

Decentering Nations: The Role of National Institutes for Culture in the Promotion and Circulation of European Cinema

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When considering the circulation of European films across Europe within a post-national framework, an investigation on the role of national institutes for culture could offer a particular take on the “Europeanisation” (Carpentier 2021) process through cinema-related initiatives. If they were conceived to promote national heritage and values, they have found themselves in the ambivalent position of pursuing their main goal within a changing institutional and cultural context that requires more integrated approaches, since the beginning of the 1990s, namely after the end of the Cold War. Notably, since the creation of the European National Institutes for Culture network (hereafter EUNIC) in 2006, they have been asked to cooperate and to valorise the heterogeneity and multiplicity of European subjectivities and communities, according to the motto “unity in diversity” (Liz 2016; Bondebjerg, Novrup Redvall, and Higson 2014).¹ In particular, this research concentrates on the circulation, among European and Italian institutes for culture, of films that deal with *European issues*, and has reflected on how they affect the construction of a transnational European identity by addressing sensitive topics.

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INTRODUCTION

This study originates from an investigation into the relationship between cinematic Europe and its multiple identities that has occurred over the last three decades and finds significant evidence in many scholars. Thomas Elsaesser and his study on European cinema are cases in point: here, by questioning its “conditions of impossibility”, he asks “on what basis, other than bureaucratic and

¹ Art. 128 of The Treaty of Maastricht on European Union (1992) explicitly claims that “The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore”. Similarly, the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production, established in the same year (1992) by the Council of Europe, was designed to “safeguard and promote the ideals and principles which form [a] common heritage” while being “an instrument of creation and expression of cultural diversity”. The Council of Europe Convention on Cinematographic Co-production was revised in Rotterdam in 2017, not only “by providing a platform to make cinematographic co-productions more systematic and easier to construct”, but also opening for accession by non-European countries. See also Paganoni 2015.

economic, a European cinema might build a sense of identity that was neither merely the sum of its parts nor the result of new lines of exclusion and 'other-ing?' (2005, 24). It follows that, to understand and conceptualise contemporary Europe on screen, it is necessary, according to Elsaesser, to enlarge the context and look at "Europe's bio- and body-politics" (2014, 17–32). It is a matter of representativeness, where at stake there is an idea of Europeanness that draws on "a common European history and cultural heritage, together with more contemporary issues addressing nationalism, migration, identity, and gender politics" (Rivi 2007). This approach seems to be in continuity with that used by Pierre Sorlin (1991) in his study on *European Cinemas, European Societies, 1939–1990*, where the author provides a comparative study on the main themes of European cinema—including urbanisation, immigration, sex and gender—drawing on examples from French, German, Italian and British films, and significantly moving from the question: what does cinema tell us regarding the contrasts between European nations?

For a finer-grained approach it is important to emphasise that the connotation of identity taken into consideration herein is that of *cultural identity*, which differs from the *civic* dimension of support to the EU as a political project, inasmuch as "people could feel European (identify as European) but not quite act upon it (identify with Europe)." (Ciaglia, Fuest, and Heineman 2018, 15). Hence, even though they do not necessarily evolve in conjunction, it goes without saying that these two facets of European identity are closely linked, as cultural activities are widely considered an instrument for fostering civic identification in EU policies by generating "new ideas, innovation and social cohesion" (Barroso 2023).

Given these premises, this study has attempted to answer the following questions: do the cinema-related initiatives held by national institutes for culture concur in building a transnational image of Europe? How and to what extent do they encourage the promotion and the successful circulation of a film that we can consider "European"? Does European cinema represent national identity first and cross-international identities second? (Comand and Menarini 2014).

As a consequence, having thoroughly examined the recurring topics in the field literature on contemporary European cinema, the investigation has been carried out according to three intersecting lines of enquiry: the first emphasises the occurrence of sensitive topics in cinema-related initiatives by considering them the litmus test of a discursive and intersectional approach to Europeanness and European multiple-identities (Carpentier 2021); the second highlights how cinema-related initiatives address a niche audience that could be deemed part of a "united European cinema sphere" (Biltereyst and Cuelenaere 2021); the third explores the status of national institutes for culture, as "diplomatic tools" and "unofficial cultural ambassador[s]" (Noto and Peretti 2016), as special sites to observe how European cinema fosters the construction of a transnational image of European culture, namely as sites "where Europeanity is discursively and materially performed" (Carpentier 2021, 237).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Firstly, the research has moved from the assumption that the circuits of national institutes for culture could help the film promotion by integrating the main paths of circulation, thus partly compensating the historical fragmentation and “lack of a [...] distribution network covering Europe” (Bondebjerg, Novrup Redvall, and Higson 2014, 1); a lack even more clear if compared with the effort made in terms of co-production (Scaglioni 2020)—especially for those films that, despite their high cultural value, are less interesting for commercial purposes. Indeed, “[w]hile discussions of European film tend to only focus just on the cinema market, it is important to stress that cinema admissions do not show the whole picture, since Europeans are not only watching films in the cinema” (Bondebjerg, Novrup Redvall, and Higson 2014, 13). In this regard, it is worth disambiguating the concept of *circulation*, intended herein in its broadest sense as the wide network of formal and informal places and occasions (Lobato 2012) that valorise the cultural and political side of film experience (Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018, 2019; Scaglioni 2020). That is the reason why the circuits of national institutes for culture have been examined by considering them as a kind of IRL (in real life) “secondary window” (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 2014), which have a significant role in film circulation beyond national borders, as in constructing the cultural value and identity of films.

