



Saving the Past, Making History: Film Festivals and the Dynamics of Rediscovery

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This article explores the impact of A-class film festivals' retrospective programming on the canons of global art cinema, wanting to contribute to a current trend in film scholarship exploring the relationship between film festivals and film histories. The argument proposed here is that, by recircling and mediating the latest film restorations and even taking ownership of specific restoration initiatives, film festivals have become key platforms for the rediscovery of so-called 'film classics', contributing to shape the articulations and understanding of film histories. To this aim, the article gauges with the dynamics of cinematic rediscoveries through the theoretical prism of cultural memory studies, exploring how film festivals developed, between the early 1980s and the 1990s, a retrospective interest in the material body of the film historical past, and its preservation and restoration, acting as both arbiters and harbingers of what body of films become available once again and, eventually, studied by scholars, critics and students. By considering several institutional cases and the emergence of retrospective strands in some of the major A-list festivals, this article contends that these festivals have become essential 'sites of passage' to the contemporary ways of accessing and historicizing of the histories of global art cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

The extensive body of literature dedicated to film festivals has described how these institutions have developed critical functions within a variety of areas of interest, spanning from pedagogy (Patterson and Gaudelli 2023) to industry facilitation (Turan 2002; Wong 2011), from human rights activism (Iordanova and Torchin 2012; Tascon and Willis 2016) to cinephile and experiential tourism (Gold and Gold 2016). In spite of this, festivals' film historical agency and their role within the film heritage sector remain a considerable blind spot in film festival and film historical scholarship. In fact, few contributions have explored the topic thus far, limiting their interventions to proposing methodological insights (Di Chiara and Re 2011) or being anchored in specific case studies (Stringer 2003; Marlow-Mann 2013; Zarandona 2016). The lack of research on the topic is surprising, given that festivals have embedded a retrospective focus on cinema's past since their emergence (see Hagener 2014, 288-89) and, furthermore, because top-tier and second tier festivals have become key sites for the public revamping of

restored film heritage. With special attention to this latter vein, this article aims to unravel the impact of festivals' retrospective programming onto the canons and histories of global art cinema¹, willing to contribute to a recent scholarly trend which investigates the ways film festivals have contributed to shape film historiographies (see for instance Ostrowska 2020; Vallejo 2020). Through that, the essay is set to lay the ground for a more systematic understanding of the relationship between film festivals and the film historical heritage, questioning the logics of cinematic 'rediscoveries' and seeking to unearth their impacts on the historicization of cinema.

Methodologically, this work is based on the analysis of institutional documents collected from across a variety of European, North-American and Asian film festivals and archival institutions. These documents were provided by heritage and festival institutions in some cases, whilst others were gathered from public archives and private collections, over the course of about four years of doctoral research. Among the archival sites visited for the purpose of this research are the Renzo Renzi Library in Bologna, the British Film Institute's Library in London, the Cinémathèque Française's Library in Paris and the Archive of the Pesaro Film Festival. Building on a variety of documents (press clipping, briefings, catalogues, meeting minutes, reportage, e.g.), the article historically explores the emergence of archival film festivals and the opening of retrospective strands in the major A-list film festivals between the 1980s and early 2000s, investigating the reasons why and how film restorations took centre stage in the film rediscoveries heralded every year by film festivals. Through that, the essay moves on to outline how film archives in collaboration with festivals have started to reconstruct global art cinema histories, mediating and re-activating the cultural and historical value of a selected number of cultural works. In doing this, the essay takes track of how film restoration initiatives are promoted and circulated through major international festivals like Cannes, Venice and Berlin, observing how these festivals either reclassify or cement specific works from the historical past as 'classics' or 'auteurial works'. In this vein, the article sheds light on how festivals in collaboration with archives have contributed to canon making processes, emphasizing how these institutions can enhance the importance of some titles rather than others within film histories, and to fasten their re-circulation and re-distribution.

¹ Though world cinema is a fundamental category within the festival circuit, here I depart from it and prefer the more conceptually neutral "global art cinema" which steers us to consider and "analyse [art cinema] in its terms of geographical engagement, thinking closely about formations and deformations of art cinematic space" (Galt and Schoonover 2010, 11).

