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FOR A MULTIPOLAR HISTORY OF THE FILM INDUSTRIES: CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN THE COLD WAR YEARS

EDITED BY GIORGIO AVEZZÙ, FRANCESCO DI CHIARA AND PAOLO NOTO

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BEYOND CINEMA

FOR A MULTI POLAR HISTORY OF THE FILM INDUSTRIES

Multipolarity in the Post-War Film Industries: An Introduction

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In this article, based on the evidence brought by TRAFFIC - Tracing American and Foreign Funds in Italian Cinema (1945-1962), a research project we were involved in the last few years and focused on the Italian case, we advance a set of methodological and operational hypotheses for the study of international relations in post-war cinema, developed in dialogue with the contributions collected in this issue. Our central claim is that a multipolar model of productive, distributive, and cultural relations was in place, in the years surrounding the Second World War, with timelines and durations that varied across geographical contexts and in relation to the specific challenges faced by different film industries. This model places under strain a fixed conception of centre-periphery relations, already questioned in transnational approaches to European cinema, as well as a monolithic understanding of the cultural and industrial dominance of American cinema, which nevertheless remained the key reference point in the global system.
After having summarized the scientific discussion on transnational cinemas to determine which elements can be retained and what new tools are needed to outline and study what we consider a multipolar system, in the following section we delve into the Italian case, focusing particularly on the trade association ANICA. During the post-war period, ANICA was structured as an interface between different systems, managing current practices such as export and co-production instructions and film credit guarantees, as well as strategic actions such as defining agreements and conducting periodic revisions. Two specific examples relating to the definition of exchange and co-production agreements with the film industries of Mexico and Yugoslavia illustrate ANICA's concrete functioning in relation to other national and foreign entities, including public and private stakeholders. Finally, we reflect on the concept of borders as a key element in the relationship between film systems and infrastructures.

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Until only a couple of years ago, any discussion of international film distribution and circulation (or any other aspect of the entertainment industry) centred on keywords such as tariffs, customs obligations, production quotas, and currency barriers would have seemed purely archaeological, if not surreal. Yet recent political events have altered the industry landscape, as well as the perceived relevance—and even the very visibility—of such issues.

In this article, based on the evidence produced by a research project we were involved in over the last few years, which focused on the Italian case, we advance a set of methodological and operational hypotheses for the study of international relations in post-war cinema, developed in dialogue with the contributions collected in this issue. Our central claim is that a multipolar model of productive, distributive, and cultural relations was in place, in the years surrounding the Second World War, with timelines and durations that varied across geographical contexts and in response to the specific challenges faced by different film industries. This model casts doubt on a fixed notion of centre–periphery relations, already questioned in transnational approaches to European cinema (Bergfelder 2005), as well as a monolithic understanding of the cultural and industrial dominance of American cinema, which nevertheless remained the key reference point in the global system (Steinhart 2019). In short, particularly when observed from the perspective of the infrastructures and intermediary bodies that facilitate and regulate exchanges, this period reveals the emergence of eccentric trajectories of circulation: trajectories in which the system's alleged peripheries communicate directly with one another; regional production and regulation hubs (as exemplified by the gradual rise of Europe); and small national industries connected to the global industry without necessarily occupying an ancillary position vis-à-vis major players.

The need to activate bilateral and multilateral connections, the 'diplomatic' circulation of films and creative or technical staff, as well as the symbolic and industrial dominance of American cinema, are certainly not phenomena exclusive to the post-war era (Locatelli 2010). They do, however, develop within a framework of conditions that differs from previous decades, owing to factors such as the impact of domestic policies that established protective and incentive mechanisms in many countries (Di Chiara 2025); the antitrust measures imposed on the American industry; the growing culturalization of cinema on a global scale (Grieveson and Wasson 2008); the division into spheres of influence during the Cold War and the instrumentalization of film culture within that context (Lee 2020); the emergence of 'new cinemas' indebted to the neorealist experience (Giovacchini and Sklar 2012); and currency restrictions that limited—at least until 1958 in Europe—the circulation of goods and services (Carli 1988; Dezseri 2000). It could be argued (and the following articles definitely suggest) that, for various reasons besides those already mentioned, including the Soviet Union's relatively limited influence as a cinematic power, substantial traces of inter-war multipolarism remained in the global film industry after the Second World War, while the overall geopolitical system moved towards its new and effective bipolar order (Gaddis 1986).

Taking these considerations into account, we would like to propose two hypotheses. According to John Gaddis, multipolarity requires "sophisticated leadership" (Gaddis 1986, 108), and therefore extremely high-quality human resources as well as complex, interdependent structures in a system that is particularly difficult, and sometimes cumbersome, to operate. Hence, the first methodological hypothesis is that, from an industrial history perspective, priority attention should be granted to intermediary bodies, internal nodes within networks of relationships (Mehta and Mukherjee 2021), and those actors capable of connecting otherwise distant realities. Such connecting functions may be performed by sectors of the state bureaucracy, trade associations, workers' organizations, as well as particularly skilled individuals such as managers, functionaries, and sales agents, to name a few examples. The quality of the people involved is reflected in the situations in which they interact, such as festivals, official meetings, and institutional committees. The second, and mostly working, hypothesis is that the activities of such intermediary bodies display a certain degree of functional equivalence (Luhmann 1982; van Deth 1998; Di Chiara 2025), to the extent that they may adopt similar solutions to tackle equivalent problems and develop comparable—in some instances interoperable—structures, according to a criterion of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Even focusing on international connections, the national dimension of the film industry is impossible to ignore; rather, it must be understood against the backdrop of the transnational relations that characterized the post-war period. In the following paragraph, we will summarize the scientific discussion on transnational cinemas to determine which elements can be retained and what new tools are needed to outline and study what we consider a multipolar system. Below, we examine the Italian case, focusing particularly on the trade association ANICA, the Italian National Association of Film Industries. During the post-war period, ANICA was structured as an interface between different systems; it managed current practices such as export and co-production instructions and film credit guarantees, as well as strategic actions such as drawing up agreements and conducting periodic revisions. Two specific examples relating to the formalization of exchange and co-production agreements with the Mexican and Yugoslavian film industries illustrate how ANICA operated in relation to other national and foreign entities, including public and private stakeholders. Finally, we reflect on the concept of borders as a key element in the relationship between film systems and infrastructures.

SCALES, FLOWS, AND INTERDEPENDENCIES

The gradual questioning of the *national cinema* paradigm has generated a broad, multi-layered body of scholarship aimed at revealing the interdependencies that have historically characterized film industries and film cultures. Within this framework, categories such as co-production, *transnational cinema,* and *world cinema* have been deployed—often in overlapping and intersecting ways—

to move beyond a conception of film systems as self-contained entities, and to reshape the vocabulary through which production, distribution, and circulation are analysed. While grounded in different premises and analytical priorities, these bodies of work share an interest in processes that cross national borders; at the same time, they raise questions of scale (i.e. national, supranational and regional) and, more broadly, of which analytical approaches prove effective when the object of inquiry is the industrial and economic dimension of cinema.

Since Steve Neale's groundbreaking work on European art cinema (1981), studies in industrial and cultural film history have shown how a film's 'nationality' is often the outcome of administrative and industrial negotiations, rather than the expression of a particular cultural or aesthetic identity. This insight has been taken up in different ways within research on collaborations among film industries, most notably in the literature on co-productions, which has often approached cinema as a regulated economic activity by focusing on agreements, legal frameworks, state incentives and certification procedures (Baltruschat 2010; Hammett-Jamart, Mitric and Redvall 2018; Parc 2020; Stubbs 2021). Research conducted in this vein has highlighted the role of states and public policies in structuring film production, as well as the ways in which private industry interacts with fiscal and financial arrangements. At the same time, an emphasis on the co-production framework tends to privilege a predominantly bilateral logic centred on contractual relationships between pairs of national actors, overlooking more complex configurations in which production is embedded within multi-level networks. In particular, co-production studies do not always fully account for the role of distribution and exhibition—that is, those industrial arrangements that regulate access to markets and which often operate according to different logics to those of the production. In many contexts, market access is determined by actors, infrastructures, and alliances operating across different scales, revealing differentiated positions and negotiated hierarchies that exceed the framework of the co-production agreement.

The notion of *transnational cinema* has frequently functioned as an umbrella term within this field of research, encompassing assorted approaches and objects, including a substantial portion of the scholarship on co-productions and industry partnerships. As Higbee and Lim (2010) have noted, the term 'transnational' has been employed in highly diverse ways, to the point of risking a loss of analytical precision. They distinguish between uses focused on the one hand on industrial dynamics, regional or supranational frameworks, and on the other on diasporic or postcolonial perspectives. This plurality of meanings points both to the productivity of the concept and to its intrinsic ambiguity, which derives in part from its capacity to hold together different scales, objects, and methodological orientations rather than from any single, fixed definition.

Questions of scale thus emerge as a central and recurring issue. As it has often been observed, the 'national' does not disappear with the adoption of transnational perspectives, but continues to operate as a regulatory, fiscal, and symbolic infrastructure, shaping the conditions under which films are produced and circulated (Hjort 2010; Hjort and Mackenzie 2000; Christie 2013). In this sense,

the transnational does not replace the national, but overlaps with it, producing hybrid configurations in which local, national, regional, and supranational levels coexist and interact. In many cases, these levels are further split by sub-national instances—local administrations, fiscal authorities, territorial bodies—that intervene directly in production and distribution processes, contributing to a multi-layered, uneven set of perspectives. Bergfelder has consistently stressed this point, warning that the adoption of overly broad or weakly specified scales risks obscuring the concrete workings of industrial and regulatory arrangements (Bergfelder 2005). Recent scholarship has also responded to these issues by shifting attention from scale to relation, foregrounding networks as an analytical framework for understanding industrial interconnections. As argued by Mehta and Mukherjee (2021), a network perspective makes it possible to account for transregional configurations of capital, labour, technologies, and practices that cut across national and supranational boundaries without stabilizing them into a single level of analysis. And, although they do not always deal strictly with the issue of transnationalism, many studies in the field of new cinema history have investigated micro-histories and highly localized contexts relating to production, distribution, film exhibition and, above all, moviegoing, with a view to the transnational comparability of such phenomena (Sedgwick 2022; Treveri Gennari, van de Vijver, Ercole 2024).

