

# “What Am I Doing Here?” Film Festivals, Awards Shows, and Stars During the COVID-19 Emergency

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## Abstract

Weaving together celebrity studies and film festival studies, the essay underscores how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the stars’ presence, mode of appearance, and employment within the rituals of film festivals and awards ceremonies. It also touches upon the way COVID-19 has impacted the relationship between film stars and their public within such events and how this relationship has been rethought also through the exploitation of Internet technologies. To this end, the essay benefits from interviews conducted with the artistic directors of the main Italian film festivals and awards ceremonies as well as with film stars that have attended such events under these unprecedented circumstances. More precisely, after providing a general outline of the changes that occurred within Italian film festivals and awards ceremonies during 2020 and how they have impacted the self-promotion of film stars, the essay focuses on two key events of the Italian awards and festival season: the David di Donatello awards ceremony and the Venice Film Festival.

**Keywords:** Film Festivals; Film Awards; Italian Stardom; Covid-19.

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## 1 Festival, Awards and Stardom: Ritual Reciprocity<sup>1</sup>

It has been more than 50 years since French sociologist Edgar Morin remarked:

The Festival, by its ceremony and its glamorous *mise en scène* attempts to prove to the universe that the stars are faithful to their image. Everything in the Festival's internal economy as well as in its daily manifestations indicates that for the stars there is not, on one hand, a private, everyday, and banal life and, on the other, an ideal and glorious image. [...]. The stars lead a festival existence: the Festival leads a life of stars – a movie life. (Morin 1961: 61-62)

The mutual solidarity of film festivals and stars has been repeatedly highlighted, but rarely deeply scrutinized. In the work of Morin, who discussed stardom through an anthropological lens, what is crucial is the reciprocity of *stars as extraordinary beings* and *festivals as an extraordinary time and experience*. The festival is the playground for exceptional beings, who meet in lavish settings, located amidst the most celebrated touristic spots, to prove their physical existence as much as the essence of their myth, that is "a life of play" (Morin 1961: 60). Conversely, film festivals benefit from the stars' presence, which in Morin's opinion replaced films themselves as the main attraction of the event. This extraordinariness has nothing but increased in recent times. According to programmer Mark Peranson (2008: 37), "Festivals have a number of advantages over regular arthouse screenings, in that festivals are *events*. And we are currently living in an event-driven culture [...]. Because they are events [...], festivals have a greater promotional budget to attract audiences". To achieve and reinforce the eventfulness of festivals and awards, rituals must be deployed. In her influential and ground-breaking research, Dutch media scholar Marijke de Valck (2007: 29-39) looked at film festivals through two main lenses: rituality and actor/network theory. In fact, she considers film festivals to be rites of passage that bestow cultural legitimization upon artifacts within a liminal space. Drawing on the scholarship of anthropologists such as Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, de Valck claims:

During a rite of passage an individual is subjected to a series of ritualistic and symbolic performances that represent his/her transition to another social position. Structuralist formulation in its original form had already wilfully revealed the parallel with film festivals to the casual observer. Festivals display a variety of rituals (red carpet premières) and symbolic acts (awards ceremonies) that contribute to the cultural positioning of films and filmmakers in the film world (de Valck 2007: 35).

Among the rituals associated with the exhibition of screen performers within the framework of film festivals, scholar Felicity Chaplin (2019) enumerates red carpet and photocalls, press conferences, awards ceremonies, and scandals. All these rituals contribute to the "mutual dependence which transcends strictly filmic considerations. Festivals use stars to promote not so much films as the festivals themselves, and stars appear at festivals to increase their visibility and marketability as stars" (Chaplin 2019: 8).

In this essay, our aim is to scrutinize and understand if this mutuality between stars and film festivals and awards endured the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, we focus on the role that Italian film stars held within the framework of film festivals and film awards shows during the first and most difficult year of the pandemic, against the background of a general social and health emergency which deeply affected media in Italy and worldwide (see Cucco 2021). As is the case for the film industries of most EU countries, the Italian one also heavily relies on public funding and a related economy of prestige, distinguishing allegedly outstanding works from trivial ones. Accordingly, looking at festivals and awards, which concur in selecting and showcasing films as much as actresses and actors, helps us understanding how these events have built prestige by displaying rituals; conversely, scrutinizing how these rituals happened in such radically altered circumstances as those of a pandemic sheds light on their constructedness.

