

## Reframing Film Festivals: Politics, Histories and Agencies

Marco Dalla Gassa<sup>i a</sup>

Andrea Gelardi<sup>ii b</sup>

Federico Zecca<sup>iii b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy)

<sup>b</sup> University of Bari 'Aldo Moro' (Italy)

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### Naming to Understand: Film Festival Studies and its Expanding Lexicon

Film festivals brand themselves as yearly rituals that set out to glorify the seventh art along with its makers. Blended in a rhetoric of universalist humanism, such a self-branding discourse has often concealed the actual variety and outreach of their agencies. Throughout their global and individual histories festivals have, in fact, done more than celebrating films, and have had significant impact in film culture as well as beyond, tapping into the domains of international diplomacy (Pisu 2013, Kötzing et al. 2017), cultural exchange (Razlogova 2020, Gelardi 2022) and local development policies (Fehrenbach 2020, Rasmi 2022), for example. It is because of their crucial role within the cultural histories of cinema that festivals have attracted critical attention since their outset, observed and theorized from different standpoints as sites of intersection, negotiation, circulation and sociability. In this vein, one can consider some of the early commentaries on these institutions, such as André Bazin's short essay (1955), in which he observed and questioned the sacred rules underpinning Cannes' religious "order" and its prestige, or the (little known) speeches by Tommaso Chiarini and Mino Argentieri (Anonymous 1966), who engaged with the controversial proliferation of festivals in Italy and Europe in the 1960s and argued for the "public value" of festivals' programming and discoveries.<sup>1</sup> Attention on festivals has not waned ever since and, throughout the last twenty years, it has become central to scholarly discussions on film and of its social, cultural, political and economic contours, including the historical developments of film aesthetics (Nichols 1994, Harbord 2002: 59-75, Bordwell 2008: 158-169), the understanding of national and world cinemas (Elsaesser 2005, Ostrowska 2010, Talbott 2015) and the study of cinema's *Histoire Croissée* and its transnational dynamics (Mazdon 2006, Hagener 2014, Salazkina 2020).

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i ✉ [dallagas@unive.it](mailto:dallagas@unive.it)

ii ✉ [gelardi.andrea.ma@gmail.com](mailto:gelardi.andrea.ma@gmail.com)

iii ✉ [federico.zecca@uniba.it](mailto:federico.zecca@uniba.it)

1. The reference here is to Chiaretti's "I festivali come possibilità di rivelazione e di spinta ai corsi più vitali del cinema" (Festivals as opportunities of revelation and as driving forces of cinema's most vital flows) and Argentieri's "I festivali nell'ambito dell'organizzazione della cultura cinematografica" (Festivals within the organization of film culture). Both speeches were presented in 1965 (6-7 December) at the "Festivali cinematografici in Italia: utili o troppi?" (Film festivals in Italy: valuable or too many?) conference (Gambetti 1981), which was held in Bologna and organized by the Porretta Terme Mostra internazionale del cinema libero.

Film festival studies, when observed as an ongoing epistemic trend running both in and outside film scholarship, have been especially preoccupied with forging an *ad hoc* lexicon for themselves. Distinctively, this lexicon has drawn inspiration from a variety of disciplinary conceptualizations which range from sociology to anthropology, from economics to evolutionary biology. Such a terminological endeavor—especially for its multidisciplinary essence—is symptomatic of the difficulties researchers face in coming to grips with film festivals and their various forms of agency in a systemic fashion, particularly when moving from the “descriptive” level to the “analytic” (de Valck 2007: 37). Hence, instead of relying on a single theoretical framework—be that Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (Elsaesser 2005, de Valck 2007) or the modern Open System Theory (Fischer 2013)—researchers have collected and patched together different conceptual tools in the form of terms or metaphors, harnessed for the purpose of discerning, describing, and classifying within the film festival phenomenon and its spatial and temporal complexities. Indeed, in the vocabulary of festival studies we find terms addressing the following phenomena: the spatial configurations of festivals, such as “network”, “circuits”, “sub-circuits” or “archipelago”,<sup>2</sup> the self-sustaining discourses and practices used by festivals to preserve their system, that is Niklas Luhman’s “auto-poiesis” (1986); the adaptive procedures festivals are equipped with to cope with internal and external factors of transformation, namely, “self-organization” (Elsaesser 2005: 83), and; the term “contingency”, which is used to describe the particular modes in which festivals historically *happen* (Harbord 2016), and that of “ritual”, which refers instead to the sacred-like eventuality of film festivals, and to their capacity to bestow momentum and cultural prestige to films (Mezias et al. 2008). Whilst the definition and ordaining of these conceptual grids remain an open and yet fundamental quest for film festival scholarship, the expansion of its lexicon is also symptomatic of another feature of this research field, that is, its enduring and thriving vitality of which this special issue bears significant evidence.