A significant portion of the scholarship associated with transnational cinema has sought to apply this category to the analysis of industrial processes, focusing on the mobility of capital, professionals, and production models. These studies have productively challenged static ideas of film systems and highlighted the relational character of film industries. Their analytical value lies in demonstrating that circulation is never automatic or unmediated. In fact, the movement of films across borders is structured by infrastructures, territorial rights, distribution alliances, and regulatory regimes that actively select, channel, and delimit access to markets (Jones 2016 and 2024; Higson 2018; Holdaway and Scaglioni 2018). From this perspective, circulation appears less as a neutral flow than as the outcome of negotiated arrangements embedded in specific industrial and institutional contexts. A similar point has been made in more recent scholarship on digital distribution. As Lobato (2019) has shown, even ostensibly deterritorialized forms of digital audiovisual circulation remain structured by territorial rights, regulatory regimes, infrastructural constraints, and platform-specific geographies, underscoring the persistence of local frictions within global distribution systems.

In the European context, transnational perspectives have often been deployed to question consolidated national narratives and to address processes of regional integration, highlighting the long-standing circulation of films, professionals, and capital across national boundaries. At the same time, this literature has also drawn attention to the risk that 'Europe' may function as an identity-based frame rather than as an analytical tool, substituting the scrutiny of industrial and institutional arrangements with a culturally inflected notion of Europeanness. Issues of scale therefore remain central: while the national framework

may appear restrictive, supranational perspectives can prove too broad or insufficiently effective to account for how production, distribution, and regulation are organized in concrete terms. Elsaesser's analysis of the relationship between European cinema and Hollywood is a recurring point of reference in this debate. He conceptualizes this relationship not as a simple polar opposition but as a field of interdependencies, negotiations, and forms of resistance articulated through economies of scale, distribution infrastructures and differentiated production arrangements (Elsaesser 2005). Work in the industrial history of American cinema has further shown how Hollywood's dominance operates through intermediaries and specific market configurations rather than direct or uniform control (Guback 1985; Govil 2015), allowing power relations to remain central to the analysis without collapsing them into a rigid centre–periphery model.

Alongside these approaches, transnational perspectives that spotlight questions of representation, identity, and cultural positioning have also focused on issues of circulation, often examined through case studies and specific circuits of visibility (Higbee and Lim 2010). This strand of research has been crucial in illuminating how cinematic forms, styles, and narratives participate in broader processes of cultural negotiation across borders. At the same time, when circulation is approached primarily in terms of symbolic visibility and recognition, there is a risk of treating movement as self-evident. In such accounts, the conditions under which films, styles, or narratives circulate—institutional frameworks, regulatory constraints, economic negotiations, and differentiated access to distribution circuits—may recede into the background, while the fact of circulation is emphasized over the arrangements and frictions that shape and delimit it.

Attention to the circulation of stylistic forms further complicates this picture. Transnational scholarship has shown how aesthetic models—such as modes of realism, genre conventions, or narrative formats— ravel across borders and acquire new meanings as they are embedded in distinct industrial, institutional, and cultural contexts. Approached in this way, style itself emerges as a mobile resource whose circulation cannot be separated from the professional networks, production practices and regulatory environments that enable or constrain its movement (see e.g. Pitassio 2019; Giovacchini and Sklar 2012).

This emphasis on representational and symbolic circulation has been amplified in debates on the notion of *world cinema*, which developed as a project aimed at decentring the canon and challenging Eurocentrism. Rather than positing a homogeneous global horizon, Ďurovičová and Newman (2010) stress the constructed, relational and contested nature of scale; their approach looks at cinemas operating "above the level of the national but below the level of the global" (Ďurovičová 2010, ix). This perspective presents cinema as a set of contact zones, shaped by historically situated interactions between geopolitical imaginaries, institutional frameworks, and aesthetic practices, without resolving these tensions into an all-encompassing global view. Other strands within the world cinema debate have advanced more explicitly programmatic models, seeking to redefine the global field through categories such as plurality, het-

erogeneity and multiple modernities (Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2011). These approaches have been crucial in shifting the focus away from established canons; however, they have also often been influenced by a broader interest in a global perspective presented in progressive terms as an open and inclusive space that challenges established national hierarchies. Within this framework, the emphasis on minor, marginal, or alternative cinematic practices has productively reoriented critical perspectives; at times, however, it has also contributed to shifting attention away from the economic, industrial, and institutional conditions of production and circulation. In such cases, close attention to texts and representational dynamics can tend to be overstated, when not systematically linked with the industrial arrangements and economic conditions that shape their production, circulation, and visibility.

Taken together, these strands of research have significantly reshaped the field of film studies, bringing to light interdependencies and processes long relegated to the margins. That being said, recurrent limitations emerge when attention turns to the industrial and economic dimensions of cinema. These include difficulties in moving between different levels of analysis without collapsing them into one another or separating them too rigidly; a tendency to prioritize circulation over the analysis of enabling conditions; and an insufficient focus on the infrastructures and arrangements that regulate market access. Therefore, a careful examination of the formation of national industrial hubs and the connections created between them must necessarily begin with the established structures that oversaw these processes. Greater accessibility to information and archival data relating to the Italian case, and in particular to ANICA—whose archives we have studied in the sections concerning international relations—makes it easier for us to reconstruct this organization and observe how it functioned in significant situations involving the building of relationships with other countries.

A SMALL STATE DEPARTMENT: ANICA AS AN EXAMPLE OF A TRANSNATIONAL, MULTIPOLAR ACTIVITY

ANICA (the Italian film producers' and distributors' trade association) provides an interesting example of the dynamics that gave rise to multipolar infrastructures during the early internationalization of the European film industry in the 1950s. As a major stakeholder in one of Europe's leading film industries, ANICA was able to expand its networking activities within the inner workings of the Italian neo-corporatist system, in which the state incorporates various stakeholders' activities into the policymaking process (Noto 2023). At the same time, ANICA established an external infrastructure comprising agents who acted as nodes in a transnational lobbying and distribution network. When we take ANICA as a point of reference, we are not suggesting that its networking activity was unique in post-war Europe. There is evidence that other associations of a comparable size were involved in similar activities. A notable example is the

French Syndicat Français des Producteurs et Exportateurs de Films (SFPEF), with which the Italian association has a long history of both collaboration and competition. Our observations can be generalized to a certain extent, insofar as ANICA represented one of the leading film industries in post-war Europe. In this section, therefore, we will focus on ANICA, for which comprehensive documentation is available. We will use ANICA as an example of a major international player acting on a global scale in relation to other international partners.

ANICA, founded in 1944, is a complex association that includes representatives from competing sectors, namely film production and distribution. Producers wanted to limit American film imports to protect themselves from what they perceived as unfair competition. Conversely, distributors benefited from importing Hollywood products. This seemingly contradictory membership was further exacerbated in 1951, when lengthy negotiations resulted in the major American studios joining ANICA (di Chio 2022, 104). This marked a shift from an initial phase of protectionist opposition between the Italian film industry and Hollywood studios, to an era of growing interdependence between them (Steinhart 2019). The complex nature and diverse composition of ANICA was further complicated by the establishment of several subsidiary organizations performing various activities on its behalf. These activities ranged from film financing and holdings (SOFINAC and ACI) to international distribution networks (IFE, UNIEF and ANICA Export) and real estate (Galeno Immobiliare). Together, these form a constellation of interests and ancillary companies that can perhaps best be conceived as a "cinematic universe", a term that was ironically coined in a comprehensive article on the association's archive (Comand and Venturini 2021). However, it is only by reading the documents regarding ANICA's international relations that one can grasp how the infrastructure and network of Italian cinema—and arguably by extension Europe's leading film industries—operated throughout the Cold War years, with all its players moving towards the internationalization of the national product. Of particular interest is Unitalia, an ANICA-affiliated society dedicated to promoting Italian cinema worldwide. Founded in 1950 by the Italo-French critic Joseph-Marie Lo Duca, who modelled it on Unifrance (established in 1949), the association's most visible activity was organizing international screenings of Italian films, known as Italian Cinema Week. However, the ANICA archive reveals that Unitalia's activities were more diverse. Unitalia agents acted as lobbyists and diplomats, establishing connections with local trade associations and state institutions to negotiate potential frameworks for bilateral film exchange and co-production agreements. These were subsequently formalized and signed by representatives of the respective national authorities. Interestingly, in addition to being ANICA's international network, Unitalia interacted directly with local Italian embassies and the Italian national authority responsible for implementing film policies: the Directorate-General for Entertainment (Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo, DGS). In the next section, we will examine some of Unitalia's initiatives, such as those designed to foster collaboration with the Mexican film industry. However, institutional archives also provide examples of lobbying activities aimed at preventing protectionist

measures from being applied to Italian films. These activities involved negotiations finalized by state authorities, with ANICA and Unitalia essentially acting as a small state department by initiating negotiations that would eventually be taken over by Italian state bureaucracy.

Documents from the ANICA archive reflect the complex ramifications of the association's export architecture, comprising entities such as UNIEF and ANICA Export. Furthermore, these documents suggest how this architecture developed in relation to, and in competition with, the French system—particularly the foreign distribution branch of the French producers' association, COFRAM—which appeared to be more successful than ANICA in non-European regions such as Latin America.

As well as setting up film export infrastructures around the world, ANICA had a complex relationship with Hollywood studios, famously negotiating a bilateral agreement with MPEA (Motion Pictures Export Association) in 1951. Ratified by the Italian government, this agreement superseded the previous regulations relating to international exports and the reinvestment of proceeds from the Italian distribution of major American films into Italian businesses, both in and outside the film industry. A subsequent version of the agreement, signed in 1955, entrusted ANICA with managing these funds. ANICA used the funds as guarantees to secure alternative financing channels from private Italian credit institutions rather than those provided by the state (Tassinari 2025). In some cases, these assets were used to finance the foreign distribution of Italian films. ANICA thus operated within a complex network of interests, developing relationships simultaneously in competition with and in partnership with Hollywood.

A final example of ANICA's networking activities is its involvement in the various attempts to create a European common market for film, which began in the early 1950s. While it is not possible to provide a full reconstruction of the complex history of these attempts here, we will focus on certain aspects, related to the attempt to establish a network of European film industries to counter Hollywood's domination, and to harmonize European film policies. This process largely preceded subsequent European integration, which gained definitive momentum with the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957. In particular, we will consider two specific moments that have been examined elsewhere. Firstly, the attempt to establish a "European Union of Film" ("Union Européenne du Film") from late 1954 to late 1955 (Di Chiara 2025). Secondly, we will consider a later attempt to govern, and to a certain extent resist, the process of adapting the film industry to the European Common Market, as required under the Treaty of Rome (Citrini 2025). In both cases, ANICA and SFPEF led the push for a common market that would align with their aspirations for the defiscalization of film products, all the while preserving existing forms of national film funding. Furthermore, both organizations viewed the common market as the next logical step following the bilateral film exchange and co-production agreements that the two industries had initiated in the late 1940s and expanded throughout the 1950s. From their perspective, the common market project was a means of transforming a series of direct relationships into a widespread network. Not

coincidentally, one of the proposed measures was the creation of multilateral co-productions. However, the establishment of the supranational network was hindered by both external intervention and internal differences. The main obstacle to the joint efforts of Italy and France was, in both cases, West Germany. The German producers' association, the Verband Deutscher Filmproduzenten e.V., participated somewhat reluctantly in establishing the Union Européenne du Film, but subsequently withdrew under pressure from the American studios, on which the West German industry was highly dependent in the decade following the end of the war. Following the signing of the Treaty of Rome, Germany's purely protectionist model—devoid of any active film support programme until the mid-1960s—made harmonization with the highly state-dependent Italian and French systems challenging.