Secondly, in trying to answer Randall Halle's questions “What is European film? How does European film differ from national film?” (Halle 2014, 15), one could assume that a film has to be deemed as European if it is a co-production—a so-called “Euro-pudding”—, or if it addresses European issues (Liz 2014)—namely if it reflects on the meaning of Europeanness and its representations. Nonetheless, this study concentrates on the second aspect. Indeed, if the WP1 of the EUMEPLAT project shows the growing popularity of European co-productions in terms of theatrical release and sold tickets (Biltereyst and Cuelenaere 2021), at the same time, co-production as a criterion to define the Europeanness of a film and its relation with the public preferences, fades into the background if we speak of non-theatrical release. In line with Harrod, Liz and Timoshkina the aim:

[...] is to revisit the issue of the significance of European cinema as a category in the wake of the recent acceleration in transnational filmmaking and globalisation as a whole. [...] Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, scholarly work considered not only the industrial aspects of European film (Jäckel 2003), particularly the renaissance of co-productions (Rivi 2007), but also its relationship with national and transnational identities (Wayne 2002; Everett 2005b). (Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina 2014)

STUDY SAMPLE AND TOOLS OF ENQUIRY

The present investigation has begun with a preliminary mapping of the cinema-related events held by seventeen among European and Italian institutes for culture, with the aim of understanding their importance within the institutes' cultural programmes. The research has focused on the cultural institutes belonging and/or taking place into the so-called Big Five Countries. Then, the study sample has been further circumscribed by taking into account the activities held by European cultural institutes in Italy: the Institut Français in Milan, the Goethe-Institut and the Instituto Cervantes in Rome, and the British Council Italy—the latter, we will see later in the text, provides a very peculiar exemplum. Moreover, the focus on the Italian cultural institutes in Europe has been on those located in the biggest cities and those deemed as important for their film tradition: Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, Madrid, Barcelona, Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Strasbourg, London and Brussels. In addition to these, even though Brussels is not located in one of the big five countries, it has been included by virtue of its peculiar geo-political and diplomatic position, and because it provides a movie-theatre with 250 seats.

By using the time frame considered by the EUMEPLAT project, this research has taken into consideration film programming from 1996 to 2019—but it also mentions more recent film seasons and single projections because of their relevance with the research question. Based on qualitative methods, it has proceeded through a comparative analysis via data collections, a literature study and interviews with the heads of cultural activities.

Each institution has a website with an archive of events, from which it has been possible to partially map the film-related activities—year by year and by focusing on film title and synopsis, some of which have been viewed for a deeper knowledge—, even though some web pages are no longer active, and it has not been possible to obtain specific information about all the films featured by the events mentioned below. Depending on the accessibility of information and documents, data-collection has offered a rather wide bird's eye view, which has been supplemented with surveys and interviews: these have been helpful in zooming in on specific cases and highlighting otherwise invisible aspects.² Indeed, paraphrasing Giorgio Avezù (2022, 10), a study into the geographies of circulation entails looking at the data from afar, but also requires a closer focus on cultural contents.

² I'm grateful for the helpful contribution to: Alison Driver (Arts Manager British Council Italia), Antonella Croci, Linda Marchetti and Agnès Pallini-Martin (respectively director of the Institut, responsible for cultural activities and attachée of cooperation of the Institut Français in Milan), Carmen Hof (Goethe-Institut Rome), Allegra Iafrate (IIC-Brussels), Maria Teresa De Palma (IIC-London), Gianfranco Zicarelli (Istituto Cervantes Rome), who read and approved the statements contained in this article.

ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE PLAYED IN THE CIRCULATION OF EUROPEAN CINEMA BY THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTES FOR CULTURE IN ITALY

Film programming depends on many variables: the cultural policies of the country the institute belongs to; the cultural policies of the hosting country—with possible restrictions on sensitive issues; the degree of autonomy from the Ministry of Culture or from the Embassy; the availability of economic resources; the specific interest or competence of the head of cultural events; the cooperation with other institutes, or cultural events and festivals; and, not least, the public tastes, which are quite heterogeneous, given the wide geographical distribution of the institutes taken into consideration.

Intitut Français

The Institut Français (henceforth IF) falls within the jurisdiction of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its presence in Italy acts under the bilateral cultural agreement signed by France and Italy in 1949 and regularly updated ever since. Its mission explicitly mentions the aim of “strengthening the French presence within the Italian audiovisual scene, especially in cinema, an art in which the Franco-Italian relationship has always been particularly rich and fruitful” (my translation). It follows that the promotion and circulation of cinema and other audiovisual media covers a specific and strategic operational area (alongside the linguistic and university cooperation, the promotion of artistic creation and the cooperation on heritage and museums, the debate on ideas and book industries).

