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This is an adapted English transcript of Future et médias, a series of French podcasts on major changes and emerging trends in the media and entertainment industry.

I'm Catherine Mathys.

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We're continuing our look into how the screen-based industry has been adapting to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, we're looking into one of the world's very first film festivals and how it brilliantly met the challenge of migrating its entire programming online in just a matter of days. Cancellation, postponement, or transformation: COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on major 2020 events in all sectors.

The audiovisual sector is obviously no exception. Take the case of Quebec, where the government announced the cancellation of all indoor events with more than 250 participants on March 12. Undeterred, organizers of the 38th edition of the International Festival of Films on Art (FIFA), made the digital shift that allowed them to present their entire programming online, and on the same dates as originally planned, from March 17 to March 29, 2020.

To discuss the online migration of film festivals and how the digital and the physical will coexist in the future, I met with International Festival of Films on Art executive and artistic director Philippe del Drago.

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- **Catherine Mathys (CM):** Hello Philippe del Drago.
- **Philippe del Drago (PDD):** Hello to you.
- **CM:** How are you doing in this strange kind of aftermath, or, let's put it this way, at least at the lower end of the COVID curve?
- **PDD:** I'd say it's going pretty well. It's true that we just recently made it through our COVID trial by fire, which I believe we'll talk about a little later, but let's say for now that we're preparing for the future

by staying in the moment, and for a future that is both terrifying and, at the same time, terribly exciting.

- **CM:** That is what is so unusual about this time we're in. We've been forced to make changes at a dizzying pace, and we realize that, in the end, there may be some good in all of this. But, nevertheless, it's been a fast and furious ride all the way.

Now if you don't mind, Philippe del Drago, I'd like to take you back to that fateful day on March 12. It's 12:30 noon and Premier Legault has just announced the cancellation of all indoor events with more than 250 participants. So, you send out a news release barely two hours later saying that there will be no FIFA this year. And then two days after that, on March 14, it's coup de théâtre time and you announce that the 38th edition of FIFA will indeed take place, after all, but online only. I'd like you to tell me what happened in those 48 hours that led to the death and resurrection of this year's festival.

- **PDD:** Well, for starters, it was a pretty intense 48 hours. I think everyone's going to remember it for a long, long time. I would say that when the premier made his announcement it was greeted with a mixture of relief and, obviously, despair. Obviously, despair at not being able to hold an indoor festival and, at the same time, relief, because of the very heavy responsibility the festival would have had to shoulder with regards to safeguarding the health of the audience, the professional staff, and everyone else involved. That weight on our shoulders was more than a little heavy I can tell you. So, I'd have to say that when the Sword of Damocles finally fell it was for the good. In other words, we knew from that moment on that the festival could not take place indoors and so, from that moment on, we were able to make decisions of a different nature. That is to say, we knew exactly what our options were and we were more in a kind of an enquiring, anxious state of mind. The question was, okay, so what do we do now? We had to move forward. We had to make a decision. Honestly, I prefer having a clear choice in front of me. It's better when the choice is clear rather than cloudy, no matter how hard it is to make.

- **CM:** But we didn't know that then. It was just beginning. We had no idea of how long it was going to last. We had no idea what to expect. So, you decided to stick to the original festival dates, March 17 to March 29. Why was it important for you to do that?

- **PDD:** There were several things. It was already clear that the pandemic was coming to Quebec, to Canada. Remember that the focus early in the year was on China, Iran, and Italy. We were getting messages early on

from guest directors in China, Iran, and Italy telling us that they couldn't come. We could see the beginning of the wave and we knew it would be coming our way, too. So, we weren't really completely caught off guard. There was already some thinking being turned in that direction inside the festival.

Later on, it seemed best to stick to the original dates, especially after we had initially cancelled. At that point, I asked myself what good we could do as a festival and what could we do that would be good for the festival? And I think that when we work at a festival like FIFA or any film festival, it's because we feel that what we're doing is good for those who make films and also good for those who enjoy them, the public. And I thought that in a crisis situation like this, art could be a source of contemplation, a source of stimulation, a source of inspiration, and I was well aware that people would be staying in their homes so I said to myself that now was a good time to bring something fresh and a new source happiness to people, too. So, it all really started from the idea that art does good and that art can do good and that's why we decided to do everything humanly possible to hold the festival on the original dates.

