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Streaming the festival: what is lost when cultural events go online

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ABSTRACT

Cultural events and collections, as curated assemblies of artists and artwork attended by live audiences, are recognised as a large and growing source of added value in contemporary accounts of ‘creative’, ‘enrichment’ and ‘experience’ economies. We analyse these, and empirical festival studies, to assess the impact on cultural production when the COVID-19 pandemic forces events to cancel or move online. Contrasting the relative optimism of ‘enrichment’ (Boltanski & Esquerre 2020) with pre-pandemic developments, we argue ‘festivalisation’ is best understood as a defensive reaction to mediated alternatives. These increasingly offer experientially comparable, lower-cost substitutes for the premium-priced immersive performance on which cultural workers have come to rely, for creative ideas, skills and career openings as well as income. Online channels weaken the eventisation defence and curatorial quests for ‘singularity’, while remote participation limits audiences’ size and mode of engagement, risking permanent damage to vital components of cultural production and valorisation.

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1. Introduction: live performances, the economy of enrichment and immersive events

Recent economic studies have detected a growing contribution of arts, heritage and other cultural attributes to the generation of value, in the form of ‘enrichment’ (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020) or ‘aestheticisation’ (Dagalp & Hartmann, 2021). This rise in consumers’ willingness to pay for exciting and
authentic ‘experience’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) potentially matches, and accommodates, the rising cost of cultural production and service delivery, relative to material goods (Baumol & Bowen, 2006). A premium on the ‘experience’ value of consumption is likely to be reinforced, rather than eroded, as artificial intelligence permits the automation of routinisable service taskshifting human providers’ value-adding capacity into areas reliant on ‘feeling’ or emotional intelligence (Rust & Huang, 2021).

But studies highlighting the growth of cultural and creative value-added have neglected the erosion of another boundary: between firsthand, direct experience of cultural performance and technologically mediated versions of such experience, delivered via transmissions and recordings of the original performance. This article argues that, while enrichment of products may become a source of economic growth and value-added, the process can seriously damage the cultural activities that do the enrichment. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 provided an international test of audiences’ appetite for mediated alternatives to venue-based, live cultural events that were halted by social distancing measures. We assess impact using accumulated film festival research, including survey analysis of the festival workforce, and early analysis of pandemic impacts as reported in specialist event-related media. To complement the systematic analysis of pre-pandemic conditions and trends, the information for 2020–2022 was gathered by an intensive process of keyword and database research extending to arts and media journals and news feeds.

Section 2 explains why events’ pre-pandemic expansion was largely a defensive move, by artists and venues economically squeezed between the rising costs of staging original performances and the falling price of increasingly high-quality alternatives. In Section 3 we show how digital technologies whose development and diffusion accelerated during the pandemic can, for different audience segments, replicate the ‘immersive’ experience of a live event or deliver an alternative, ‘emersive’ experience that transforms it through mediation. We argue that digital transmission, currently typified by streaming, intensifies the ascent of a consumer-focused ‘convenience’ logic over the previous ‘commitment’ logic (Hadida et al., 2021) which preserved a space for unmediated performer-audience interaction ahead of commodified distribution.

Identifying two crucial elements of venue-based festivals’ operation that disappear or get diminished in online event curations, Section 4 shows how immersive environments contribute to festival workers’ skilling, networking and career-building, irreproducible via online channels, and Section 5 assesses how live events add value via artistic curation and collection. Section 6 concludes that in order to survive, venue-based events will try to further amplify the immersive and participative experience of ‘being there’ at cultural events, which neither transmissions nor recordings can replicate. Countervailing this, we expect competing digital technology to further aesthetisise the
online experience, exploiting demographic shifts in media-format consumption already under way.

2. Theoretical perspectives: eventisation and curation as defences for the live-performance premium

The new twist in ‘enrichment’ arguments is that an aesthetic experiential element – drawing on contemporary artistry or past heritage, and evoking distinctive quality or authenticity – can induce customers to pay more for goods and services, without necessarily raising their production cost (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020, pp. 42–47). The resulting price premium does not arise from inherent scarcity, as with positional goods which cannot be, or lose value when, replicated (Hirsch, 1977, pp. 27–41). An enrichment economy thus escapes any inherent social limits to growth. Since cultural enrichment can be achieved through superior arrangement of materials, without using more refined or larger quantities (Zafarmand et al., 2003), it may also respect natural resource limitations and even reduce environmental footprints via voluntary material simplicity (Daoud, 2011).

Increased willingness to pay for direct experience of culture can also, in principle, compensate for the rising expense of delivery due to productivity limitations. If, as Baumol (2001) demonstrated, artists and others who personally perform a marketed service cannot do so in greater quantity without losing quality, the increasing cost of their performances (compared to manufacturers or impersonal services) can be passed on to audiences if these are willing to pay. Authentic originals must command a premium over mediated replications. The escalation of ticket prices for live culture and sport has been widely observed in practice (e.g. Graham & Radio 5live, 2018). Venue-based presentations of new work, before it becomes accessible via transmissions or recordings (Hadida et al., 2021), has achieved a sequential segmentation of audiences, some paying a premium for immersive first experience. Audiences appear to be divisible into those that are satisfied with a transmission or recording, and those that will (instead or also) pay more to be present at the moment of creation or unveiling.

Part of the premium is paid for being close to the creative action at the moment it first happens. Another part is justified by immersion in the company of like-minded enthusiasts. This has long been recognised by eventive public theatre screenings of new film releases, before their subsequent appearance on TV or other media (Kehoe & Mateer, 2015, pp. 100–102): being there for the first public sighting adds value even when cast members are absent having left their performance ‘in the can’. Asked ‘What have you most missed from the cancellation of music festivals in 2020?’, 32% of respondents to a UK survey (DCMS Committee, 2021) cited ‘the atmosphere’, and 27% ‘socialising with others and meeting new people’. These attributes, the hardest for any online or broadcast
alternative to re-create, proved twice as important as ‘Seeing your favourite artists’ (16%) or ‘Discovering new music’ (7%), which a mediated substitute might still permit. Meeting and socialising with others overtook ‘atmosphere’ as the most important attribute for frequent festival attenders, going to five or more per year (DCMS Committee, 2021: Annex 1). Online forms of socialising, necessarily distanced and (especially with large audiences) often reduced to typed or audio-only communication, are inevitably difficult to invest with the spontaneity and immediacy common to the face-to-face form.

Audiovisual artists have a further reason for putting more effort into live events, beyond the scale of audience that will pay a premium for them. Sales-prices of their recorded work, and associated royalties, have been steadily pushed down by the increasingly powerful companies that transmit and distribute recordings via offline channels or online platforms, drawing protests even from ‘superstars’ about the impossibility of making a living from digital distribution alone (Bosher, 2020; Ulvaeus, 2021). Within one generation, bestselling musicians have moved from being able to sell bonds against their expected future royalties in the 1990s (Espiner, 2016) to selling their back-catalogues for lump sums (Peplow, 2021) in case their income stream dries up altogether. Once acquired and digitised, back-catalogues (often in Boltanski and Esquerre’s ‘collection form’) compete openly with the latest releases, further constraining artists’ earnings from new work. This diminishing share of a declining sale-price for recordings and reprints has left a rising number of creative producers – writers, actors and visual artists as well as musicians – dependent on in-person appearances as performers or teachers to generate the income stream that sales of recordings alone can no longer provide. Musicians typically derive 70% of their income from live performances, mostly from summer festivals unless they can tour independently (DCMS Committee, 2021, pp. 19–20).

Under these competitive pressures, sustaining demand for live performance depends on keeping it distinct from transmissions and recordings. Artists have responded by ‘putting on more of a show’, steadily expanding the number, size and frequency of events that cluster live performers and live audiences, a trend identified as ‘festivalisation’ (Bennett et al., 2016). In cinema alone, an estimated 1,300 film festivals are run annually or biannually somewhere in the world and form a network of circulating movies (Vogel, 2023, forthcoming), making them an important informal yet much understudied component in media value creation (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2021, p. 161). Music festivals grew comparably fast, with 975 in a typical pre-pandemic year existing in the UK alone (Association of Independent Festivals 2021). Organisers’ intention is that audiences perceive events as a ‘superior’ product, worthy of taking a larger share of their income as this rises; or even a ‘Veblen product’ whose rising price adds to its appeal (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). New ticket pricing techniques
that gauge willingness-to-pay boost revenue from a given size of live audience, capturing what was previously ‘consumers’ surplus’ (Shaw, 2019). As long as the original performance remains a unique experience commanding a premium price, subsequent re-broadcasts or distributed recordings of the event serve to supplement the live performer’s income, not erode it. Enrichment thus may be found not just in distinguished goods such as luxuries, antiques and collectable art (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020) but in the experience of directly seeing or hearing a uniquely skilled performance.

Music, film, literary, theatrical and general cultural festivals have steadily risen in number, size and frequency, as have special events and exhibitions staged alongside cultural venues’ regular programmes and permanent exhibitions. To maximise the difference in experience between the original performance and any mediated versions, venues work to transform artists into more complete ‘performers’, and festival organisers to assemble artists and their work into more complex wholes that can only be appreciated via co-presence with them. The already comprehensive curatorial role becomes that of a ‘postmodern arranger’ (cf. Reckwitz, 2017, pp. 73–78), heightening audience experience through affective-aesthetic and spatial arrangements, assembling numerous live acts or previously scattered exhibits. Across cultural-creative fields, curatorial entrepreneurs have expanded from the more business-oriented role of the ‘impresario’ (Becker, 1982, pp. 119–122) to builders and managers of immersive environments which contrast, or skilfully integrate, recordings and transmissions as a live performance co-created by the attending publics. Outside the core arts, the event format has been embraced by creative industries for their value in stimulating innovation (Gross & Zilber, 2020; Lampel & Meyer, 2008).

Events heighten socio-cultural experience through offers of emotionally charged atmospheres that mediated versions struggle to imitate, and may even shrink. Augmented reality ‘enhancement’ of entertainment or educational experiences can negatively affect engagement and communication (Savela et al., 2020), and access to virtual channels distracts people’s attention from those who are co-present but excluded from those channels (Miller et al., 2019). The related shift from permanent art forms to more contingent art performances as part of a late-modern bourgeois renaissance (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 193) erodes the value or defies the possibility of recording, by ensuring that the performance or assemblage of work disperses and disappears immediately after the first delivery. Making the performance more eventful can match the rising price premium to a rising ‘experience premium’, based on the unmediated performance’s embrace as authentic and unique, and any second-hand replaying as second-best. Eventisation therefore appears as a largely defensive reaction to audiences’ increasing acceptance of mediated alternatives, with consequences for the cultural workforce.
The role of cultural events can be expressed clearly in enrichment-theoretical terms. Festivals circulate objects that conform to the ‘trend’ and ‘collection’ forms of valuation (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020, pp. 164–192, 221–239). While festivals eventised cinema, ‘musealisation’ (Reckwitz, 2017, pp. 193–195) provides a historically parallel enrichment strategy, strengthening valuation of cinematic art through collection-form valuation which recognises the glorious past of cinema as public screen art and safeguards diversity and discovery (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020, pp. 22–25). Ongoing attempts by cinema artists and festival directors to define cinema as a museum art, reflecting the pessimistic future of theatrical cinema and independent film (Bismuth et al., 2008), support the enrichment theory: musealisation of cinema secures continuity with curatorial power, intensifying the already existing dimension of the curating collector, as festival directors ‘programme’ so-called new waves of cinema and seek out ephemeral trends as well as classics.

3. Breaching the defence: digital disruption and pandemic acceleration

This expansion showed signs of reaching a limit, however, during the long phase of real income stagnation that followed the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (OECD, 2018). Festivalisation’s fragility was exposed by the closure of public venues during the pandemic. Since consumer demand is deflected away from most products whose relative price rises, live performers’ share of the market and of audience attention will diminish to the extent that audiences treat recordings as close-enough substitutes. Pandemic conditions have tested the extent to which audiences were prepared to pay more (in travel, ticket and time costs) for social immersion than to receive a mediated version that either replicates or distils the consumption experience in another place and time.

Forced to experiment with online alternatives to live gatherings, cultural (and other) businesses turned to ‘event technology’ to keep performers and audiences connected online (Rankine & Giberti, 2021). Festivals’ online migration has juxtaposed, and helped to assess the relative strengths of, two institutional logics and valorisation forms in the cultural economy (Hadida et al., 2021). The ‘commitment logic’, which balances audience preference against the economic needs of production and distribution channels, has been pitted against strategies pertaining to the ‘convenience logic’ that focuses on delivery according to place, time and form preferences – by-passing intermediate production and distribution stages when audiences don’t value these. Personal safety dovetails with convenience when an assembled audience raises risks of viral transmission or compels extra steps to prevent this. Although countries’ typical risk perceptions vary, it could be noted that among UK music
festival-goers polled in 2020 almost 40% of those who attended for ‘atmosphere’ were less likely to do so if required to show a negative Covid-19 test, whereas 30% deemed themselves more likely (DCMS Committee 2021: Annex 1).

Personally delivered services (such as teaching, surgery and social care) continue to rise in price relative to standardised-goods production as average incomes grow, and so are relatively more expensive in higher-income countries (Duarte & Restuccia, 2017; Glejser, 1965). This can be explained by the difficulty of raising the service performer’s productivity (hourly output per person) without letting quality drop. In contrast, the productivity of goods production is steadily increased by new equipment, automation and organisational advance. This tends to lower the price of manufactured goods relative to that of services necessitating the direct presence of the provider. By the same process, recordings and transmissions of cultural performances – which can be mass-produced or mass-communicated to large audiences without loss of quality – become cheaper over time while access to live appearances and performances becomes more expensive (Baumol & Bowen, 2006). With the increasingly effective remote replication of immersive experiences by digital technology (Tom Dieck & Han, 2021; Rankine & Giberti, 2021), mediated versions can start to compete with original performances by offering equivalent or different quality as well as lower price. Although – by definition – a mediation lacks the immediacy of the original, technological developments allow it to get closer to the immersivity of the venue-based experience, while adding refinements such as commentary, re-mastered sound or special effects. Mediated forms can save audiences time and cost, by editing-down a live performance and eliminating the need to travel to it. These developments have helped online media platforms, distributing first via downloads and then streaming, to capture market power from upstream generators of content, asserting the ‘convenience logic’ of instantly available recordings, privately consumed away from public venues (Hadida et al., 2021).

Curations assembled in a physical event space – ranging from the festival programme and gallery collection to the shopping mall, business conference and newspaper page – are examples of ‘novelty bundling’, achieving synergies from combining production while also facilitating consumption (Potts & Hartley, 2015, p. 270) and enhancing the consumption experience as a result of a distinctive contemporary cultural event format. Walt Disney’s eventive, communal adventure park (Chytry, 2012) was a prototype for contemporary immersive environments, pioneering standardised design elements observable in current festival curation. Contrasting these curated arrangements, digitalisation and online curation enable a consumer-driven unbundling, breaking presentations apart so that users can enjoy chosen chunks in their own space and time.
The digital-technological branch of cultural production now works to replicate and improve on the immersive experience, in traditional business-to-consumer arenas such as television, storytelling and cinema and new interactive alternatives, typified by video games (Joyce & Navarro-Remesal, 2020; Saker & Evans, 2021). Digital innovations enable an ever-closer approximation to, even augmentation of, ‘live’ experience, while maintaining the mass production and cost reduction associated with transmissions and recordings of the original. Growing online cultural consumption is profoundly changing the ways in which more permanent cultural forms – such as opera, literature and museums – are presented, and the way that audiences experience or ‘consume’ them. The boundary between online and offline presentations is easily blurred, as observable in venue-based arrangements that mix in digital formats, or generate social media ‘buzz’ that enhances the experience of those who attend (Burgess, 2020), especially when ‘contagion’ spreads to those who cannot (Houston et al., 2018). Accelerated by the pandemic, the development of the hybrid online-offline format propels events towards the consumer-focused convenience logic associated with platform entrepreneurs (Hadida et al., 2021).

When distributors of cultural products recognise their reliance on original performances for raw material, and the existence of an audience that pays extra for original performances, they are incentivised to support live culture even if not directly involved in it. Thus broadcasting and record companies were, early on, major sponsors of content production including live concerts (Beutler, 2017, pp. 5–9; Kehoe & Mateer, 2015), supporting independent companies to generate original material when not producing it in-house. But the achievement of this segmentation always depended on performers, producers and venue proprietors holding a degree of market power over downstream distributors, or on vertical integration that kept them all within one marketing strategy. In a disintegrated structure with power shifting downstream to online platforms, the commercial relationship between live and recorded performances shifts from complementary towards competitive, with mediated versions of a performance experience incentivised to capture audiences that might have attended it live.

Industry-driven shifts towards the convenience logic, substituting mass-produced replications for the original performance, are resisted by the segments of audience that still place premium value on the original performance, and wish to consume the immediate (live) as well as mediated versions. Once high-quality recordings and transmissions become available, criteria of cultural taste extend beyond the ‘quality’ of art – as in high, middle and low-brow or omnivore tastes (Warde et al., 2007) to the choice of format, which is driven by demographic factors as well as the socialised value of co-creativity and life-stylisation (Tofalvy & Barna, 2021). But to the extent that artists and event organisers succeed in preserving an income stream which recording
and distribution companies cannot capture, the strategy of competitive differentiation through eventisation further polarises the immediate and mediated experience formats.

Competition increases media channels’ incentive to disengage from production or sponsorship of original performances, and replace them with recordings or transmissions. Alongside their commissioning of new content production, digital platforms use new techniques to revive, repair and digitise old recordings, enabling the film, music and book publishing industries to revive and re-market past work that was previously in inaccessible formats or out-of-stock. The pre-pandemic digital economy was already a major challenge to unmediated, ‘analogue’ culture through the construction of communities around brands and experiential events around their products, alongside capture of intellectual property rights to recorded material (Elder-Vass, 2016, pp. 123–134). A shift to digitally created or transmitted experience is consistent with the encompassing logic of enrichment (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020, pp. 69–132), which is not specific to a medium, therefore favouring online and other mediated forms of replication if these deliver the desired cultural experience to a wider market at lower cost.

The pandemic and its prolonged global restrictions on event culture accelerated the development of online event technology (Rankine & Giberti, 2021). Organisers even of the earliest-reopened live events have come under pressure to retain a hybrid model that admits online audiences and tries to integrate their felt experiences with those present in the venue. Live streaming has become more widely accessible, easier to organise and significantly less costly for both producer and audience than traditional live broadcasting, taking online audiences closer to the experience of a live performance, while adding the replayability and digital enhancement previously associated only with recordings. Such online audiences are easier to track, passively via digital monitoring and actively through surveys, polls and chatrooms during and after events.

Replicating immersivity, to close the experiential gap, is one technological way to make mediations substitutable for original performance. The opposite, potentially just as effective substitution strategy is to create an ‘emersive’ experience, distanced from the original, that audiences prefer. This distancing (in time and space), achieved by mediation, enables post-production modification on the way to the audience perhaps regarding this as improvement. Enhancements that aestheticise the live event include editing-out of interruptions and grafting-on of translations, commentaries, special effects, subtitles and links to related assets for the audience’s convenience. Aestheticisation – the addition of value by building aesthetic experience into products or their context of consumption – can be achieved through either of these channels.
Some consumers find the aesthetic maximised in the experience of raw performance, others in the refined and perfected version that emerges from a studio (Dagalp & Hartmann, 2021).

4. Production-side vulnerability: festival organisation, networks and volunteer labour experience

The coronavirus pandemic was ‘wreak[ing] havoc across all countries’ (Cineuropa, 2021) within weeks of its outbreak. Most were to continue experiencing intermittent lockdowns, travel restrictions and curbs on social gathering for over two years, as new variants rekindled media attention. These threatened the creative and cultural sectors whose social and economic contribution extends well beyond its 1.5% average employment given for the most advanced economies (OECD, 2020). The freelancers and micro businesses that account for much of this employment often struggle for profitability even in easier times (Banks, 2018).

Film festivals provide meeting spaces for the artists who devise or appear in film, industry people who commercialise their work, patrons who sponsor it and cinephile audiences. In addition to screenings, traditional (offline) events give significant opportunities and experiences to participants in the intervals between the scheduled presentations (Dickinson, 2015), and an opportunity structure for excitement, gossip and rumour to spread (Burgess, 2020). For entrepreneurs, festive event sites provide social networking space for business opportunities (Lampel, 2011). While the chance for face-to-face ‘backroom deals’ diminishes in the pandemic, the online channel conveniently enables social-capital seekers to attend many more.

The precarious income and employment patterns of temporary-cultural event workforce are uniquely recognised by the enrichment theory (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020, pp. 313–324) and supported by evidence recent film festival workforce surveys (Vogel, 2023, forthcoming). These illuminate the contribution of volunteers as transient ‘supply artists’ (Becker, 1982, p. 4) to cinema’s enrichment economy, sacrificing pay while audiences pay an experience premium for the aesthetic-social immersion.

Motivated by an attachment to the art form mixed with anticipation of non-financial benefits of experience and knowledge, volunteers are as essential to venue-based performance events as professional staff. Volunteers organise the appraisal and exhibition of cinema arts, supporting the organisational goal of a curated immersive environment. Their diverse roles in a temporary division of labour range from general-operations management to functional units such as screenings, guest services, industry services, press office, marketing and audience relations. Depending on the size of the curated event, festival work roles can be discrete or overlapping, fulfilled by professionally trained people or amateurs, often fans (Peaslee et al., 2014). Event production by a largely unpaid
and seasonal volunteer workforce is a form of commons-based peer production that long pre-dates new internet-enabled versions, such as open-source software (Rumpala, 2020; Benkler, 2006, pp. 59–75).

Work and occupational-career opportunities offered in non-profits, including event organisations, are linked to profit-making industries which generate high incomes for those at the top of the hierarchy (Rosen, 1981). Non-profit festivals in particular use ‘the for-profit technique of short-term contracting for artistic talent (which they can do because they operate in the summer, when other organizations are dark) to reduce fixed costs, minimize risk, and avoid unions and government regulation’ (DiMaggio, 2006, p. 438). The ubiquitous role of arts-non-profit events in providing opportunities for experiences reflects the rising cost of staging performances, and the need to keep costs to a minimum even when eventisation is securing scale economies and raising audiences’ willingness-to-pay. Popular conceptions continue to identify festival volunteers as charitable work, but voluntary-sector research increasingly shows the dual motivation of getting a work experience and ‘doing good’ (e.g. Vogel, 2023, forthcoming). In cinema, the festival is an opportunity structure for cultural workers (Author removed, 2021), providing an inside track into the industry and art worlds (Author removed, 2007). The first survey of 140 festivals (Lang et al., 2006), with final reporting on a diversity of events in the US, UK, Germany, France and Canada (81% of the total response and the largest cinema festival sectors) deserves to be highlighted as display of first systematic evidence for festivals volunteers, indicating 18 full-time and 81 part-time persons at the average event.

Festival workforce studies highlight the danger resulting from online migration of events in a field ‘ecosystem’ were multiple-job holding and career-building expectations/experiences are typical (Menger, 1999). The risk-spreading hypothesis (Menger, 1999; Throsby & Zednik, 2010) captures the pervasive behaviour of artists to spread economic risk by combining arts, non-arts, and arts-related jobs and projects in various ways and can be expanded to volunteer workforce in events. Volunteering is an essential and experiential exploration and entry mode, as further reported in film festival fieldwork for 14 European, Asian and American countries in 2005–2011 (Vogel, 2023, forthcoming). A study on risk-spreading identifies distinct individual orientations in the sample of 50 UK film festival workers (Author removed, 2007): directed towards a film career, less targeted at an arts career, or keeping the main career away from arts or cultural production, as well as more diffuse experimenting or drifting orientations. Fewer than 20% of interviewees were able to concentrate on strictly artistic occupational activity, the study confirming strategic risk-spreading in a subset of festival workers.

‘Getting an experience’ goes beyond searching for industry skills and tacit or formal knowledge of processes and structures. Venue-based festivals provide group socialisation and ethical enculturation, which are largely absent
from online alternatives. Work and consumption experiences are detached for those still able to participate online, who fade into the ‘digital labor force’ (Gandini, 2021). This shrinkage of festival volunteering opportunities poses new challenges for governments responsible for creatives’ future employment and labour-market socialisation, and educators needing internship opportunities for the ‘practical’ elements in their media students’ preparation. Online, most of the already invisible festival workforce becomes structurally obsolete.

5. Audience-side vulnerability: shifting curatorial power

Event organisers and curators acquired new power from the expansion of events and collections, as a defensive strategy to conserve the audience for unmediated performance (Báez-Montenegro & Devesa-Fernández, 2017; Benito, et al., 2013) and a space for independent art. Curators not only perform a unique coordinating role as connectors of artists, arts administrators, audiences and sponsors (Brenson, 1998), but also make original artistic inputs in the way they combine, confiture, confer recognition on and weave narratives through the cultural products they assemble (Ventzislavov, 2014; Cook, 2013). Detotto et al. (2020) empirically demonstrate the power of curation in the visual arts context, audiences’ willingness-to-pay being raised when a historic artist’s work from Italy and the US was physically assembled in a way that appealed to regional identity, thus ‘sense of place’.

Online movement essentially disturbs this power, demanding a narrower curatorial expertise focused on technical presentation needs. It also interrupts the ‘contingency’ of the event (Harbord, 2016), individualising participatory viewing experiences and thereby hindering the emergence of ‘collective effervescence’ (Collins, 2005), ‘imagined communities’ (Iordanova & Cheung, 2010) and ‘tiny publics’ (Fine & Harrington, 2004), all of which are important integrative functions of post-traditional festivals. The lack of an ‘explosive space’ where ‘things happen’ under the orchestration of curatorial designs, to ‘create the right atmospheres’, may also lead to the loss of the festival as a public space characteristic of current ‘aesthetic capitalism’ (Böhme, 2017). It potentially removes film festivals’ established role as ‘alternative networks of distribution and exhibition’ (Caves, 2000, p. 100), substitute for ‘near-empty art-house theatres’ (Carroll Harris, 2017, p. 55) and potential ‘field-configuring’ actor (Lampel & Meyer, 2008; Leac et al., 2015).

The very different career paths of typical artistic event curators and event-technology experts, who are essentially software professionals, implies a transfer of power to those who design and run the electronic system (Rankine & Giberti, 2021; Ruiz, 2021). This shift occurs just as festival organisers, especially those linked to film, announced a ‘curatorial turn’ (Dovey, 2018; Ventzislavov, 2014), allying artists as arrangers with today’s media scholars around the collection form. Curatorial power is enhanced by the need for eventisation to justify
the premium for venue-based performance. This power is drained when the event, or its dismembered contents, are moved to an online platform, whose curation is unavoidably a task of distillation, replicating neither the synergy of assembled performances nor the energy of a co-present audience.

Audience involvement was essential to film programme quality and competition in the pre-streaming era.

(Burgess, 2020). Filmmakers interviewed by Hobbins-White and Limov see buzz generated in physical festival space as critical. One of the interviewees reported that the online version of SWSX (South by Southwest) Film Festival 2020 ‘lost the whole festival experience’, which empowers audiences to ‘watch films with another type of energy...’, insisting that ‘no online event can substitute for the feeling you get by attending festivals.’ The ‘simulation’ of a festival online distils a collection to its basic shape, losing the performative character of the event that needs physical staging to feel ‘live’ (Hobbins-White & Limov, 2020, pp334-336).

Remote, on-demand delivery removes these and other ‘critical devices’ (Karpik, 2010) from a larger frame of reference for online consumption, which is the art world proper (Becker, 1982). (Online audiences are deprived of exposure to critics and other experts, whom at venue-based events they can meet face-to-face, along with performers and their entourage).

In principle, the staging of live events and distribution of recordings via digital platforms can widen access to a larger audience, and empower it to make its own choices, without these being filtered or shaped by professional critics and curators. Platforms may also bring artists and audiences into a more equal engagement, enabling customers to feedback on what they receive and to offer productions of their own (Benkler 2006, pp. 293–297). But digitisation brings discernible shifts of participants’ orientation towards cultural production and exchange, heightened by concentration among a few giant global platforms.

These shifts may be expressible in terms of the six orders of worth identified by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), also understood as distinct cognitive formats of justification and evaluation (Thévenot, 2007). In venue-based festivals, audiences and the largely volunteer workforces that run them evaluate their engagements with other attendees and exhibited artists in terms of personal trust, civic solidarity and inspiration – three evaluative orders which largely sidestep economic considerations. A fourth-order, authority, also informs audiences’ acceptance of the event’s curatorial choices and volunteers’ willingness to take on their respective positions in the event production’s division of labour. When events move online or curators broaden their reach by adding the online channel, a shift toward alternative orders of worth – market competition on the audience side and industrial efficiency on the organisers’ side– can be expected. Authority, meanwhile, does not dissolve, but more likely passes to a different style of curation and organisation, usually more closely shaped around the demands of the digital media format.
Outside physical venues that symbolise the civic arts space, exhibitions and performances condense into limited participatory culture the mediating technology dictates. Online-event audiences typically seeing nothing until the particular recitation or screening begins, are logged out as soon as it ends. While this negates the experience for those who prize events for their immersivity, it may give others added value in the form of time savings, helpful mediations (such as commentary, captions, translations and replays), the empowerment of selection from the programme – and for some the chance to ‘attend’ an event out of reach of their travel budget. In demonstrating that mediated experience can be refined and enhanced, ‘refining’ live performance via augmented reality technology, online event curators who seize on the new business opportunity seek to eliminate the element of messiness and unpredictability (contingency, buzz and noise) that the art worlds take for granted.

Equally disruptively, online curation may easily eliminate the serendipities, juxtapositions, complementarities and contradictions that venue-based curators deliberately build into their programmes. Conversely, by allowing (even guiding) audiences to be more selective, online events break down this aspect of curation. By ‘portal’ design constraint, if not by intention, they invite art-worlds to fragment in the same way as observed in other online media worlds – into information and entertainment ‘bubbles’ shaped around consumers’ existing preferences (Nikolov et al., 2019) that shield them from any conflicting experience or experimentation typical for venue-based encounters. Privatising the experience, online event culture also features a more clearly hierarchical structure. To keep a large online audience manageable, the speaker is given absolute command over it. Members must listen silently and ‘raise a hand’ before being called to speak. This imitation interrupts the social processes typical of immersive environments and felt as unique by the festival participants, deflecting any social interaction into digital versions of ‘social’ sites.

6. Conclusion: live art worlds and their digitisation

This article argues that pre-pandemic changes in the relationship between culture producers and consuming audiences, combined with rapid advances in digitisation, drove cultural producers to develop the immersive ‘event’ as a counterweight to disembodied recordings and transmissions. The improving quality and falling cost of these has, despite successful venue-based ‘festivalisations’, enabled intermediaries to capture an increasing share of audience-generated revenue. Immersive eventisation, as a defence of cultural performance space that cannot be replicated at a distance, is under pressure from digital advances that achieved a breakthrough advance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The battle between arts-venue experience and digital technology has a long history, especially in cinema, reflected in successive ‘manifestos’ addressing the
unique cultural challenges from advancing industrial technology and its audience impact (MacKenzie, 2014). Digitisation has been embraced for collection value, solving the problems of film preservation and cinema-history making, simplifying the editing process and adding special effects (de Valck, 2008). In early optimism for the internet, Ana Kronschnabl’s *Pluginmanifesto* written in 2001 (see MacKenzie, 2014) hails it as a consumption site for the typical short (10–15 min) film, which she sees as ideal length for online presentation:

> It is the length of time we want to stop for a coffee at work, the length of time we spend having a smoke, or the length of time we don’t mind spending viewing a film we don’t find easily accessible. (Kronschnabl in [MacKenzie, 2014, p. 586])

Similarly, Samira Makhmalbaf, writing in 2000 (see MacKenzie, 2014) sees digital filmmaking as a tool to counter capital’s influence on the creative process, freeing artists from commercial and censoring forces, and enabling better art consumption and production conditions in developing countries (Makhmalbaf in [MacKenzie, 2014, p. 575]) MacKenzie, 2014, p. 575). Cultural-taste making, modes of production and film education seemed already at this time to be shifting, with audience composition, towards ‘millennials’ who are more receptive to digital viewing for work and leisure, take for granted screen-based learning and may be less appreciative of immediate exposure as portable content keeps them online (cf. Borowiecki & Prieto-Rodriguez, 2015; Kehoe & Mateer, 2015, p. 100).

The downside of these shifts for festival organisation was clearly expressed in the first (2012) manifesto for film festivals, in which Mark Cousins (a former chief curator of the Edinburgh International Film Festival) warned of loss of control, and a need to return legitimacy to festivals justified by civic value. Inviting us to think of festivals ‘as narratives – stories lasting ten days or two weeks, just as films are narratives’, cinema curators were encouraged to recapture their events as ‘shows being produced on stages, were each as a mise-en-scène just as a film has a mise-en-scène’ (Cousins, in MacKenzie, 2014, pp 559–563). ‘Offline’ events re-emerging from the pandemic now confront an escalating challenge to regain art and community-focused curatorial control from technologically empowered platforms, with enhanced opportunities to provide equivalent immersive experiences along with mediated alternatives.

To summarise our arguments:

Defensive eventisation entails venue-based event curators pushing the boundaries of their performance space to accommodate innovation from the production side, often deliberately stretching audiences and post-production or distribution intermediaries beyond their ‘comfort zone’. In so doing they try to overcome the unsatisfactory art-world limitation of producers being bound by what distributors can carry or what audiences accept (Becker, 1982, p. 27). Online curators and their enabling technologies undo some of the defence, emerging from a commercial world in
which production is primarily shaped by the demand-pull of audiences’ known preferences, or the technology-push of new media for recording and transmission.

We have presented evidence that the changing economic pattern underlying online migration is likely to inflict damage across the board of cultural production. This goes beyond the already-embattled element that relies on ‘immersive’ experience, because of important inputs to production that are specific – and local – to the venue-based event and cannot be fully replicated in online or broadcast alternatives. Simultaneously, the already precarious cultural work in highly competitive labour markets on which festivals depend, evidenced here with film festival surveys, is challenged by structural changes at the nexus of cultural production, education and non-profit organisation.

The forcible shift in powers of curation underpandemic conditions, in which important elements of the cultural workforce continue to ‘attend’ events online, is likely to accelerate existing trends towards a new ‘paradigm’ for many art worlds. Cultural industries that previously balanced the convenience of consumption against a commitment to sustainable production conditions, were already on the defensive when they moved towards festivalisation as the source of premium immersive experience. As events move online, organisers yield to forms of mediation that put audiences and consumers in the driver’s seat, diffusing the power of critical devices. This shift might result in a greater concentration of remaining festival activity, a further ‘corporatisation’ of festivals through concentration detrimental to the currently high event diversity in many art worlds and the public sphere. We suggest that the preservation of diversity will depend heavily on event curators’ success in attracting the right set of patrons and audiences, but also of this young occupation’s collective ability to secure the right set of skills needed for streaming the festival. This in turn will depend on how the diverse stakeholders fare in the new online-event scenario where the audience manoeuvres the screen; and where policymakers, while still aspiring to ‘govern by culture’ (Reckwitz, 2017, pp. 195–200), may be less directly engaged with users, organisers and artists whose communities are permanently more dispersed.

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