

## London's Independent Cinemas and COVID-19 Restrictions: Responses, online solutions and impacts on the UK film exhibition sector (research report by Ellen Kemp)

Cinema exhibition has long been a sector faced with a variety of challenges: from debates concerning the digital revolution and streaming platforms, to the strict rules around distribution rights, and the evolving demands of maintaining audience numbers in an increasingly competitive arts and entertainment market. Independent exhibitors frequently survive on precarious ground, often reliant on the relatively threadbare safety nets provided by patrons, trustees or government funds. In the face of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent Lockdown restrictions that prevented cinemas from operating physically between the 23rd March 2020 and 4th July, the fragility of the film industry as a whole has been exposed, yet in some cases cinema exhibitors were able to continue their work as curators by transposing their activities into online formats. This report intends to investigate the methods, motivations and differing approaches of cinema exhibitors in London who remained active during the crisis through expanding their online activity, with specific attention paid to those cinemas which attempted to create an equivalent of the communal, theatrical film screening event in order to remain present in the consciousnesses of newly confined audiences. Focusing on the period of strict Lockdown in the UK until 3rd June (with an allowance for delays in content planned and publicised, but not published until slightly later in June) I will also look to analyse the opportunities online activity potentially gave the exhibitors studied, in order to evaluate the degree to which these organisations were able to develop resilience as public entities through this work despite the unprecedented challenges of Lockdown. Material used for this report will include interviews<sup>1</sup> with staff of three case study cinemas (The Lexi, Bertha DocHouse, and Screen 25), as well as research collated into tables logging the activities of other London exhibitors, and of industry networks and the resources, such as webinar presentations and surveys, generated and circulated through various online film industry networks. I will also provide examples of social media posts created by cinemas where relevant, all to provide an overview of the dynamic activities that occurred within the studied time-frame.

### Exhibition in Lockdown: 'Eventising' online film activities

Two surveys conducted during the Lockdown period provide useful insight into the activity of UK exhibitors: Audience and Exhibition Consultant Johnny Tull surveyed 97 independent exhibitors, finding that 58% were not continuing activity online (Tull, 2020), a figure echoed by a similar survey conducted by Regional Screen Scotland, where 39% “were not planning online activity of any kind, partly due to staff being on furlough or simply not having an online presence/not knowing how to go about things online,” with a further 19% “preferring to signpost towards online content on MUBI and catch-up TV relevant for their audiences” rather than scheduling live content or virtual events (Cunningham, 2020). This division, with a slimly inactive majority, raises the question of what motivates active cinemas to undertake the additional work. To map this situation for the London exhibition landscape, I have attempted to observe and log qualitatively the activity of independent cinemas, community cinemas and film societies. From these observations, it appears that London’s independent exhibitors are potentially more active than those sampled in the mentioned surveys, with a higher proportion of exhibitors continuing with their usual social media engagement, newsletters and blog posts. Additionally, many have transposed activities online or undertaken supplementary activities, including online quizzes, watchlists, and publicity for special partnership offers with distributors and platforms launching ‘virtual theatrical releases’, providing discounts to

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Rosie, Tom, Pippa and Catriona for generously giving their time and insights in their interviews for this report.

cinema members, or percentage profit shares with cinemas publicising their events via social media channels.

The term 'virtual theatrical release' was coined through the 'Digital Resources' webinar series hosted by Together Films, a UK film marketing and distribution consultancy. I have also monitored other webinar series serving a similar purpose which were launched during the crisis, such as those by trade papers such as Screen Daily and Celluloid Junkie, or by Scalarama Glasgow. However Together Films' webinars were unique among them since they were created specifically for Lockdown (Scalarama moved their annually scheduled activities online and tailored them to the crisis) and also had less of an investigative, journalistic impetus than those run by trade papers. Their webinars were set up "to help people navigate the potential opportunities for online engagement and digital distribution" by providing information on technical infrastructure and marketing strategies, offered for free, worldwide, creating a space for collaboration, networking and sharing insight, to ensure that "great work gets seen" (Together Films, 2020). Claiming to be motivated by a spirit of collaboration that goes beyond the ordinary activities of industry consultants, much of the rhetoric employed by Together Films and partners is that they intend to strengthen industry networks, drawing on their experience as 'impact distributors' of socially-oriented films. A considerable portion of the emphasis of these webinars was therefore on downplaying competition in favour of encouraging use of consistent language and unified approaches to marketing to promote specific film.

The concept of 'virtual theatrical releases' arose from a need to differentiate between Video On Demand (VOD) and one-off, limited capacity screenings of films online that sought to replicate the exclusive experience of a film premier or theatrical run in order to continue to monetise and exploit otherwise defunct theatrical rights (Mosses, 2020). The initial lack of distinction and subsequent precisions made has had interesting consequences for the rules surrounding exploitation of film rights online. Generally, distributors are better positioned than exhibitors to host online screenings, as the principal rights holders for titles due for imminent release. Online screenings run by distributors meant that distributors became the recipients of box office data hitherto held exclusively by exhibitors, reversing the relationship and control of data insights. The lack of transparency by major streaming platforms reporting on viewing figures has been a long-standing point of contention in the industry, now intensified by the fact that 'virtual box office' data became the only possible source of audience analysis. This shift in access to data has therefore created a call for a new reporting system from the likes of Together Films: "we need clear definitions of the new emerging rights categories as the first step towards a radical rethink of data analysis across the sector", in order to share data with those seeking to understand the new market created by emerging exhibition scenarios, and to create a new means of assessing comparable releases to guide future marketing strategies and rights negotiations (Mosses, 2020).

Through 'virtual theatrical releases', the industry attempts to preserve the buzz that makes theatrical runs crucial to a film's promotional campaign. The decision by certain distributors to share profits generated from online events with cinemas therefore reveals recognition of cinemas' role in preventing the theatrical exhibition model (and the publicity theatrical releases provide) from becoming obsolete, as arguably they would if films were to go straight to VOD. It is also an acknowledgement of how locally-based, established cinemas can contribute to publicising virtual events direct to local cinemagoers. Yet the extent to which this benefits the cinemas is potentially minimal, since such offerings may be discounted for audiences but are rarely free, and as the Cinema Director of The Lexi, Rosie Greatorex, pointed out in our interview, the percentage of ticket sales offered, for example, through Modern Films' profit share scheme, was just 10%.

This conscious differentiation between VOD and virtual theatrical releases is tantamount to an attempt to create new streaming habits among audiences by 'eventising' (a term employed by Together Films, see Mosses, 2020) the online experience of film viewing, excluding these events

from competition with standard streaming platforms. Subsequently, the partnership offered by the distributor and streaming service, MUBI, to independent cinemas presents an interesting case: MUBI's curatorial format, with film availability limited to one month (prior to the launch of their 'library') was already partially mimicking the restricted run of theatrical releasing and presenting content as specially curated, sitting between the two poles of VOD and the new 'eventised' virtual model concocted for the crisis. MUBI had already established a network of partnerships with independent exhibitors across the UK prior to Lockdown, but extended this with an offer of a 90-day free trial to members of partner cinemas (existing and new) opting in to the scheme. This allowed cinemas to rapidly present an alternative offering to their audiences upon Lockdown, and whilst this is seemingly at MUBI's expense, they do stand to benefit financially from those who continue their subscription beyond the trial, as well as from the positive publicity this generates. However, for exhibitors, this initiative risks reinforcing perceptions that streaming platforms are a close equivalent to the audience-specific curation they offer, and potentially undermines their claims to being authentically independent. Many cinemas, including three of my case studies, have attempted to circumvent this dilemma by using MUBI titles in conjunction with content available elsewhere as a source from which to hand-pick more specific recommendations for their audiences and therefore maintain the specificity of their curatorial role.

### **Curating Online Events**

Alongside (or in place of) these partnerships with different platforms and distributors, some London exhibitors have also sought to 'eventise' recommendations by hosting live virtual events, such as quizzes, webinar discussions and Q&As with film-makers, frequently combined with scheduled watchalong screenings. Given the amount of work that goes into curating, marketing, moderating and organising the technicalities of these events, the popularity of this strategy is somewhat surprising – especially since most of these virtual events are not monetised, unlike most eventised virtual releases of films by streaming platforms and distributors.

Of these cinemas, I was able to contact three case studies that each had varying approaches to the creation of these 'eventised' screenings of free content: Bertha DocHouse, a charity-funded cinema specialising in documentary and operating within Curzon's Bloomsbury venue; Screen 25, a community cinema operating within a secondary school in South Norwood; and The Lexi, a not-for-profit 'boutique' cinema in Brent. I have chosen to exclude cinemas which are not predominantly film exhibitors, such as Riverside Studios (a multi-arts venue) and LUX (specialists in artist moving image) despite high levels of activity, and film clubs including Sands Film Club, Tufnell Park Film Club and Cinema Italia UK, all of which have continued their weekly screenings by transposing them into online watch parties, but which have not created new events specifically for the crisis. It is also worth noting that one of the most active cinemas in London on social media was the Prince Charles Cinema, however their only scheduled live event was an iteration of the 'filmaggeddon' film quiz, an activity which does not strictly entail the curatorial emphasis that this report is interested in as it was mostly the usual activity of the cinema in live-stream format. I will also examine the activities of Deptford Cinema, an entirely volunteer-run cinema which has been particularly innovative in setting up of 'Deptford On Demand' streaming service via Vimeo, curating titles independently through direct contact with film-makers, often accompanied by Instagram live interviews upon the film's release to the platform. Though unavailable to interview within the time constraints of this report, their newly established podcast and blog articles provide insight into their practises and viewpoints.

In practical terms, Screen 25 and The Lexi developed comparable strategies for their online activity: both curated weekly recommendations using freely available content from terrestrial television as well as through MUBI. Screen 25 noted that this was to make content "diverse and accessible and inclusive," while The Lexi also quickly decided that accessibility and pricing were

crucial to their strategy, adding however that the decision also owed to “an instinctive reluctance for my empty cinema to be used as a kind of shop window for paid streaming services”, referring to MUBI's marquee rental initiative that cinemas such as The Rio, Phoenix and Genesis took part in. Using mostly free-to-access sources for their recommendations correlates with both being community-oriented cinemas. By comparison Deptford Cinema initially sought to charge moderate ticket prices for their streaming service, but later offered all films to screen for free, presumably to encourage usage and increase exposure for film-makers: as a non-profit, the cinema was unlikely to seek revenue except to cover start-up costs, pre-existing overheads or offer remuneration to film-makers.

The approaches of The Lexi and Screen 25 also differed in terms of the post-screening discussions at the centre of both cinemas' digital programmes. The Lexi developed discussion forums using real-time Facebook comments, allotting time for attendees to discuss the film with Cinema A staff following the scheduled watch-time each Monday, while Screen 25 operated post-film discussions via Zoom video-calls following screenings each Wednesday.

Bertha DocHouse also implemented a weekly watch party, mostly using free films, or otherwise via easily accessible streaming platforms: alternate weeks used films available via Netflix, MUBI, Amazon Prime and Vimeo, as well as eventually screening using their own beta platform developed through their online hub. Crucially, all these events were supplemented by surrounding discussions: using the 'Netflix Party' Google Chrome extension, as well as in most cases organising free Q&As with the film-makers following the watch parties. DocHouse's initiatives therefore entailed additional cybersecurity considerations as well as research in order to host their guests, including establishing a system to limit attendance, securing links to the Zoom discussions using Eventbrite ticketing, recruiting hosts and preparing questions.

Interestingly all three cinemas interviewed were in agreement over the usefulness of existing streaming platforms for their online activities. When questioned on the potential antipathy traditionally held by exhibitors towards streaming platforms, these exhibitors noted that they had been mostly supportive of streaming since before the crisis. This stance, combined with the extension of different offers and partnerships from streaming services to independent cinemas was also a contributing factor in the viability of continuing online activity. As Greatorex notes: “we've always seen The Lexi positioned within people's whole viewing lives, we understand that people don't only watch films at the cinema, it's a specific part of a much broader context”. Meanwhile Screen 25 noted the importance of free or discounted streaming opportunities as they “[gave] us something to offer the audience,” predicting that “if we didn't have these kind of opportunities then it would be hard to engage the audience so much”, and that in general they felt “very grateful that MUBI wanted to work with cinemas [...] they could have very easily just put that offer out there to their subscribers”. Bertha DocHouse's Marketing Manager, Thomas Humphrey, noted that prior to the crisis there was still something of a “hostile relationship” towards streaming from exhibitors in general, and that using more commercial platforms such as Netflix entailed a certain amount of “soul-searching” and the examination of “ethical considerations” for Bertha DocHouse. However, generally he viewed collaboration with streaming platforms as an “opportunity to show how nicely you can have that synergy between cinema and online streaming,” and given that the more mainstream content has hitherto been less embedded in DocHouse programming, he noted that “it's really exciting that we can interact with Netflix content now in a way that we couldn't before”. Further, Humphrey pointed out that financial support had been offered by both Netflix and MUBI, donating to the BFI Resilience Fund and others schemes providing financial support for exhibition workers, gestures which demonstrate solidarity with independent cinemas.

This suggests that a potential result of the crisis is the dissolution of old tensions between streaming and theatrical exhibition as audiences are increasingly found to differentiate between the two experiences, a process which, according to the 2020 Nostradamus Report commissioned by

Göteborg Film Festival, was already in progress, with the recent day-and-date release of *The Irishman* (Scorsese, 2019) by Curzon showing how streaming availability did not appear to impact cinema ticket sales (Koljonen, 2020, page 47). Further, the Cinema First audience survey suggests that however closely VOD and 'virtual theatrical releases' of films attempt to replicate physical experiences of cinemagoing, ultimately audiences believe that they cannot succeed in replacing them. Cinema First's survey shows that the most prized elements of a trip to the cinema are, firstly, the physical and technological screening conditions (the big screen and surround sound) and secondly the potential social event that the physical space facilitates. The emergence of the 'virtual theatrical release' therefore reveals the importance of the differences between standard VOD streaming set-ups and theatrical ones, such that although it is impossible to replicate the way physical cinema spaces naturally create an experience of a screenings as a 'special event', exhibitors hosting online screenings were wise to emphasise the curated, social, real-time nature of their eventised online activities.

### Cinema as community space

This social element becomes more crucial when addressing the question of what motivated a particular cinema to organise these eventised online screenings. Crucially, the speed with which cinemas had to decide upon an approach to the crisis, taking into account practical and financial considerations as well as those of the organisation's image and reputation, meant that decisions regarding online activity would have been made somewhat instinctively. It should also be acknowledged that none of the case studies I have chosen were under particular financial duress, though equally all have either salaried staff or venue overheads, meaning nor are they exempt from such concerns. All are registered charities: Bertha DocHouse is supported by The Bertha Foundation, while Screen 25 and The Lexi and are run as not-for-profit organisations, meaning that operating on a shoestring or with uncertain funding are perhaps not unfamiliar challenges. Yet the relative lack of concern for monetising online activity implies that the work undertaken, especially following the announcement of the Job Retention Scheme, was not motivated either by financial needs: if anything the additional work would have been detrimental to salaried employees shifting focus from tasks which supplied immediate revenue or funding. Instead, the decision to continue to produce curated content for audiences seems to stem at least in part from a sense of civic duty to their audiences.

In the case of Deptford Cinema, The Lexi and Screen 25, these audiences are the local demographics of their Greater London bases; in the case of Bertha DocHouse, it is the documentary community consisting both of viewers and film-makers, based in London and who frequent Bertha DocHouse as a bastion for non-fiction film (Bertha DocHouse is the UK's first and major cinema specialising in documentary). This kind of unremunerated labour therefore could be understood to reveal a potentially utopian or humanist dimension underpinning work in the cultural sector: a belief in access to cinema, and in cinema as essential to cultural enrichment, (although arguably the generosity of this work also creates positive publicity for these organisations which in turn boosts their sustainability).

The importance of the notion of providing cultural labour without expectation of financial return should not be understated. In the case of DocHouse, my interviewee noted the "exhausting" nature of the transition, which was orchestrated and launched within three to four working days whilst adjusting to new remote-working conditions. He emphasised that part of the vision for the digital activity was to provide reassurance through continuity for their audiences, meaning that programmers had to be conscious of maintaining a coherent curatorial vision, "doing that at speed is extremely difficult". The difficulty of providing consistent content to maintain the programme for the digital cinema also led to significant fear of burnout for the team, noting the "erraticness" and "unknownness" of the work conditions and a sense of "constantly feeling your way in the dark"

exacerbated by the limits of remote communication. Given that this interview took place early on in the crisis, Humphrey acknowledged that things were likely to stabilise and become easier as time progressed, especially once technological teething problems were overcome and a structure established. Yet in the initial stages, the will to continue activity despite the stresses of this work tangibly demonstrates the socially-oriented attitude of these workers.

For the team at Screen 25, technological difficulties also proved challenging, with early post-film discussions via Zoom targeted by 'Zoom-bombing' (a phenomenon wherein anonymous internet users join a video-call in order to harass users with unwelcome comments or images). Screen 25 also described how the transition meant adjusting the roles and responsibilities within the team, and that a significant amount of work went into crafting a tone sensitive to the lived realities of the community during Lockdown.

The transition to online was somewhat easier for The Lexi, who closed one week ahead of the official Lockdown, and had by 20th March announced a strategy for 'The Lexi Virtual' to newsletter subscribers. Greatorex suggests that this was owing to the reputation of the venue as a community hub. Continuation of community initiatives were prioritised as much as the programming of online content, with the set-up of "a community hub page on our website to post local news and information" pertaining to the food bank donation point located at the cinema, as well as other aid initiatives by local businesses. Greatorex stated in relation to local businesses and charities that "it will be really positive to have us all networked and supporting each other through this time and hopefully new relationships have been fostered and maybe work will come out of that in the future", though she stressed that broadly the impact of the crisis on community projects would be negative, with many of their existing community schemes, such as prescribing trips to the cinema through local GPs, or the women's refugee cinema group run by Salusbury World would be difficult to recommence. Yet, using the cinema's following to publicise local aid initiatives and help support local businesses operating during the crisis was a practise undertaken by many of London's community cinemas and film societies: a feature which undoubtedly further endears audiences to them, demonstrates commitment to the local, and is arguably beyond the scope of larger multiplexes and nationally-based distributors, highlighting the advantageous plurality of networks of different scales that independent cinemas may have unique access to within the film industry.

For all these case studies, the strength of core audiences and community ties appear to have greatly informed the decision to move activity online, since encouragement and appetite for content specifically curated by these organisations was more evident. For Screen 25, Lead Programmer Pippa Eldridge noted that they "had quite a lot of feedback from our members and customers [...] they did really want to continue to support the cinema and to have it in their lives in some form" and that they therefore "wanted people not to forget about us, to feel like their social space was still there", noting the desire for there to be no gap in programming. Screen 25 therefore benefited from the assurance that they had an attentive audience for online activity.

In the case of The Lexi, Greatorex cites the impact of the fundraising campaign that had been happening prior to Lockdown for the construction of more community space and a second screen at the venue. These efforts entailed "working really hard on raising our profile locally" including through social media, which she notes "has stood us in good stead for this unforeseen nightmare". The status of The Lexi as a community-oriented social enterprise similarly gave the team confidence that their online activities would not go unnoticed.

Both The Lexi and Screen 25 were able to mobilise support from volunteers, with Greatorex citing how it is "really useful to have that group of people who will jump on things and share them and comment" for The Lexi Virtual programming. Screen 25 meanwhile has placed significant emphasis on inviting volunteers to submit articles and blog posts alongside those written by the curators on the principle that "creating your own content and sharing that tends to bring in more engagement, and more people click through to the website, and it's good for branding".

Additionally, Screen 25 were in regular communication with volunteers in order to ensure that they “feel like they are still an active part of the cinema”. Both these cinemas are therefore examples of where a dialogical, interactive approach to content created and shared by the cinema and their supporters has enabled programmers to generate higher levels of engagement from their local audiences.

For Deptford Cinema, being entirely run by volunteers, their decision to continue came from the willingness of programmers themselves, their commitment to the mandate of the cinema and the cultural role it plays in the community, of which the local volunteers themselves form the core. The forms that this activity took were decided within the cinema’s non-hierarchical operational structure, and though their strategy took longer to implement, the result, a customised streaming platform, was entirely unique to Deptford Cinema, allowing them a similarly high level of curatorial freedom as that which the cinema had prior to Lockdown. Again, for Deptford Cinema the impetus for continuing stemmed from a will not to be forgotten and to “continue to serve the community”, the dedication of their network of patrons making the transition to online activity relatively natural.

An interesting initiative by Bertha DocHouse was the creation of a WhatsApp group, inviting their audience to interact by sharing recommendations and thoughts about documentary beyond the cinema’s virtual programming. Often these discussions were then reformulated into articles and shared on the DocHouse website. By moderating and structuring the community discussions in this way, Bertha DocHouse was able to create a unique forum for its core audience, mutually beneficial for the cinema and audiences alike since it provided audience insight, put audiences in contact with the DocHouse team (useful for technical difficulties during the virtual events) and stimulated appetite and curiosity for documentary culture in general.

Humphrey mentioned that the engagement of this audience in particular may be owing to DocHouse’s reputation for having a “direct line to the documentary industry”, enabling them to source films for virtual events more easily and allowing for better curation for keen audiences. This also benefits film-makers, many of whom “recognise that by supporting the cinema industry they also long-term ensure that on the other side of it they will have something to build content for”. Further, Humphrey noted “that some film-makers are seeking any way to get their film out there, so it’s nice to help some of them achieve that”. Humphrey explained that the cinema has “taken the stance that it’s about promoting documentary as much as possible, wherever possible,” even where the cinema itself does not stand to benefit directly from providing such support. Further, the inclusion of filmmaking resources such as access to recorded master-classes via the online hub and the networking opportunities provided by forums including the WhatsApp group also contribute to the culture surrounding documentary, perhaps more actively than physical screenings, given the international scope and democratising nature of online communities. DocHouse’s forums therefore provides opportunity for a different kind of dialogue to occur, something strongly in keeping with Bertha DocHouse’s mandate, and undoubtedly appreciated by both documentary producers and fans.

This is comparable to Deptford Cinema’s strategy for curating using the connections they have to film-makers as a means of sourcing films for their streaming platform which were unavailable or difficult to view elsewhere. Aside from repertory screenings that the cinema usually schedules, their online programme therefore remained consistent with the physical cinema’s curation, which tends to favour niche or specialist films usually supplied by volunteer curators through personal contact with film-makers, as opposed to first-run releases or “generalist” films shown by The Lexi and Screen 25 respectively.

### **Collaboration before Competition**

That said, industry connections relevant less to production, but more to exhibition and distribution, represent another community which The Lexi and Screen 25 have participated in and benefited

from. As well as the aforementioned webinars, Facebook groups orchestrated by institutions such as the BFI FAN Network provided free resources and spaces for discussing solutions to COVID-19 related issues. Screen 25 cited the UK Cinema Network Facebook page as crucial to their strategy, noting that it seemed like the UK exhibition sector was “more of a community than it has ever been”. Similarly, The Lexi noted that while most of the networks were pre-existing, “people are using it better and maybe using it more proactively”. The Lexi mentioned communicating and collaborating with other independent cinema staff on a daily basis through this network, no longer limited to the BFI-run Hub system, but UK-wide. Both the industry webinars and Facebook groups are also spaces for distributors and technological services to actively solicit support for or custom from film exhibitors by promoting their services to them directly, and tailoring offers and products through direct feedback. This means that partnerships, such as those undertaken by Screen 25 to view newly virtually released films through 606 Distribution, Modern Films or Curzon Home Cinema, were more easily orchestrated via the cross-promotion by both distributors and cinemas. Catriona Mahmoud, Marketing Manager of Screen 25 cites the example of *Pahokee* (Breslan and Lucas, 2019), which the cinema may not have come across or screened were it not for distributors reaching out through these networks. The Lexi mentioned collaborating with Claire Vaughn of Chapter Arts, sharing the viewing workload and impressions of films ahead of releasing their virtual programmes. Similarly, a new partnership between Bertha DocHouse, and Manchester’s cinema Home was facilitated through MUBI, revealing the potentiality for the increased use of these networks to establish entirely new creative partnerships.

Eschewing competition and instead working on collaborative partnerships shows the need to preserve something that market economics alone would not preserve during this crisis, since different organisations participating in these networks appear to be acting in the interests of the broader industry as much as in their specific interests. Recognition that the cultural sector is dependent on this attitude and mode of work therefore could prove influential in revaluing independent cinemas in social rather than economic terms. In relation to this, the specificity of the cinemas as local or niche entities is also highlighted by the democratic, informal nature of networks such as the UK Cinemas Network, the diversity of styles of online activity implying that locally tailored, flexible approaches to increasing engagement, given the pressure of the crisis, is deemed the best strategy by most industry professionals. Indeed, in a follow-up questionnaire, Humphrey indicated that the success of localising online events might inspire DocHouse to create more “hyperlocal programming” in future.

### **Curators as community experts**

It is therefore worth investigating how a consideration of the specificity of a cinema's audience and community is reflected by the curatorial modes and tones that each cinema adopted. All interviewed case studies sought to cover a broad range reflective of their usual offer, and all of them demonstrated an awareness of the need for sensitivity relating to the tone of content given the crisis situation, entailing judgements which necessitated curators to have clear understandings of their audiences' tastes and behaviours. Humphrey noted that this was a particularly challenge, given the original mission of the cinema, “tackling really difficult social issues head on, and promoting that freedom of speech to talk about those kinds of issues”. Humphrey noted that it was not necessarily the right time to present more difficult subjects, and therefore they were balancing selections of uplifting films with titles which were more faithful to expectations of the socially engaged work held by DocHouse’s core audience. Humphrey noted that DocHouse was however criticised for certain choices, mentioning that they “have had people reach out and say ‘these aren’t the films you should be encouraging people to watch right now’”, although overall people were responsive to the usual fare, “more so now than they perhaps were so before”. This latter observation potentially indicates that levels of engagement and the politicisation of the public

mood during the crisis may explain, to some extent, the unprecedented levels of engagement with documentary that DocHouse was able to note from the boom in social media following observed immediately following Lockdown's implementation.

Screen 25 described the difficulty of judging the tone of their curation and communications with audiences, stressing the need to acknowledge potential emotional struggles of individuals within their communities, yet noting how initially they felt that not acknowledging the crisis in their curation would have made the issue the “elephant in the room”. Their first film club title was *Force Majeure* (Östlund, 2014), and in promoting the screening Screen 25 wrote “In the current circumstances, what else could we choose but the very aptly-named *Force Majeure*, a jet-black comedy about shifting family dynamics in the face of natural disaster?”; “sure to put any cabin fever to rest!”. Elsewhere, “[t]onight we launch with a collective viewing of *Force Majeure* (yes a deliberately tongue-in-cheek decision)”. The comical approach is potentially controversial, yet here appears gentle enough and with only tenuous links to the crisis itself, such that they remains consistent with what Screen 25 have described as the “tongue-in-cheek” tone that they are known for. Interestingly, *Force Majeure* was also virtually programmed within The Lexi’s recommendations, though not as an 'eventised' title, featuring only within the newsletter recommendations without emphasising links to social isolation. This indicates the way curators frame programming in order to suit their specific audiences. Consistency in programming style was key to all of the studied cinemas’ strategies, seen largely as building an image of resilience and reassuring audiences by continuing normal practice as far as possible. However, in addition to this, both The Lexi and Screen 25 noted the freedom with which they could implement more experimental titles into their virtual programming, free from the requirement to attract paying attendees.

This was also observed by DocHouse, who reported similar levels of attendance for screenings as disparate as *Three Identical Strangers* (Wardle, 2018) via Netflix and *The Whalebone Box* (Kötting, 2019), via MUBI, and mentioned that the virtual cinema had provided them not only with the opportunity to present these titles to audiences more willing to take risks, but also to try out digital initiatives left “on the back burner” prior to Lockdown. Humphrey was also most enthusiastic about the possibility of continuing an online offering of some sort given the levels of engagement witnessed, something particularly suited to the internationality of the documentary community and the status of the organisation.

Deptford Cinema's online initiatives were also positively perceived by their team to such a degree that in their podcast discussion, the participating volunteers stressed their enthusiasm for continuing and expanding upon them. Their conception of the cinema as an ‘ethos’ rather than a venue, along with the understanding that they were due to outgrow the venue itself anyway, meant that the possibility of new online activities, or of future outdoor, mobile screenings (a possible solution to social distancing) meant that the refocusing of efforts online had provided them with opportunities to experiment with content creation and curation.

To a lesser extent, both Screen 25 and The Lexi also noted this as a possibility. Greatorex mentioned that their programming of online artist video, initiated through The Lexi Virtual, would be impossible beyond Lockdown given that access was only provided by film-makers on the basis of it aiding the cinema during difficult times. Nevertheless, the opportunity for curators to take risks in this way and shape the tastes of their audiences could be beneficial for the variety of programming attempted in the future. Screen 25 were optimistic in this sense, noting that, contrary to previous fears, they expect that “people will appreciate going to the cinema more, it will make it more of an experience and I think it will allow us as event producers to be a bit more experimental and take more risks, and be more creative with the way an event is set up”. Questioned on the same point, The Lexi agreed that streaming presented little threat to the physical cinema, and may in fact alter people’s attitudes to cinemagoing as an event distinct from home leisure activities. Humphrey also

believed that “after this Lockdown ends I think we will see a big flood of people coming to the cinema, getting out there, resuming their social lives and doing it really emphatically”, a situation which could make programming more daring content more viable given the emphasis on the social experience over the choice of content.

As earlier discussed in relation to Cinema First's study, this idea is supported by the perception that cinema visits are valued more as a ‘special events’ in people's social lives, attributing less importance to the films themselves. Greatorex noted that without the usual structures and with the fluctuating attitude to release strategies from different distributors, first-run cinemas such as hers could be left with limited booking choices. Yet this potential change in attitude and taste from audiences owing to their increased consumption of streaming services and willingness to take risks could provide art-house cinemas with an opportunity upon reopening to nimbly program more obscure content through appealing to these aspects of cinema screenings. This is arguably shown by the positivity and success demonstrated by Deptford Cinema, the proliferation of their creation of content demonstrating the appetite for lesser-seen films despite restricted opportunities for discussions. Further, this attitude and flexibility could position independent exhibitors at a potential advantage over the traditional model used by multiplexes, given the potentially fraught situation with regard to the availability of new commercial releases. The 2019 Nostradamus report supports this too, indicating that more challenging films were already steadily becoming more appealing to audiences, stating that "the arthouse film renaissance we are at the cusp of can be leveraged to remind them how satisfying it can be to take a chance on something contained, deep, and complete" (Koljonen, 2020, page 49).

However, a concern for The Lexi, for Bertha DocHouse, and to a lesser extent (as a non-theatrical first-run cinema) Screen 25 was the difficulty of marketing films for reopening, given that usually cinemas require a significant lead-up in order to properly implement a promotional campaign. Additionally, there was shared concern not only over the type of content that will be available, but also the profitability of screening said content with social distancing measures in place, as well as the demographics that would be willing to attend and to whom this content would appeal. While Screen 25 mentioned the usefulness of audience surveys and insights of other cinemas, all three interviewed case studies agreed that the online activity they were witnessing particular to their organisation did not stand in for the possible audience insight gained from physical screenings (observationally, or via box office figures). The Lexi did not feel the popular streaming titles from her online programming were reflective of what people would pay to see at the cinema, while Screen 25 agreed that the diversity of their audience was not reflected online, given the high percentage of BME attendees they would expect at physical screenings, and that engagement online was much lower than at in-person events. DocHouse meanwhile had experienced higher levels of engagement with screenings online, yet Humphrey also expressed fear that the online environment would not necessarily translate into physical footfall, owing to the audiences being non-local, and predicted that online engagement would drop significantly once Lockdown was eased. Therefore while the relationships cultivated between community-oriented cinemas such as my case studies are valuable, it is questionable whether or not the activity they have undertaken has value beyond its publicly visible reinforcement of the cinema's commitment to film culture and the positive image this creates, since the anomalous nature of the Lockdown period and the subsequent unpredictability of audience behaviours and attitudes may mean that upon reopening, strategies for attracting audiences have to be entirely rethought once again, and the audience insights generated by the crisis' online activity may become irrelevant long-term. This is less consequential for Deptford Cinema since, being volunteer-run, their dedicated continued activity is in itself an assurance that the cinema will be able to continue in some form regardless of

their reopening strategy because of the mutual interest of volunteers in their fellow programmers' activities.

If we are to assert that the value of online activity is thus limited to that which audiences can gain from it, and the subsequent loyalty to the cinema that this may nourish, then it is worth noting the importance of other factors within the context of the crisis which could be more influential on audience perceptions of the establishment than either their style of curation or the good-spirited gesture of providing free sources of entertainment. Key to this is each cinema's financial situation and approach to reopening, which surveys indicate are major sources of anxiety for cinema exhibitors. According to a report by the Independent Cinema Office, 38% of independent exhibitors expect to have to make redundancies by the end of the first three months of Lockdown (ICO, 2020) a major consideration given the staffing levels required to undertake new health and safety measures. Further 86% of exhibitors sampled by the Pressing Play survey felt between "a little anxious" and "very worried" about the speed with which audiences would return to cinemas (Tull, 2020). As with the backlash generated towards cinemas such as Genesis due to it staying open longer than others in London, the policies employed by different cinemas ahead of reopening, and the ways in which these policies are communicated, may entail similarly high-stakes decisions, though fortunately with far longer gestation periods. Unsurprisingly 84% of the most recent responses to the Pressing Play survey anticipated that "our venue is clean and safe" would be their lead message in communications upon reopening, and 93% overall were predicting that the major barrier to attracting audiences back would be fear of infection (Tull, 2020). Therefore, exhibitors were preparing for a situation in which the cinema's survival was dependent not on the quality of the cinematic experience, but instead on public perceptions concerning their ethical responsibility to keep audiences safe and mitigate health risks.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has created a situation in which the exact role of independent cinema programmers can be assessed, since, deprived of the foundational element of the physical screening and social gathering place, cinemas have been forced to pivot to focus on other, less tangible characteristics that differentiate them as organisations from other viewing formats. This has revealed how arts institutions orient and view themselves in relation to their audiences and the artists they support, and has revealed their priorities as well as many of the strengths and flaws of the ways that they operate, both internally and in relation to broader industry networks. My study of the situation for London's film exhibitors has demonstrated the mutually beneficial relationship between cinema programmers and audiences: across all of the cinemas I selected to focus on, their activities were motivated by the sense that they could, and were ethically bound to, provide a valuable service to their audiences during the crisis through their status as entities around which communities could gather in a communal (virtual) space. Across the duration of the Lockdown, the difficulty of understanding their social impact through viewing figures or in terms of revenue shows how those who initiated these eventised online activities were sustained instead by a belief that such work was necessary and beneficial for their communities as well as for the organisations themselves. The ways in which the independent exhibitors studied have utilised the notion of making the best of a bad situation in order to demonstrate the resilience of film culture and to use the restrictions as creative inspiration for new styles and forms of curating content goes beyond the economic requirements to grow audiences, market films, or lay a case for funding applications. These community-led, socially-minded cinemas therefore demonstrate the extent to which this part of the exhibition industry is fuelled by a determination to carry forth the original cultural and social mandate of their cinema, in spite of the stresses of practical uncertainties, and the difficulties of projecting the correct image in relation to the crisis and communicating and catering to a sensitive public. Further, the work of these cinemas to help new film-makers and promote a diversity of taste

may resonate particularly with a public searching for variety, open to taking risks on content and rethinking their own entertainment habits due to the Lockdown context, and given the preceding growth in popularity of art-house films.

In light of what the crisis has revealed, the role that these types of cinemas play within the exhibition circuit in London is in need of reappraisal. The enthusiasm from experts and agents such as distributors and streaming platforms operating on larger scales and less drastically impacted by the crisis for supporting and celebrating independent cinemas indicates that localised and specialised cinemas form a crucial link between film representatives and audiences, without which the crucial word of mouth promotion by core audiences would be far more difficult to generate. Though beyond the scope of this report, further investigation into the exact nature of the economic benefit of this privileged connection between community-led cinemas and their audiences would be welcome. However, perhaps a more definitive and more valuable conclusion could be drawn in stating that the cultural and social value of these connections are of unprecedented and underappreciated value to film culture and to society at large. This could be explored in greater depth through a wider array of case studies, since as the crisis situation evolves and as cinemas eventually reopen, other important changes in the attitudes, relationships and practices of both audiences and professionals in film exhibition may emerge, or accelerate current trends even further.

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### Filmography

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