Functions and roles change every three or four years; a fact that hampers from thinking about a wide-ranging programming with continuity, or to have a general vision in a diachronic sense on how the cultural offer of the institute has changed over the years. The choice regarding contents and film programming depends on both budget management and on the curators’ choice and competence—even though their particular training is not a precondition for recruitment. Its programming refers to a central film library (coordinated by a person in charge of the French Embassy in Rome), from which it is possible to draw films without right transfer costs.

One of the most interesting aspects of such a film library is that, alongside the section dedicated to French cinema, and to alternative contents—namely to new audiovisual forms—there is a special section on the *Cinémathèque Afrique*, that contains over 1,700 films of Francophone African cinema from its origins to the present, more than 600 of which are royalty-free for non-commercial use. Cases in point are: classics by directors such as Sembène Ousmane, Souleymane Cissé, Idrissa Ouédraogo and Moustapha Alassane; the winners

of the Yennenga Stallion Fespaco Grand Prix; the recent productions of young filmmakers, including the Ghanaian comedy *Keteke* (Peter Sedufia, 2017), the documentary *Roundabout in my Head* (*Fi rassi rond-point*, Hassen Ferhani, 2015) and the romantic drama film *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2018). Furthermore, and not by chance, among the thematic seasons such as *Cannes Film Festival* and *Carnets de campagne-Élections présidentielles 2022*, a season devoted to the *Auteurs de la décolonisation* could also be mentioned, as could a special collections dedicated to the *New Generation of Female Filmmakers and Young Audience*.

Particular attention to the platformisation processes is the distinguishing feature of the IF—alongside more traditional initiatives such as *New French Cinema*, a collaboration based on the theatrical release between Milan and Turin held since 2000. Indeed, it allows access to a wide range of online content through the *Rendez Vous Play* platform that acts as a collector of audiovisual content, available thanks to collaborations with other platforms such as ARTE, MUBI, Il Cinema Ritrovato and RAI Play. It also offers the possibility to watch eight feature films and eleven French and African shorts for free and through the online platform *IFcinéma à la carte*.

Moreover, not only cinema, but also new audiovisual forms have a certain weight in IF programming: initiatives such as *Théâtre à l'écran*, and both the production and distribution of the artwork presented at the French pavilion of the Venice Biennale (*Les rêves n'ont pas de titre* by Zineb Sedira), and at the XXII Triennale Milano (*De la pensée au visible. Design as a Large Ring*) are cases in point.

External occasions such as events and festivals significantly affect the film programming, with a number of collaborations with Milano Film Network, the Francophone month, the partnership with Cineteca di Bologna and MUBI.

Goethe-Institut Roma

The information available on the Goethe-Institut (henceforth GI) dates back to the last decade, which was characterised by the coordination of Carmen Hof, Department of Cultural Programmes and film library. Whilst, data related to the 1990s and 2000s have been difficult to recover.

The organisation of a yearly thematic film selection, which shows a clear interest in sensitive topics, is at the core of the GI's strategy. In 2010 and 2011 two thematic exhibitions regarding gender issues were devoted to *Divas* from the early and modern cinema (Marlene Dietrich, Hildegard Knef, Hanna Schygulla e Romy Schneider), and to the new actresses of contemporary German cinema like Franka Potente, Nina Hoss, Martina Gedeck e Corinna Harfouch. While, more recently, in 2018–19, the exhibition devoted to female directors (*Frauenfilm*) included films by Maren Ade, Valeska Grisebach, Margarethe von Trotta, Doris Dörrie, Helke Misselwitz, Caroline Link, Karoline Herfurth, Sylke Enders, and Maria Schrader, authors that have been recognised for their “extraordinary diversity of themes and approaches”. As for LGBTQIA+ issues

the film programming in 2013–14 was devoted to the topic *Couples* “declined in all its possible variations: very young, elderly, gay, lesbian”.

With reference to the focus of this research, the most interesting initiative concerns migrations and multiculturalism, such as a longitudinal exploration of what it means to be Europeans: yesterday, today and tomorrow. Indeed, even though the title—*Hollywood is far away. Films, Stories and Protagonists under the European Sky*—refers more to the old opposition between the north-American and European approaches to filmmaking and storytelling, the selection features films by German directors of foreign origin, who depicted Europeans as a multi-ethnic society. In this vein, the film selection *Il migliore dei mondi possibili?* held in 2017–18 questions the recent history of Europe through the lens of the family.

A further aspect worth mentioning is that, similarly to the Institut Français, GI provides a film library with over 600 titles, including feature films and documentaries, which are available on loan and for non-commercial purposes, even for cultural practitioners operating outside the GI. It also offers other services, such as the collaboration for thematic exhibitions; a research service in the field of film and cinema studies; and support for programming on silent films with musical accompaniment.

Instituto Cervantes

Similarly to the Institut Français, the Instituto Cervantes (henceforth IC) falls within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Founded in 1991, it represents an unicum within the panorama outlined in the present study, because its main goal consists in promoting not only the Spanish language and culture, but also those of the three other official languages of Spain—Catalan, Basque and Galician—and those of the all “hispanos hablantes” countries. It follows that its cultural programming covers a wide range of intrinsically transnational aspects, to the extent that since 2012 the IC organises *Scoprir*, a yearly *Muestra de cine Ibero-Americano* held with many Ibero-American embassies in Italy and hosted by Casa del Cinema in Rome.

