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NECSUS
European Journal of Media Studies

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2023

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19745

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Pires, Bianca: 17th DocsMX: Returning to the streets and meeting with audiences. In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Ports, Jg. 12 (2023), Nr. 1, S. 305–315. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19745.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:
https://necsus-ejms.org/17th-docsmx-returning-to-the-streets-and-meeting-with-audiences/

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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MEDIA STUDIES
www.necsus-ejms.org

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NECSUS 12 (1), Spring 2023: 305–315
URL: https://necsus-ejms.org/17th-docsmx-returning-to-the-streets-and-meeting-with-audiences/

In person events, human contact, direct encounters with the protagonists are the keys to a film festival. We are still in a pandemic, let's not forget, but we are already returning to theaters, to that dark but bright place that makes us feel so comfortable.[1]

The introductory text for the 17th International Documentary Film Festival of Mexico City (DocxMX),[2] published in the program guide In Docs We Trust 10, reaffirms the centrality that in-person gatherings have for the festival's dynamics. In 2022, DocsMX commemorated the return to in-person events after two years with restrictions due to the pandemic.[3] The 17th edition of DocsMX took place from 13-23 October in Mexico City. A selection of 91 titles were featured at 121 screenings. In addition, part of the program was available nationwide through the Docs en línea platform (Docs online).[4]

The opening film for DocsMX was proof of the festival's power to bring people together. Two hours before the screening's scheduled time, the first attendees began to line up to enter the courtyard of Claustro de Sor Juana University. Before long, the line stretched along the entire length of the block that houses this imposing building located in the Historic Center of Mexico City. Admission was free, and the only condition was to have previously registered on the festival's official website.

Fig. 1: Opening ceremony in the Claustro de Sor Juana University.

The screening took place under a starry sky. The film selected for the opening was *Werner Herzog. Radical Dreamer* (2022), by Thomas von Steinacker, preceded by a screening of *Trasiego*, an expanded documentary by the Tijuana-based collective Antropotrip. The huge courtyard was filled with spectators and film workers gathered in a great celebration. In their opening speeches, the founders Inti Cordera and Pau Montagud stressed how important it was to gather together again and revisit the festival's roots. In addition, Pau emphasised that the DocsMX selection had been curated with care and commitment to audiences, that it was not 'based on algorithms' or market expectations. After the screening, I witnessed numerous encounters between acquaintances and friends; beer and mezcal were available for purchase, and many continued to socialise to the beat of the DJ.

By analysing the latest edition of DocsMx, my aim is to understand how the spacetimes promoted by the festival creates environments in which spectatorial practices are experienced that make participating in a festival different from going to a movie theater in a regular context.[5] To do so, I concentrated my ethnographic observations on the screenings and activities intended for audiences in an attempt to understand the meaning that going to the festival had in their lives, which was prompted by research aimed at questioning the importance of going to the movies within 21st century spectator practices.[6]

Over the ten days that DocsMX is held annually, audiences can access a vast selection of documentaries in different spaces with mostly free access. Moreover, the festival prioritises that screenings have discussions at the end of the films, bringing together audiences, filmmakers, and sometimes the characters who star in the documentaries.[7] I maintain that

these two characteristics encourage viewers to gather periodically for the extended activities surrounding the screenings within the framework of DocsMX – spacetimes that create and sustain communities around films,[8] which were impaired during the pandemic.[9]

Likewise, to understand the importance of film festivals for audiences in Mexico it is essential to point out that, often, they are the only opportunity to see documentaries on the big screen within a market that provides little space for screening this genre and independent productions in general.[10] The perception of Mexican festivals acting as counter-cultural refuges within national contexts is similar to that in other countries throughout the continent – Argentina,[11] Brazil,[12] Chile,[13] and Colombia[14] – and gives us clues for understanding the fundamental role that audiovisual events play in promoting the circulation of works that are seldom premiered in the region's regular exhibition circuits.[15]

This article will review three central and complementary topics. In the first section I will briefly analyse the history and peculiarities of DocsMX, which will provide an understanding of its general operations. In the second section I will address the importance of both festival screening venues with free access and the participating government-supported movie theaters. Third, I will analyse the discussions using examples and emphasising their importance for the public's experience within the framework of DocsMX. Finally, I will review the festival's lines of action.

A brief look at the history and particularities of DocsMX

In the international arena, the turn of the century represented an increase in the number of audiovisual events within a growing ecosystem of festivals,[16] among them those specialising in documentary film.[17] This has been no different in Mexico, where the number of documentary film festivals increased from two to eight in the first decade of the new century.[18] DocsMX was established in 2006 as the first competitive annual festival dedicated exclusively to documentary film.

