

Introduction: non-theatrical film festivals

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The idea for this publication stemmed from the *Reframing Film Festivals* conference that the curators of this special issue organised in Venice in February 2020, which was conceived to foster research engagement with the histories of film festivals and their relationship with film historiography and canons.¹ During this two-day event, among the contributions dedicated to the micro-histories of a variety of festivals based in Central and Eastern Europe, South America and South-East Asia, several artists, curators, archivists and historians from France, Austria, Italy, Chile and Spain presented research focused on non-theatrical cultures and related festivals. This strand of research ranged from historical analysis of international competitions for amateur filmmakers to theorisations of the festivals dedicated to analog video art and time-based art, from the study of the historical developments of national non-fiction festivals to the mapping of ethnographic film festival circuits. Hence, in this special issue dedicated to non-theatrical film festivals, readers will find a combination of voices representing film cultures that have been developing outside of movie theatres and away from the logics of theatrical distribution, as the title implies.

The common denominator of these essays is their spatial focus on film festivals, understood as 'sites of passage' (de Valck 2007, 36) where it is possible to explore and historicise the particular modes of circulation, exhibition practices and promotion strategies associated with ethnographic, amateur, documentary and experimental cinemas. So, the overall purpose of this collection is to understand how certain sub-circuits of festivals have operated and taken shape in the European context, and how they have informed cultural hierarchies, canons, and histories of cinema. In examining a variety of local, national, and international cases, the essays engage with some of the core ideas related to the study of film festivals, including matters of programming, networks and sub-networks, audiences and award ceremonies, access to and curation of their historical archives, and their historical connections with local communities and specific cultural fields. Tackling these and other research topics, the authors provide reflections on how festivals influence the production and circulation of amateur, experimental, and ethnographic films. Thus, this collection draws a set of viable methodological and conceptual paths to frame and analyse the relationship between festivals and developments in film historiographies, while also interrogating a wide range of topics related to film festival studies and non-theatrical film cultures.

Following the 1999 Orphan Film Symposium and through a *Film History* special issue curated by Streible, Roepke, and Mebold (2007), the category of non-theatrical cinema has been primarily adopted in Anglophone film scholarship to describe and historicise amateur and professional small-gauge films experienced in non-theatrical settings. More recently, the term 'non-theatrical' has gained currency in film and media scholarship to define several practices surrounding digital access to films (Aveyard 2016; Brown 2016), and to describe complex cultural artifacts that require special cataloguing, restoration, and preservation procedures (Marlazzi et al. 2017; Cavallotti and Parolo 2019). Given that the conceptual distinction between the theatrical and non-theatrical modes of film exhibition is 'always subject to redefinition, contestation, policing, blurring, or erasure' (Waller 2019, 55), here we choose to borrow 'non-theatrical' as an increasingly useful and inclusive umbrella term that accounts for a variety of cinema

histories and screen practices that have developed outside the domain of movie theatres. In fact, whilst 'theatrical' generally entails motion pictures that are made to be screened in cinemas, 'non-theatrical' is tethered to the multiplicity of sites where certain films are experienced. So, this term is here used to describe audiovisual productions, such as industrial, scientific, amateur, family, anthropological, ethnographic and experimental films, that are primarily meant to be shown, watched and discussed in different private and institutional contexts (universities, schools, home, community centres, churches, thematic events and festivals).

Clearly enough, to engage with non-theatrical cinemas through the lens of film festivals implies a form of paradox inasmuch as it steers the focus onto the theatrical spaces of these institutions. Nevertheless, these festivals have been the primal – and, in some instances, even the only – sites of passage where certain non-theatrical film works had visibility and public exposure within (semi)institutional frameworks, gaining symbolic value through the traditional festival rituals. Besides, most of the festivals considered in this issue were created as exhibition operations, shelving the engagement with industrial production and distribution stakeholders – except for the case of the Lussas Festival, examined by Jacopo Rasmi. Rather than 'industrial nodes' (Iordanova 2015), these festivals can be better framed as 'performative social events' (Hughes 2003, 29) that have structured particular spaces and times of gathering, discussion and exhibition, also contributing to forge informal connections between programmers, audiences and creatives and – by means of award ceremonies, jury evaluation criteria and participation requirements – to influence developments in the modes of film production. Hence, whilst not being geared to turning symbolic value into economic value, these institutions are variously characterised by a distinctive communitarian character and sociocultural drive that demand special attention, particularly from a research perspective.