As we have attempted to demonstrate, ANICA—and, by extension, other major national trade associations such as the SFPEF—was thus a sort of interface between domestic systems, aiming to create a transnational networking infrastructure with film industries in other countries. In the next section, we will consider a few examples of interaction.

BILATERAL CONNECTIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR CONTEXT: ANICA, MEXICO AND YUGOSLAVIA

The key aspect of ANICA's activity as an entity capable of managing, facilitating and sometimes designing interactions between the Italian and foreign film industries is the flexibility of its functions, and its proven ability to support, assist, or replace public bodies in managing international relations. This characteristic is particularly pertinent in the complex, multipolar post-war film industry, where the presence of a dominant global player—namely the United States of America—does not prevent the formation of bilateral relations between different countries concerning film production and distribution. These relations take the form of exchange or co-production agreements, which can significantly impact the development of each domestic industry involved. Take, for example, the case of two completely different attempts undertaken by ANICA (and the Italian film industry as a whole) to expand its international presence: the agreements with Yugoslavia and Mexico. Both took place in the mid-1950s, but they had very different aims and outcomes. In the case of Italy's relationship with Yugoslavia, the Italian film industry's fundamental objective was to leverage the favourable conditions offered by the Yugoslav industry, to reduce the production costs of films in genres that require extensive use of natural and human resources, such as costume dramas. Conversely, Yugoslavia benefited not only from an influx of hard currency, but also from professional and technological upgrades, as well as the transfer of film exploitation rights, all of which were guaranteed by their partnership with Italy. The negotiations resulted in an agreement signed in 1957 which, while destined to remain mostly unimplemented, paved the way for less

formalized and more fruitful forms of cooperation (Di Chiara and Noto 2023). The objectives of the attempted agreements with the Mexican industry (which was in the final phase of its *época de oro* and could count on a huge domestic market) are not entirely clear, and various draft agreements did not result in a fully-fledged collaboration (Noto 2025).

By applying Lasswell's policy cycle framework (Lasswell 1971)—a conceptual tool which envisions the decision-making process as a sequence of discrete stages, moving from a first stage of problem recognition and agenda setting, through a second stage of policy formulation, followed by implementation, and finally to evaluation of the policy outcomes—we can see how ANICA's interventions spanned the entire spectrum of governance, from agenda setting and formulation to implementation and evaluation. This systematic engagement allowed the association to act as a crucial hinge between national interests and the emerging realities of the international film industry, often supplementing or even assuming functions delegated by the Directorate-General for Entertainment and other governmental bodies.

In the phase of agenda setting, ANICA managed to establish international connections that frequently preceded or operated alongside official diplomatic channels. In the case of Yugoslavia, contacts between ANICA and the Udruženje Filmskih Proizvođača Jugoslavije (UFPJ), the Association of Yugoslav Film Producers, were initiated even before the territorial dispute over Trieste reached its provisional settlement in 1954. Early correspondence between officials from the two associations (Babić 1953) suggests that the film industry was moving toward structural cooperation while formal intergovernmental relations were still strained. This partnership was further cemented by high-profile projects such as *War and Peace* (King Vidor, 1956). The collaboration between Italian producers, US companies like Paramount, and Belgrade's Avala Film served as a catalyst for broader industrial agreements (Ružić 1955), eventually leading to the official Italo-Yugoslav accord signed in 1957 (Valignani 1955a).

The relationship with Mexico further highlights the complexities of managing a system where national interests and divergent economic rules require constant mediation skills that public and private officials do not always demonstrate. Once again, the signing of an intergovernmental agreement was preceded by a research and information-gathering phase on the Mexican film industry. ANICA produced reports on theatre facilities, specialised lending, and audience numbers (ANICA [1954a]) and monitored the distribution of Italian films through its connections with local distributors working with Italian companies (ANICA 1953).

As the process moved into formulation and implementation, the lines between private industry representation and public administration became increasingly blurred. ANICA representatives were not merely consultants but active participants in drafting the regulatory framework for international agreements. This is evident in the Italo-Yugoslav negotiations, where private entities were delegated the task of drafting protocols for governmental approval (ANICA 1955a; ANICA 1955b).

During the implementation phase, the association transitioned into what can be described as 'street-level bureaucracy' (Lipsky 1980), providing the professional consulting and operational assistance necessary to keep policies functioning. In the Yugoslav context, ANICA Export became the sole channel for obtaining temporary export permits, a monopoly effectively encouraged by the Italian state to interface with the centralized Yugoslav import model overseen by Jugoslavija Film (De Pirro 1955; Valignani 1956).

This substitution of bureaucratic functions was so pervasive that following ANICA's procedures became an indispensable, albeit technically informal, requirement for private companies, to the extent that prominent production houses such as Excelsa-Minerva and Documento Film found their export requests to Yugoslavia delayed when they failed to navigate this quasi-governmental channel (Valignani 1955b; Hecht Lucari 1956). Furthermore, the association began to adopt functions resembling those of a commercial agency, charging fees on contracts as reimbursement for its administrative expenses (Valignani 1959). This development, while questioned by some producers who interpreted it as an agency commission (Gurgo Salice 1959), underscores the extent to which ANICA had integrated itself into the commercial and administrative heart of the industry.

In the case of Mexico, ANICA kept playing a role in maintaining relationships with the partners, but the outcome was unfavourable. Despite extensive negotiations involving ANICA and Unitalia, a 1954 draft agreement—modelled on the Italo-French treaty—was discussed and drawn up during the Venice Film Festival in 1954, but never implemented (Lo Duca 1954; ANICA 1954b). Failure stemmed from Mexican public opposition and structural disparities: Italy's import policies and currency restrictions clashed with Mexico's nominally free market. This regulatory mismatch caused a blockade of Italian imports, necessitating a 1957 private pact between ANICA and Cinematográfica Mexicana Exportadora (CIMEX). This trade agreement established a 24-to-8 film exchange ratio and coordinated governmental lobbying for censorship clearance (ANICA 1957). Here again, the exchange pact placed the responsibility for signing import permits in the hands of the ANICA delegate, a shift that even the delegate himself found somewhat unexpected (Campilli 1957).

Finally, in the evaluation phase, ANICA's involvement in joint commissions allowed it to propose revisions to policy. When the Italo-Yugoslav co-production agreement reached a standstill due to the impossibility of maintaining strict reciprocity, it was the trade associations' representatives who proposed a total overhaul of the criteria for revenue sharing and production ratios (ANICA 1961). These proposals were not merely operational adjustments but strategic reorientations of the bilateral relationship. This reliance on a private body to manage state-level diplomatic and economic tasks confirms the multifaceted nature of ANICA's activity during this period. Furthermore, it suggests that the association acted not solely as a lobby; it was a sophisticated institutional actor that managed the complexities of the international film industry by integrating itself into the very fabric of state bureaucracy and diplomacy.

A MULTIPOLAR HISTORY OF MEMBRANES AND VALVULAR PIPELINES

The examples of interaction that we have explored thus far lead us to reconsider how the transnational studies framework envisions the circulation of products, technologies, and professionals, as well as networking between national film industries. To address this, we will draw on two concepts from media infrastructure studies and political science. The first is the concept of the "border as method", formulated by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013). Rather than viewing borders as barriers between geographical entities such as nation-states, continents, regions, or areas, these authors consider borders to be an "epistemic angle [that recognizes the] tensions and conflicts that blur the line between inclusion and exclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, viii–ix). From this perspective, borders are not obstacles, but rather devices that regulate the movement of people, money, and goods. They are social institutions that simultaneously unite and divide geographical entities by filtering and selecting inbound and outbound movements. The border is intended not only in its material form—as a line on a map, for example, or as people working in customs or border control offices—but also as a "cognitive border", allowing for reciprocal distinctions. This concept enables Mezzadra and Neilson to analyse various phenomena relating to identity formation through border creation or displacement from a historical perspective. For instance, they discuss how the notions of an enlightened West and an indolent, mysterious East were co-constituted in Gerard Mercator's sixteenth-century atlas, and how forms of 'reflexive nationalism', defined in opposition to neighbouring countries, arose as a result of the postcolonial division of South Asia (Samaddar 1999). "Taking the border as a methodological point of view, as well as investigating concrete borders and borderscapes", as suggested by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013, 51), has several implications for our work. Secondly, the aforementioned Italo-Mexican agreements demonstrate that the needs and logic behind borders can differ depending on which side of the border is being considered. This means that borders can function differently in both directions. For example, Italy was concerned about currency movement and censorship management, whereas Mexico was not, which could lead to misunderstandings. Thirdly, borders change as a result of the creation of new networks and hubs, which involves redesigning areas and borders. The aforementioned attempts to create a European common market inevitably involve shifting borders: the proposing nations aim to create a tax-free, quota-free area for the circulation of films from member countries. As a result, the border would be moved outside those nations' markets, creating supranational areas that would include and exclude other partners and set new rules for countries within such borders. Thus, the incompatibility of Italian and French policy systems with respect to the German system would have to be addressed. Focusing on borders means understanding the communication interfaces between countries and how they function, as well as the underlying logic behind their actions. It also means being aware of the institutional efforts and costs involved in border-crossing activities.

This brings us to the second concept, which we borrow from media infrastructure studies. Over the past decade, a number of studies have challenged the notion of the intangibility and pervasiveness of digital circulation by focusing on the physical infrastructure that enables content delivery. Blum (2013) exposes this material quality in the title of his book *Tubes*, which focuses on the complex architecture and geography of data centres, broadband pipelines, and communication hubs that allow data traffic on the internet. Lobato (2019) attributes the ubiquitousness of Netflix's seemingly intangible streaming activity not only to its ability to penetrate different geographical markets, but also to its complex global content delivery network. Finally, Parks and Starosielski (2015) reflect on the materiality of audiovisual infrastructures and their effect on distribution processes, and public involvement in their development, regulation, and use, emphasizing how "infrastructure refers not only to tubes and pipes but includes 'soft' systems of organization and knowledge, ranging from professional societies to classificatory procedures" (Parks and Starosielski 2015, 9).