Created by Inti Cordera and Pau Montagud, this audiovisual event – which until 2015 was called DocsDF – was born linked to the Latin American megalopolis as its identity brand.[19] Throughout its history, DocsMX has included different screening activities in its programming, with cycles featuring international productions, Mexican films, short films, films geared at young audiences, as well as numerous retrospective cycles or tributes to filmmakers. Furthermore, it has carried out training projects based on two main lines of action: one seeks to make documentary filmmaking a bridge for generating dialogues and

discussions on social and environmental causes (Good Pitch; Docs Talks; Skylight) and the second is focused on thinking about the documentary genre in and of itself (Docs Forum) and its work through laboratories for project development and support (Docs Lab), including Plataforma MX, Plataforma IB (Ibero-American), Docs in Progress (works with a first cut), and Impact LAB. It has also promoted creative activities, such as the Reto DocsMX project (DocsMX Challenge), which consists of groups of film professionals and amateurs working together to make a collaborative short film in 100 hours during the festival – the results are projected within the programming framework.

Despite being configured as a competitive event that includes different award categories, the awards ceremony is simple, dismissing the red carpet and other practices common to generalist film festivals. The ceremony is also accessible for spectators who wish to attend, and it is free of charge. The breadth of the festival and its spaces have varied over time, including commercial movie theaters, alternative-circuit cinemas, cultural center auditoriums, and university venues. Moreover, ever since its first edition, DocsMX has promoted the temporary use of the city's public spaces through outdoor screenings, a drive-in cinema – set up from 2009-2013 at the central campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and temporary canopy tents that became a DocsMX icon.

Fig. 2: Discussion with Roberto Urzúa Castillo, director of *Mapu kutran* (2022), in a temporary tent in Parque Mexico.

For audiences, the experience of appropriating public spaces in Mexico City in an uncommon way and coming together collectively at festivals promotes reclaiming the urban environment and other ways of belonging as citizens. Furthermore, screening documentaries in public spaces has contributed to promoting the right to cultural diversity, either through free access to the most recent national and foreign documentary film productions (often not available in the usual markets) or due to their cultural diversity.

The different central themes and actions promoted by DocsMX have varied over time based on public contributions, support from international organisations, and the private funding secured for each edition. Sponsorships have been essential in allowing the festival to make a significant part of its programming available for free and in inviting national and international guests. Upon analysing the 17th DocsMX programming, we see the range of its free screenings and the importance of government funding for participating movie theaters.

The importance of free access and government-supported movie theaters

An analysis of the 2022 program reveals DocsMX's effort to offer free access to features. Practically all the documentaries were programmed at least once in venues with free admission, representing more than 60% of the total screenings.[20] It is worth noting that the Condesa and Roma neighborhoods, in the Cuauhtémoc district, have traditionally hosted a significant percentage of the festival's exhibition venues.

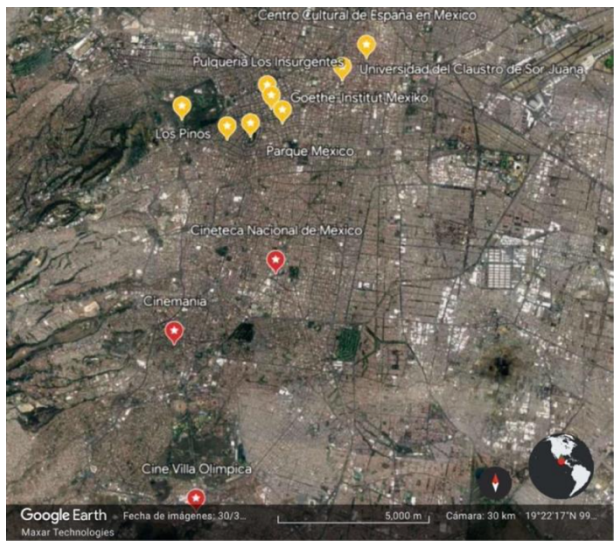

Fig. 3: Map of Mexico City and the spaces programmed by DocsMX 2022.[21]

In the course of the festival, it was relatively easy for audiences to flow between the different venues at the Condesa and Roma neighborhoods, often on foot or by bicycle, thus avoiding the megalopolis' heavy traffic. This was made possible by the consecutive showings and the proximity between the venues, namely the movie theaters and alternative spaces with free screenings: Cine Lido, Goethe-Institut Mexiko, Pulqueria Insurgentes, Universidad de la Comunicación, and the temporary tent in Parque México that showed around four films per day.