Additionally, it collaborates with IBERMEDIA, the Ibero-American aid fund that promotes audiovisual activities in its member States: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Spain, Uruguay and Venezuela, to which Italy has been added in 2017.

The curators' choices are aligned with the address notes of the IC headquarters in Madrid and a considerable amount of the programming is devoted to cinema, also thanks to the collaboration with a number of local and regional events and festivals, such as the RIFF—Roma Independent Film Festival and Pesaro Film Festival, CinemaSpagna.

The online data concerning cinema-related events have been available since 2004. They show that the main trends consist of prioritising contemporary Spanish cinema, with a focus on young directors (*Il giovane cinema spagnolo*,

2004–05) and debut features (*Opera Primeras*, 2008), with the explicit intention of promoting young “directors who manage to enter feature film production for the first time”, and on auteur cinema (*Cinefilia e nuovo cinema d'autore*, 2016).

As far as European issues are concerned, the IC collaborated with *Festival Europa Cinema* (2007) and *L'Isola del Cinema* (2012), which is a summer event that presents European films released during the previous winter.

The attention paid to LGBTQIA+ topics is recent and took place mostly online via the IC's Vimeo channel, because of Covid-19 restrictions (*LGTBI+ en español* in 2020; *Te estoy amando locamente. Rassegna di cortometraggi LGTBI+* in 2021). Furthermore, the space devoted to gender issues is much wider and, so far, has focused on films directed by women (*Mujeres en la cresta de la ola*, 2009), on the presentation of single directors, such as Carla Simón with *Estiu* (1993) at the *Med Film Festival* in 2017, on debut features (*Opere prime: donne nel cinema*, 2018), on short films (*Cortos en femenino*, 2020) and on the women who debuted as film directors from the 1950s to the 1980s (*Espacio femenino. Pioneras*, 2021).

British Council

Founded in 1934 the mission of the British Council (henceforth BC) consists of “promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilisation [by] encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere”.³

This case is quite different from other national cultural institutes because the British Council in Italy does not itself run film festivals or other film screening events which directly engage audiences, but its commitment goes through other channels and strategies. First, BC features a special website dedicated to the UK productions, with a yearly updated catalogue of films produced and co-produced in the UK, with information from leading experts in the field and conceived as a tool for festival programmers.

According to Alison Driver (Arts Manager for Italy), BC does not directly seek to engage with audience development, but performs an intermediary function and concentrates on offering “opportunities to film professionals—filmmakers, actors, platforms, festival programmers and film enthusiasts—and broker creative relationships between UK filmmakers and their international counterparts”, with a particular attention to issues facing our contemporary societies. Indeed, as for Italy, BC is among the partners of the network *Europe Beyond Access*—a four-year program conceived to internationalise the disabled artists' careers. Therefore, the role of BC Italy is focused on business connection, and over the years it has also worked with MIA – Mercato Internazionale Audiovisivo on events promoting inclusivity in the sector through invitations to share UK expertise.

3 <https://www.bfi.org.uk/>.

The BFI Film Fund is the main tool used by the BC to sponsor new productions, previously testing them through a *cultural test* designed to certify whether they are properly “British” or not, by considering four sections: cultural content, contribution, hubs, and practitioners. As for the first section on cultural content, what is remarkable is that the list published by BC every year includes films considered as “British” if: they are set in the UK “or a *European Economic Area*”; are based on British “or EEA subject matter”; their lead characters are British “or EEA citizens or residents”; and where the original dialogue is recorded mainly in English or UK indigenous language “or EEA language”.⁴

In light of this, one could infer that even the national institute for culture representing a country that recently left the EU cannot avoid considering the film production as a cultural issue that, first and foremost, addresses the idea of a European identity and its less visible subjectivities, and accounting national culture and its cinematic representations in terms of transnational identity.

ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE PLAYED IN THE CIRCULATION OF EUROPEAN CINEMA BY THE ITALIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTES IN EUROPE

Similarly to the Institut Français and to the Instituto Cervantes, the Italian Cultural Institutes (henceforth IIC) depend on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation: their mission and operation are regulated by the law n. 401/1990, updated with the D.M. 27 aprile 1995, n. 392, which has remained unchanged over the years. Within their general mission of promoting Italian culture and language abroad, cinema has always been one of the leading sectors of the cultural programming: its importance as a diplomatic tool has been confirmed in recent years through the creation in 2018 of the annual festival *Fare Cinema*—entirely dedicated to the promotion of the field’s professions and skills—by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Each institute in the world reinterprets the annual theme of the exhibition, by organising screenings, talks, masterclasses and meetings with professionals. As reported by Paolo Noto, “[t]he dissemination of film culture takes place in collaboration and overlaps with other public and private initiatives” (2019, 427). Indeed, Noto points out that, if the promotion of Italian cinema abroad is one of the MAECI’s diplomatic tasks, it also falls within

the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economic Development, through the ICE—Agency for the promotion and internationalisation of Italian companies (cooperating with ANICA), and of the Ministry

⁴ <https://www.bfi.org.uk/apply-british-certification-tax-relief/cultural-test-film>.

of Economy and Finance, which in turn supports the activities of FilmItalia, an agency specialised in the promotion of Italian films, through the Istituto Luce-Cinecittà, which operationally falls within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage. [...] In addition to these intersections with government agencies, the Italian Institutes often collaborate or act in parallel with private associations, foundations, or cultural institutions (Noto 2019, 426; my translation).