We take pride in presenting the essays included in this special issue, which is primarily intended to contribute to film festival studies by providing a stock of refreshing terms and concepts, as well as by shedding light on the history and agency of several festivals. In terms of its genesis, this special issue mainly draws from academic research presented at the Reframing Film Festivals (RFF) conference (Venice, February 2020),<sup>3</sup> as well as from studies dedicated to more recent developments within the film festival world. This special issue is, in fact, the second output from the Reframing Film Festivals project<sup>4</sup>, aimed at steering scholarly attention and support toward research on film festivals within Italian academia and film culture. As for *Cinergie. Il cinema e le altre Arti*, it is a particularly well-suited platform for this issue, having accommodated, during the last ten years, several special issues and a variety of articles which have explored the position of festivals within cinephilia, film industry and circulation and, thus, represents an important site of discussion and study for film festival studies in Italy. Across the essays in this issue, although fragmented in different localities and historical formations, we have found a set of important term-concepts that we will move on to elucidate in the following sections. Particularly useful for honing the research methods of film festival scholarship and reframing certain topics or case studies from original viewpoints, these term-concepts are applied to several case studies and topics and, as such, offer important historical, theoretical and methodological insights.

## Ideologies and Ideas

Opening this special issue, Rachel Johnson provides a better method for dissecting the public utterance of film festivals and unraveling their capacity to define and construct the status of films. By hinging on the specific case of *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, Gianfranco Rosi, 2016) and its presentation and accolade at the Berlinale, Johnson’s essay stands out as a highly stimulating one for its treatise of “ideology” through a substantiated reading of Neo-Lacanian theories. Hence, bringing in a set of voices that have remained outside film festival

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2. For an extensive review of the metaphors used to describe the global-local configurations of film festivals and their modes of inter-relating, see: Loist, Skadi (2016). “The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies and Circulation.” In *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, edited by Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, 49–64. London, New York: Routledge.
  3. For more information, see <https://www.unive.it/data/agenda/1/36818> (Last accessed: 12-12-2022).
  4. The first publication stemming from the RFF was the special issue dedicated to Nontheatrical Film Festivals, which was published in *Studies in European Cinema* in September 2022. For more information, see: Dalla Gassa, Marco, Andrea Gelardi, Angela Bianca Saponari and Federico Zecca (2022). “A Special Issue on Nontheatrical Film Festivals.” In *Studies in European Cinema* 19 (3).

scholarship thus far,<sup>5</sup> Johnson draws from the work of contemporary theorists like Slavoj Žižek and Samo Tomšič to construct an original three-fold methodology that serves to unpack and address issues of agency and power at film festivals, putting in play three other term-concepts: “apparatus”, “paratexts” and “film text”. Whilst the essay is effective in debunking the “humanitarian” discourse used by the Berlinale for self-branding purposes and in demonstrating its impact on the reception of *Fire at Sea*, it also makes room for further experimentation of this methodology on different festivals and cases (e.g., filmmakers’ careers, films or national waves), given that “ideologies” are fundamental and yet unspoken components of festivals’ programming practices (Iordanova, in Brown 2009: 216–217) and, thus, of the emergence of certain film canons. Shifting from “ideologies” to the “idea” of the festival itself, Christel Taillibert and John Wäfler contribute to the history of film festivals by proposing a genealogy of the concept of “film festival”, taking into account various sources like posters, screening programmes, and newspaper articles from the first three decades of the 1900s, focusing mainly on Francophone and German-speaking areas. By using Foucauldian discourse analysis to interpret multifarious social forces (e.g., nascent cinephilia, educational filmmakers, film critics, film producers) involved in the emergence of this concept, Taillibert and Wäfler provide a detailed description of a moment of *Herkunft* in film festival history, namely, the period in which several conflicting forces negotiated and molded the distinctive functions and features of a film festival, which would later come to place in 1932, at the first edition of the Venice Film Festival. Through this meticulous reconstruction, the authors point out how the “idea” of the film festival did not make a sudden appearance in the Laguna nor was it a clever invention, but the outcome of a lengthy transformation rooted in the experiences of European music festivals and performances, local fairs, club meetings and commemorations.