During the conversations with audiences, some viewers commented that what they like most about the festival is the opportunity to watch many documentaries, reflect on them, and sometimes intertwine the different stories presented in the films. For them, the free access and the consecutive showings is what allows them to participate in the programming in a 'more immersive' way, jumping from one screening to another, participating in the numerous discussions, and interacting with strangers who share their interest in documentary film. At the different venues, the workers and volunteers from the DocsMX team help the audience feel like an essential part of the festival. Warm welcomes, congratulatory remarks for attending another screening, and publicly recognising engaged audiences create an atmosphere of proximity and familiarity, which sometimes refers to a return that occurs year after year.

Even when they have consecutive showings, it is not as common for venues that charge a fee to allow for audience participation in multiple screenings. Only two venues charged admission fees: Mexico's Cineteca Nacional and Cinemanía,[22] which together accounted for 45 screenings (approximately 38% of the total).[23] Mexico's Cineteca Nacional, located in the Xoco neighborhood in the Benito Juárez district, stands out among the venues that charge a fee. In 2022, DocsMX scheduled 37 screenings at the Cineteca, with 28 paid shows and another nine screenings in the outdoor forum.[24] This means that more than 60% of the paid screenings took place at a public institution, where the price of admission is lower than in the regular market.[25]

While conducting my ethnographic fieldwork on the 17th edition, I noticed that the spectators were not only diverse in age, but they also came from different areas of the city. Wide-ranging free access makes it possible for audiences to participate in more activities. However, when observing the territorial extension and the spaces used for DocsMX 2022 programming, I concluded that it was conceived as a compact festival – concentrated in the Cuauhtémoc and Xoco districts. Within the metropolitan context, these districts are equipped with regular film venues and a more diverse offering of films compared to other areas of the city.[26]

Likewise, outreach efforts carried out by DocsMX, beyond the festival's duration, allow more audiences to have access to sections of the programme in other parts of the city and the

country. Among the activities promoted by DocsMX that have strengthened alternative circuits is the creation of the Mexican Collaborative Exhibition Network: Doctubre MX in 2012. In 2022, Doctubre made a selection of eight films available free to 'more than 100 venues in 30 states and 12 districts of Mexico City'.[27] Moreover, since 2017, the festival has promoted replicas in other states of Mexico: DocsPuebla (2017-) and DocsJalisco (2021-).[28] All these initiatives have contributed to extending the reach of DocsMX beyond its host city and the duration of the festival, thus promoting the transformation of documentary film culture in Mexico.[29]

Discussions

The discussions are another important attribute of the festival's programming. In 2022, 73 DocsMX screenings (equivalent to approximately 60% of the total) featured the participation of invited guests. Among them were filmmakers from Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, and Europe. The discussions were carried out at different venues. In many cases, guests participated in panels at more than one screening. The significant presence of directors and filmmaking crews is proof of the fundamental value of the discussions held as part of the event's programming.

For example, the Mexican documentary *1985. Heroes Among Ruins* (2021), directed by Jeanette Russ Moreno, was shown at Mexico's Cineteca Nacional and in the temporary tent in Parque México. The film explores human solidarity during the earthquakes that shook the country in 1985 and 2017 through archive images and interviews with the brigade members who voluntarily worked in the rescue efforts. On both occasions, the director, the producer, and numerous brigade members were present and engaged in rich conversations with broad participation from the audiences.

In these discussions, filmmakers talk about their research and filming experiences; protagonists participate by sharing their own experiences with the audience; and important public debates are held on the topics that are portrayed in the films, among others. All this confirms that the festival is a meeting place with the capacity to spark in-depth reflection among viewers and to promote the socio-political role of documentary.[30] Moreover, the presence of international guests allows audiences to get a closer look at the experience of making documentary films, as well as stories and realities from other latitudes.

Finally, among the numerous examples highlighting the importance of discussions, I would like to examine the final screening of the 17th edition in more detail, where *Letters from a Distance* (Mexico, 2022), directed by Juan Carlos Rulfo, premiered. The screening was held in the outdoor area of Complejo Cultural Los Pinos in the Chapultepec Forest. Collapsible

chairs and straw mats on the ground served as temporary seating and free popcorn was distributed to recreate the atmosphere of a movie theater. The documentary told a story of the Covid-19 public health crisis as experienced in Mexico City, following messages between family members, inmates, and doctors.

Fig. 4: Final screening in the Complejo Cultural Los Pinos.

During the showing, audience members were able to express their emotions freely. At the end, the director, the protagonists, and their families were invited to participate in a discussion with the audience. Throughout the talk, they revisited the difficulties faced when developing the project and the experience of the humanitarian crisis with first-person accounts from the spectators themselves and with a number of tributes to those who are no longer with us. The screening was characterised as one of the first (if not the first) collective gatherings in Mexico in which people met and talked about what they had experienced during the pandemic from the not-so-distant past – a major collective trauma that was marked by countless losses. Meeting again, after having lived under restrictions for such a long time, and being able to discuss the pandemic publicly prompted participants to recall their personal experiences.