As far as data collection is concerned, the information on cultural events available on various IICs' websites dates back to 2006. This first survey shows that the main trend over the course of the 2000s was to screen and support films directed by authors considered to be part of the Italian (male) canon related to Neorealism and the post-Neorealism period and to Italian-style comedy (namely Luchino Visconti, Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Federico Fellini, Marco Bellocchio, Ettore Scola, Mario Monicelli), and to host tributes to leading female directors, professionals and actresses such as Liliana Cavani, Cecilia Mangini, Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Anna Magnani and Monica Vitti.

Furthermore, these years were characterised by the tendency to focus on the relationship between cinema and other aspects that are deemed to be qualifying the Italian cultural identity, such as gastronomy and fashion—and more sporadically with architecture, literature and music—sometimes with a regionalist declination: the IIC in Strasbourg (with *L'Italie et ses Régions: voyage à travers l'Art, le Cinéma, l'Histoire, l'Artisanat, la Gastronomie et l'Oenologie* in 2006); and the IIC Berlin (*Kino-di-Vino* in 2007, *CineFood - Basilicata tra cinema e cibo* in 2013) are cases in point.

Afterwards, similarly to the Instituto Cervantes in Rome, main trends consisted of prioritising contemporary Italian cinema, especially the new wave of Italian documentary filmmakers, a choice justified also by the intention to support the sector—as confirmed by Allegra lafrate (IIC-Bruxelles). In their study dedicated to the Italian cinema in the IICs abroad, Noto and Peretti affirms:

The IICs regularly screen Italian films which even in Italy often do not benefit from theatrical distributions, or that are poorly distributed: this is the case of a huge number of documentaries which are screened abroad, and that over the last few years turned to be a sort of example of Italian cinema for diplomatic functions, if not an exportation product (2016, 409).

It follows a diversification in programming that comprehends more films directed by women and/or addressed to sensitive topics, including gender and migrant issues, and, to a lower degree, LGBTQIA+ and disability issues.

Although, according to their mission, film programming doesn't draw on a distinctly European perspective, the IICs take part in events dedicated to European cinema such as *Les Rencontres du Cinéma Européen* (held since 1999). More specifically, what follows is an overview of recurring films in most

of the IICs' film programming.

During the 2000s, the IIC-Brussels programming undoubtedly presented the largest number of initiatives specifically addressed to European issues, also due to its particular geopolitical position and to the fact that the city hosts the EUNIC cluster. A case in point is the screening of *Once You're Born You Can No Longer Hide* (*Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2005), presented in 2008 at the EUNIC Film Festival dedicated to intercultural dialogue; and *FOCUS 89. Film e dibattiti su 20 anni di (r)evoluzione in Europa* (2009), alongside other recurring events such as the *Festival del cinema Mediterraneo*.

In 2006 the IIC Barcelona hosted the 2nd edition of the *Congreso Internacional de Cine Europeo Contemporáneo* (CICEC), focusing on the "need to create a 'eurocinema' capable of facing the challenges of the market and those of the new geopolitical scenarios, without erasing the differences".

In 2009 the IIC Berlin hosted the film season *La caduta della cortina di ferro*.

In 2010 the IIC Madrid collaborated with the *Atlantic Film Festival for the Screen Europe* section.

In 2013 the IIC Paris collaborated with the *ÉCU-European Independent Film Festival of Paris*.

In 2017 the IIC Lyon hosted *Métamorphoses. Focus sur le cinéma Européen* and, more recently, in 2022, *Vox Populi. Focus sur le Film Européen Engagé*. It also collaborates with La Maison de l'Image for *Les rencontres des cinémas d'Europe* (held since 1999), as well as that of the IIC Barcellona with the *Festival de cine de Menorca - Young European Cinema On the Move* in 2014, and with the *Festival del Cinema Europeo di Siviglia*—by supporting the presentation of *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019) in 2020.

In 2019 the IIC London presented the documentary film *Looking for Europe* (*Alla ricerca di Europa*, Alessandro Scillitani, 2019), and in 2020 collaborated with the *ArteKino festival*.

In the same year the IIC Paris paid attention to the relationship between the European East and West, by screening films like *Comunisti* (Davide Ferrario, Daniele Vicari, 1998) and *Verso Est* (Laura Angiulli, 2008).

In 2020 the IIC Munich hosted an event dedicated to the *LUX Prize of the European Parliament*.

Ultimately, it should be mentioned that the film with the greatest circulation among the IICs has been *Primo Levi's Journey* (*La strada di Levi*, Davide Ferrario, 2005), screened in Strasbourg, Barcelona, Lyon, and Marseille: a road-movie that follows the Primo Levi's journey from Poland to Italy, which depicts the image of a new Europe still linked to the remains of the Soviet Union and its neo-Nazi movements.