From this perspective, what material and relational infrastructures (i.e. diplomatic and/or institutional) facilitate transnational connections between film industries? Previous sections analysed a selection of case studies, highlighting the roles of actors working at macro (state institutions, ministries, and supranational associations), meso (embassies and trade associations), and micro (cultural mediators) levels. These actors have played a pioneering role in establishing bilateral transnational relationships, formulating agreements, and constructing international networks. This has enabled and managed the cross-border circulation of capital, audiovisual products, materials, technologies, and labour. This infrastructure comprises negotiations, agreements, and regulations that act as a pipeline to regulate the flow between the poles of the system. However, this pipeline has nodes that act as valves, since many communications are asymmetrical, if not one-directional. As we have seen in our examples, one country may provide film financing or finished products, while the other provides labour and raw materials. This asymmetry is generally reflected in exchange agreements, whereby larger producing nations export three times more films than they import from their partners. The delocalization of film production followed established patterns, such as Hollywood studios financing Italian producers to shoot films in Yugoslavia. However, the direction of such flow through this relational pipeline could be influenced by many other factors related to currency policies or the soft power of the countries involved. These factors do not always reflect the weight of those countries in the geopolitical scenario, as demonstrated by the failed Italo-Mexican co-production agreements and the Italian government's success in controlling the export of Hollywood film revenues.

Adopting a multipolar approach to the history of film industries requires us to reconstruct the infrastructures, hubs, and configurations of valves and membranes that enable exchanges and highlight hierarchies. It also requires us to identify the conflicts of interest that shape the geography and flows of multipolar networks.

TOWARDS MULTIPOLAR HISTORIES

This special issue is one of the main outputs of the PRIN 2022 project *TRAFFIC – Tracing American and Foreign Funds in Italian Cinema (1945–1962)*. The project provided a shared empirical and archival framework for investigating the industrial, economic, and institutional dimensions of cinema in the post-war period, with particular attention to historically situated processes and to relationships unfolding across multiple, interacting scales. The contributions collected here extend this perspective beyond a single national context, addressing different film industries and regulatory environments while maintaining a common focus on the concrete arrangements, frameworks, and mechanisms shaping film production and circulation.

The essays are intentionally arranged in neither chronological or geographical order. Instead, they range across different nodes of the film value chain—production, distribution, and regulation—while acknowledging the inevitably approximate and blurred nature of these categories. This progression is intended to show how these levels operate as partially overlapping and non-coincident arenas in which industrial practices, institutional arrangements, and power relations are continuously negotiated.

The first two essays focus primarily on production. In *Between the National and the Transnational*, María Paz Peirano and Alejandro Kelly-Hopfenblatt examine forms of industrial collaboration between Argentina and Chile in the 1940s, focusing on production agreements, professional exchanges, and market strategies within a regional Latin American framework. The analysis reconstructs a system of commercial and industrial relations that developed largely independently of direct US intervention, while remaining embedded in an international market strongly shaped by Hollywood's presence. By foregrounding intra-regional dynamics, the article highlights shifting hierarchies, national modernization projects, and negotiated forms of cooperation among neighbouring film industries, challenging both centre–periphery models and established periodizations of international film collaboration. In *In compartecipazione*, Luca Peretti analyses a set of Italian–Algerian film collaborations in the second half of the 1960s, focusing on production practices that developed in the absence of formal co-production agreements between the two countries. Through a close reading of Italian archival sources alongside Algerian documentation and film-historical accounts, the article reconstructs a range of informal arrangements—*compartecipazioni*, technical cooperation, and location-based collaborations—that complicate rigid definitions of national production. By shedding light on the partiality of Italian records and the different ways in which these films have been retrospectively incorporated into Algerian film history, the article situates these collaborations within the material and symbolic formation of early post-independence Algerian cinema, while they remain outside the framework of treaty-based co-production.

The next two articles shift the focus to distribution, approached as a structuring infrastructure rather than as a neutral extension of production. In *From*

Moscow to Mainstream, Claudia Fiorito examines Soviet attempts to distribute and promote national cinema in the United States through the activities of Amkino and its successor Artkino, from the inter-war period through the early Cold War. Focusing on distribution as a regulated segment of the film industry, the article reconstructs how Soviet institutions and intermediaries adapted film selection and exhibition practices in response to the constraints of the US market, relying on specialist distributors and networks of independent theatres. By examining import practices, exhibition circuits, and institutional mediation, Fiorito reveals forms of exchange and influence that moved in more than one direction within a constrained and politically charged market environment. In *The Russians Are Coming!*, Fernando Ramos Arenas analyses the circulation of Soviet cinema in Spain between the late Franco period and the post-Transition years (1969–1993), focusing on the activities of the distributor Alta Films. The author shows how Soviet films entered and were positioned within the Spanish market through negotiations with Soviet export bodies and within shifting regulatory frameworks, foregrounding the role of distributors, cultural intermediaries, and exhibition strategies in shaping concrete trajectories of circulation. By situating these practices within specific institutional and political contexts, the article highlights distribution as a historically contingent process assembled through negotiated arrangements rather than as a stable or automatic channel of access.

The final two essays address regulation, concentrating on the active role of state and sub-state institutions in structuring film industries. In *Cinema on the Eve of the Cold War*, Aydın Çam and Çiğdem Aksu Çam examine the emergence of Turkish national cinema in the late 1940s through the lens of film regulation and fiscal policy. Focusing on the 1948 Municipal Revenues Law, the article shows how differentiated admission taxes on domestic and foreign films—administered at the municipal level—reshaped production incentives and exhibition practices, affecting in particular the circulation of American and Egyptian films. By tracing the interaction between local fiscal regimes, national policies, and foreign economic interests, the essay reveals a layered regulatory environment in which municipal authorities retained significant leverage within broader international dynamics. Finally, in *Two Modernizations*, I-Lin Liu examines the Taiwanese film industry of the 1950s through the U.S. AID film program, focusing on how technological assistance and the circulation of film knowledge interacted in uneven and sometimes contradictory ways. Concentrating on party-state studios in Taiwan, the article reconstructs negotiations between local bureaucracies and US agencies around infrastructure, training, and studio organization, while also tracing how imported film theories and aesthetic models—particularly in debates on widescreen cinema—were appropriated, contested, and reworked within a specific institutional context. The contribution highlights how processes of industrial modernization and and the transnational circulation of film styles unfolded through multi-layered configurations rather than through linear transfer or top-down control.

Taken together, these historically grounded case studies propose a way of looking at film industries that emphasizes concrete practices, institutional arrangements, and negotiated relations across multiple levels. By shifting attention away from abstract models of influence and towards situated configurations of production, distribution, and regulation, the articles collected in this issue open up alternative perspectives on how film industries were organized, connected, and transformed across the second half of the twentieth century.

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Between the National and the Transnational: Commercial and Industrial Links Between Chile and Argentina's Leading Film Companies over the Second World War

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Center-periphery perspectives have been challenged recently by transnational studies that provided more nuanced perspectives beyond Hollywood's predominance in the international market. Shifting the focus to the transnational interactions within other regions opens up a multipolar and decentralized story of Latin American cinema, a region that was distant from the WWII scenario, with its internal dynamics and exchanges, and where the Cold War's impact was delayed. This article looks into one of these cases by examining the commercial and industrial ties between Argentina and Chile in the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the relations between their leading studios, Argentina Sono Film and Chile Films. It examines the commercial and industrial links between Chilean and Argentine cinemas, not just economically but as a space where modernization and nationalism ideologies conditioned the emergence and sustainability of their film industries. The article shows how film production in Latin America's Southern Cone generated its center-periphery dynamics, beyond Hollywood's undisputed dominance, challenging standardized periodizations and calling for a multiperspective that acknowledges global asynchronicities.

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In 1936, Uruguayan cinema produced its first sound film, *Dos destinos*, directed by Juan Etchebehere. The initial credits presented a plaque that read, "This film is the initiation of the film industry in Uruguay. It is up to the public to make the country proud to see the triumphant opening of a new expression of the Uruguayan soul." Behind this legend, the national flag was proudly flying.

This initial image condenses some of the main features of the studio era in most Latin American countries. Although many of them produced movies during the silent period, with different levels of development, the irruption of sound meant a turning point for Latin American cinemas. Local audiences, fascinated

by the technological novelty, demanded films in their native language (Spanish and Portuguese), which propelled further institutionalization of local industries. Making sound films implied larger investments than the existing ongoing amateur organization of film production.

This context led most Latin American countries to try, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, to create their film industry. These processes were marked by nationalist discourses, as seen in the Uruguayan case, which promoted an equation between industrialization, modernization, and nation. This motivation, often led not only by film entrepreneurs but also by artists, intellectuals, and politicians, was articulated by national states' emphasis on economic autonomy and development, which helped to promote the desire for an industry of their own. Despite these dreams, however, most national industries were truncated for several reasons. Uruguay, for example, beyond this proclamation of intentions, did not manage until the 1960s to make more than two films per year at most, limited by lack of resources and its proximity to the much stronger Argentine film industry.

The technological transformations of the film industry of the 1930s changed the local level of production and circulation dynamics of Latin American films within the region. To an extent, Latin America replicated some of the power dynamics of the global film scene. As Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (2003) points out, its countries can be divided into three levels in terms of production. First, those that managed to develop local industries and maintain constant production over the decades were Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. A second level comprises those with what Paranaguá calls *production spurts*, i.e., moments of high activity interspersed with others of stagnation: *mid-tier* industries such as Chile, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, and Cuba. Finally, we can find the rest of the countries that struggled for a long time to create a national film industry.

These different production levels meant that Latin America—a region in itself peripheral to the global production centres in Hollywood and, to a lesser extent, Europe—reconfigured its film map with its internal hierarchies and local peripheries. Two *centres* arose: Mexico and Argentina.[1] Both countries had the highest production levels and were the only ones that managed to develop an industrial model with serial output, a stable system of genres and stars, and sustained success over time. Thus, they became the predominant Spanish-speaking industry in the regional market.

Argentina and Mexico alternated in their dominance of the Latin American film market, each representing a distinct popular aesthetic: Argentina offered a more cosmopolitan and urban style, while Mexico emphasized traditional, rural themes and characters. Toward the end of the 1930s, Argentina gained the upper hand by showcasing a diverse range of urban-set films. These included tango melodramas (*Ayúdame a vivir,* José Agustín Ferreyra, 1936), popular

1 Brazil managed to develop a strong film industry, but as the only Portuguese-speaking country in a predominantly Spanish-speaking region, it remained something of an outsider in Latin American film circulation.

comedies (*Mujeres que trabajan*, Manuel Romero, 1938), crime films (*La fuga*, Luis Saslavsky, 1937), and bourgeois family dramas (*Así es la vida*, Francisco Mugica, 1939). By 1939, Argentine productions had become the most popular non-Hollywood films in Latin American movie theatres.