Both past and recent debates occasionally opposed business- and audience-oriented festivals, or cinephiliac and star-based events (Czach 2010). However, we posit that this opposition is questionable in general, and

1. The arguments and the general structure of this article have been discussed collegially by the three authors. However, in particular, Cristina Formenti wrote the paragraph "The COVID of Donatello: A Domestic Awards Show" and co-wrote "Conclusion"; Francesco Pitassio wrote the paragraphs "Festival, Awards and Stardom: Ritual Reciprocity", "Critical Festivals: Networks, Adaptability, and the COVID-19 Crisis", and "Normal Extraordinariness, or the Other Way Around: The 77<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival" and co-wrote "Conclusion"; Sara Sampietro wrote "Star, Festivals and Awards Shows in 2020".

misleading when applied to contemporary Italian film stars. Broadly speaking, as Paul McDonald (2013: 221) thoroughly discussed, even Hollywood stardom coins and nurtures prestige stars, whose celebrity does not rely on box office revenues, but on "the accumulation of award nominations and wins, or [...] positive critical notices from the culturally legitimated press, which defines their status". We believe that the Italian film industry works as an institution mostly as state cinema, that is under the patronage of the state and through public support (see Elsaesser 2005; Cucco and Manzoli 2017). This rationale originates an oscillation between economic and cultural values and film festivals that works in both directions, converting symbolic value into financial ones, or prestige actresses and actors into marketable stars. In fact, in the scholarship of James F. English, who moves in the wake of Pierre Bourdieu, prizes and awards conflate two kinds of economies, that is financial and symbolic, and this equivocality is strictly inherent to them. In his words,

Prizes have issued from societies and associations of artists, from academic coteries and committees, even from individual artists and critics, as rapidly as they have from corporate sponsors and wealthy philanthropists, and this is largely owing to the fact that they are the single best instrument for negotiating transactions between cultural and economic, cultural and social, or cultural and political capital—which is to say that they are our most effective institutional agents of *capital intraconversion* (English 2005: 10–11).

This premised, in this essay, after more broadly illustrating how film festivals and awards shows worked in 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 emergency, and how the role of actors and actresses within such events have been reshaped, we address more in depth two events that best substantiate the different ways in which the exceptional circumstances determined by the pandemic has been dealt with: the 2020 edition of the David di Donatello awards show and the 77<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival.

## 2 Critical Festivals: Networks, Adaptability, and the COVID-19 Crisis

Among the most remarkable characteristics of film festivals Marijke de Valck (2007) mentions adaptability. The Dutch scholar discusses film festivals through the lens of Actor Network Theory, as conceptualized in Bruno Latour's work (see Latour 2005). According to the French scholar, social relations are permanently shifting and redetermined, and involve humans and non-human entities as well as material and conceptual factors. However, de Valck advances that if, as Latour believes, networks are inherently unstable, the film festival system, in her view, is certainly a fragile network, but originates its strength in resilience. In her words, "the film festival network is successful and capable of self-preservation precisely because it knows how to adapt to changing circumstances" (de Valck 2007: 35-36).

Furthermore, in his pioneering work, media anthropologist Daniel Dayan, who surveyed as a case study Sundance Film Festival (Dayan 2000), found that film festivals are socially constructed realities made of written and performative material. But how did the pandemic affect and alter these realities? How did their components and participants, and notably screen performers, reshape it?

Institutional surveys and film festival scholars explored how hard the pandemic hit film festivals and the Cultural and Creative Sector. A report produced in late 2020 for the Council of Europe indicates that "according to the European Festival Association (EFA), the average value of the estimated loss is EUR 150.000 and the median is EUR 40.000 per festival, with tremendous repercussion for the touristic sector and local economy" (KEAnet 2020: 3). A previous report by the European Parliamentary Research Service hinted at the sudden transition of most film festivals to an online mode: a shift which might imply a pitfall, too, for what the transition to streaming services entails in terms of audiences, attendance, and social life (Katsarova 2020). Marijke de Valck and Antoine Damiens (2020) highlighted the peculiar condition of film festivals, a suspension, while also hinting at the inherent resonance between crisis and media. By focusing on the case of US-based film festival SXSW, Phil Hobbins-White and Brad Limov (2020: 329) ask a more radical question, underpinning also our article: "Can film festivals still function as media events without physical components? How might both their exclusivity and opportunities for social interaction be approximated online for filmmakers and audiences alike during a pandemic?"