Opening this special issue, Paolo Caneppele proposes an exploration of festivals dedicated to small-gauge and amateur film festivals in Europe, tracing back the origins of this phenomenon to the early 1920s and broadly outlining its historical developments in the post-war era. By building on a wide array of sources and materials, including but not limited to magazines, bulletin, posters, catalogues and photographs, this historical excavation provides a vibrant representation of the social dimension of European amateur film festivals, emphasizing the transnational ramifications of this cultural phenomenon and the synergies with local institutions and agents. Focusing on the same festival sub-circuit, Diego Cavallotti and Paolo Simoni shift the perspective to consider the organisation of festivals dedicated to amateur and home movies from the standpoint of professional curators. Providing a historical account of the emergence of exhibitions and public events dedicated to the small-gauge film phenomenon from the early 2000s up to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors posit the notion of *metadispositif* to conceptualise the specific functions that archival small-gauge festivals perform in relation to the local and global spheres. Building on this notion, Cavallotti and Simoni analyse the specific case of the Archivio Aperto (Bologna, Italy), also encompassing other institutions based in Italy, and describe the technologies, event formats, innovation, and valorisation practices which these archival small gauge festivals implement to create particular interpretative frames for archival materials. It is through the transforming configurations of these elements, the authors maintain, that these festivals are able to reignite the significance of film materials from the past in the present, thus acting as fundamental 'cultural sites' of knowledge for the international community of scholars and researchers. Similarly, Rossella Catanese and Clizia Centorrino engage with the analog film festival circuit and the network of experimental filmmakers. Drawing from media archaeology scholarship, Catanese and Centorrino put forward a both conceptual and methodological framework to interpret the format of analog film festivals and its capacity to stimulate bodily experience, which is based on the physical presence of both the audience and the performers along with the material manipulation of cinematic objects. Through an overview of the international context and considering several cases in Italy and France, the authors go on to emphasise how these festivals

constitute a social and counter-cultural movement that seeks to criticise the logics of digital media obsolescence and reaffirm the nexus between cinema and the physicality of experience.

The second half of the special issue is geared towards the exploration of festivals and networks of ethnographic cinema and documentary filmmaking. Maria Paz Peirano and Aida Vallejo here continue their study of the film festival ecosystem by scrutinizing the sub-circuit of ethnographic film festivals, using this specific case to conceptualise how sub-circuits are positioned, interconnect and self-define within the general domain of film festivals. The authors start by providing a wide-ranging review of key concepts (network, ecosystem, centre–periphery, nodes, open systems) in film festival studies and analysing the characteristics of a variety of specialised festival sub-circuits, before going on to consider the historical developments of ethnographic film festivals in relation to academic communities of anthropologists. Through these cases, Peirano and Vallejo develop an analysis of the hierarchical interlockings between festivals and sub-circuits, tethering such an analysis to the consideration of highly disruptive contingencies like the COVID-19 pandemic and their impact on festivals' relationships, autopoietic practices and positioning strategies. In the concluding article, Jacopo Rasmi retraces the origins and micro-history of the *États Generaux du Film Documentaire*, better known as the Lussas Documentary Film Festival and generally regarded as an important centre of discovery and circulation for documentary and non-fictional filmmaking in Europe. Here, Rasmi assumes a two-fold perspective – that is, one geopolitical and ecopolitical – to unravel the struggles of small communities like that in Lussas for political autonomy and self-management, on the one hand, and the efforts of this community to establish and nurture a lively sociocultural environment in rural spaces, on the other.

Therefore, whilst being distinct in methodological approach and research focus, the articles that make up this special issue together work to shed light on different non-theatrical film cultures, positing the festival as a key site of intersection for tackling questions of power relations, exchange processes, political forces and local–global dynamics. In doing so, this special issue aims to encourage an interdisciplinary and intersectional understanding of film festivals, here conceived of as a historiographic 'dispositive', as cultural formations and as financial institutions, with significant relations with film culture, (geo)politics and social movements.

Notes

For more information, see <https://www.unive.it/data/agenda/1/36818>

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