technology in its creation, distribution, and vision” (FIFI 2000, Kurtzke’s translation 2007). The SeNeF festival stated that its focus was on providing a

platform for digital filmmaking, because the organization believed that digital filmmaking would herald an entirely new type of film aesthetics. Park An, the chief programmer of SeNeF 2002, claimed in *The Korea Herald* that “the goal of the film festival is to discover the possibility of a new image through an imagination stimulated by a new medium” (Jin 2002). The Sync Online Film Festival started in 1998 as a side-project of The Sync, an online broadcasting company. Their 1998 website presents The Sync’s purpose as “creat[ing] compelling, interactive content that is specifically tailored for an Internet audience.” The site showcased webfilm which was, “specifically tailored for the ‘Net Generation,’ the highly-online 16-34 demographic.” The website states that, “this is not television recycled, but the beginning of a *totally new medium*, aimed at the needs and expectations of the *Net Generation audience*” (my italics). In short, the original impetus for establishing online film festivals therefore seems to have been the possibility of offering an online exhibition and distribution platform for film that was specifically made for the internet. If materiality, as Wasson highlights, is important in the formation of new cinematic practices, it is only logical that these new, digital, low-quality and easily-distributed moving images are also exhibited on a platform that caters to such characteristics. This place was obviously the internet. And if regular films could have regular festivals, why couldn’t online film have an online film festival?

However, as Kurtzke’s quote indicates and as the example in the following section will show, this idea of the revolutionary potential of webfilm was primarily a discursive construction rather than based in reality, resulting in a dismissal of this idea around 2005.

### **Business**

Film festivals can and should be perceived as a hub for cinephile audiences and as an exhibition and distribution platform for a specific type of film, but the most important (often unacknowledged) quality of a film festival is its propensity to foster business interactions between movie producers, directors, actors, local businesses, sponsors, and more. In this section I will therefore argue that for online film festivals too a business climate has played an important role in their development.

In the late 1990s, the internet was perceived as a space where new businesses would flourish, bringing an end to old-fashioned business models (Hewson 2001). Take, for example, *Wired's* article from 1997, "The Long Boom: A History of the Future 1980-2020", wherein technological evangelists Peter Schwartz and Peter Leydon make some daring prospects about the future. They provokingly open their article with the words, "we're facing 25 years of prosperity, freedom, and a better environment for the whole world. You got a problem with that?" They argued that after the bad "meme" (in other words, a contagious idea) of the 1980s that America was in decline and the slightly more positive "meme" of the 1990s that America would get its act together, a new and radically optimistic meme was spreading that "we are watching the beginnings of a global economic boom on a scale never experienced before. We have entered a period of sustained growth that could eventually double the world's economy every dozen years and bring increasing prosperity for—quite literally—billions of people on the planet" (Schwartz and Leyden 1997). This economic boom was explained by "two metatrends": fundamental technological change and a new ethos of openness. The new ethos refers to a global free market economy (neo-liberalism, if you like), and fundamental technological change refers to new technologies such as the personal computer and telecommunications (most notably the internet).<sup>7</sup> Schwartz and Leydon argued that in 1995, after the explosive growth of the Internet, a major "economic discontinuity" occurred and in its aftermath stimulated growth of hardware and infrastructure companies. The result put an entire new media industry on the market and changed the face of online commerce. As they so convincingly proclaimed: "the networked economy is born." What they did not predict, however, was that in March of 2000, this radical optimism about the future of internet ventures changed dramatically with what is now generally referred to as the dotcom crash (or the dotcom bubble).

In his book *Dot.Con* (2002), journalist John Cassidy gives an overview of how speculative bubbles such as the dotcom crash occur. He argues that they have happened frequently throughout history and says that there are four stages in every instance. The first stage is what he calls "displacement" and starts when

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<sup>7</sup> Other technological inventions that would bring equal prosperity are biotechnology, nanotechnology and alternative energy. They are not of relevance for this essay and I will therefore not discuss these inventions in detail.

expectations about the future start to shift as a result of government policies or technological inventions (in this case the internet). A few investors will invest in this new development and return with high profits. The second stage, called “boom,” will start when other people feel silly that they did not seize the first opportunity to make money. They will enter the market as well, which drives the prices up even more. Then boom turns into “euphoria.” Everything that used to be regarded as common sense will be dismissed and prices lose connection with reality. In the case of the dotcom crisis, this was caused by shares of dotcom businesses that rapidly gained in price, large scale speculation, and the eager investment of capital from banks in dotcom businesses. It is at this point that “swindlers and catchpenny schemes flourish.” The inevitable fourth stage is then “the burst” of the bubble. Sometimes there is a contributing event and sometimes it is just the result of the previous stages that cause this break, but in any case, the prices will plummet and companies will go bankrupt (Cassidy 2002: 4-5).