## Foundations

Much like the “idea” of festivals, the “foundations” of the Locarno Film Festival—among the oldest festivals—were laid into a ground of competing interests and ideological tensions, as Cyril Cordoba demonstrates in his essay dedicated to the creation of the Swiss festival in 1946 and to its developments up until 1976. In this piece of historical research, Cordoba problematizes the narrative of Locarno as an event created for “purely artistic motivations”, providing a detailed account of the local political forces, economic factors, ideological tensions and cultural ambitions at play in the early history of this festival, showing how they contributed to—or hampered—the festival’s climbing of the FIAPF’s (International Federation of Film Producers) ranking up to the A-tier. As Cordoba illustrates, the Locarno Film Festival not only stands out for its grassroots origins, but also its quest for autonomy and self-organization differed from that of other festivals, as it was aimed at gaining the authorities’ support and legitimization to emancipate itself from the pressures of national tourist and film industries. In particular, by retracing the hinge role played by the festival between the two sides of the Iron Curtain in the tensest years of the Cold War, Cordoba bears significant evidence of how productive the encounter between the methods of contemporary historical research and film festival studies can be. The theme of “foundations” is reversed in the essay by Konstantinos Tzouflas. Focusing on the Locarno Film Festival along with the Fribourg Film Festival and several other Swiss institutions, the author describes the ways these institutions bankroll, bestow prestige and visibility and, thus, contribute to lay the “foundations” of new cinematic waves from countries in crisis. Whilst the relationship between European film institutions and art cinema from so-called developing countries, namely, world cinema, has been covered on many levels (Falicov 2010, 2016, Ostrowska 2010, Shaw 2014, Talbott 2015), here Tzouflas illustrates how the Swiss festivals in collaboration with several national institutions have both contributed to the international success of the New Argentinian Cinema and New Greek Wave and helped to develop the local film industries in Argentina and Greece.

5. In fact, to tackle issues such as those of cultural hierarchies and power relations within the festival circuit, or to problematize the celebratory discourses of film festivals vis-à-vis canon making processes, film festival scholars have conventionally borrowed Bourdieusian sociological term-concepts like “capital”, “distinction”, “field” and “habitus”. For a comprehensive discussion of Bourdieu’s theories in film festival studies, see de Valck, Marjike (2014). “Film Festivals, Bourdieu, and the Economization of Culture.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 32 (1): 74–89; and de Valck, Marjike (2016). “Fostering Art Adding Value, Cultivating Taste: Film Festivals as Sites of Cultural Legitimization.” In *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, edited by Marjike de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, 110–116. London, New York: Routledge.

## Microhistories

As evidenced in Cordoba's essay, the historiographical reconstruction of film festivals, taken as single and closely-knit units embedded within multiple forms of relation, can be highly informative for its capacity to zero in on the interactions between different local social forces, while also shedding light on wider dynamics that occur at national and international levels. In a similar vein, Dunja Jelenkovic offers an excellent example of "microhistory" in her essay, tackling the Trieste Crisis and its reverberations in the present day by focusing on the discovery and current rediscovery of several films at European film festivals. Jelenkovic examines the early reception of a set of Italian and Yugoslavian feature and documentary films by focusing on the different forms of agency (e.g. selection and rejection, awarding, establishment) of the Venice, Cannes, Karlovy Vary and Pula festivals. Through a careful examination of film texts and paratexts, the author first charts the circulation of conflicting cinematic narratives through the festival circuit between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, illustrating their ideological positioning and role within both Italian and Yugoslavian territorial claims over the Northern Adriatic region. This historical reconstruction is then coupled with an observation of the second circulation of these feature films and documentaries in the last two decades, moving the focus on festivals' retrospective strands and archival film festivals like Il Cinema Ritrovato and the Festival of Nitrate Film in Belgrade. Finally, by observing the rediscovery of these texts and their revamping in cinephilic and public memories, Jelenkovic unravels the important connection between festivals' "microhistories" and the making and re-making of cultural memories, highlighting the importance of considering these institutions, their agency and shifting ideologies within political, social and cultural historical accounts.

## Intentions

Laura Cesaro directs attention to more recent developments occurring within Italian and international film circuits, charting the spread and development of ecological sensibilities across the European film festival circuit, and classifying the different forms of festivals' engagement with the environmental cause. After providing a much-needed historical mapping of festivals that have prioritized the issue of ecological sustainability within their identity and programming activities, the author introduces several distinctions between these festivals based on their distinctive practices and relations with filmmakers, NGOs and audiences. In doing so, Cesaro highlights how specific "intentions", emerged and gaining momentum within certain historical formations and sociopolitical debates, take shape and modify the conventional functions of festivals to meet the transformative demands of the public sphere. Concluding this special issue, Jean-Michel Frodon offers a passionate reading of the agency of film critics and festivals, describing how their "intentions" of resisting to and thus defying the commercial interests of the film industry brought about fundamental transformations in international film cultures, histories and canons. While critically acknowledging that film criticism and festivals have historically been dominated by a Eurocentric and white-masculine gaze, Frodon thoroughly explains how these two agents have been open to a ceaseless re-interrogation and can still play a crucial role in the development of international film cultures, protecting them from the control of the market and of ideologies.

Locating film festivals within a set of histories, practices, economic and political relations, and ideological tensions, this collection of essays will contribute an array of theoretical and methodological tools to film festival scholarship, and potentially provide course material for different disciplines, ranging from film studies to contemporary history, from destination management studies to post-structuralist philosophy. Finally, we take this chance to thank the authors, the peer-reviewers and the Cinergie editorial team for their passion, efforts and patience which have contributed to make the publication of this special issue possible.

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