From the attention paid in recent years to contemporary Italian cinema has also sprung an increasing interest for films directed by women, especially when emerging. The most screened female directors are Alice Rohrwacher, Susanna Nicchiarelli, Laura Bispuri, Emma Dante, Valeria Golino, Francesca Comencini and Francesca Archibugi. In some cases the IICs organised or collaborated,

more or less regularly, with events or festival dedicated to female directors such as *Films, Femmes, Méditerranée* (IIC Marseille, since 2008); *Con gli occhi di lei* (IIC Munich, 2010); *Cinema al Femminile* (IIC Barcelona, 2013); *Festival Internacional de Cine Hecho por Mujeres* (IIC Madrid, 2019); *Sguardi Altrove* (IIC Brussels, 2021); *The Wave: Italian Women Filmmakers* (IIC London, 2020–21) and, more recently, *Femminile, plurale, una nuova generazione di registe italiane* (IIC Berlin, 2022).

Furthermore, and in a complementary way, great attention has also been paid to films that address gender issues such as *The Interval* (*L'intervallo*, 2012) and *L'Intruder* (*L'intrusa*, 2019) by Leonardo di Costanzo, *Lea - Something About Me* (*Lea*, Marco Tullio Giordana, 2015) and *A Chiara* (Jonas Carpignano, 2021).

Similarly, when it comes to migrant issues there are recurring films and directors such as Jonas Carpignano with *Mediterranea* (2015), Emanuele Crialesi with *Golden Door* (*Nuovomondo*, 2006) and *Terraferma* (2011), Gianfranco Rosi with *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016), Daniele Vicari with *The Human Cargo* (*La nave dolce*, 2012) [Fig. 1], Antonio Augugliaro, Gabriele Del Grande, Khaled Soliman with *On the Bride's Side* (*Io sto con la sposa*, 2014). In this case, it should be noted that the IIC Paris regularly takes part to the *Semaine des cultures étrangères du FICEP - Forum des Instituts Culturels Étrangers à Paris*, and organises events like *Destinazione Italia: cinema di migrazioni, migrazioni di cinema*; while the IIC Monaco collaborates with *Rassegna del Mediterraneo* by organising the season *Lontana terra: i migranti nel cinema italiano*.

Fig. 1
The Human Cargo
(*La nave dolce*,
Daniele Vicari, 2012).





Fig. 2
A Ciambra (Jonas
Carpignano, 2017).

Conversely, much less attention is usually paid to LGBTQIA+ and disability issues, except as for few isolated occasions represented by *The Mouth of the Wolf* (*La bocca del lupo*, Pietro Marcello, 2009) and *Loose Cannons* (*Mine Vaganti*, Ferzan Ozpetek, 2010) in the first case, and by *All My Crazy Love* (*Tutto il mio folle amore*, Gabriele Salvatores, 2019) in the second one.

Finally, also the occasions devoted to new audiovisual forms are sporadic: indeed, the institutes that over the years had paid more attention to this aspect are the IIC Berlin and IIC Paris through their involvement in *Les Rencontres Internationales Paris-Berlin. New Cinema and Contemporary Art* (since 2011)—which also involved Madrid for a few years—; the IIC Berlin with the screening of artworks by Rosa Barba; the IIC Madrid, through its collaboration with the *Milano Design Film Festival* and the organisation of two screenings of the artists Francesco Jodice and R  di Martino. The reason for this lesser attention to new audiovisual forms (which IICs share with other national institutes for culture) may lie in the fact that such a kind of double relocation—of cinema in contemporary art and vice versa—, is not expected by their regular spectators and disregards their viewing habits. This kind of content, indeed, seems to be difficult to present within this context, if compared with other forms of contemporary audiovisual practices. Nonetheless, Maria Teresa De Palma (IIC-London) affirms that “in recent years, the action of the IIC has tried to focus more on the contemporary audiovisual culture and recent productions, in every artistic and creative field, as well as on sub-sectors and genres that have excellently established themselves in the film scene, such as documentary and animation”.

THE CARPIGNANO TRILOGY

As far as the representation and the fostering of European cultural identity through the lens of sensitive topics are concerned, the projection of the Jonas Carpignano trilogy *Mediterranea* (2015), *A Ciambra* (2017) [Fig. 2] and *A Chiara*

(2021), is particularly emblematic and symptomatic of the way institutes approach cinema to address issues that are relevant for both national and transnational perspectives.

Moving forward from the Cinema-of-the-Real approach, Carpignano deals with the representation of marginal subjectivities, and his dramas genuinely adhere to the body of the non-professional actors he works with,⁵ through whom the director suggests how civil rights and the right to search for a better life cannot apply just to a few social categories. Indeed, Ayiva (an African migrant, in *Mediterranea*), Pino (a Roma boy, in *A Ciambra*) and Chiara (daughter of an affiliate of the criminal organisation 'ndrangheta, in *A Chiara*) respectively embody the failure of EU migration policies, the minoritization of ethnic groups, and the persistence of a culture of criminal violence and old values in certain remote areas of Southern Italy. Here, the scarce presence of institutions and public agencies in citizens' lives gives way to wide areas of stubborn social exclusion. Their vicissitudes take place in Calabria, an economically and culturally backward region of the peninsula; an area that is already marginal per se, at the periphery of Europe, both from a geographical and political point of view, where old and new forms of slavery and human rights violations are daily committed against refugee seekers, ethnic minorities and lower middle classes. Southern Italy, namely Italian shores, are not only a mere scenery or a narrative pretext, but a significant framework, a vantage point from which to explore and return the Other's point of view.