The dotcom crash reached its climax in 2000 and 2001 which resulted in a massive amount of bankruptcies in dotcom businesses. In July 2002, Webmergers, a research body tracing developments in the dotcom world, reported a total of 862 bankruptcies since January 2000. It was clear that the euphoria surrounding internet business and e-commerce as a way to completely alter traditional business had to be quieted down. As journalist David Hewson wrote in the *Sunday Times* of 14 January 2001: “it was time to get real,” which meant that after “a brief period of insanity” where “previously sober business individuals (..) came to believe that a couple of centuries of standard commercial practice had been outdated virtually overnight by the arrival of silicon and cable,” it was time to return to business as it was previously done.

This return to traditional business practices did not mean that the internet was simply a short-lived craze that would be gone after the dotcom crisis. The key was to create sustainable businesses that would take essential elements such as profit, return on investment, revenue, and a business plan into consideration again. One lesson that the dotcom crash years taught entrepreneurs was that simply taking existing businesses to the online realm usually did not work. When Hewson discusses B2C (business-to-consumer) companies, he notes that “the idea that they would one day replace the way individuals buy goods and services has now virtually disappeared.

Today B2C sites are seen as *supplementary* sales channels that will live alongside supermarkets, direct mail and high street stores, and often work in tandem with them” (*Sunday Times* 2001; emphasis added). Businesses needed to take a step back and develop web services in a more modest fashion, in support of regular businesses.<sup>8</sup>

The same idea of supplementing, rather than “getting rich quick,” or in the case of film festivals finding audiences quickly, can be found in the setup of online film festivals that sprung up after the dotcom bubble. The SeNeF film festival, for example, was not just an online film festival, but was, as mentioned above, a way to complement the offline festival by providing a new platform that different people could engage with. With this, it was not the intention to reach entirely new audiences, but simply enlarge the already existing audience. The same could be said of The Sync Online Film Festival, which was primarily a way to provide an alternative viewing platform for their medium: webfilm. By adopting the concept of the film festival, the online film festival format created new opportunities to promote, distribute, and exhibit films on the internet.

There are many other examples that could come to mind, but the one I would like to highlight is that of the Sundance Online Film festival, which is interesting for a number of reasons. First, by adopting an online counterpart in 2001 Sundance is considered one of the first established film festivals to adopt the internet to enhance its services. Second, because it was already a well-established brand by that time, it has likely influenced other film festivals. Third, it has made some interesting changes over the years which indicate more general trends concerning the development of online film festivals. In its first phase, the creation of an online counterpart for the Sundance Film Festival was presented as a vehicle to promote webfilm, meaning that its programming would be unrelated to Sundance’s regular programming. As co-director Geoffrey Gilmore explained in 2000: “the Sundance Institute has always been interested in exploring innovative work, and the dynamic material currently being generated for the

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<sup>8</sup> Of course this was far from the only way the internet was used after the dotcom crisis, but it is an important point for my further analysis. Hewson himself names five principles that are crucial for e-businesses to succeed: strategy, people, process, technology and partners. The conciseness of these terms points to the fact that he felt that businesses needed to return to the basics in order to succeed. At the same time, there were still a handful of companies that *were* able to change the face of e-commerce. Think for example of Amazon’s success in providing services for online shopping.

Web is something that we are excited to present” (Bartlett 2000). Festival programmer Groth expressed the same sensibility by stating: “we tried to make it clear in the application that we were looking for films that were created with the aesthetics and style to be seen on the Web” (Donahue 2001). However, it turned out that the popularity of webfilm started to wane over time and did not prove to be the revolutionary medium people had hoped for. Therefore, the attitude towards the online film festival also changed quite drastically from approximately 2005 onwards.<sup>9</sup> In its second phase, rather than being a distinct festival with its own content, Sundance’s online film festival became a supplementary exhibition platform for their regular (mainly short) film programme. Director of programming at the time, John Cooper, confirms this disappointedly by saying: “There weren’t that many voices in web films that were right for us” (Silverman 2005). This shift was also shown by the change in operational cycle which changed from running next to the regular film festival to starting months before the festival in order to end at the same time. In 2010, perhaps Sundance’s third phase, the festival even gave up hosting this alternative exhibition platform on their own website altogether and outsourced this task to YouTube.<sup>10</sup> Paralleling Hewson’s earlier mentioned observations about businesses on the internet, this example shows clearly that the idea of the internet as radically reinventing business models turned out to be problematic. Despite the opportunities that going online can offer film festivals, this example shows that early online film festivals cannot be considered as having the same status as a regular film festival. They were a means to an end, rather than an end in itself—supplementary to the regular business rather than an organization’s main activity.