The Italian Association of Film Festivals (AFIC) recently published a report about film festivals during the COVID-19 crisis, based on a sample of 142 events (Pommier and Gosetti 2021). From it, it emerges, among

other things, firstly, that in 2020 more than 40% of film festivals took place in person, 30% just online, and almost the same percentage in a hybrid form, partly online and partly in person. Most festivals relied upon the platform which MyMovies, a TVOD provider, offered. In fact, more precisely, an analysis of the different strategies adopted by the main Italian film festivals and awards shows allowed us to identify four predominant modes of carrying out the event:

- 1) in person, but fully complying with security measures (as in the case of the Venice Film Festival);
- 2) fully online, through TVOD platforms (as it occurred for instance for the Trieste Film Festival);
- 3) what we can refer to as the "TV studio mode", which involves delivering the contents through the mediation of a presenter (e.g., the cases of the awards shows David di Donatello and Nastri d'Argento);
- 4) the blended mode, which offered the presence of national actors and actresses but confined international guests to online contacts (as it was the case of the Giffoni Film Festival to which US stars Richard Gere and Sylvester Stallone participated only virtually).

Secondarily, the report brought to light that 96% of the film festivals held meetings with artists, including actors, and more than 70% workshops. Most of these initiatives took place either on Facebook or YouTube. Therefore, despite the pandemic, *film festivals were resilient and maintained the involvement of screen performers within their activities*, even if the network supporting them was vulnerable. Indeed, many festivals had to find additional resources for their online edition, while more than 30% underwent cuts to the private support.

Beyond the dramatic uncertainty that most festivals faced in terms of organization, schedule, human resources, artistic and financial resources, we believe that the restrictions that the COVID-19 crisis enforced on the staff and the audience and the need for many events to migrate to streaming platforms deeply affected the nature of events of film festivals. British film scholar Janet Harbord attempts to draw an archaeology of film festivals, with regards to temporality. The chronological experience of film festivals is alternative to social time. In fact, social time is increasingly one of "distributed nonalignment," conflating working and leisure time, and capitalizing on the latter to produce value. Conversely, the film festival "operates a temporality which runs counter to the deregulated environment in which it exists" (Harbord 2016: 69). Harbord argues that film festivals bring together a cyclical time – the annual iteration – and eventfulness – a regulated number of contingencies and controversies, producing the uniqueness of each edition. However, both historicity and eventfulness happen as regulated phenomena. We posit that this undergoes major shifts when film festivals partly or entirely migrate online, and their time is no longer separated from our common experience, designed on specific timeslots (i.e., screenings, press conferences, periods of the year), but collapses into our deregulated time. Furthermore, if screen performers are a crucial component of the film festivals' eventfulness, through the rituals revolving around them, changed circumstances during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on these ceremonies and the place actresses and actors held within them.

### 3 Star, Festivals, and Awards Shows in 2020

To better understand how the presence of actresses and actors within Italian film festivals and awards shows changed during 2020, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the artistic directors of those events that, as Claudio Bisoni (2016) has shown, give out prizes that confer an automatic "reputational asset". That is, we focused on those 19 festivals and awards shows, heterogeneous in terms of size of the manifestation, that two subsequent bills on film and media production identified as the events whose awards bestowed unto artistic personnel contribute at defining whether a production project is qualitative enough to be supported with funding (Bisoni 2016, Cucco 2017). Therefore, by the law, these Italian film festivals and awards in concrete terms convert the cultural value of film acting into financial support to film production. In this sample fall major events such as the Venice Film Festival or the David di Donatello, mid-sized festivals like Trieste Film Festival or Bergamo Film Meeting, and smaller initiatives, such as Sedocicorto or Skepto Film Festival. The interviews have been conducted using the video chat platforms Zoom and Skype to allow the safest possible conditions healthwise but also to facilitate the organization of the meetings and more easily reach interviewees living in different contexts geographically far from each other. In addition, this interview situation proved functional

for putting at ease the interviewees (who were able to connect from home, from their everyday environment), favoring a direct, authentic and in many cases also confidential and informal exchange (see Caliandro and Gandini 2019, Stella et al. 2019).