In showing and promoting this kind of films, national institutes for culture hinge on a two-speed Europe. The first represents the cultural identity and diplomacy fostered by institutes, their community and niche-audiences, who are in the position and have the faculty to imagine Europe as a long-term cooperative project. The second, however, represents a position that cannot be anything but local, circumscribed and unable of wide-ranging political imagination or, simply, of thinking of a social ecosystem beyond its narrow regional boundaries. In particular, the *A Chiara's* final scenes, which portray the long-standing and apparently irremediable distance between the North and South of Italy, mirrors, in a sort of scale model, the distance between the North and South of Europe; they both strive for *unity*, but still struggle to engage with their different shades of *diversity*.

EUNIC – EUROPEAN UNION NATIONAL INSTITUTES FOR CULTURE

Bi- or three-lateral collaborations are important occasions to foster diplomatic relations through European film culture from a transnational perspective. In

5 Cfr. the video essay *A Chiara - Breath of the Real* (2022) by Chiara Grizzaffi: <https://vimeo.com/686624679>.

2022, for instance, the Instituto Cervantes, the Institut Français Italia and the Goethe-Institut signed a partnership to launch *Sala Europa*, consisting of three months of European cinema in original language with Italian subtitles at Casa del Cinema in Rome. A few institutes have also been involved in the promotion of a more experimental cinema that tends the hand to other arts thanks to occasions such as the already mentioned *Les Rencontres Internationales Paris-Berlin. New Cinema and Contemporary Art*.

This kind of collaboration has become more and more intense over the years, and is progressively moving towards developing a coordinated, namely bilateral and multilateral, strategy of value-co-creation by "exchanging cultural practice and diffusing cultural productions" (Martel and Simic 2017, 48), rather than merely *projecting* national values. In particular, this shared vision became established thanks to the creation in 2006 of EUNIC, the European national institutes for culture network from all EU Member States. Founded with the explicit intention to cooperate with the Council of Europe as a strategic partner of the EU "actively involved in the further definition of European cultural policy",⁶ its existence confirms the diplomatic weight of institutes for culture, yet within a renewed transnational framework. Since 2014 EUNIC has been supported by the Creative Europe programme, and the Joint Communication *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (2016) recognises it "as one of the implementing partners of the EU's cultural relations approach". The partnership with the EU consists of joint activities between EU Delegations and EUNIC clusters, as well as on partnership agreements with the European Commission (2017) and with the EEAS-European External Action Service (2021). Its vision is based on the idea of culture as a tool to enhance international relations. That is the reason why it also works as a "platform for knowledge sharing and for capacity building amongst its members and partners", with the aim to promote cultural diversity, understanding and cooperation, to conduct research and share best practices.⁷ According to the aim of this study, it is important to shed light on the section of the EUNIC mission that focus on the criteria through which the 38 members act: "for or on behalf of a national entity, based in EU Member States" but "engage[d] in cultural and related activities beyond their national borders".

Over the years EUNIC has promoted different events and supported shared programming on some common themes. The film season *The Fall of the Iron Curtain* (2009) is a case in point: the occasion was offered by the Wall's fall twentieth anniversary, through which the European cultural institutes members of the EUNIC in Berlin presented films on the Cold War, its end and its consequences on contemporary Europe. While initiatives such as *Europa che Ride (Europe laughing)*, held in 2013 at Casa del Cinema in Rome hosted films chosen by the various institutes to reflect on prejudices and stereotypes. As for

⁶ <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/about>.

⁷ <https://eunic.eu/media/site/fbf4c8e726-1591718794/eunic-strategic-framework-2020-2024-final.pdf>.

Metamorphoses - Focus sur le Cinéma Européen Contemporain (*Metamorphoses - Focus on Contemporary European Cinema*) in 2017 at the IIC-Lyon, the occasion was the celebration of the Rome Treaty's sixtieth anniversary,⁸ with twelve contemporary European films (from Germany, Romania, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Spain). Another common initiative that does not question the concept of national cinema but supports the idea of a transnational and pan-European cinema is *Days of Contemporary European Cinema*: held for the first time in 2018, it is a selection of the last two years' European film production.

The *European Film Festival* (held since 1988) is probably the most important initiative co-organized by EUNIC. Founded by the European Union and based on the partnership between institutes for culture, academies and embassies, it is a travelling film festival that offers a kaleidoscope of European film production in its original language,⁹ and film programming is accompanied by debates and meetings with directors, actors and screenwriters.