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<sup>9</sup> Blogger Jason Silverman’s statement about the festival sums up this attitude when he exclaims: “The web film is dead! Long live films on the web!”

<sup>10</sup> This points out another recent development. The curated video-on-demand website MUBI is now hosting different channels for film festivals such as the Berlinale, Karlovy Vary, Venice and many others therefore providing an online afterlife to films that have played on these festivals. Platforms like MUBI, but also film festivals that host films on YouTube, extend the question of what still constitutes an online film festival. Keeping in mind the definition I proposed in the introduction of this article, these practices cannot be considered online film festivals, but they obviously hold close relations to them.

## Contemporary online film festivals

Let us now take a leap forward in time to address the current state of affairs concerning online film festivals. Are the aspects that I addressed in the previous sections still relevant for online film festivals nowadays or have they transformed in any way? In order to get a grasp on this question I will take a look at one particular online film festival that has been fairly successful over the past few years, My French Film Festival (MFFF).

Looking at how MFFF deals with the question of its virtual location, it is interesting to note that this online film festival is aware of the fact that in spite of its existence on the internet, connections with the offline world are an important aspect of the festival. The festival focuses specifically on France. It is not only the title that indicates the Frenchness of the platform, but every aspect of the festival invokes a certain Frenchness: the baguette on the 2013 festival poster, the macaroon on the 2014 poster (food seems to be a recurring theme), certain famous French directors as jury members, a prize which allows winning films to be played in AirFrance planes for six months, and the countless ads of French companies that you can find on the website. The relation with place in the case of MFFF is thus primarily an identity marker. In line with more recent debates within the field of virtual geography (Kinsley 2013), the virtual location is no longer seen as a place distinct from the real world, and therefore a utopian promise for greater things. Instead, the two are always intertwined.

Because it is now a lot easier to show feature length films online than it was 15 years ago, primarily due to the increased quality of broadband connections and the fact that we are more used to watching films on our computer, MFFF is able to showcase ten feature length films in their competition. It can no longer be claimed that the content of the festival's programme is specifically tailored for the internet. Although there are surely some people who create films specifically for the internet, the genre of webfilm (or medium, if you will) is no longer prominently present on the internet and thus the direct link between online film festivals and showcasing webfilm has disappeared too. This does not mean, however, that online film festivals or other online spaces where films are programmed do not follow some sort of overall logic. I would argue that it is no longer the type of film that is of great interest, but it is a specific identity marker,

consistency in content matter or a particular aim that holds an online programme together. For MFFF it is the fact that a film has to be French in order to qualify for programming, while SikhNet, The Tricycle and Culture Unplugged focus on Sikh youth culture, Buddhism and deep spiritual and cultural engagement respectively.<sup>11</sup> The Viewster Online Film Festival, on the other hand does not have a specific genre or topic that it emphasizes, as their aim is to promote films that “are not always as famous as they should be”, which is another strategy to create coherence.<sup>12</sup>

The most important observation, however, is that MFFF is the result of a collaboration between UniFrance, a government-sponsored organization of film professionals that aims to promote French film worldwide, and AlloCine, France’s biggest online film directory, an indication that this festival is funded, supported and directed by these organizations. In a *Variety* article, UniFrance director Regine Hatchando points out that there are three trends that prompted the creation of this online festival: “the decline of arthouse cinemas in the world, the contraction of overseas markets for titles outside France’s top 10 films, and the aging of audiences [that visit] French arthouse films” (*Variety* 2011). The crux of his argument is that one of the main goals of MFFF is to screen lesser-known French films abroad in a different, more cost effective format. This shows that immediately upon creation, the festival was in essence a supplementary activity for UniFrance, because it was a perfect platform to promote and distribute, non-theatrically, the French films that were difficult to release through theatrical distribution. The additional value of going online is that there is an increased possibility that one will attract a younger audience too. The amount of visitors of the website are an indication of the success of this method to increase visibility abroad and non-theatrically.<sup>13</sup> This does mean, however, that despite its presentation as an

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<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.sikhnet.com/filmfestival/>, <http://www.tricycle.com/buddhafest> and <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/> (all last visited in March 2014).

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.filmfestivallife.com/Viewster-Online-Film-Fest> (last visited on 22 October 2014).

<sup>13</sup> The first edition in 2011 generated around 40 000 views, but a year later approximately 1.1 million films were watched during the festival. This amount dropped to 750 000 a year later (Screen International 2013), but the most recent 2014 edition attracted a stunning 4 million views. The reason for this incredible amount of visitors lies in the fact that MFFF has found partners in different VOD platforms from all over the world. Most of the people that watch the films playing in the festival do so through VOD platforms. Because of this, the fees for watching a film are not equally distributed throughout the world. Chinese visitors, for instance, do not have to pay to watch the films and therefore make up the biggest part of the audience segment.



autonomous organization, this online film festival is still primarily a means to an end, rather than an end in itself.

## Conclusion

In summary, this article has been an attempt to indicate what the implications are of moving a film festival to the internet, while also presenting a historical overview of some of these online film festivals. Three distinct aspects have been central for the arguments made: the festival's virtual location, the content of the festival and the business motives behind the festival.

The idea that a virtual location, the "online" part of the online film festival, was able to create unprecedented connections among audiences turned out to be utopian and unrealistic. Therefore, community building was not the main incentive for creating online film festivals.<sup>14</sup> While the virtual location increased the ease of composing an international programme, the unusual operational cycle of online film festivals met with quite some resistance. Instead, the idea that online film festivals, as well as other online exhibition platforms, were best suited to show webfilm and other digitally produced content turned out to be the biggest motivation for creating online film festivals. However, as much as providing a platform for webfilm exhibition was usually the explicitly stated motivation for the establishment of the online film festival, I contend that the online film festival as a supplementary distribution or promotion platform to a specific business' core activities was even more important for the establishment of early online film festival.

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<sup>14</sup> Whereas MFFF does not indicate this clearly, there are other contemporary examples such as the Viewster Online Film Fest that puts community creation in a more central place, which is indicated by the description of the festival: "You—along with our community of viewers—will watch, discuss, share and vote for your favorite entries. At the end of the festival period, a short list will be created of at least the top-ten entries. It's your participation that can help these entries make it to the final round—and make some creators very happy." Of course, the word "community" in this description still does not guarantee interaction between different members of the audience. See: <http://festival.viewster.com/> (last visited: 13 October 2014).

In the last section I related the results I obtained for the early online film festivals to an example of a seemingly successful contemporary online film festival (MFFF).<sup>15</sup> In doing so I noticed that the idea of the online film festival as a supplementary practice has become even more dominant although, just as with the earlier examples, it is not explicitly stated as such. However, through MFFF, Unifrance can promote the French films that do not find theatrical distribution globally to a younger, more internet-based audience, in a relatively cost-efficient manner. Besides that, the utopian promise of internet's virtual location, not bound to geographical restrictions, is long gone as is perfectly illustrated by MFFF's focus on their French identity. Although I am aware that one case study can only tentatively illustrate the more general issues that concern contemporary online film festivals, looking at other examples I have briefly mentioned I believe that the observations I sketched out are relevant to most contemporary online film festivals. Questions that still remain unexplored, however, concern the actual audience experiences, a more detailed account of their business models, and the impact online film festivals have within the network of regular film festivals. In order to address these questions it is important that researchers take up other case studies which will allow comparative research and eventually more cogent claims about online film festivals.

Finally, it should be noted that whereas the arguments presented in this article indicate that the online film festival is in essence an alternative exhibition platform for more established practices, other platforms on the internet have become dominant exhibition and distribution modalities for film (Tryon 2013). Think for example of Netflix's popularity or the incredible amount of traffic on Torrent websites. I hope therefore that this paper and further research on online film festivals will provide some useful insights to make sense of the social, aesthetic and economic implications of this fundamental transition in our film culture.

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<sup>15</sup> I say "seemingly", because I do not know whether the festival generates any profit. All I know is that it has been able to attract a lot of viewers, which is at least one condition for success.

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