The advent of the Second World War, however, meant a sudden change of direction. Although the war did not take place in Latin American territory and it was the geographically furthest region from the conflict, the echoes of war impacted its economic development. Within the cinematic field, the intervention of the United States in the region under the Good Neighbour policy deeply impacted the industrialization process of Argentine and Mexican cinemas.[2] The constant suspicion of the U.S. State Department about Argentina's allegiance during the war, and the country's sustained neutrality until March 1945, led to a growing tension and a constant fear of a possible infiltration of Nazi agents into its industrial and economic field. This led to the U.S. blocking the import of celluloid into Argentina and providing financial, technological, and logistical support to the less-suspicious Mexican industry.[3]

At the same time, far from the uncertainties of war, other South American countries were also working to develop their national film industries. One example is Chilean cinema, which, in an effort to turn a fragile local industry into a competitive international player, established the state-private partnership *Chile Films* in 1942, an ambitious but failed attempt to create a *local Hollywood*. Despite being conceived as a national political initiative to stimulate economic development, its implementation relied on international collaboration. From early on, the company's executives sought the expertise of foreign film professionals, hiring many prominent Argentines from across the Andes. In addition to directors, stars, screenwriters, and technicians, Chile Films' main trans-Andean partner was *Argentina Sono Film* (ASF), Argentina's leading production studio, which had been severely affected by a U.S.-led embargo on raw film stock imports. While Chile Films aspired to strengthen its industry through Argentine collaboration, we will see that this alliance did not end very well for the Chilean industry. On the other hand, the partnership offered ASF a lifeline, helping it avoid bankruptcy and opening the door to business expansion at a time when Argentina's film industry was plunging into a crisis from which it would never fully recover.

This article explores the relationship between ASF and Chile Films during the 1940s and 1950s, focusing on the commercial and industrial ties between Argentina and Chile. While acknowledging the influence of the United States

2 The Good Neighbor policy was the foreign policy enacted by the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration in the US towards Latin America. It was based initially on a non-interventionist stance that positioned the United States as a friendly ally for the region. With the start of World War II this policy shifted towards a more active soft power strategy promoting activities that ranged from health campaigns to cultural diplomacy to ensure the allegiance of Latin American countries and to block any presence of Axis agents within the region.

3 For detailed accounts of the impact of World War II on Latin American cinema, see Usabel (1982), Bender (2002), and Peredo Castro (2004).

on this relationship, the article emphasizes the significance of each country's position within the international arena, particularly in the context of Latin America's internal power dynamics. The fact that Argentina and Chile were the two principal players gave this collaboration a unique character, shaped by a shared history of rivalry and interdependence, distinguishing it from other Latin American experiences.[4] We will see that the space of collaboration between Chile Films and ASF was enabled by specific material conditions and mobilized by modernization and nationalism ideologies, which constrained the emergence and sustainability of both film industries. Addressing this relationship throughout the 1940s allows us to understand a map of commercial, industrial, and cultural relations that challenges the single centre-periphery views that tend to dominate the study of global cinema. We suggest that this map of relations is an exponent of a regional system that questions traditional frames of reference and periodizations. Chile Films and ASF developed a collaboration which, although conditioned by external war conditions, responded mainly to a complex shared history and Latin American own cultural dynamics, with high levels of autonomy from the global sphere.

This article is based on joint research into the case of Chile Films, drawing on the limited archival material available in both Chile and Argentina. Most of the sources on the company's fate are found in the press of both countries: *El Mercurio*, *La Hora, La Nación*, *Ecran, Ercilla, Vea*, *Boletín Cinematográfico* in Chile; and *La Nación, La Prensa, El Heraldo del Cinematografista, Film, Radiolandia, Sintonia,* and *Set* in Argentina. Given the disappearance of the company's original archives, except for some company reports (from Chilefilms S.A. and the Chilean Economic Development Agency, CORFO), we also revised the parliamentary sessions on the company's operations (National Congress Session Diaries at the Library of the Chilean National Congress). Likewise, Argentina Sono Film's archives are not currently accessible to researchers.

RE-MAPPING LATIN AMERICAN CINEMAS

Transnational studies of global film *peripheries*—often considering regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Elena 1999; Iordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010) and commonly referred to as the "Global South"—have demonstrated the existence of vibrant dynamics within these regions, articulating both global and local trends that go beyond and across national borders. Highlighting international connections, movements, and interactions between agents, films, ideas, and institutions (Hjort 2009; Higbee and Lim 2010), captures cine-

4 The historical rivalry between Chile and Argentina has been marked by territorial disputes and ongoing tensions, particularly throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their relationship has been shaped by several border conflicts (including the dispute over Eastern Patagonia and the Beagle Channel crisis), although these periods of friction have also been interspersed with moments of cooperation and diplomatic resolution.

ma's global nature, beyond the reductive frameworks of a single country and the sweeping predominance of one single international agent. Worldwide, cinema was shaped by multiple cultural exchanges and overlapping international power structures, negotiated in specific local contexts. The increasing incorporation of transnational perspectives into the field of film history has not only contributed to shedding light on previously overlooked relationships but has also demonstrated the need to reconsider the geopolitical mappings that guided discourses on global cinema.

Latin America, in particular, challenges some of the dominant assumptions about postcolonial regions, as its historical trajectory and relationship with core countries differ from those of Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia. Unlike these regions, which remained under colonial rule well into the mid-20th century, most Latin American countries had gained independence by the early 19th century. By the time cinema arrived in 1896, they had already spent nearly a century constructing their nation-states. This earlier autonomy—socio-politically distinct from the U.S.-Europe dynamic—enabled Latin American countries to begin developing independent cultural industries relatively early. As a result, much like other politically sovereign nations at the time, the arrival and evolution of cinema during the first half of the 20th century were not solely shaped by colonial influence. Instead, they were deeply tied to national projects of affirmation and progress. Cinema emerged within broader local processes of modernity and modernization, entangled with debates over national identity, international recognition, and the pursuit of economic development grounded in industrial ambitions and cultural independence.

Despite these developments and ambitions, Latin American film industries have traditionally been regarded as peripheral to a global centre dominated by Hollywood, and of limited significance to "world" film history—at least until the rise of politically engaged Latin American cinemas in the 1960s. This U.S.-centred perspective has been perpetuated not only by global film historiography but also by local scholars, who have often viewed Latin America's golden age of industrial production (1930s–1960s) as a self-contained period, largely characterized by imitations of Hollywood. As a result, Latin American cinema has frequently been studied (King 1990; Schumann 1987), with an emphasis on the apparent imitation of Hollywood practices, or on the influence and direct involvement of American companies in shaping the region's industries. However, recent scholarship has shown that Latin American film production generated its own centre-periphery dynamics, independent of Hollywood's undisputed dominance in regional film culture (Purcell 2015; Miskell 2016; Schroeder-Rodríguez 2016; Falicov 2019). Newer studies of the golden age have highlighted the diverse transnational connections between Latin American film industries and underscored the popularity and cultural significance of local cinemas, especially before the 1960s (Lusnich, Aisenberg, and Cuarterolo 2017). Research has also pointed to a longstanding regional engagement with international cinema and the presence of cosmopolitan narratives that extended beyond Hollywood's stronghold in local markets (Navitski and Poppe 2017).

While these transnational studies have challenged the traditional centre-periphery model, they have largely concentrated on relationships involving Latin America's dominant Spanish-speaking industries (Mexico and Argentina), which were relatively equal players in the region. As a result, mid-tier countries have often been overlooked. We argue that examining international relationships involving a broader range of national players can offer a more nuanced understanding of the region's industrial dynamics. In this spirit, we propose a re-mapping of Latin American film history, inspired by Tim Bergfelder's (2000) revision of European cinema. Bergfelder suggests that the rise of international co-productions and popular cinema in the 1950s and 1960s was driven by two simultaneous yet diverging forces: the economic necessity of international cooperation and the ideological drive to define distinct national cinemas. This cartographic rethinking is especially productive for analysing Latin American film industries, where local development unfolded amid seemingly contradictory forces—economic dependency, nationalism, and uneven forms of international collaboration. Drawing on Bergfelder's dual framework, we advocate for a re-evaluation of Latin America's industrial dynamics that includes mid-tier cinemas. Though smaller in scale, these industries played a crucial role in efforts to forge national identities while also navigating the economic imperative for transnational partnerships. Refocusing attention on these players and their interactions with the region's unstable centres, such as Mexico and Argentina, opens the door to a more decentralized, multipolar narrative of Latin American cinema that extends beyond the dominant influence of Hollywood.

Latin America can thus be understood as a region with its own map of international film collaborations. While the broader regional landscape was shaped by modern aspirations of industrialization, mirroring Hollywood's expansion since the 1910s, segments of the internal market continued to favour Spanish-language films produced in the region, which resonated strongly with local audiences. In addition, national cinema was seen not only as a commercial product but also as a politically valuable tool, embraced by nation-states as a symbol of autonomy and cultural advancement. Within this context, Mexico and Argentina emerged as dominant players, both in terms of industrial strength and in shaping shared regional imaginaries. Their competition for market leadership and for setting the commercial terms of the region reached a peak in the early 1940s, when external forces disrupted the existing balance and new regional actors began to challenge their hegemony. The case of Chile Films and Argentina Sono Film exemplifies these dynamics.

AN IMPOSSIBLE COLLABORATION? CHILE FILMS AND ARGENTINA SONO FILM

Argentina Sono Film (ASF) was founded in October 1932 by Italian producer Ángel Mentasti and Argentine director Luis Moglia Barth. One year later, they released their first film, *¡Tango!* (1933) directed by Moglia Barth, the first Argentine film with optical sound technologies. During the 1930s, ASF would consolidate itself as one of the leading studios in the country with movies set in low-

er-class scenarios, storylines about show business—in a multimedia strategy to sell records—and leading figures from popular theatre and the music industry, like Libertad Lamarque and Pepe Arias.

ASF became what Nicolas Poppe calls "Latin America's first industrial studio" (2021, 208), marking the way for the formation and consolidation of a national film industry. By 1938, the studio had taken the lead in Argentina's international film distribution efforts. Spanish-speaking countries became its primary market, where competition was minimal aside from a few Mexican and Spanish productions. ASF began opening offices in major Latin American and European capitals, including in Portuguese-speaking Brazil. At the same time, ASF's mogul, Ángel Mentasti, expanded his reach toward Hollywood, making frequent trips to forge commercial agreements with its leading studios. In the early 1940s, the company reached an agreement with Disney to dub its feature films in Argentina, and in the following years, films such as *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941) had Argentine voices in their Latin American distribution.