The 17th edition of DocsMX marked a return to the streets and to in-person encounters with the public. For audiences, the different spaces where screenings and activities take place as well as the possibility to attend the many exclusive films and discussions included in the program shape the special meaning of going to the festival. The importance of collective screenings, public discussions and debates, and talks about non-fiction filmmaking, among

other activities, reaffirms the significance of DocsMX as a spacetimes for mediation and encounters surrounding documentary filmmaking.[31]

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Notes

[1] The DocsMX printed program guide In Docs We Trust 10, year VIII, 2022, p. 5.

[2] https://www.docsmx.org/ (accessed on 8 February 2023).

[3] In 2020 and 2021, DocsMX was presented as a hybrid festival; the Q&As were held online.

[4] In 2020, the Docs en linea platform was created, which was born out of the need to adapt to the public health emergency. https://www.docsmx.org/docs_en_linea/index.php (accessed on 14 February 2023).

[5] De Valck & Hagener 2005; De Valck 2007; Bonfil 2014; Pires 2015; Sendra 2020; et al.

[6] García Canclini 2006; Rosas Mantecón 2017, 2019; Domínguez Domingo 2017; et al.

[7] The only exception was the University of the Cloister of Sor Juana, where the opening ceremony was held.

[8] Pires 2019.

[9] Pires 2021; Damiens & De Valck 2023.

[10] Zirión & Cyr 2014; Zirión 2018.

[11] Gómez & Ambrosis 2022.

[12] Cesar et al 2020; Melo 2016, 2022; Melo & Muylaert & Mattos 2021.

[13] González 2020; Peirano 2020, 2021.

[14] Calderón-Acero 2020.

[15] Vallejo & Peirano 2020; Rosas Mantecón & González 2021.

[16] De Valck 2007; Leal & Mattos 2008; Loist 2016.

[17] Zavala 2012; Peirano & Amieva 2018; Vallejo & Winton 2020a, 2020b; Muylaert 2021.

[18] It is relevant to highlight the following Mexican documentary film festivals, which were founded in 2010 or earlier: Escenarios – Encuentro Internacional de Cine Documental (1996-2013); and Contra el Silencio Todas las Voces – Encuentro Hispanoamericano de Vídeo y Cine Documental Independiente (2000-); Borderland Film Festival (2003), precursor of BorDocs – Tijuana Foro Documental (2007-2013); Ambulante – Gira de Documentales (2006-); Festival de la Memoria – Documental Iberoamericano in Tepoztlán (2007-2016); Zanate – Festival de Cine Documental Mexicano (2007-); the Mexican location of In-Edit International Music Documentary Film Festival (2009 and 2010); and DOCSTown (2010-2016).

[19] Stringer 2001.

[20] The exceptions were two Mexican documentaries presented in one special screening at Mexico's Cineteca Nacional: Sanción y yo (2022) by Rodrigo Reys and El reencuentro – 500 años de Moctezuma y Cortéz (2021) by Miguel Gleason, as well as the screenings of Villa Olímpica (2021) by Sebastián Kohan Esquenazi at Cine Villa Olimpica.

[21] See the DocsMX 2022 venues on Google Earth: https://earth.google.com/earth/d/1GCDgSuf97DeqzXT-loYggmYDY_vezfGFm?usp=share_link

[22] An independent commercial movie theater located in the San Ángel neighborhood in the Álvaro Obregón district. During DocsMX 2022, there were 17 screenings and eight discussions.

[23] A special showing was held, with an admission fee, at the Cine Villa Olímpica, which is maintained by the Mexico City Government; it is located in the Miguel Hidalgo Villa Olímpica neighborhood in the Tlalpan district.

[24] Two of these showings were canceled due to rain.

[25] General tickets are 60 pesos, equivalent to just under 3 euros.

[26] Ochoa 2019, p. 92.

[27] https://www.docsmx.org/exhibicion/doctubremx/index.php (accessed on 14 February 2023).

[28] In 2019 they made the only edition of DocsXalapa, in the state of Veracruz; also in Spain, with the sister festival Docs València (2017-); https://docsvalencia.com/ (accessed on 14 February 2023).

[29] Moreover, DocsMX has historically supported events located in other regions of the country by loaning film cycles and promoting local filmmaking challenges.

[30] Vallejo & Winton 2020a, p. 8.

[31] I would like to thank the editors Marijke de Valck, Antoine Damiens, and Diane Burgess, and Juliana Muylaert, for their critical reading and suggestions for the final version of this review.

[32] With appreciation for the financial support of National Council of Humanities Science and Technology (CONAHCyT), and for the scholarship awarded in the Call for Postdoctoral stays for Mexico: Modalities 1 to be held at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa (UAM-I).