The interviews followed a semi-structured guideline (see Di Fraia and Risi 2019), divided into thematic macro areas and conceived to be adaptable based on the answers of each interviewee and the development of the conversation. The interviewees were first asked to illustrate the identity and the origins of their festival. Subsequently, more specific issues connected to the presence of film stars at their event were addressed, including the role(s) entrusted to actors and actresses, the way in which they are recruited, their on-field handling, and the way in which their presence is communicated and promoted. Each of these items has been reread also in the face of the changes and restrictions imposed by the pandemic. In addition, the interviewees were asked to support their claims with concrete examples and "anecdotes" so to be able to gain an understanding also of the more emotional, spontaneous, and characterizing aspects of each festival experience.

The interviews, which had a variable duration of between 30 and 60 minutes depending on the availability and the commitment of the counterpart, have been conducted by a researcher experienced in non-directive methods, sided by one with a strong knowledge in film and star studies to grant a correct and in-depth coverage of the different issues. All interviews have been videorecorded with the consent of the interviewees and have been the object of an "edited transcription" (see Losito 2004; Corbetta 2015) so as to favor a comparative analysis of the collected data.

For the entire layout of the field research a "grounded approach" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Tarozzi 2008), characterized by a continuous circularity between data collection and analysis has been followed. That is, the guideline of the interview was modified based on the feedbacks collected and new issues arisen. In addition, interpretative models that served as spur for the subsequent interviews were gradually built.

From the interviews conducted and developed as such it emerged, first of all, that the reasons for persisting in organizing the events were various but fell into two major categories: *continuity* and *solidarity*. To the former belong motivations such as the attempt not to lose money, time, or relationships achieved in the past as well as the willingness not to discontinue a historical initiative. Within the latter, instead, falls the desire to display recent film productions and offer a hub to the film industry that the crisis struck hard, or the attempt at staying close to the audience. For example, an interviewee declared: "Carry on, give it a shot... it was important for all film industry professionals. We couldn't not do it". Another one said: "Perhaps this is a new way to reach audiences apparently not interested in festivals. We have undertaken a work of sensitization to cinema".

Secondly, and most importantly, the interviews brought to light that by substantially imposing the adoption of new technologies the pandemic allowed an achievement, namely the increase of visibility and outreach to different audiences of the event itself, and consequently of the screen performers taking part in it. For this reason, several festival directors interviewed (and especially those of smaller size events) declared that for the post-pandemic future they were considering complementing the usual ways of star-exhibition with virtual ones (including those developed through social media). A festival director explained: "We had to rethink everything. At the beginning it seemed just a loss. Then we understood the advantages ... We were able to have important international guests who we could have never had in an in-person event". Another director pointed out: "I need to see our festival happen again within the city walls ... but we will certainly keep a virtual component in the future ... because we have seen that video-chat meetings work well, they have enabled a positive mood akin to that of informal chit-chat ... with direct and genuine exchanges". Indeed, more generally speaking, these new forms of storytelling have proven functional, found appreciation in audiences, and allowed stars to showcase their empathy as well as their improv and speaking skills.

However, it also emerged that the functions stars usually hold within such events has been severely impacted by the pandemic. Indeed, normally, the main roles of a star within the framework of a film festival are juror, patron, or awardee. In 2020, the first one was less visible, and frequently meetings of the jury took place online, at a distance. One of the interviewees explained: "It has been an event completely different from the previous ones and thus also the roles had to change, they had to be adapted to the environment". Broadly speaking, patrons became less institutional and gained in terms of intimacy, as in the heartfelt, to the point of awkwardness, performance of Anna Foglietta at the Venice Film Festival. One of the festival directors

interviewed declared: "Actors also have showcased their most spontaneous and natural side. In that moment we were all 'on the same level', all scared but also willing to get back on our feet". Another one stated: "It has been difficult but also highly heart-warming, intimate ... among the stars, the awardees there was an unusual atmosphere, as if we were all living the same situation". Indeed, awardees forcefully lost in terms of glamour, as the ritual of the red carpet was weakened or disappeared.

Among the roles that stars play within the framework of film festivals, we might also list glamour, attraction, market-oriented initiatives, humanization, and regional, national, or international promotion. Yet, glamour and related rituals underwent drastic reductions or disappeared from the 2020 editions of Italian festivals and awards, either due to the fact itself that the event took place online or even just because organizers preferred sobriety over excess. Red carpets, photocalls, and open meetings were cancelled or significantly reduced. In this respect, for instance, one of the festival directors interviewed declared: "Festivals are fashion, events, and mundanity, and they must go back to being this. Yet, this year [2020] we have tested another style and attitude". Another one stated: "It has been a sober festival. We couldn't do otherwise. But it has come spontaneously, we all wanted it ... A mood chosen by everybody that has naturally emerged". Moreover, while normally at film festivals a star is frequently a means for market-oriented initiatives, since private sponsorships met major cuts the presence of the so-called talents was accordingly affected.

Also, if screen performers usually provide events with a human face, fostering identification and emotion, during 2020, while emotion was preserved through online events, the aura of the encounter was lost. For example, one of the festival directors interviewed stated: "We missed the people, the applause, the screaming but also seeing the bars open till late and the city that lives with and for the festival". Furthermore, for many festivals, stars could no longer be a means for contributing at promoting the city or area hosting the cultural event by integrating them into the surroundings, through meetings, photocalls, and so on. Indeed, the protocols and restrictions in place obliged the festivals to reduce the promotion of and connection with the city/region in which the event normally took place. In addition, due to the restrictions in place, national actresses and actors had not as many chances of being exposed to different production cultures as they would have had if sharing the event with foreign performers in person rather than just online.

Finally, stars join in festivals for many reasons, including self-promotion, exposure, and expanding their professional network (e.g., see Mezias et al. 2008). However, during the height of the emergency, their motivations shifted. Appearing within a festival framework turned into a simple act of presence and witnessing, enhancing the professional attitude, despite hard circumstances. Also, in many cases, taking part in the event became a way to belong to a professional community, through repeated statements of support for its less privileged members.

All in all, festivals spread a different image of stars: normal in its everydayness, and notably when displayed in their households; intimate, in their domestic seclusion; vulnerable to the virus, as everybody else; and, most of all, supportive to colleagues, media professionals, and the nation altogether, as in the addresses presenters and awardees delivered at official ceremonies. These new narratives promoted a domesticated, normalized, often solitary representation of stardom, more intimate – as social network celebrity already circulating – and, most of all, vulnerable and therefore supportive. Indeed, this new dimension has been described by interviewees using the adjectives "authentic", "normal", and "domestic" as well as words like "warm" or "close" and expressions like "as us, as anybody", "isolated but with a great desire of interacting with their audiences". Moreover, for instance, one of the festival directors interviewed has declared: "We have seen them in their houses, among their belongings, in their environment, surrounded by their loved ones, and this has had an incredible impact on the audience, also in terms of social media communication".

In fact, this development increased due to new forms of storytelling, which relied on social networks for displaying stardom – Italian stardom being usually reluctant to online presence (see Pitassio 2021)<sup>2</sup>: informal chat from within the household; open dialogue with the audience; and brainstorming with other celebrities, both national and international.

In order to more concretely understand these shifts and changes, let us consider the exemplar cases of the 2020 edition of the David di Donatello awards show and the 77<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival. We chose to

2. More generally, on the reluctance of Italian film stars to expose themselves see Bioni 2016.

scrutinize these two cases because of their relevance for the Italian film industry and stars. In fact, as previously explained, awards bestowed at these events contribute to attracting State funding for subsequent projects casting awardees. Furthermore, both are key social events, because they act as moments where the national film industry represents itself either to the country (David di Donatello) or at an international level (Venice Film Festival), or because they offer an opportunity for social networking (Venice Film Festival). Finally, whereas the rest of the festivals we surveyed have little or no room within national public broadcasting, David di Donatello and Venice Film Festival are televised, which testifies for the significance of these events and increases the visibility of national film stars.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4 "The COVID di Donatello": A Domestic Awards Show

Ironically referred to by actor Roberto Benigni as "the COVID di Donatello" and presented by its artistic director, Piera Detassis (in Ulivi 2020: 43), as "a David of the emergency", the 2020 edition of the David di Donatello awards show was put together with the spirit of creating attention around an industry whose many workers were "experiencing uncertain times". What mattered was that it happened, even if this meant that it had to be an unusual ceremony, as it ended up being. Indeed, presenter Carlo Conti hosted it from an empty TV studio, while the nominees of the main categories joined him virtually from their homes exploiting video chat technologies. Consequently, the show was characterized by an abundance of those low definition visual and aural aesthetics, such as glitches or metallic voices, determined by digital technology faults that are "synonymous with authenticity, sincerity, and even truth" (Casetti 2015: 121) but also with precarity, as Arild Fetveit (2015) has suggested. And as such, through their very presence the moment of extreme insecurity and vulnerability that the film industry was enduring at the time was conveyed also at an aesthetic level.

In addition, due to how it was structured, the 2020 David di Donatello awards show was marked by the absence of some of its usual ritual components wherein stars have a key role, such as the red carpet, the glitz and glamour, and the material handover of the prize. Indeed, to physically hold the David in their hands winners had to wait for it to be delivered to their homes in the following days. The statuettes, which were aligned on a table next to Conti, were assigned only virtually by the host himself. Thus, a role that normally sees the stars as protagonists such as that of offering the awards to the winners was completely cut.

Yet, perhaps to compensate for these absences, first of all, the nominated actors and actresses were devoted much space during the show. Breaking the usual ritual that sees only the winner give a speech, for each of the four acting-related categories (i.e., best actress in a supporting role, best actor in a supporting role, best actress in a leading role, and best actor in a leading role) all the nominees were invited to say a few words prior to the announcement of who had been awarded the prize. These speeches were used by many mostly to convey their emotions and acknowledge collaborators. However, not surprisingly – if we consider that, as Richard Dyer (1991) pointed out, a star normally embodies values that "are felt to be under threat or in crisis ..., or else to be values that are key to understanding and coping with contemporary life" – various actors and actresses exploited these moments also to hint to the precarity that the entire industry was experiencing. For instance, Fabrizio Ferracane used part of his speech to express "the hope that they could soon go back to work together on sets", while Benigni meaningfully dedicated his nomination "to all workers of the entertainment industry".

Secondly, perhaps in the attempt of offering an image of sobriety in line with the difficulties of the moment, the domestic space "as house" was erased as much as possible (Baschiera and De Rosa 2020: 4). In other words, from an architectural perspective, the stars hid the home context from which they were appearing by choosing a monochromatic – and more precisely, in most cases, white – wall or drape as background, almost as if they wanted to give the impression of being in a neutral space, a nonplace (e.g., see Figure 1). Borrowing the oxymoronic expression used by Alice Leppert (2020: 498) to describe how the pandemic brought ordinary people to celebrate themselves, we could thus say that the stars set up for themselves a "fictional domestic space of television" in their homes. Yet, they opted for an artificial, neutral space of sobriety rather than for a celebratory one.

3. The two following paragraphs do not incorporate statements or declarations originated in the interviews we held, because we granted anonymity to the interviewees. Accordingly, we stuck to the non-disclosure agreement we had with our counterparts.



Figure 1. Actor Luigi Lo Cascio with a white drape behind him that hides the architectural features of his house

At the same time, however, the domesticity of this peculiar edition of the award show was highlighted by giving space to the home as “a site of ... family bonds” (Baschiera and De Rosa 2020: 11), especially during the acceptance speeches. Indeed, in various cases, loved ones briefly made an appearance onscreen to congratulate the winning star. The wife of Pierfrancesco Favino, actress Anna Ferzetti, quickly came to kiss him after he was virtually awarded his first David as Best Actor in a Leading Role. The two sons of Luigi Lo Cascio were encouraged to go and hug their dad in front of the camera, after it was announced that he had won the statuette as Best Actor in a Supporting Role. Likewise, the daughter of Jasmine Trinca, recipient of the David for Best Actress in a Leading Role, also made a brief appearance to congratulate her mother to the benefit of the camera. Furthermore, several stars recouped and somehow challenged the notion of “home as a safe place” (Baschiera and De Rosa 2020: 9) through their pre- or post-winner-announcement speeches. Indeed, many expressed their surprise in realizing that, despite being in the comfort of their homes, the emotions that they were feeling were equivalent or even greater to those that they had felt at in-person ceremonies in the past. For instance, during the short speech he gave as nominee in the Best Actor in a Supporting Role category prior to the announcement of the winner, Carlo Buccirosso declared: “I thought that from home it would have been more comfortable. Instead, the emotion is triple”. Stefano Accorsi, who was given the virtual floor immediately after him, confirmed: “It is an emotional moment even from home. I would have never imagined it. In fact, I am stuttering, and it never happened to me before.” Likewise, in his pre-winner-announcement speech for the Best Actor in a Leading Role category, Pierfrancesco Favino underlined: “The heart is racing much more than I would have expected. If the evening is more comfortable as far as shoes are concerned, since one can keep them unlaced, it is not under this perspective”. And on this aspect the latter star insisted also in interviews given in the days following the awards show. For instance, to journalist Valerio Cappelli of newspaper *Corriere della Sera* he declared: “I don’t know why but the emotion from home was hundredfold” (Favino in Cappelli 2020: 49).

In sum, as highlighted in the title of an article reviewing the event that was published in newspaper *Il Mattino di Padova*, the 2020 edition of the David di Donatello awards was “the night of the stars from home” (Anonymous 2020). Indeed, while alternative paths were undertaken to maintain actors and actresses central to the event despite the main limitations that the COVID-19 emergency was imposing, the contingencies of the peculiar moment that the world was undergoing were mirrored by having them engage moderately and wisely with the domesticity of this unconventional iteration of the show.

## 5 Normal Extraordinariness, or the Other Way Around: The 77<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival

The 77<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival celebrated an alleged restart of the festival circuit – and more generally of the film industry – but with all required restrictions in terms of health and safety. The first film festival to happen in person, after such major events as the Cannes Film Festival were canceled, took place under two keywords: extraordinariness and normalcy. As actress Maya Sansa put it, when we interviewed her

about her presence at the event:

I felt nothing was missing... There was a widespread desire to celebrate cinema and be together, which I found extraordinary. Moreover, there were no confusion, hysteria, or crowds. Just the most affectionate cinephiles, and friends catching up. It has been wonderful for me.<sup>4</sup>

As previously discussed, film festivals stand out from the usual spatial-temporal experience: located in renowned and stunning cities or settings, film festivals, and notably some of the most prominent, inherit the flair of tourism for elites, while separating their environment and modes of vision from everydayness. That being said, this was not the extraordinariness that Venice 2020 performed. In fact, as its director Alberto Barbera explained, what was unprecedented were the circumstances under which the whole event was organized. He declared:

Like everybody, we were totally uncertain for a long time. Until the end of May nobody had a clue of what was before us. Therefore, we worked as if the festival could take place under usual circumstances. We had to work virtually, and I must confess that often the feeling that nothing could really take place prevailed. Despite this, many films came in and we never stopped selecting them. Only by early June, however, and even more so by the end of the month we could start thinking in practical terms and designing what we call the festival's "usual day" (Barbera in Manassero 2020: 6).

Accordingly, the festival struggled to offer its usual and vast film selection, within almost the same venues, while implementing and painstakingly enforcing all due measures for preventing contagion. Many observers remarked upon and praised such a comeback to normalcy, with all required care, as a celebration of a revitalization of urban space (Stanford 2020), or as a return to an irreplaceable in-person shared experience (Winfield 2020). The whole festival area was secured: temperature controls were enforced; masks were mandatory; and admittance to screenings required advance booking of the seats so as to guarantee social distancing.

What epitomizes the extraordinariness of major film festivals, that is the red carpet, was as usual there, whereas in other film festivals, such as the Toronto International Film Festival, the stars' pageant was cancelled (Delap 2020). However, its mediatory function between production and vision, filmmakers and cinephiles, and most of all fans and stars underwent a reconfiguration. The place for displaying luxurious fashion and celebrity stuck to the sober standards which marked media events at the time of COVID-19. Therefore, if the red carpet is the place condensing the extraordinariness of the event through a pageant of glamour, stating the value of the production whose stars parade before fans, and concealing the workforce behind the scenes (Mitchell 2021), possibly only this latter function was fully performed at Venice 2020. Being a secluded area, which only photographers and cameramen could access (see Figure 2), the red carpet greatly reduced its traditional function of being a space where stars and fans can come closer.



Figure 2. The red carpet of the 77<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival

4. After interviewing the artistic directors of film festivals, we have conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews also with a selection of Italian film stars that have been awarded at least a David di Donatello, and actress Maya Sansa was one of the actresses that were part of the sample. Indeed, in conducting the research we not only sought a gender balance but also a balancing of roles, and we have activated a process of "snowball sampling" (i.e., a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects) (see Vitalini 2010).

The awards ceremony, which took place in the Sala Grande of the Palazzo del Cinema on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2020, attempted to reinforce a sense of community. Not by chance, in the opening speech of the patron of the festival, Anna Foglietta, the pronoun "we" was used to address the film community and, more generally, society. However, the ceremony was also under the sign of uncertainty and hybridity.<sup>5</sup> Many awardees could not attend the ceremony, due to national and/or international restrictions, as was the case with the directors receiving the Golden Lion and the Silver Lion, respectively Chloe Zhao and Kurosawa Kiyoshi, who sent video message. Masks embodied the essence of the normal extraordinariness of the edition and ceremony, and became a glamorous object themselves, as in the case of those worn by Tilda Swinton (Okwudu 2020). However, masks epitomized the anomaly of extraordinary normalcy: actresses and actors alternately wore them on stage or took them off too soon, shedding light on the precariousness of the enforced protocol and of stars' existence during the COVID crisis. Proxemics between people on stage was also uncertain, as the hug and kiss without mask between the President of the Jury, Cate Blanchett, and the patron of the festival, Anna Foglietta, reveals. To summarize, if film festivals rely on the extraordinary experience of proximity to stars and glamour, and on social interaction and professional networking, Venice 2020 certainly magnified the resilience of one of the major events in the world and highlighted the sense of community and sobriety that made it possible. However, the festival also reduced the sense of eventfulness usually associated with a series of regulated controversies and happenings, rituals and occasions, which forcefully underwent significant reduction or awkward and momentary transgression. Stars constantly hinted at the eventfulness of the pandemic, which was the major extraordinary circumstance taking place and forcing the actresses and actors to seek normalcy in two ways: in terms of address, in repeatedly evoking a community countering the virus and, therefore, working as testimonials of a shared effort and challenge; in terms of performance, by struggling to enforce an exemplary behaviour by respecting the protocol, which they often violated during the awards ceremony, thus exposing the artificial normalcy at the time of the COVID crisis.

## 6 Conclusion

The attempts that, during 2020, Italian film festivals and awards shows made to adapt their usual rituals to the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic produced heterogeneous results and undeniably had repercussions on the function actresses and actors normally play within such events. Yet, even if the most affected rituals were the ones through which they habitually create symbolic and economic capital, stars have not stopped having a key role in such events. Only, now they appeared more as heralds of a category experiencing precarity rather than ambassadors of glamour and luxury. Indeed, the setting for exhibiting the latter and magnifying screen performers either underwent major reshuffling and was somehow "rendered private" by making it inaccessible to the audience, or simply disappeared and was replaced by households. Accordingly, magnificence faded away, while intimacy, precariousness, and solidarity took over. Film festivals and awards shows capitalized on what the changing circumstances generated, with the aim of testifying of their resilience. Today we still cannot foretell if the transformations that the pandemic produced in the rituals that such events display and the role stars hold within them are here to stay or will swiftly and completely disappear once the COVID-19 crisis finally end. Yet, already from the interviews with festival directors that we undertook a desire to revert to what was before the pandemic emerged. For instance, one of them declared: "Our festival is strongly linked to the territory. It is also a means for promoting and valuing our area ... This aspect with the ongoing restrictions has fallen short but it needs to be recouped in the near future". Similarly, referring to the 2020 edition of their festival, one of the interviewees stated: "The films selected this year were seen by more people thanks to the online platform. However, I think that going to the movie theatre and visiting the city during the days of the festival is a different experience from a cultural and emotional point of view ... it is not comparable to viewing a film at home on your laptop". And returning to the pre-COVID-19 outbreak rituals and habits seems to also be the path that has been undertaken in practice. For instance, the fact that the 2021 edition of the David di Donatello not only happened in person but also reinstated such rituals as the red carpet or the use of stars as awarders and the fact that the 2022 edition even took place in the same Cinecittà theatre

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5. The broadcast of the whole ceremony can be retrieved on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy084C7MwWA> (last accessed 22-12-2021).

as before the COVID-19 outbreak point at least to a desire to make the "new normal" as close as possible to the pre-pandemic normal – that is, the normal extraordinariness of bestowing prestige to and through stars.

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