It is not surprising, then, that when Chilean officials began organizing the Chile Films project, their first point of contact was Argentina Sono Film (ASF). In 1941, Chile's Economic Development Agency (CORFO) launched an industrialization program aimed at strengthening the national economy. At the time, Chilean film production was limited to sporadic efforts by a handful of independent filmmakers and private companies, such as V.D.B. and Estudios Santa Elena. CORFO proposed the creation of a joint-stock company with the purpose of "building and operating film studios, producing films, leasing facilities, partnering with other producers, and, more broadly, engaging in the commercial activities related to the film industry" (CORFO 1943, 236). Through Chile Films, the Chilean state aimed to increase the volume and consistency of national film production. In line with the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) strategy and the economic policy of the centre-left Radical Party governments (part of the Popular Front), Chile Films was envisioned as a step toward deeper industrialization and economic independence. One of its goals was to replace the import of Spanish-language films (mainly from other Latin American countries) with Chilean productions. However, state involvement was limited to supporting the industry through credit mechanisms, stopping short of direct state control over production.

The project adopted a mixed model inspired by the Mexican and Argentinian film industries (Gobantes 2014, 93–94), aiming to encourage and protect private investment without resorting to full nationalization. From 1941 to 1949, Chile Films operated as a partially state-owned production company, with CORFO as its principal shareholder. This gave CORFO the authority to appoint three representatives to the company's board of directors. The remaining shares were distributed among private individuals and strategic institutions in exchange for key contributions. One of the most significant of these was Argentina Sono Film (ASF). An agreement signed prior to the company's launch granted ASF 3,000 shares in return for providing technical advisory services. As a result, the Argentine firm played an active role in Chile Films' management from the outset and was consulted on all major decisions during its early years (Gobantes 2014, 97).

In fact, Ángel Mentasti, president of ASF, appointed a representative to attend Chile Films' first board meeting on January 21, 1942, and established a dedicated division within ASF to oversee its operations in Chile (Bossay 2008, 55).

Chile Films' mission was to develop a national film industry capable of appealing to both domestic audiences and the broader Spanish-speaking market. To support this goal, large studios were constructed in Santiago, envisioned as the most modern and largest in South America, providing the necessary infrastructure for sustained production. Chile Films' general plan (including the construction plan for the studios and the purchase of the first equipment) followed the indications of Emilio Rodríguez Remy, the technical director of ASF until early 1943 (España 1984, 90). The creation of Chile Films sparked high expectations in the national media, hailed as a "foundational" moment, with the company described as "a collective asset and a matter of national interest", reflecting a spirit of modernizing optimism (Kelly-Hopfenblatt and Peirano 2020, 32). The company came to symbolize the defence of the national industry, rooted in the belief that protecting cinema also meant safeguarding national identity, "...our cinema—bad, good, so-so, or terrible—interprets the national soul against an imported one, even if it comes from the most admirable [foreign country] in the world" (Rivas 1945).

One of the main challenges the project faced, however, was the lack of technical expertise required to operate under an industrial model. Although Chilean filmmakers such as José Bohr and Jorge "Coke" Délano had substantial experience in the field, there simply weren't enough trained professionals to lead such an ambitious initiative. To address this, Chile Films launched an international recruitment program aimed at professionalizing the sector by training local technicians, with strong support from ASF. As a result, most of these international hires came from Argentina, such as the first cinematographers and sound technicians, Fulvio Testi, Antonio Merayo, and Jorge di Lauro. Most noticeably, when Chile Films began operations in mid-1943, the aforementioned Luis Moglia Barth was appointed technical director of the studios and sole head of production. Although this role was not originally part of the agreement, he also directed the company's first film, the epic melodrama *Romance de medio siglo* (1944).

Chile Films' decision to collaborate with ASF reflected a deliberate preference for Latin American professionals over those from Hollywood, a choice intended to ensure the *quality* of Chilean film production. Writing about the company in 1946, *Sight and Sound*'s correspondent in Chile, Raymond del Castillo, argued that

> While the [Hollywood] studios are equipped with the most modern film-making appliances obtainable in the States, the company refused to import technicians from Hollywood on the grounds that, in the long run, it was more profitable to train Chileans. This policy has averted the labour troubles agitating the film communities in Buenos Aires and Mexico City at various times, when the appearance of American technicians, not always the best, has led to prolonged and extremely bitter disputes... (del Castillo 1946, 121).

However, the hiring of Argentinians was not without controversy. Moglia Barth's appointment created a direct conflict with the duties of the Chilean technical manager, Chilean filmmaker Armando Rojas Castro, who had initially been responsible for all technical decisions. The disagreement culminated in Rojas Castro's resignation in December 1943. Between 1943 and 1944, the company's internationalization practices became a target of media criticism, as they were seen as contradicting Chile Films' stated goal of creating a *national* cinema. The press accused the company of discriminating against talented Chilean professionals and technicians in favour of Argentinians. Local journalists warned of what they described as a dangerous *foreignization*, claiming, for example, that "Chilean cinema will no longer be Chilean. It will have a foreign tinge, a different accent to ours" (Rivas 1945). Criticism also extended to the content of the films, which were perceived as lacking authentic national character. Since Chile Films aimed to produce movies with *universal* plots suitable for international markets, it often abandoned local themes in favour of a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism. This, in turn, reinforced the perception that the company lacked a genuine national identity.

Underlying the press criticism over the company's transnational production strategy was the suspicion that Chile Films was tailor-made for second-class Argentinian professionals who would have taken advantage of local inexperience. Chilean media distrusted ASF's "sudden interest" in Chile and its "hidden motives", which consisted of benefiting from Chilean resources without bearing the costs of production: "... cinema turns out to be a splendid business for those who come from outside and an eternal sacrifice for those who have been trained in Chile" (Rivas 1944, 15), "Chile Films is the greatest hope for an industrial future of Chilean cinema: it would be regrettable if it were to become only a continuation in our country of an Argentine company" (*Ecran* 1944).

This criticism was fuelled by growing disappointment with the company. Despite the high expectations placed on Chile Films, it never achieved the success that had been anticipated. *Romance de medio siglo* (1944) suffered money losses, and Chile Films managed to produce only two other films, four years after its creation: the melodramas *Amarga Verdad* (1945) by Chilean director Carlos Borcosque, and *La Casa está Vacía* (1945) by the Argentinian Carlos Schlieper. These films did not perform well enough at the box office to cover their production costs, prompting an internal restructuring within the company. The board replaced all the company's managers with Chileans, including filmmakers Jorge Délano and José Bohr.[5] Since mid-1946, Chile Films produced more commercially successful films, most notably the hit comedy *El Padre Pitillo* (1946), which helped restore public and institutional confidence in the company. The Chilean press reported enthusiastically on upcoming productions, the emergence of new local stars, and international distribution deals. However, despite

5 For a detailed account of the internal restructuring and several controversies surrounding Chilefilms' local administration between 1946 and 1947, see Gobantes (2014).

this renewed optimism, the Chilean economic crisis of 1947 had a significant impact on the film industry, particularly on the importation of celluloid. By then, amidst the dawn of the Cold War, Chile Films' longstanding financial crisis became public, causing a national scandal (*Ercilla* 1947b, 4 and 31). The company's board was accused of unpatriotic attitudes, and CORFO was urged to intervene again and supervise this *patriotic work* (Pistolas 1947). The inability to overcome this crisis ultimately led to the company's closure in 1949.

The failure of both the ASF–Chile Films partnership and Chile Films itself can be understood as the result of a combination of national and international factors. Firstly, Chile Films was unable to achieve long-term economic sustainability. Secondly, the nationalist tensions were sparked by the increasing exchange of professionals between Chile and Argentina. Lastly, the impact of the Second World War on South America—particularly the global shortage of raw film stock—further strained relations with its main international partner, ASF.

WWII: STOCK SCARCITY AND GROWING TENSIONS

Chile Films was established at a time when the world was entering the most intense years of World War II. Both Argentina and Chile maintained neutrality until the final stages of the conflict, yet they were closely monitored and infiltrated by both Axis and Allied powers, each seeking to sway their international alignments. In this context, the United States' rationing of virgin materials for film production and distribution became a powerful geopolitical tool. The U.S. frequently threatened these South American nations with boycotts and trade blockades as a means of exerting pressure. The blockade of Argentina began in 1941 and soon had a significant impact on its film industry. The country's output dropped dramatically, from over fifty films in 1942 to barely fifteen in 1945. Argentine cinema entered a period of deep decline, marked by the loss of international markets and a wave of emigration by stars and directors, many of whom sought refuge in Chile. Faced with a critical shortage of raw film stock, some Argentine production companies were forced to shut down entirely. Others resorted to desperate measures, including reusing celluloid from old films and, reportedly, smuggling materials from neighbouring countries.[6]

Therefore, for Argentine producers, the emergence of the new trans-Andean film industry represented a valuable professional opportunity during a time of crisis. ASF, in particular, saw strategic value in this unusual collaboration with its neighbouring country. In statements to the Argentine press, Ángel Mentasti emphasized the importance of the partnership, stating that

6 For a detailed account of the celluloid crisis in 1940's Argentina, see Kelly-Hopfenblatt (forthcoming).

> The official Chilean invitation means, certainly, a public and impartial recognition of the importance that our company has achieved through tenacious work, in which we have demonstrated our technical capacity and economic solidity. But I believe even more. I consider that the honour given to our company should be a great satisfaction for all Argentine cinema, since it is reflected without distinction on it, with the consequent benefits of moral order (*Film* 1941, 3) [our translation].

ASF saw an ideal opportunity in Chile Films since, at the time, Chile was not suffering from such a strong lack of raw film stock. Argentine Jorge Carlos Lemos was hired to organize the Chile Films laboratories in 1943, which he created in 1944 (Maranghello 2000). ASF, together with other Argentine studios, used these laboratories to develop new prints of their movies, which they distributed in Latin American markets, in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid losing regional primacy to the growing Mexican industry.