SAVING THE PAST: NEW FILM HISTORY AND THE FESTIVAL-ARCHIVAL ALLIANCE

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the call for saving films spread significantly among film experts and cinephiles, film festival programmers included. Claims about the “disastrous implications of [film] losses for the memory of mankind” (Glissant 1984, 3) on a 1984 issue of the UNESCO Courier verify that anxieties around the wealth of cinema’s material body were climaxing in those years. Under the aegis of UNESCO, key non-profit organisations like the International Federation of Film Producers (IFFP), the International Film and Television Council (IFTTC), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the International Council on Archives (ICA) started drawing public attention on the world-wide preservation of film heritage to safeguard the “most popular art of the twentieth century” (Glissant 1984, 3). Simultaneously across Europe and North America, revivals, retrospective events and festivals grew in number and relevance through these decades, each characterized by a specific engagement with the recuperation of cinema’s history and the preservation of its material body, and all inspired by the FIAF ‘Cinema 1900-1906’ conference (Brighton, 1978). Regarded as the foundational myth of the so-called New Film History (or NFH: see Elsaesser 1986; Gunning 1990; Musser 2004) and as a watershed in film culture on many levels (disciplinary, methodological, theoretical, organizational, etc.), the influence the Brighton conference has exerted on the realm of festivals and film-related events is certainly remarkable.

Several methodological changes and shifts of emphasis fall beneath the NFH umbrella-term, which was coined by Thomas Elsaesser to underscore the transformative effects triggered by the Brighton conference and the related “Early Cinema movement” (Elsaesser 1990: 1–2). The former, in particular, set in motion a redefining process within the discipline of film history, drawing attention on the empirical study of the Early Cinema period, its surviving examples, and of the conditions and contexts of existence of cinema – both in its physicality and as object of production-consumption (Strauven 2014: 61–62). This meant a series of disciplinary shifts towards research approach based on the close-reading of film texts and para-texts for instance, and a significant growth in scholarly interest on previously neglected periods of cinema’s history – especially, the silent era (Bowser 1979: 510-11); on a theoretical level, ‘ideological’ film historiographies (for example, Marxist-oriented histories à la Georges Sadoul [1959] as well as Internationalist-universalist accounts of world cinema in Paul Rotha’s way [Rotha 1930; Rotha and Griffin 1949]) and along with the so-called ‘Grand Theories’ they started being discarded, as they came to be perceived as flimsy and inapt to scientifically sustain film historical research and film scholarship altogether (Bordwell and Carroll 1996: XII–XVII). Most notably, NFH united film experts’ communities around the archival mantra ‘to collect, preserve, and restore’, fuelling a shared anxiety around and a parallel commitment to the safeguarding of film materials from the “many potential deaths” of cinema

(Groo 2019, 12). Among the most productive and seminal germinations of such a commitment was the creation of festivals like Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, the CinéMemoire, the Internationale Stummfilmtage and Il Cinema Ritrovato, which were set to counter 'the destruction of the youngest art', to say it with Il Cinema Ritrovato's curator Gianluca Farinelli (1989, 4). All these festivals sought – and some actually managed – to establish themselves as yearly sites of gathering and discussion for the community film experts (Cavallotti and Simoni 2022, 209-10) and, more importantly, took ownership of the mediation and re-circulation of the latest archival re-discoveries.

The first edition of GCM was organized in 1982 by La Cineteca del Friuli in Gemona (Italy), in association with the local cinephile organisation Cinemazero, under the supervision of Davide Turconi (festival director from 1982 until 2005), Carlo Montanaro and Paolo Cherchi Usai, among others. Presenting a programme entirely focused on silent cinema, this festival has played an important role in exploring and reviewing film history since its outset. To this aim, collaborations with influential scholars or film historical researchers' community, such as the Domitor (International Society for the Study of Early Cinema), have been staple in the Pordenone's programming strategies throughout the years, thus making the festival a crucial site for exploring the first two decades of the twentieth century through research focuses that change each year (national cinemas, directors, performers, etc.). Taking a less specialist curatorial approach than GCM, the CinéMémoire in Paris was first organized in 1991 by the French film historians Emmanuelle Toulet and Christian Belaygue, in association with the Cinémathèque Française and with the patronage of the then French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang. In 1990, together with Martin Scorsese, Lang launched the 'Nitrate Plan', namely a vast ministerial initiative aimed at restoring and preserving nitrate films, and a festival, originally named the French-American Restoration Film Festival. From the collaboration between international film preservation actors, the French Ministry of Culture, the Cinémathèque Française, the CNC and the Cinémathèque de Toulouse, the CinéMémoire soon became an important site for the revisitation and rediscovery of old films, primarily showcasing the restorations of French and North American 'film classics' from the so-called 'cinema of the origins' (1895-1915). Despite its rather vast audience and international success and the publications stemming from these events², the festival had a short life, with its last edition held in 1997.

A more enduring and seminal archival festival has been Il Cinema Ritrovato, first conceived in 1986 as a tentative strand of the Mostra Internazionale del Cinema Libero – the so-called Porretta Terme antifestival³. By turning attention

2 The catalogues of these events were sophisticated scientific outputs that provided audience with rich historical and technical information in view of the film programme. See, for instance Toulet and Belaygue 1991, 1993, 1995.

3 The Mostra Internazionale del Cinema Libero, also known as 'antifestival', was established and formerly held in Porretta Terme and, in the mid-1980s, it was relocated in Bologna to be placed under the aegis of the Cineteca di Bologna. For more information about the Porretta antifestival, see Gelardi 2022.

to film restoration in the light of the Brighton Congress, the Mostra undertook a process of self-differentiation by evolving from an anti-institution of cinematic discovery into an institution of re-discovery, which was tethered to the Cineteca's year-round activity, its restoration lab (L'Immagine Ritrovata)⁴ and the international network of film archives. Created "to inspire [film historical] revaluations" (Rosenbaum 2010, 61), Il Cinema Ritrovato has regularly attracted a special cluster of cinephiles, one including highly reputed film archivists, curators, festival programmers and directors together with film historians, critics and scholars, including Ian Christie, Michel Ciment, Pamela Hutchinson, Aboubakar Sanogo, Kristin Thompson, among others. However, Il Cinema Ritrovato differed from other archive-driven festivals as it grew into an event capable of catering also for vaster, non-expert cinephile communities, for it took on a wider curatorial spectrum which has embraced the whole span of film history, while also privileging international auteur cinema.

Shelving the glamour of traditional festivals and embedding instead a rigorous commitment to the discipline of film history and the "theory of film restoration" (Farinelli and Mazzanti 1991, 5), these festivals provided film archives with an access-strategy alternative to the traditional in-house screening programmes, tethering film historical research to archival work and its usage in their annual programmes. By endowing critical momentum within exclusive festive spaces, festivals have been able to grant films that are not materially destroyed but fallen out of the frames of attention, valuation, and use an important resurfacing from cultural forgetting to memory and opening them to reinterpretation: from archival sources to canon. The kind of functions festivals perform in this context arguably resonates with a metaphorical insight put forth by cultural memory scholar Aleida Assmann. In Assmann's conceptualization of the archive-museum relation, the museum is framed as an exhibition site where some objects are displayed within informative frameworks (specialized strands, thematic retrospectives, tributes, anniversaries or celebrations, e.g.) so as to impress the viewers, others are stored in peripheral rooms and are not made publicly accessible: through these means, the museum shapes its own history of the field, cataloguing and exhibiting selected works of art (Assmann 2008, 98). This metaphor shed light on some of the functions played by film-related retrospective events at festivals and helps to understand the festival-archive relationship: whilst the festival serves to exhibit films from the past to catch viewers' attention and make a lasting impression, the latter stores and preserves films, and eventually restores some of them. From the mid-1990s onwards, such an alliance and the necessary synergy between festivals and archives went on to influence the priorities of film preservation in the international sphere.

⁴ In 1990, L'Immagine Ritrovata was launched thanks to a two-year workshop sponsored by the European Social Fund, aiming to establish a film restoration laboratory specialised in photochemical restoration and train several archivists. The laboratory was established in 1992 and is now a limited liability company (LLC), acquired by the Cineteca as a subsidiary company in 2006.

REVIEWING THE PAST: FILM RESTORATIONS GO 'CLASSICS' AT FILM FESTIVALS

The impulse to re-view the past can be traced back to the very origin of the film festival phenomenon. Already in 1929, at the Stuttgart *FiFo*-exhibition (abbreviation of 'Film und Foto') – considered by some to be the archetype of the modern film festival for its focus on the artistic and cultural remit of cinema (Hagener 2014: 288-89) – Hans Richter presented a retrospective program about the 'master works' of the 1920s film avantgarde, along with contemporary filmwork by Dziga Vertov, Germaine Dulac and Man Ray (Newhall 1955). Among the top-tier festivals, the Berlinale started revisiting the film historical past from its outset (1951) through its 'Retrospectives' strand that, between the first and third editions of the festival, was dedicated to 'Silent Movies' from France, Germany, Italy and the US. The Italian antifestivals also engaged with cinema's past, staging tributes for recently deceased filmmakers or creating programmes retracing the milestones of the French and the British New Waves. Equally event based, though smaller in scale, cineclubs selected films from previous decades, catering to audiences keen on either experiencing for the first time or recollecting canonical films, thus reigniting their 'historical memory'.

From the audience's perspective, the desire to re-watch classics has been framed through the prism of cinephilia (Elsaesser 1995; Willemen 1994, 226- 28), and interpreted as an act of remembering which, coloured by nostalgia and a bittersweet sense of loss, renegotiates the distance between one's own past and the present. On an institutional level, re-presenting and re-framing canonical films have usually served a disciplinary aim, propagating a discourse of film as art by retracing the historical development in the use of the cinematic medium, from the past to present days. These fragments of the film canon, framed variously as milestones in the development of the art of cinema, or having left an enduring mark in the memory of generations of cinephiles, are meant to outlive their present, being ceaselessly reinterpreted and remediated within different historical and sociopolitical circumstances. To perform such canonization, integral to the institutionalization of cinema (Staiger 1985), film festivals have usually dwelled on the celebration of *auteurs*, national waves, the motif of film-as-universal-language and the labels of 'classic' or 'cult' films.

Before moving to further explore the logics of festivals' cinematic rediscoveries and consider their potential impact on film canons, a caveat must be given. When observing the global festival circuit, any attempt to lump together film festivals, their cultural policies and especially their agendas within a single, cohesive conceptual framework has been hampered by the inherent heterogeneity of this panorama. Consistent with that, a systematic theorization of film festivals' engagement with film history and heritage would fall short of considering their differences in subjects of interest (film formats, historical focuses, genres, e.g.), screening practices, audiences and stakeholders, financial sources and structures. An archive-driven film festival like the Festival of Film Preservation

in Los Angeles⁵ could hardly be compared with the ever increasingly popular and eclectic Il Cinema Ritrovato, given their diverse programming policies, local and international stakeholders, and locations; however, should one choose to focus on their audiences, it would be surprising to notice that the two have much in common, given that they are both considered seminal events to contemporary film historiography tendencies, being flocked every year by international film historians and archivists eager to keep track of the latest findings from archives. The following sections will narrow the analysis on a cluster of institutions, that of A-tier film festivals and their retrospective programmes dedicated to restored film heritage. This methodological choice is supported by the consideration that, being these festivals fundamental "industrial nodes" within global film markets (Iordanova 2015), they have great impact both on the film distribution industry, and on public discourses. Thus, the theoretical insights put forth in the following paragraphs are mainly related to these institutions and their cultural agendas.

Within the main film festivals in the global circuit, the ordaining of past works as 'classical', which has run in tandem with the discovery of contemporary films, has been a perpetually ongoing process which has interwoven with contemporary historical, cultural and technological developments. In this vein it is significant to note that, with new film restoration techniques being ceaselessly updated and the proliferation of digital means of film distribution, A-list film festivals have established themselves as influential platforms for the circulation of restored films. Around the 1990s the 'major three', Cannes, Berlin and Venice, have started actively advocating for the protection and conservation of the world cinematic heritage, embracing the heritage rhetoric traditionally heralded by UNESCO and FIAF. Tellingly in this regard, the Cannes Film Festival invited, in 1994, the then-director of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, to present the work carried out by the UNESCO with FIAF "for the preservation of the world film heritage" at a press conference. In this occasion, Mayor presented the general lines of the UNESCO *1980 Recommendation*, and the fund-and-interest-raising projects to establish new film archives in the 'developing nations' of the world. The fight for preserving the world film heritage, he argued, had to be seriously undertaken by all nations, "with the hope that Cannes Festival would help to promote the cause concerned" (FIAF 1994, 13-14) – and it helped indeed.

Since 2000, this trend has intensified with the opening of specialised strands, such as 'Cannes Classics' (2004) and the Berlinale's three-fold programme, with the long-standing 'Retrospective' (1951) & 'Homage' (1977) sections being augmented by the Berlinale Classics parallel, where "digitally restored film classics and rediscoveries celebrate their premieres".⁶ As for the Venice

5 Running since 1988, the Festival is organized by the UCLA Film and Television Archives and, from its outset, it was used to present the yearly preservation achievements of the UCLA's Archives and of other US film heritage institutions (MoMA Film Library, National Film Archive, e.g.), also willing to raise public awareness on the 'historical and cultural importance' of the sector. For more information, see: Cullum et al. 2015.

6 <https://www.berlinale.de/en/festival/sections/retrospective-homage-berli>

Biennale, it was under the directorship of Gillo Pontecorvo (1992-1996), in 1992, that several retrospective events started being curated (see Donati 1996, 70-71) and, in partnership with the Cineteca di Bologna, the 'Venice and the Italian Film Archives' conference (1994) was organized to discuss joint access strategies to allow film archives to screen and circulate their latest restorations through the main Italian festival. Eventually, these strategies were implemented in 2012 with the opening of the Venice Classics strand, presenting "a selection of the best restorations of film classics carried out over the past year by film archives, cultural institutions and production companies around the world."⁷

Throughout the last twenty years, film festivals have cemented their investment in cinematic rediscoveries and their commercial potential. This has been a slight shift, but it brought with it important consequences. With new restoration initiatives being launched every year in these sites, major festivals like Cannes have been involved in the organization of specialized market-events, where streaming services' representatives and film distribution companies can acquire newly restored 'back catalogue' contents for their libraries⁸. Quintessential, in this regard, is the case of the International Classical Film Market (MIFC) of the Lumière Film Festival (LFF) in Lyon (France), a film festival dedicated to so-called 'heritage cinema', and which was founded in 2009 by Thierry Frémaux, director of the film museum and cinémathèques Institute Lumière in Lyon and, more importantly, delegate general of the Cannes Film Festival. The MIFC was established in 2013 as a sidebar of the LFF and is today regarded as the world's leading event in the business of heritage cinema. The event brings together numerous agents (film distribution companies' representatives, TV and VoD programmers, film archivists and restorers, rights holders, institutional organizations, private exhibitors and festival directors), sharing best practices and prompting the sale and purchase of film rights within "the international heritage film industry".⁹ Whilst it was initially meant to draw on the interest of French agents mainly, through the last nine years the MIFC has turned into an event of international relevance, flocked to every year by professionals from around Europe and North America (Meza 2021), this itself being a sign that important economic and cultural interests are expanding (and shaping) this market and the film restoration and preservation business.

By merging symbolic and financial values in their yearly celebrations of the latest film restorations along with the art of conservation, A-class festivals

[nale-classics.html](#), last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

⁷ <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/films-restored-venice-classics>, last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

⁸ 'Back catalogue films' or 'catalogue films' is a formula used within the digital streaming service jargon to describe films that have already had a first cycle of distribution. In some cases, these terms are used interchangeably with other terms such as 'classic films' or 'heritage cinema'. For more information, see Gilles and Simone 2016, 9–10.

⁹ <https://www.mifc.fr/media/mifc/mifc-press-book.pdf>, last visit on March 7th, 2023.

along with seminal archive-driven festivals (above all, Il Cinema Ritrovato) have grown determinant to the priorities of what films ought to be restored and re-circulated internationally, in some cases even commissioning specific projects.¹⁰ As top-tier events like Cannes offer a powerful sounding board to promote and legitimize the circulation of rediscovered films, archives seek to meet both the expectations of festivals' directors and programmers and the taste of their target audiences, proposing film restoration initiatives of consolidated cultural and historical value, which are thus palatable to the festivals' community of interest and arthouse networks. From the archives' point of view, the rhetoric of 'authenticity' and that of 'philological restoration' can generate novel attention for one title, adding a layer of staged truthfulness to cinematic rediscoveries.¹¹ Comparable to the aura of an auteur, restoration has emerged as a significant operation for both the marketing and canonization of films. While suggesting an act of cinematic discovery insofar as it indicates and legitimates new entries in film canons, film restorations and, thereby, festival rediscoveries have been unique in their reversal of the obsolescence of certain objects from the horizon of the relevant. In this vein, the narrative of 'restoration' entails a generative act which, by reinstating a film's material body within film history, offers novel critical relevance and presence to films.

From a technological perspective, the re-contextualization unfolds through state-of-the-art restorations which adapt films to the most recent digital formats (2K or 4K), remixing sound elements and, in some instances, even altering chromatic elements, timing or producing different edits – a trend well evidenced in the 4K restoration of part of Wong Kar Wai's oeuvre (see Elrich 2021). In tandem with this, a further argument in support of digital restorations is that these operations are said to enhance the digital availability – adding a slightly different nuance to the twin notion of 'accessibility', traditionally emphasized in film heritage discourses by policy makers.¹² For instance, on occasion of the

10 By way of example, one can consider the Udine Far East Film Festival and the Shanghai Film Festival which have commissioned several restoration projects through *L'Immagine Ritrovata Asia*, the Cineteca di Bologna-owned laboratory in Hong Kong. See Gelardi 2020.

11 In the early 1990s, Michele Canosa, Nicola Mazzanti and Gian Luca Farinelli proposed replacing the notion of 'original' with that of 'authentic'. Reconstructing a film's authentic meaning is, according to them, the goal of a philological research that entails the census of all existing versions, the collation to establish their degree of kinship, and the individuation of the 'forefather' copy to be restored. Building on the convergence between Lachmannian literary philology, the conservation-preservation theory from Cesare Brandi and Gianfranco Contini's theory of literary criticism, the so-called 'Scuola Bolognese' of film restoration theory characteristically hinges on such preliminary processes, deemed indispensable to indicate a film's 'authentic version' (See Canosa 1992; Farinelli and Mazzanti 1994). By drawing attention to a single version and regarding film degradation as a loss of quality, this theoretical approach has supported and influenced film historical methodology by making ecdotic procedures and philologically accurate film restorations necessary to the work of film historians (in this regard, see Venturini 2006, 16–19).

12 For a debunking of the rhetoric of 'innovation' and 'digital accessibility' in the film heritage sector and its lurking economic rationale, see Antoniazzi 2017.

Film Restoration Summit, an event convened by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association and dedicated to the “challenges of film preservation” (Lerman 2019), Fremaux deployed a familiar scaremongering discourse, warning of the desertification of theatres, and took on the defence of film culture to teach it to younger cinephile generations: “you have to make sure that the great classic films can be seen anytime, anywhere with DVD, but also in a movie theatre” (quoted in Saperstein 2017). Similar rallies to save ‘classic films’, those digitally restored and ‘rediscovered’ at festivals (Fremaux’s *Cannes Classics* sidebar being one of the main global platforms for such purpose), are conventionally coupled with an emphasis on the educational goals (“to carry the cinephile flame on to the next generations”) of film restoration initiatives, but hardly mention their main driving impulse: “the direct or indirect economic exploitation of collections,” to say it with Luca Antoniazzi (2019, 83). Whilst the ubiquity of ‘classic films’ such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dollari*, Sergio Leone, 1964) – whose 4K restoration was presented and celebrated at the 2019 Film Restoration Summit – may lend some financial earning in return, less known films tend to require institutional legitimization to accrue critical and public interest. For the re-connection of films with the present, festival events have been crucial through their presentation of the new premiere of ‘old’ films that may have slept out of cinephile memories. Accompanied by critical paratexts (brochure, interviews, catalogue entries, reprinted articles, etc.) and merged into larger thematic retrospectives dedicated to auteurs, waves, intellectual movements or historical periods, within festivals films can be set for a significant return in the now. That is the case for films and auteurs generally included in the global art cinema category. In this vein, we are prompted to consider what benefits archives and festivals are likely to gain in return when they take ownership of the restoration of so-called ‘world cinema’.

MAKING HISTORY: FESTIVALS' (SELF) PRESERVATION AGENDA AND THE LOGICS OF CINEMATIC REDISCOVERIES

Within the retrospective expansion of the art cinema market through digital distribution means (Hediger 2005, 142-43), we have observed that A-class festivals and their retrospective sidebars have become institutional guarantors of the quality and ‘authenticity’ of cinematic rediscoveries. Furthermore, we have framed these events as key legitimising actors and (both symbolic and commercial) value-adding forces to film restoration initiatives. Hence, to fulfil this essay’s goal – that is unravelling how festivals can contribute to shaping film histories and canons retroactively – let us consider how film restoration initiatives gear significantly with film festivals’ retrospective programming. In this regard, I have chosen to consider several titles selected and restored by

The Film Foundation (TFF)¹³ and the Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata: these films were later circulated through the Cannes, Venice and Berlin festivals and the North-American and European arthouse exhibition networks, thus being distributed in DVD and Blu-ray by companies like Criterion (USA), Carlotta Films (France) and Trigon-Film (Switzerland). Significantly enough, these films had been either the subject of major festivals' discovery or related to the oeuvre of acclaimed auteurs, and, following their restoration and rediscovery, have climbed back to critical attention, being both re-circulated and re-distributed.

Let us consider, for instance, *Insiang* (1976) by Lino Brocka, a film which, whilst having been a box-office flop at home, was known as "the first Filipino movie to be shown at Cannes" (Dupont 2015, 78). After receiving critical acclaim and several awards at the Manila Metro Film Festival (1976), the film sparked a heightened debate, since its representation of the harsh living conditions in the Manila's slums jarred with the idyllic and beautified image purported by the then-dictator of Philippines Ferdinand Marcos and his first-lady Imelda Marcos, a debate that resulted in the film's censorship (Capino 2020, 50–52). This dramatic climax aroused the interest of Pierre Rissient, Cannes' artistic consultant scouting in South-East Asia, who strongly recommended Brocka's film for the Director's Fortnight (1978). Rissient's and Cannes' clout abetted *Insiang* theatrical releases in France (de Montremy 1978) and throughout the European arthouse exhibition network (Lo 1978). Brocka earned critical praise as a 'new' auteur in the world cinema pantheon, being compared with Luis Buñuel, Yasujiro Ozu and Vittorio De Sica for the 'truly revelatory' and 'authentic' representation of Manila (Capino 2020: 55). Rissient recalled that:

*In 1977 I was in Sydney for the film festival. Before going home, I zigzagged my way back through Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong-Kong, Manila and Seoul, to discover a new filmmaker and an unknown film: Insiang by Lino Brocka.*¹⁴

Introduced by Rissient's personal memory of discovery, *Insiang* was restored in 2015 and rediscovered at the Cannes Classics, the same year. Brocka's 'authentic' visions of Manila was married with its no-less-authentic restoration which, carried out at L'Immagine Ritrovata, conveyed a second layer of truthfulness to the rediscovery of *Insiang*: it is now more real than it has ever been. This restoration further cements Cannes' longstanding role of trendsetter in global

13 Founded in 1990 by director Martin Scorsese, TFF is a non-profit organization aimed at protecting US' film heritage, lobbying Hollywood studios to preserve their holdings, and to improve the quality of restoration laboratories' work. From the 2000s onwards, the scope of TFF's mission has widened as it started contributing – mostly in financial terms – to restore films 'of all subjects, genres and nationalities' through projects like the World Cinema project (2007-ongoing), and the African Film Heritage Project (2017-ongoing). See The Film Foundation (2013) *Staff/FAQ*, Available at: <http://www.film-foundation.org/contents/reports/2013/2013.pdf>, last visit on November 3rd, 2023.

14 <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/film/insiang/>, last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

art cinema, by re-introducing a 'classic' of Filipino film culture that, having been premiered or awarded at the *Croisette* and in other A-list festivals, added a new flag in the map of the international film culture.

Another case in point is that of *Touki Bouki*. Hailed as one of sub-Saharan African cinema's 'lost classics', the film's restoration had been championed only a year before by prominent film critics and scholars (for instance see: Cousins 2007). Restored in 2008 by the World Cinema Foundation,¹⁵ *Touki Bouki* was introduced at the CR by Peter von Bagh, the then-artistic director of the festival:

[...] the restoration program promoted by the World Cinema Foundation has become one of the finest points of our program, both for the individual films—unknown or little-known films from Third World Countries—and as an idea that will change 'the face of film history', which has always been too preoccupied with films that are easily accessible (Von Bagh 2008, 14).

Yet *Touki Bouki* had, in its initial release, hardly been an 'unknown' film, but was rather a major festival's discovery: it found distribution in European and North American arthouse networks after being selected at Cannes, garnering multiple awards¹⁶ and entering 'festival cinema' canons.¹⁷ The film's return to festival screens in 2008 was hailed by critics praising the 'subversive energy [that] made Mambéty a one-man African New Wave' (Bradshaw 2020), Mambéty's representation of Colobane's youth through an original appropriation of Nouvelle Vague – especially Godardian – aesthetics (suggesting a visual familiarity with, yet essential difference from, European art cinema – see Mambu 2018), the film's pre-established cultural and artistic value – citing Mambéty's awards at Cannes and Moscow (Gilbey 2018).

Touki Bouki would go on the same year to be screened at festivals like the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the BFI London Film Festival and the Locarno Film Festival. Shortly thereafter, this digitally restored version of the film was released on DVD and Blu-Ray editions by Criterion,¹⁸ Trigon-Film¹⁹ and Carlotta Films²⁰ – respectively the US, German and French language home-video

15 Renamed World Cinema Project, this is one of the most important outputs of Scorsese's TFF and the Cineteca di Bologna, having drawn attention towards the precarious conditions of the developing countries' film heritage. For more information, see <https://www.film-foundation.org/world-cinema>, last visit on November 12th, 2023.

16 Premiered and awarded at the Cannes 'Directors' Fortnight' in 1973, *Touki Bouki* was also selected at the Moscow International Film Festival the same year, obtaining the Winner Diploma and the FIPRESCI prize. See Ukadike 2000, 186–87.

17 Lindiwe Dovey uses "festival cinema" to refer to non-mainstream films, with minimal commercial edge, characterised by aesthetic experimentation, framed as auteurial filmworks, and dependent of the financial support and symbolic value provided by European film festivals (Dovey 2015, 4–5).

18 <https://www.criterion.com/films/28412-touki-bouki>, last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

19 https://www.trigon-film.org/en/movies/Touki_Bouki, last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

20 <https://carlottafilms.com/films/voyage-de-la-hyene-le/>, last visit on Novem-

distribution companies which often focused their efforts on global art cinema. Since its digital edition became purchasable on Amazon Marketplace²¹ *Touki Bouki* has been ranked on *Empire's* world cinema chart²² and listed second in the 'Twenty Best African Films' by *The Guardian* (Bradshaw 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

These recuperations of global art cinema attain special relevance as they have reignited and reconfigured a film historical past that had arguably slept out of cinephilic memories, film histories and the spectrum of the relevant. Equally bound to Cannes' legacy of cinematic discoveries is *Chronicle of the Years of Fire* (Algeria, 1975) by Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, the first African auteur to win the *Palme d'Or*. This is not to mention other films and filmmakers who share similar trajectories of historic discovery and contemporary rediscovery within the European festival circuit, such as *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus o Diabolo na Tera du Sol*, 1964) by Glauber Rocha, *The Night of Counting the Years* (*al-Mummiya*, 1969) and *The Eloquent Peasant* (*Al Fallah al Fasih*, 1969) by Abdel-Salam Shadi, *Soleil Ô* (1970) by Med Hondo, *A Brighter Summer Day* (*Gǔlǐng jiē shàonián shā rén shìjiàn*, 1991) by Edward Yang, or *The Boys from Fengkuei* (*Fēngguì lái de rén*, 1983) by Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Primarily, titles such as these all have historically marked the international critical recognition of 'new' national waves and auteurs, via the legitimization of major European film festivals – Cannes above all. This is often restated in presentations of their rediscoveries, celebrating the historical role of major festivals as pivotal trendsetters of cultural and aesthetic quality in global art cinema.

Observed from this angle, these cinematic 'rediscoveries' seem to sustain rediscovery of festivals' own deeds in the historic developments of art cinema. This complex dynamic sees A-class festivals committed to support the preservation of 'world cinema' as part and parcel of their own "memory narratives" (Stringer 2003, 83). This is congruent with some of Aleida Assmann's insights on how and the reasons why (political, civic, cultural) institutions construct certain memory narratives:

Institutions [...] do not possess a memory like individuals; [...] They make one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments. Together with such a memory, [...] institutions 'construct' their identity. Such a memory is based on selection and exclusion, neatly separating useful from not useful, and relevant from irrelevant memories (Assmann 2008, 216).

ber 2nd, 2023.

21 <http://amzn.to/2jFi6sg>, last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

22 <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/100-greatest-world-cinema-films/>, last visit on November 2nd, 2023.

Whilst A-class festivals largely purport the idea that the preservation of cinema's past serves an educational purpose, this essay has sought to unearth other underlying rationales governing the logics of festivals' cinematic rediscoveries. In this regard, emphasis has been put on the fact that, by selecting and revisiting their own memorable achievements and favouring the restoration, recirculation and remembrance of 'festival cinema' (i.e., films with secured success within the festival circuit and arthouse cinemas), these cinematic rediscoveries sustain autopoietic processes in retrospect, revamping the relevance of the festivals' findings in and contributions to global film culture. In other words, these memory narratives, shaped through dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, are constructed so as to historicize, legitimate and thus perpetuate the essential role which European festivals have played and continue to do so in defining global art cinema, both in the future and in retrospect. As Cannes and major European festivals seek to merge their own past with that of global art cinema through their cinematic rediscoveries, such attempts of retrospective self-glorification consolidate their historical role as film quality regulators and, thus, keeps 'the system, which legitimised their social function, up and running' (de Valck 2012, 33). In this vein, these observations of the film historical agenda of A-Class festivals further confirms what Marijke de Valck has labelled as the "self-referencing" strategy of festivals' programming practices, which favours the restoration, circulation and re-distribution of 'festival cinema', and reinforce the value system (auteurism, art, universalism) upon which the domain of festivals has dwelled and thrived thus far.

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