- **CM:** So how does one do that? How do you hold a major festival like this online from one day to the next? How did you do it? What were the first steps? What had to be done?

- **PDD:** Well, I think the first thing is to understand that a festival is not something you do on your own. A festival is a community effort, a community of partners, a community of producers, distributors, directors, and, of course, the public community. So, the first thing is to see if the directors and producers are willing to collaborate in an online festival. Obviously, this is the first item on the agenda. So, we very quickly drafted a proposal letter to the film rights holders, and very quickly we got a lot of responses. I remember that we sent the email on Friday afternoon, that would make it Friday night in Europe, and we had a big lineup of European films to cover. And by Saturday morning we already had confirmations on over 100 films. From the moment I knew we had confirmation on over 100 films in less than 24 hours, some in less in 12 or 16 hours, I said to myself that it was a good sign, that we now have enough films to hold a real festival.

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- **PDD:** I really wanted us to have a real panorama, a real wide range of what we could offer to the public. So, the number of titles was really important to me. Then, on the other hand, when things happen like this, I think it has a lot to do with the corporate culture and the culture of the organization. It's also true that at the festival, I'm known as someone who's really gung-ho and committed to everything related to technology and the arts, the internet, streaming, and all that. And that goes way back. I'd also say there was already a somewhat general culture leaning in this direction within the festival. During the previous year, we had organized three days of professional development meetings dealing with the production and online distribution of films on art.

- **CM:** No kidding? That came in pretty handy!

- **PDD:** I must admit it didn't hurt. We had already established links with a number of organizations and looked into a number of technologies. We weren't really looking at the idea of having an online festival at any given time, but rather at the idea of making the festival accessible online to a wider audience across Canada. For sure, we had planned to do a little bit more along that line, and I'd have to say that we had already done some thinking on this internally, and this was reflected in our culture, a culture of creativity. I often say that, for me, running a festival or organizing a festival is a creative process in itself. Because we can't take anything for granted in a world where everything happens so very, very fast. With each edition of the festival, we must always ask ourselves how can we improve, how can we be even more in tune with what the public wants? When your entire team has a mindset like this, they're always questioning the way things are done, questioning and then challenging each other to go even further. So, it's not surprising that everyone bought into the idea as soon as they saw the possibilities.

And, yes, it also required a lot of changes at the team level because, obviously, one of the choices we made at FIFA was to monetize the programming. Our decision was somewhat different from decisions other organizations made. The main reason I made that choice was because I wanted to save jobs. The jobs of those who worked at the festival. It wasn't any more complicated than that. I knew that if we weren't able to hold an online festival with some kind of revenue coming in, we'd have to let everyone go, and since they all came from the cultural and events sector, there wouldn't be many job openings coming up for them in the months ahead. I told myself that we'd at least have to honour our contracts with the people who worked all those months to organize the festival. So, we had a bit of a crisis team meeting on Saturday trying to figure out what the situation was and prepared a complete overhaul

of the organization chart for dealing with it. The upshot was that the entire organization chart was rearranged by Sunday morning.

- **CM:** So, people literally changed their jobs functions overnight?

- **PDD:** That's right, in most cases. Just like that. I think only those in programming and in communications kept their positions. Others in ticketing and so on, everyone else was assigned new jobs and they all accepted that. For sure there were some difficulties because it was the beginning of the lockdown. So, we had to manage an online festival in lockdown. That certainly was an all-new experience. There was nothing we could reference on that. There were no workflow tools that we could test, or even understand. Not with everyone changing jobs. So, it was quite a challenge, but we did have something important going for us and that was a global vision of what we wanted to offer. And what we wanted to offer was 180 films online for 13 days for just \$30 and provide support to the ticket buyers in that process. So, once our mission was given a framework and put in place, it was still a ton of work, but it was relatively easy to understand how we, as a team, could actually get the job done.

- **CM:** That's a very important point, Philippe del Drago. Supporting the consumers of online culture. That's a big job in itself, a risk that must have made your head spin in making the transition to online at such dizzying speed. Deciding to charge a flat rate of \$30 to see all 180 films was also a big risk.

- **PDD:** It was a big risk, indeed, but there comes a time when you just have to make that leap of faith and jump in with both feet come hell or high water, as they say. Naturally, we did some fast benchmarking, checking the fare on other platforms, and I don't mean Netflix, but other platforms with somewhat similar offerings. What were they charging? Of course, we were still among the first in the world to do something like this so there weren't many points of reference. We were, in fact, the second film festival in the world to go entirely online.

We had the choice between a much more expensive model that would sell less tickets, but we opted for one that was much more affordable across the board. There you have it. We wanted something everyone could afford. I wanted to make sure that price was not a factor in stopping anyone from accessing all the programming. The consensus was that \$30 was the magic number for 13 days of access to 180 films. That's literally just pennies a piece. We felt we had something that was about as accessible as you can get. And accessibility was really fundamental. It also allowed us to provide viewer support because we were certainly going to have

traffic, and a more diverse audience than ever before. Because for the first time FIFA was being held coast to coast, with viewers from Toronto, Vancouver, Halifax, Îles-de-la-Madeleine, and the Yukon.

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- **CM:** That's the digital advantage at work. Borders are no longer a problem in many ways.

- **PDD:** It really is incredible when I think of the power and potential going digital gave us. Compared to an indoor festival where, by definition, we are in one place only, where only people who have access to that physical place can have access to our programming and meetings. Digital is something that is clearly very, very important, and it's also clear that, on the other hand, when we talk about new technologies or online technology or new ways of disseminating content, there are bound to be a lot of questions. And, of course, as I was saying earlier, we did overhaul the FIFA organization chart. In fact, the revised chart had five people dedicated to customer service. Their job was to answer questions from emails and on Instagram and Facebook. We had a 24-hour phone line for anyone with questions, and I'll tell you that for the first eight or nine days of the festival, our customer service people were at it non-stop, responding to questions and comments.

It was really great because a lot of the comments were on the programming as well. People would tell us they liked films on architecture or on dance or whatever. They'd also ask for advice and suggestions. Callers would say things like they have a computer, and they're trying to connect it to their TV, but they want to know how the HDMI cable works on a MacBook Pro and other stuff like that. It could get really technical. We were actually happy that questions like these came up fairly regularly and we could help. We quickly built up a bank of ready-made answers. We picked up a lot, and quickly, during the experience. Providing support like this was extremely important and it had to be bilingual since we were fielding calls from across Canada.

- **CM:** You're talking about technical challenges some of the audience may have encountered. What about any technical challenges you had to face? I would imagine it takes a ton of bandwidth to show 180 films at a time online. It couldn't have been easy, eh?

- **PDD:** No kidding. It was definitely a real technological challenge. But when any big opportunity comes along in life it's always a good idea to

do whatever has to be done to seize it and make the most of it. As luck would have it, I had the internet connection at the festival office seriously upgraded just a few weeks before the festival had been scheduled to start. I don't have to tell you how useful that serious upgrade turned out to be, to have access to the festival's own server. What it meant was we could both upload and download films from the festival's office, and also our people could do the same remotely from their homes, and when we all chipped in, we were able to have the full program of films online on the day the festival opened.

- **CM:** And did you see firsthand how this all-digital edition allowed you to extend your reach to a wider audience?

- **PDD:** We sure did. There were two segments, in fact, that I would say literally exploded during this year's festival. We really got to the under-25 segment in an amazing way. And you can see that in the data, in the stats you get from the website, and also in the connections to the platform. I think it helped that we had a whole range of programming aimed directly at them, with creators working in shorter, more compact formats, I would say. The themes were also a bit more avant-garde. Not to mention our focus on the next generation, like the focus we had on China called 'The China Wave' and it was really about young underground artists in China. No doubt that this all worked in our favour. Our success with the 25-to-45 segment was pretty impressive as well, and very interesting. It's typically a segment that's quite difficult to reach in terms of the arts and culture community in general.

- **CM:** It's a segment that never stops.

- **PDD:** That's a good way to put it. They finish school, start having kids, get a condo, a car, a dog. And it's just work, work, work and more work. So, they end up having less flexibility and often less disposable income, too. Anyway, the money and time just seem to evaporate. Truth is this segment has also increased, but in a very, very significant way. And, of course, it was relatively simple because even with children you can put them to bed at 8:00 pm and then afterwards you still have free time at home, so you don't have to...

- **CM:** Pay the babysitter.

- **PDD:** To be able to stay home and watch films. So that's really the kind of situation that's allowed us to expand our audience. And even if you're living outside of Montreal, online gets you in. When we put the festival online, I decided to devote a small budget, very small, to deliver some very highly targeted online ads in specific Canadian cities

based on certain criteria. Using Facebook and Instagram, you can really target the people you want to reach. We looked at cities that had a vibrant cultural life, and if they had film festivals or documentary festivals. So, our initial focus was on Toronto and Vancouver for sure. But arts and culture are doing well in Calgary, Halifax, and other cities, Quebec City, too. And that's where we ran ads. And I can tell you, with really small budgets we generated major interest right away. In other words, we had a lot of people logging on, particularly in Western Canada, that we never had before, that we never even imagined would be in our audience at all. We created specific messages designed to attract people who had never heard of us before. In other words, we didn't necessarily put the emphasis on FIFA because we're not necessarily well known in Vancouver and Toronto, but we pushed the program of 180 films on art, international culture, and the like, instead. Reaching people by focusing on the programming generated a lot more awareness for the festival than it would have had in Quebec and in other countries outside Canada.

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- **CM:** Do you plan on keeping the new FIFA formula in the future, in a post-COVID world? Do you think the film community is ready to accept a change like this?

- **PDD:** Look, I think it's more like a group decision. It's a question, too, of what festivals are going to be able to offer. Also, what the distributors will be willing to accept. Distributors, producers, and directors. What we're seeing right now for the next edition of the festival is much more along the lines of coexistence. Because I'm one of those people who thinks that a gathering around a film should take place in a cinema with conditions that ensure that the work is seen under optimal conditions, and that's what's important. Cinemas are better places for us to meet and exchange with others, something that both the public and the directors are big on. So, the idea of going all-digital is something I really hope doesn't happen, you understand. The only reason we did it this year was because we were caught in the middle of a terrible global health crisis. Know what I mean?

- **CM:** I get it. The 38th edition of FIFA was the pandemic edition and there won't be another.

- **PDD:** Exactly. But, on the other hand, things will never be the same in that both the public and the professionals in the business are aware

that consumption habits are changing, are in the process of changing. Expectations are certainly no longer the same. So, I think you know, before COVID there was a lot of talk about immersive content. There was this need to create immersive experiences where users could feel a wave of emotions and so on. I think we're hearing less about this type of thing now. It's no longer such a hot topic. What's actually important to me when you're doing something that's real, not virtual, is the relationship between people.

So, on the one hand, from an organizational point of view and from a strategic point of view, how do we preserve interpersonal relationships, human relationships? We all know very well that this is something we really miss - the interaction with our friends, our families, and our colleagues at work. On the other hand, how can we use digital tools to develop an audience, and reach out to people who would not otherwise have access, whether for physical or geographical reasons, and with 24-hour availability? So, how do we ensure that the physical world, and the virtual world, coexist within the physical environment and that they enrich each other in the process?

- **CM:** And the public needs to follow, too. Consuming paid arts and cultural content online is also a behavioural change and one that must continue.

- **PDD:** Absolutely, and that has us asking questions that are very, very fundamental. Because in the process of educating, learning about, and changing consumer behaviour we must be very, very careful, in my opinion, about what we do. And by we, I mean all festivals, whether film festivals, performing arts festivals, or music festivals, and so on. And also, creators of online content, because as much as I'm really in favour of free online content - I obviously have nothing against it since it's very important for cultural accessibility, after all - mustn't give people the idea that online culture is by definition free. And there's a small downside I have to mention. It just kind of happened. We've seen lots of orchestras, and artists doing free live performances, and in the current context I can completely understand it because obviously art does good, right?

- **CM:** Sure.

- **PDD:** That's what we've been working on. There's no denying that generosity like that is important, and we know that artists are generous people who need to have contact with their audience. But, on the other hand, what is the message people are getting? They're saying in a sense that we can only function with government funding. Shouldn't we also be

saying that paying customers are important, that their personal input as members of a live audience is essential. Face-to-face rapport is what any performance is all about, how it impacts the content, not to mention what's said during any question and answer session, and the intelligence they also bring to any performance or film just by being there. That's really what we're saying, and it's certain that when we address an audience that is, I would say, a little older, consumer behaviour will change, but maybe not as quickly we might like. There was a lot of inertia even before COVID, the crisis that began some three and a half months ago. An even if it lasts a little longer, it's still going to be just a short pause in their life, when these people look back.

Things are different when we look at the very young segment, I would say the 13-to-18-year-olds just discovering online cultural consumption, and they do consume a lot. Okay, that's fine. They consume on their iPads, on their phones, and on all their connected devices. What are we teaching them? Are they not getting the message that online culture has to be free? If that is the case, we can expect some very major problems in perhaps five or ten years from now when this group enters the next phase in their cultural consumption.

- **CM:** That belief was instilled already in older generations. Younger ones, too, really anyone in the past 15 years who's used YouTube. That's the culture change I was talking about. What we really need to do is to somehow find a way to instill a willingness to pay for access to culture. So, it may be still a bit too early to claim victory. I referred to your 38th edition as your pandemic edition. In a more normal edition, so to speak, and I'm not really sure what a normal edition will mean going forward, will audiences want that very particular formula you used this year again? I guess that's maybe still up in the air.

- **PDD:** No question about it. Then there's also the possibility that the online segment might cannibalize the physical part that plays out in the venue, right? So, I think we really need to rethink the experience we offer in theatres to make sure that experience is not transferable online. In other words, how can we create venue experiences that can be enjoyed only in the venue? You have to ask yourself what comes in under par online. That is, of course, the human interaction, the whole experience, the experience from the moment you leave home to go and see a film at a festival, to the moment you return home or go somewhere else.

Then, of course, we also used the word pay, which is a rather interesting verb. Maybe we have to ask ourselves if paying must always mean money. Perhaps there are other ways for people to pay, for the audience to pay.

If the films were free, could we bring other things into the experience that we could monetize like some outrageous popcorn, for example? You hear a lot of talk about how important the popcorn industry is to the movie industry. For a lot of theatres popcorn and soft drinks are real profit centres.

- **CM:** I know because I'm responsible for a good part of those profits.

- **PDD:** We haven't quite figured out what our popcorn will be? We'll have to give it some thought. Now's a time to think over a wide range of possibilities because when you're in a crisis like this you really do have to think outside the box. I mean why couldn't tickets to the festival would be totally free, but popcorn would cost you big time and there would be an awful lot of popcorn for sale? Now when I say popcorn, I mean any merchandise and plenty of it. It could also be something completely different, something that might enhance the experience. Perhaps we need to move away from the classic economic model, and come up with a more freemium model, as we call it, where people have free access and then we can monetize items of interest at the venue. The idea is that we might have to put our conventional business models back on the table and rethink them. People could come to the free festival, select the film or films they want to see, and watch them when they get back home. Then again, maybe the way we've been doing it all along is the right way. (Laughs). Know what I mean? But I do think that now is a good time to completely turn everything upside-down and see if there is a way we can think about things from a radically different perspective.

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- **CM:** Well, that's still exciting though. You seem pretty pumped up at the prospects. As you say, now is the time to start the rethinking process. Have you any thoughts on what you said earlier about maybe putting a portion of the programming online? I'm amazed you could go into so much detail on your ideas on such short notice. Looks like the crisis has kicked your thinking about cinema and digital into overdrive. Is that a fair statement?

- **PDD:** I really couldn't disagree. I certainly am pumped up about the subject. The only thing that worries me is that the stakes are so high for everyone.

- **CM:** Indeed!

- **PDD:** I think having to make suggestions for some radical innovations now is because I feel, if I may be a little critical of the industry, that the national and international film industry has always been somewhat conservative in terms of its business models. I remember some 20 years ago talking to a Quebec distributor and he was really concerned about music being pirated. So, you see it goes back a long way.

- **CM:** Who can forget Napster?

- **PDD:** Exactly, and I remember at the time I almost got the boot because I just wanted to talk about film piracy. I was told in no uncertain terms that it could never happen because downloading music is one thing, but nothing will replace the big screen and anyway the internet will never be fast enough for people to download films, and the formats are far too complicated, blah, blah, blah. Well, obviously that person was completely wrong right down the line and I've had more than a few experiences like that over the years, behaviour that proved to me that people who thought they knew better, people on their high horse, as they say, and all they ever did really was put the brakes on any attempt at innovation. So, the only way is to apply as much sheer force as you can to get the disruptive innovation process going. One thing for sure is that going backwards would be a big mistake and for a lot of reasons, including economic reasons, and for the reason that consumption patterns have changed. You do have to think completely differently. You do have to really think outside the box, and then you have to be able to accept full responsibility if you fail. Because no one can say they're going to make a breakthrough innovation, on one hand, and then say they're 100% certain that it's going to work, on the other hand. Because if you're 100% certain it's going to work, then it's not a breakthrough innovation. You see what I'm trying to say?

- **CM:** Absolutely. Every innovation is a risk.

- **PDD:** Exactly. This is where partners come in, particularly public partners, who can help us, who can support us, to reduce the risk in certain areas through their expertise, through research, through studies on consumer behaviour, and so on. And, of course, financially so that we have some kind of safety net. So, it's time to break some eggs and make some breakthrough innovations and I think the last thing you should do is look at what different festivals around the world are doing right now and say ah, now what am I going to do? I think you have to ask yourself what your job really is, what your programming is, what fascinates you, what fascinates the people who come to your festival, and how you can offer the content to match in a completely different way.

- **CM:** That sounds pretty exciting to me. I can't wait to see what comes next. Before we end, I have one final question for you, Philippe del Drago. As you said, we're obviously in an emergency situation. And it all happened so fast we hardly knew what hit us. If you had to do it all over again, would you do it all over again in the same way?

- **PDD:** I think if we did things in exactly the same way it would be a sign that we were bored and boredom is a sign of non-innovation, so I think I would obviously change some things. I also think that putting the festival online under the conditions at the time was the right decision. Actually, it's not what I think, it's what I know. It was the right decision to make at the time. I can't say if it would be the right decision for some future time. What would I change? Maybe not too much. Maybe some technological aspects that people wouldn't really notice anyway. Some details here and there, but otherwise I would say that, roughly speaking, it was really the right thing to do and we are very satisfied, in fact, with the results.

- **CM:** And you managed to save everyone's job, which in itself, is a major accomplishment in the annals of COVID-19. Bravo! And thank you Philippe del Drago for spending this time with us. It was very refreshing, and we really look forward to the 39th edition of FIFA next year. We can't wait to see how the lessons you learned in this year's totally unique edition will have an impact on next year's festival. And when the 40th comes around, who knows what we can expect?

- **PDD:** You bet, and let's make the most of it!

- **CM:** It's a deal and thanks again.

- **PDD:** I thank you.

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And that's about it for this episode of Futur et médias, a podcast series presented by the Canada Media Fund.

Thanks to our guest, International Festival of Films on Art executive and artistic director Philippe del Drago.

This interview brings Season 2 of Futur et médias to a close. Thank you for joining us and I hope you enjoyed all six episodes.

For production notes and a transcript of this episode, please visit the CMF Trends website.

Finally, if you've enjoyed this episode, please take a moment to rate the series on Apple Podcasts.

I'm Catherine Mathys. See you again soon.

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