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The above survey outlines a multi-faceted panorama of practices. Nonetheless, even though institutes have different juridical statuses—a difference that could be an obstacle to developing joint projects according to a supra-national model, as institutes continue to adhere to their national models with the risk of big countries imposing their visions (Martel and Simic 2018)—at the same time, as film promotion and circulation are concerned, they share a number of complementary strategies. On one hand, thanks to a capillary presence on territories, they stand as partners or supporters of many festivals, benefitting from collateral events and occasions to present films with their directors, interpreters, and professionals. Indeed, according to Noto, not only the circuit of the IICs takes part in the *value-adding* process, but organically participates in the *value-creation* of films, potentially functioning “as a sort of temporal and spatial extension of the festival circuit” (Noto and Peretti 2016, 430; my translation).

Moreover, they keep alive a kind of (traditional) cinematic experience, by implementing practices similar to those of the art-house sector, which “include inviting directors, actors and film critics, screening retrospectives dedicated to a particular filmmaker, or organising special seasons of films originating from a particular country or continent” (Jäckel 2004, 26). A strategy confirmed by interviews with Carmen Hof (Goethe-Institut in Rome), Linda Marchetti (Institut Français in Milan), and Maria Teresa De Palma (Italian Institute for Culture in London).

⁸ Signed in 1949, the Treaty of Rome not only established the European Economic Community (CEE), but also fostered the circulation of co-produced films between the six founding members. See also Rivi 2007, 42.

⁹ <http://www.accadromania.it/2015/MNCE.pdf>.

Another aspect worth to be mentioned is that the national institutes for culture foster a transnational cinematic community, grounded on niches formed by small audiences of regular visitors. Besides, if this could be considered as an obstacle for the widespread circulation—or a consequence of the *fragmentation* of cultural policies (Noto and Peretti 2016)—, nonetheless it should be noticed that such niches are increasingly intersecting, also due to initiatives like that taken by EUNIC. In doing so, they “challenge a monolithic configuration of Europe and attempt to reconfigure it into a heterogeneous, hybrid, and polycentric space so as to take into account multiple subjectivities, nations, and realities” (Rivi 2007, 7).

The investigation has also revealed a general shift of interest towards a more (trans-)European cinema occurred between the 1990s and 2010s. Indeed, on the side of non-theatrical release this study has dealt with, audiences seem to prefer neither American productions (Comand and Menarini 2014) nor their own domestic ones (Jäckel 2004), at least not exclusively as it could be assumed when speaking of theatrical distribution. Similarly, Higson also points out that European national film cultures are “surprisingly resilient in this era of globalised, digital storytelling [while] a surprising amount of national filmmaking is still enjoyed by national audiences”. (Higson 2018, 306).

This scenario highlights an inversion of the general trend of the influence institutional policies have had on film reception—here clearly intended as affected by the film promotion and circulation strategies. According to Pierre Sorlin, indeed, until the 1990s they played “a rather marginal part” and “no simple, direct connection existed between political evolution and the tastes of the public” (Sorlin 1991, 200). Otherwise, the conclusion that could be drawn from the present enquiry is that the role of national institutes for culture in the promotion and circulation of a European transnational cinema clearly emerges as an outcome of European shifting policies and practices addressed to overcome the nation-state framework (Elsaesser 2005, 2014). Therefore, according to the EU policies which supports “national, transnational (co-production) and cross-European policies” (Bilterheyst and Cuelenaere 2021, 18), they form a useful network to ensure film circulation among a particular audience.

Therefore, one could state that cinema-related initiatives of the national institutes for culture take advantage, paraphrasing Elsaesser, of a sort of “tactical weakness”, which consists in “[p]erforming the nation rather than representing it” (Elsaesser 2014, 28). Undoubtedly, they return the image of an “imperfect Europe” or of a European cinema’s newly found freedom to be marginal” (Harrod, Liz, and Timoshkina 2014, 35). Nonetheless, how long can this *weakness*, albeit *tactical*, be incisive within a scenario characterised by increasingly scarce resources? Will the *art-house model* further ensure non-theatrical circulation among a transnational niches-based audience? Can the fragmentation be overcome in favour of a more structured network-oriented strategy?

A possible answer is offered by the British Council *circulation model*. As reported above, even if the BC doesn’t offer proper film programming in the cities where

it is present, it aims at fostering business connections between professionals and cinema industries in the UK and the hosting countries, ensuring proper distribution for films otherwise difficult to position within the European cinema market. Hence, the *value-creation* and *value-adding* processes here are focused not only on the distribution but even on the production, in particular of films that address sensitive topics and by supporting disabled artists' careers.

Such a *verticalization* could be assumed as a best practice to emulate also by other national institutes for culture, by intensifying, for instance, their relationships via EUNIC to improve the transnational features of films and their circulation beyond the mainstream circuits. Indeed, the fragmentation could be a weakness for the circulation and the promotion of European films beyond their theatrical release, primarily due to a lack of funding the individual institutes have to deal with. Conversely, pooling economic and human resources for a more efficient network, could ensure broader circulation for European films and their authors in different countries despite their nationality.

In conclusion, if national institutes for culture already play a significant role in film circulation, they also have the potentialities to increase their role in the construction of films' cultural value and identity, by fostering the European cinema sphere: "a vibrant space in which to understand and work through notions of and beyond national borders" (Gott and Herzog 2015, 1).

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