The American government, trying to ensure Argentina's ban, followed closely these operations. In February 1944, at the meeting of the Argentina Motion Picture Sub-committee of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, a member of the organization informed that

> Carlos Cunio Santini (*sic*) of the Laboratorios Alex, Buenos Aires, had just arranged for the purchase of 500 cans of raw stock, which apparently was in the possession of some Chilean company. The secretary explained that the facts together with other details had been forwarded in a memorandum to Mr Burrows of the Embassy and that Mr Burrows had immediately telegraphed Santiago requesting that no permissions be granted for the export of such film into Argentina.[7]

In August 1944, Chile Films requested a larger quota of film stock from the American Embassy in Chile. They argued that this was needed to help the Argentines develop new prints of their movies for Latin American distribution. In a letter sent by the American ambassador in Santiago to the State Department, he informed that

> Since the beginning of 1944, Argentine motion picture companies have been attempting to overcome the inadequacy of positive film supplies in their own country by shipping to Chile one negative copy of each feature picture and having reproductions made here from raw positive film obtained in the Chilean market.[8]

This had led to a faster depletion of Chilean celluloid than expected, which is why they were requesting new deliveries. The American Ambassador pointed out

7 "Minutes: Motion Picture Sub-Committee Meeting No. 73", Feb 7, 1944, Folder "Motion Picture Sub-Committee - Minutes of Meetings (1943-1944)", Box 1248, RG 229 Office of Inter-American Affairs – General Records – Central Files, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD, USA. In fact, two weeks later it was stated that this operation had been stopped.

8 "Motion Picture Film Shipments", letter from Merwin L. Bohan, Counselor for American Affairs at the Embassy of the United States of America in Argentina to the Honorable Secretary of State, Aug 22, 1944, Microfilm 1322, Roll 26 - Argentina 1940s, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), College Park, MD, USA.

that the main Argentine company interested in this request was ASF, which had proposed to Chile Films that it "undertake to produce copies of Sono Films features for distribution in countries on the West Coast of South America, other than Chile." He also pointed out that "the fact that Sono Films is a stockholder in Chile Films and has loaned the latter organization production equipment and technical personnel for filming its first full-length feature, which is nearing completion [*Romance de Medio Siglo*] are conditions giving rise to the present proposal." The Embassy closed its letter by stating its agreement with Chile Films' request, but at the same time, leaving the final decision to the Washington offices.

By 1945, reports of these dealings began to appear in the American press. In January, *The Film Daily* reported that

> The use of American raw stock under Chile's quota is understood to have been made part of a co-producing agreement between Argentine Films and Chile Films, whereby both companies will exchange actors, and studio equipment, and make films in their respective countries. [....]. A recent investigation as to the source of Argentina's adequate supply of prints revealed that local laboratories were printing on Chilean quota (FD 1945).

Two months later, *Variety* stated that "Chile is understood to have turned over part of her raw stock to Argentina, but not sufficient to meet requirement" (*Variety* 1945). Finally, in November 1945, the United States decided to act on it and penalize the Chileans, reducing by 66% the quota of film stock destined for Chile. The official argument was that the supply far exceeded the needs of the Chilean industry, but the press on both sides of the Andes quickly deduced that this was linked to the actions of the Argentines. In Argentina, *Film* magazine stated that

> This measure is due to frequently verified reports of large-scale smuggling of blank film from Chile to Argentina. It places the Chilean film industry in a difficult situation, having had to suspend the shooting of several productions, including the newsreel *Chile al día* (*Film* 1945) [our translation].

We can see that the effect of collaborating with a bigger player in the region allowed Chile to set up for production but also worked against its interest. This penalization from the U.S. affected even further the already fragile film industry, which was also going through a difficult period. The international economic crisis had led to a growing shortage of dollars and an annual inflation rate of around 20%. Consequently, the costs of production increased considerably, and, at the end of 1947, the government decided to limit the use of dollar reserves only to imports of essential goods. This situation further affected the import of celluloid, and during the following years, it had to be rationed among the different film productions (Pistolas 1946). This and other factors, such as the increased costs of production and the internal management and investment errors (Gobantes 2014, 91-138), led Chile Films to an economic crisis after only three years of full operation.

Faced with this shortage of celluloid, Chilean specialized press did not, however, mention any of the U.S. impositions. Instead, it turned directly against

the company's administration and the Argentinians. The main Chilean film fan magazine, *Ecran,* stressed that the police had arrested "well-known characters," presumably working at Chile films, for smuggling celluloid to Argentina; however, these allegations were never verified, nor was it specified who these detainees were (*Ecran* 1946). Faced with rising production costs, the press accused Chile Films of irresponsible squandering "There is no celluloid, but some people waste it and throw it away with open hands" (*Ercilla* 1946). This led to a series of political accusations about corruption in the company, alluding to board members who were not aligned with the Chilean pro-U.S. government of Gabriel González Videla. They were also accused of being communists, amidst the government's anti-communist policy.

The issue of celluloid only reinforced the nationalistic tensions and mistrust that persisted in the company's international collaborations with Argentina. The political reading of the Chile Films' economic crisis also touched upon the idea that, ultimately, the company failed in the hands of foreign interests. In 1947, the new company director Hernán García Valenzuela vigorously defended the patriotic nature of saving Chile Films from bankruptcy saying "I put the Nazis at bay in the South. Be assured that I will never allow our film industry to cease to be Chilean [...] Chile Films was managed as a private business, forgetting that it was as national as our roads" (*Ercilla* 1947b). The reference to Nazis in García's statement was not coincidental, given the longstanding mistrust toward Argentina, particularly the unfounded fear of a trans-Andean invasion and the idea of a fifth column linked to a so-called Fourth Reich. These anxieties were rooted in Argentina's controversial reputation for neutrality during World War II (Nocera 2005).

Despite the negative press surrounding Argentina, after 1947 Chile Films sought to overcome its economic difficulties through a new collaborative model: direct co-productions with Argentine partners. This approach culminated in the company's final production, which was made under this new arrangement, *Esperanza* (1949), co-produced with the Argentine company *Sur Cinematográfica Argentina*. Despite these final efforts, the industrial project turned into a failure. Local revenue never got to cover its production costs, films were never widely distributed internationally as originally expected, and the company kept experiencing a downturn in the following years. Finally, Chile Films declared bankruptcy in 1949, and the studios were leased to private Chilean companies (the Taulis brothers) in 1950.[9] During the 1940s, the company produced 9 films, co-produced 4 films with different Argentine companies, and 6 other films were filmed inside its studios, which was not enough to build a sustainable national industry (Peirano and Gobantes 2014, 253-273).[10] Eventually, the exchange

9 In 1966, Chilean historian Mario Godoy goes even further, blaming Chile Films failure on a sort of trans-Andean plot: "Chile Films would be an excellent field of experimentation for those who, instead of coming to help us, would come to harm us. After all, how could Argentine filmmakers come to help Chilean cinema to progress, if we were going to compete with their own productions? [...] They should have gone to any country but Argentina for advisors." (Godoy Quezada 1966, 118) [our translation].

10 Interestingly, none of the co-productions with Argentine producers were with

with ASF paid back only to local professionals who effectively learned from the international exchange—Chilean technicians and filmmakers who started their careers in the company and who built the national field in the following decades (like Andrés Martorell, Patricio Kaulen, Nieves Yankovic, and Naum Kramarenco) and Argentinians who remained working in Chile, like Jorge di Lauro. After its closure, there was no other systematic attempt to create a large national industrial project, and Chilean professionals continued to work independently. It was not until the mid-1960s that the company returned to the state's administration and began to produce documentary films. The company was eventually privatized by Pinochet's dictatorship in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, on the Argentine side, the end of the Second War allowed celluloid imports from France and Belgium, but it was not until the end of the decade that Argentina recovered its production levels. However, once the winds changed, ASF focused its efforts on recovering its production in Argentina and gradually retreated from any international collaboration, including Chile Films. National protectionism and state funding for film production, screen quotas, and other legal measures taken by Juan Domingo Peron's government helped this process, although several studios still went bankrupt. The only major studio that survived this process was Argentina Sono Film, which became closely identified with the Peronist movement. When a military coup overthrew Peron in 1955, the leading producers and directors of the studio were arrested as part of the de-peronization policies of the new regime.

Despite this turmoil, in the following decades, ASF was able to remain the country's leading industrial film company by producing mostly family entertainment and avoiding political conflicts with the various democratic and dictatorial regimes. During the 1960s and 1970s it resumed its international intentions and embarked on a series of co-productions like *En la selva no hay estrellas* (Armando Robles Godoy, Argentina-Peru, 1967), *Amor en el aire* (Luis César Amadori, Argentina-Spain, 1967), and *La mamá de la novia* (Enrique Carreras, Argentina-Mexico, 1978). These included even the Spain-Chile-Argentina collaboration *La pérgola de las Flores* (Román Viñoly Barreto, 1965). The nature of these later co-productions was not as unbalanced as the Chile Films experience, following the global models of post-WWII international co-productions based on financial collaboration, location shooting, and cosmopolitan topics.

Argentina Sono Film. They were rather with independent, mostly ad-hoc companies such as the aforementioned Sur Cinematográfica, or Sur Cinematográfica Del Carril for *Surcos de Sangre* (Hugo del Caril, 1950). Although there is no documentation explaining ASF's absence, we can speculate that, since it was already an established brand, the Argentine producers chose not to associate their name directly with Chile Films' output, and instead kept the collaboration purely technical and financial.

DE-CENTRING AND RE-PERIODIZING CINEMA HISTORIES

Focusing on relevant actors from the Global South and working towards a multi-perspective requires an acknowledgment of global asynchronicities and the nuances of international interactions, unfolding some of the historical complexities of cinema as a transnational phenomenon. Though there exists in recent scholarship a spirit of challenge towards the centralization of global cinema history, peripheral interactions like those within Latin America have often been overlooked.

These interactions not only exist outside traditional frameworks but also challenge them. We can consider this case as an in-between of other instances of international collaborations in global cinema. On the one hand, it fits into the 1920s proto-industrialization approach of projects like Film Europe; on the other hand, it predates the multipolar model that guided post-war co-productions. Thus, the Chile Films-ASF case strains traditional periodizations of global cinema exchanges.

Likewise, the conventional Hollywood-Latin America narrative typically frames the region's cinema as a reaction to, or consequence of decisions made by the Hollywood industry and its predominance in the market, but we have seen that this perspective is not fully accurate. While American decisions did play a role in fostering internal collaborations within South America, these were driven by political motives from the State Department, not Hollywood itself. Furthermore, despite Chile Films and ASF aiming to emulate Hollywood's industrial model, these initiatives were homegrown and independent, with no direct influence or collaboration from major American studios. Both countries ended up partnering with each other while focusing on their own national and regional market, with Hollywood only being in the background of these endeavours.

After the transition to sound, film studios became a synonym of progress and an evolutionary ideal for many Latin American countries, while, as this case shows, their development was shaped by local and external factors that highlight some of the material, cultural and political complexities that framed the region during this period. While Chile Films is often viewed as a failure due to its internationalism and failed state intervention, ASF is considered a prime example of populist audience-serving production and business-savvy flexibility. Both their histories are more complex because their commercial possibilities were strongly framed by their overlapping international links. We have seen that commercial and industrial links between Chile Films and ASF were built in a social and cultural space where ideologies of modernization and nationalism conditioned the emergence of these local film industries, but also often obstructed their continuity.

By focusing on the internal interactions of the Southern Cone, we have looked into a region that was distant from the WWII battlefields. While these global scenarios impacted the development of Argentine and Chilean cinemas, a close analysis demonstrates that they did so in quite a different way from the rest of the world. Instead of war narratives of destruction and reconstruction, ASF

and Chile Films present stories of industrial shortages, modernization programs, business strategies, and nationalist quarrels that coexisted with the global turmoil. And whereas the political and cultural entanglements of this industrial venture were indirectly linked to broader international issues (such as Nazism and Communism), they mostly reflect the internal conditions of each country and, over and above, the tense relationship between a regional centre and a neighbouring periphery, and between two countries with a competitive historical past.

A similar perspective guided the post-war scenario. While most European cinemas reorganized themselves after WWII, deeply influenced by the postwar economic and cultural world reorganization, Latin American cinemas faced these years as a moment of crisis, which only gradually turned into a strong political positioning. The Cold War was initially an indirect background for local cinemas, whereas the national and regional dynamics were shaped more by the failure of numerous national industrial projects than by the Cold War climate. The main impact of the Global North came with the decline of the U.S backing of the Mexican industry after the war, by which, as Seth Fein has suggested, "the United States betrayed its rhetoric of free trade and open markets to undermine the competitiveness of the global cultural market" (1996, 578). The direct insertion of Latin American cinemas in the Cold War dispute would not manifest strongly until the 1960s, and it would be only because of a redefining event that forced the world to look towards the region: the Cuban revolution (1959).

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In compartecipazione. Italian and Algerian Films in the 1960s[1]

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This paper focuses on a handful of films made between Italy and Algeria in the late 1960s. I analyse the trajectory from political and militant interactions—Ennio Lorenzini's *Le Mains libres* and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, *La Battaglia di Algeri*, both produced in Algeria by the Casbah film—to more strictly industrial and financial preoccupations which we can trace in a heterogenous group of films: Luchino Visconti's *The Stranger* (*Lo straniero*, 1967), an adaptation of Camus's book of the same title; Sergio Spina's *The Golden Donkey* (*L'asino d'oro: processo per fatti strani contro Lucius Apuleius cittadino romano*, 1970), based on Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*; Mario Monicelli's comedy *Brancaleone at the Crusades* (*Brancaleone alle crociate*, 1970), and Enzo Peri's Spaghetti Western *Death Walks in Laredo* (*Tre pistole contro Cesare*, 1967). Combining an archival, historical, and cultural approach with a consideration of the business models involved, I discuss why these Italian directors and producers went to Algeria, what kind of collaborations were in place, and what were the long-lasting effects of these productions.

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"Bienvenue à Alger à Luchino Visconti pour le tournage de 'L'Etranger'":[1] Algerians read this headline on page 6 in the 19 October 1966 issue of the national newspaper *El Moudjahid* (Hennebelle 1966, now in Layerle 2018, 163).[2]

1 I presented this paper, in different forms, in a PhD seminar at La Sapienza, University of Rome in March 2025 and at the University of Texas at Austin in April 2025: thanks for the invitations to Damiano Garofalo, Claudia Pisano, Paola Bonifazio, and thanks to all the participants of the two events for the excellent questions. Thanks also to Ahmed Bedjaoui, Valentina Carola, Leonardo De Franceschi, Valerio Coladonato, Nabil Djedouani, Luana Fedele, Zineb Sedira.

2 The article is anonymous, but written by the French film critic Guy Hennebelle,

As the article makes clear, the Italian director arrived in the Algerian capital to shoot *The Stranger* (*Lo straniero,* 1967), based on Albert Camus' book *L'Étranger*, and set precisely in Algeria, where the writer was born and lived for a long time (Camus 1988; Kaplan 2016). At the time, sixty-year-old Visconti had already shot eight feature-length films, several documentaries, short films, and episodes in collective films: he arrived in Algiers with the aura of a "great director" and therefore, Hennebelle wrote, "we welcome him, and we wait impatiently and curiously for his adaptation of Camus' work. But we are perfectly tranquil, as we know his immense talent" (Hennebelle 1966, now in Layerle 2018, 163).[3] The seasoned Italian director arrived in a city that was not new to Italian cinema: in September of that year, among the few non-French and non-Hollywood films that the inhabitants of Algiers could watch in cinemas, there were Italian films like *L'avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) and Visconti's own (*The Leopard*, *Il gattopardo,* 1963) as we learn thanks to the advertisements for the films in different *El Moudjahid* issues. Several arthouse Italian films were also distributed in post-independent Algeria, where Neorealist cinema was an important point of reference, discussed in publications and events—like a special screening of *Rome, Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945) in December 1965, where the film is praised as a model (EM 1965, 6). At the end of October 1966, one of the most anticipated films in the recently independent Algeria opened in as many as three cinemas of the capital: *The Battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeri,* Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), having recently won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, could be seen at the Marignan, the Roxy, and the iconic L'Afrique—where another Algerian film directed by an Italian, *Les Mains libres* (Ennio Lorenzini, 1965), had premiered the year before (Peretti 2022). Algerians knew about the film, which was produced by one of the heroes of the struggle for independence ("produit par Saadi Yacef", as the newspaper advertisement mentioned), which was highly anticipated in *El Moudjahid* with several reports and whose filming, in the second half of 1965, mobilised half of the city (Forgacs 2007). Later in the 1960s, the Algerian audiences would also be increasingly exposed to Italian genre films, westerns and much more, as the long-forgotten film *November* (1971, sponsored by the ruling party FLN) would later illustrate in a sequence with Algerian filmgoers watching spaghetti westerns.[4]

From this brief information it should already be clear how Italy and Algeria enjoyed a privileged cinematographic relationship; one that, however, has hitherto been little analysed. Whilst distribution and critical discourses on these films and in general on the filmic interactions between the two countries de-

who was in charge of the cinema page of the Algerian newspaper (Layerle 2018, 153–165).

3 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's responsibility.

4 The film, preserved at the Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico in Rome, has been screened publicly only once and, at the time of the writing of this essay, still awaits a new life.

serve further analysis, in this paper I will focus on the making of a group of Algerian and Italian films, all made after the most known and studied one, *The Battle of Algiers.* In fact, after Visconti (and of course after Lorenzini and Pontecorvo) other Italian directors made the trip across the Mediterranean Sea: Sergio Spina, to shoot the peplum *The Golden Donkey* (*L'asino d'oro: processo per fatti strani contro Lucius Apuleius cittadino romano*, 1970, henceforth *L'asino d'oro*), based on Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*; Mario Monicelli, who filmed in Algeria several scenes of the second instalment of the Brancaleone saga, *Brancaleone at the Crusades* (*Brancaleone alle crociate* aka *For Love and Gold*, 1970, henceforth *Brancaleone*), and Enzo Peri, who filmed in the North African country the only spaghetti western ever made in Africa, *Death Walks in Laredo* (*Tre pistole contro Cesare*, 1967, henceforth *Tre pistole*). Combining an archival, historical, and cultural approach with a consideration of the business models involved, I will discuss why these directors and producers went to Algeria, what kind of collaborations were in place, and what were (and are) the long-lasting effects of these productions.

COPRODUCTIONS AND *COMPARTECIPAZIONI*

In the 1960s Italian cinema was booming. A 1962 newsreel about the opening of the De Laurentiis studios in Rome optimistically noted "Hollywood is known to be in decline, and Rome can rightly take the leadership in the world of cinema. With the studios under construction, all the pieces are now in place for this succession" (CIAC 1962). If perhaps the emphatic newsreel voice-over was exaggerating, it is true that in terms of quality and quantity Italian cinema was second only to Hollywood. This is reflected in the value of coproduction and the span of filming abroad that Italian cinema enjoyed at the time. Leonardo De Franceschi calculated that during the so-called golden era of Italian cinema, from the end of World War II to the 1970s, as many as 209 Italian films were partially or completely filmed in Africa—more than French, British or US American films from the same period (De Franceschi 2024, 12). It is a stunning number that certainly speaks to the Italian abilities to collaborate with different national cinemas and to seek profitable markets and production opportunities, but also to the role that Italy had in the Mediterranean basin and in Africa more in general (Borruso 2024). Eight of these films were filmed in Algeria, either by Italian productions or Algerian-Italian joint productions or even Algerian-Italian-French productions. Some of these films were made before the independence, as the relationship between Italian cinema and Algeria was one with roots in the past (De Franceschi 2024); furthermore, during the liberation war some of the early Algerian newsreels and militant films were developed in Italy, particularly at the Microstampa Laboratory in Rome (Bedjaoui 2020), possibly with the intercession of the same Sergio Spina who, during the 1960s, would entertain privileged relationships with Algeria (Peretti 2023b, 66–67). These interactions and relationships made the making of *The Battle of Algiers* possible:

as producer and guerrilla fighter Yacef Saadi noted, Algerians were strongly influenced by Neorealism, they recognised a Mediterranean kinship with Italians, and this film could not be done in France, and he therefore looked at Italy (Forgacs 2007). Gillo Pontecorvo and writer Franco Solinas were also planning a film on Algeria, *Parà,* and from this serendipitous or "fortunate encounter" (Forgacs 2007, 363) one of the most important political films in history was made. What interests me here is understanding the production model they employed, and how the making of this film helped make other Algerian and Italian films possible. After being rejected by several Italian producers, Pontecorvo created a small company with a trustworthy production manager he worked with, Antonio Musu: the Igor Film, named after Igor Stravinsky, a composer they were both passionate about. He partnered with Casbah Film, created by Saadi Yacef in the immediate post-war Algeria, with the aim to make a film on the struggle for Liberation, that is to continue the struggle with other weapons (Peretti 2023a). A similar model followed for two more films that I analyse here, *The Stranger* and *Tre pistole*, both produced by Casbah Film with an Italian company, or by one Italian and one French. For the other films, it is not Casbah Film that partners with Italian firms but the Algerian cinema office, the ONCIC (Office National pour le Commerce et l'Industrie Cinématographique), created in the second half of the 1960s, during a period of drastic reorganisation and centralisation of Algerian film institutions, as with many other aspects of post-independence Algeria. Understanding how these productions came to be, from the Italian side, is relatively easy, as they employed similar production models of other international coproductions—when official agreements were signed—or *compartecipazioni*, as the collaborations with countries without treaties were called (Nicoli 2017; Di Chiara 2023).[5] