Porn film festivals during pandemic times: San Francisco PornFilmFestival and UNCENSORED in lockdown

In 2020, a lot of film festivals were cancelled or postponed to 2021. Others were organised in person (following the security measures imposed in each country regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, reducing the number of people in a closed space). Most festivals opted for online or hybrid options. Some festivals chose to use online platforms, turning to virtual streaming services such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Netflix. These online festivals had the possibility of presenting each film within a program where the viewer can choose to watch the content they want, interrupt and restart a film, and also rewatch a specific film or an entire program. On one hand, these actions gave flexibility to the spectators, but on the other hand, online film festivals individualise the experience of an event normally held jointly with other people.

Film festivals are celebratory film events where people with common interests come together to watch films and participate in debates, exhibitions, and other activities, creating a sense of community. In the context of the Covid-19 health crisis, online festivals enabled participants to stay connected at a distance. In so doing, they may however make attendees and organisers miss the social interaction and the communal viewing experience that happened in face-to-face film festivals. As Wanda Strauven points out, despite the remoteness and our different time zones, during these events there was a common sense of knowing that everyone was in the same predicament, experiencing together both the online spaces of the festivals and social distancing.[1]

The first wave of the virus created a difficult economic situation for sex workers and adult businesses around the world. The pandemic forced studios to stop filming on set for several months and actors and actresses were asked not to shoot videos with someone who did not belong to their home or bubble. In that context, performers looked for different ways to continue producing content and to make money. For example, some used the OnlyFans platform, on which performers can post exclusive content for their subscribing fans. Others worked as webcammers and collected tips from viewers.[2] The situation was particularly difficult for many performers who had just started their careers: suddenly out of work, they did not have enough time to build a sufficient fan base (necessary to earn a living through these platforms). Similarly, the pandemic particularly impacted the people who work behind the scenes – doing for instance camera, sound, makeup, and lighting.

Several collectives held various webinars and conferences that aimed to address the unique impact of Covid-19 on adult performers and sex workers. Some even created new audiovisual projects to raise money for their communities. An interesting example is *Sex in Times of Corona* (2020), a collaborative short film made by sixteen erotic filmmakers from Berlin: it depicts about eleven peculiar ways to have sex while maintaining social distance.[3] As such, this film was explicitly sold to create an emergency fund for sex workers who did not receive government aid during the health crisis.[4] Another short film created during that time was *Moan Together* (2020) by Matt Lambert, an erotic and pornographic music video featuring more than fifty submissions

[1] Strauven 2020, pp. 291.
[2] Gold 2020.
[3] See https://meow.wtf/2020/04/17/corona/
[4] See https://berufsverband-sexarbeit.de/index.php/besdemergencyfund/

from around the world, made in support of queer sex workers impacted by Covid-19: spectators were invited to donate money to the Red Umbrella Fund.[5] Covid-19 also impacted the content of adult films: gloves, masks, and medical clothing were used as accessories in these kinds of porn films. Similarly, several adult films revolved around lockdowns and social distancing measures on a narrative level.

While sex workers were losing money and finding themselves in vulnerable situations, the pandemic benefited pornographic sites. PornHub saw the consumption of videos increase by 30% when they released premium content worldwide in March 2020.[6] PornHub belongs to Mindgeek, a Montreal-based company that currently owns 90% of online adult platforms. These platforms do not care about performers and in fact regularly disregard copyright (posting stolen materials for free): their economic model does not benefit workers and has participated in breaking the adult industry. As porn actress and director Ovidie evidenced in her documentary *Pornocracy: The New Sex Multionationals* (2017), MindGeek is the 'Monsanto of porn', 'destroying all competition through deceptively ordinary practices that hide a bigger agenda'.[7] Adult film companies almost do not have any alternatives to Mindgeek: most online platforms and streaming services prohibit sexually explicit content. The situation is quite similar for porn film festivals: platforms used by 'regular' festivals (such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Eventive) do not accept erotic materials.

The platform PinkLabel.tv, founded by Shine Louise Houston in 2012, is here an exception.[8] This website hosts hundreds of unique, independent, and award-winning adult films. According to PinkLabel's Jiz Lee:

> Shine Louise Houston was inspired to create PinkLabel after attending the PornFilmFestival Berlin […] PinkLabel.tv […] was conceived as a Video-on-Demand platform where we would be able to host fellow filmmakers and studios. We wanted to create a viable, sustainable, financially beneficial business model that could sustain filmmakers, give audiences a chance to see the films that she appreciated, and hopefully encourage more filmmakers to make films.[9]

As an adult platform, PinkLabel.tv includes a greater variety of pornographic films and is guided by an ethical commitment to paying artists fees, thus offering an alternative model to free porn tubes. They host adult movies that offer a respectful vision of sexuality, that centre marginalized LGBTQ+ and BIPOC artists,[10] presenting them in stories rich in diversity but without capitalising on their differences and stereotyping them.

San Francisco PornFilmFestival

Fifty years ago, San Francisco was the first city in the United States to celebrate a

[5] See https://www.redumbrellafund.org/covid-initiatives/
[6] See https://www.pornhub.com/insights/corona-virus
[7] Reed 2017.
[8] Shine Louise Houston is a film director and the founder and producer of Pink & White Productions, a queer adult film company located in San Francisco. She is also the founder of PinkLabel.tv and the San Francisco Porn Film Festival.
[9] Olson & Lee 2021.
[10] BIPOC: Black/Indigenous People of Colour

public screening of films depicting hardcore sex, with the International Erotic Film Festival at the Presidio Theatre.[11] The San Francisco PornFilmFestival aimed to pay homage to the sexual cinematic legacy of the city with the creation of a pornographic festival. The 2020 San Francisco PornFilmFestival was organized by Pink & White Productions (creators of PinkLabel.tv).[12] Running from 19-23 August, the festival aimed to showcase the creativity of sex-positive film artists from the San Francisco Bay Area and other parts of the world.

The San Francisco PornFilmFestival was initially planned as a live event at the Brava Theater for the Arts. Organisers were forced to pivot to a virtual adult film festival available to watch anywhere. The San Francisco PornFilmFestival launched a fundraiser on IndieGoGo, asking for donations to help organise the online festival and secure artists fees. The people who donated money to this crowdfunding campaign received an all-access Festival Pass, a membership to PinkLabel.tv, and the option of putting their own name or company in the show.[13] The campaign was a success, with 197 donations collecting more than $10,000 (their objective was to raise a minimum of $7,000).[14]

The festival featured ninety live streaming short films, post-screening Q&As, and a meet-and-greet with some of the filmmakers who participated in the online event. It was held on the online pornographic ethical and feminist platform PinkLabel.tv. The festival program was divided in six segments – 'Fore/Play: The pre-show', 'Brazen/Brits: Short Adult Films from the United Kingdom', 'Power play: Kinky short Adult Films', 'Post/Porno: Short Adult Films from Latin America', 'Vivid/Vision: Experimental Short Adult Films', and 'Tell/Take: Beautiful and Narrative Short Adult Films' – where they exhibited movies from Germany, Colombia, Australia, United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Brazil, Spain, Greece, Chile, Argentina, and Mexico. Also, if you missed a live event –or just wanted to watch it again- a special replay of recorded programs was available on demand for 24 hours.

UNCENSORED in lockdown

The first edition of UNCENSORED was held in May 2019 in London. This interdisciplinary festival of art, porn, and activism featured more than 35 artists, sex workers, and activists from the UK and abroad who participated in various workshops, talks, performances, roundtables, and film events. According to their website, Uncensored aimed to:

> reflect on the existing and forthcoming legislation regarding sexually explicit content in the UK […] explore diverse permutations of censorship along with their artistic and political implications and map what is at stake in the regulation of pornography in the 21st century.[15]

In this way, they created a space for an open conversation about art, porn, and queer-feminist politics that celebrated freedom of expression.

[11] See https://pinklabel.tv/on-demand/2020-san-francisco-pornfilmfestival/
[12] See https://blueartichokefilms.com/save-the-date-sf-san-francisco-prn-film-festival-first-edition/
[13] See https://pinklabel.tv/on-demand/crowdfunding-porn-build-a-virtual-home-for-the-san-francisco-pornfilmfestival
[14] See https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/2020-san-francisco-pornfilmfestival#/
[15] See https://www.uncensoredfest.com/about/

UNCENSORED in lockdown was the result of an open call run by UNCENSORED festival for porn and erotic movies made while part of the world population was in quarantine in March 2020. The online event was held on 24 November 2020. It was accessible via online streaming through PinkLabel.tv, with the possibility of talking to other attendees through a chat. PinkLabel.tv offered their platform to other festivals impacted by Covid-19 for free. They saw an opportunity as these online porn film festivals were encouraging the creation of more feminist, queer, and indie pornographic content, which could be potentially hosted on PinkLabel.tv later on.[16]

The program was a selection of 13 movies from Canada, Germany, Brazil, UK, Sweden, and Spain, each with different stories and approaches to sexuality and/or featuring inventive fantasies inspired by the first quarantine. At the end of the screening, guest juror and porn performer Heidi Switch announced the winners for the categories of 'Best Short Film', 'Jury's Choice' and 'Body of Work'.[17] The prizes were provided by the adult toy manufacturers Gvibe and all profits raised were given to Pineapple Support, a charity that provides free support and therapy service to adult industry performers.

Some of the films screened at UNCENSORED depicted sexual encounters between couples who followed Covid-related regulations and safety guidelines. For instance, *Waiting for the Tsunami* (2020) by Rori Dior and *Reverie* (2020) by Danius Monoceros play with the fantasy and daydream of a sexual encounter with another person. In the first film, we step into the story of two neighbours: one is fantasising about wet encounters in the shower and the other about a playful kitchen sex scene with the use of food (pasta) to cover and caress their bodies. The second film takes us on a ride on the London subway, where two passengers hear the announcement 'Please keep your distance'. In the next scene, those passengers are having sex. When a new announcement is heard on the subway loudspeaker, we see how everything that happened was in fact a fantasy of one of the passengers. As Danius Monoceros discussed in an interview for UNCENSORED fest:

> *Reverie* was inspired by a favourite fantasy of mine: to have sexual intercourse with a stranger in a context where redundant messages remind you over and over to avoid any social interaction. The idea developed by observing the sexual tension that can occur between two individuals looking into each other's eyes, the only area of the face not covered by the mask. Filming during the lockdown was fun, having an empty city like London as a stage was something to remember, but also challenging when it comes to filming without a crew, and to readapt the storyboard in a way that it was possible for me to be in front and behind the camera, and to make everything work.[18]

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[16]They hosted the Seattle Erotica Cinema Society Festival, the Berlin PornFilmFestival, Satyrs and Maenads: the Athens Porn Film Festival (first edition), CineKink, UNCENSORED in lockdown, and also a curated program from Vienna Porn Film Festival. Also, inside the San Franciso PornFilmFestival they had a showcase that was curated by the London Porn Film Festival and a Latin American shorts program that they had seen at Berlin (Olson & Lee 2021).

[17]*Reverie* (2020) by Danius Monoceros won 'Best Short Film', *Sex in Times of Corona* (2020) by CoronaSolidarityFilm was the winner of UNCENSORED's 'Jury's Choice', and *Arid* (2020) by Kupalua, produced by Brazil's EDIY productions, was the winner of best 'Body of Work'.

[18] See http://www.uncensoredfest.com/danius-monoceros-reverie-interview/

Another movie worth mentioning is *The Silent Witness* (2020) by Torri Lisek, which tells the story of the performers Bat Boi and Manon Praline, who after months of being isolated decide to meet in person to have sex. The performers explore the medical world with the use of protective masks, suits, and plastic gloves – maybe part of a fetish – and thanks to that, they can feel the touch of another body again. These films serve as a reminder of the amazing originality and freshness this year has produced.

Despite the circumstances, we can see that new ways of creation and distribution have been generated, because maybe our bodies were restricted but our minds and imaginations were not. This is demonstrated by the success of the convening power that the San Francisco PornFilmFestival and UNCENSORED in lockdown had, being able to screen films from different parts of the world that deal with sexuality, desire, and non-hegemonic pornography from a feminist and queer perspective. Furthermore, sex workers and festivals were supported through the creation of economic emergency funds that helped them survive during these difficult times. The fact that these festivals have been held online has given audiences the opportunity to attend events that they might not otherwise have been able to afford – maybe for financial reasons, time, or distance. The strategy of the San Francisco PornFilmFestival and UNCESORED in lockdown to target a global audience through PinkLabel.tv, as an easy and convenient platform, gave people the chance to watch the movies at different times and even to rewatch content. Similarly, the fact that these festivals organised online events with the organisers and directors, or that the audiences could use a live chat function during the film festivals, made the attendees feel closer and giving them the experience of collectiveness, which is ultimately the feeling of an in-person film festival.

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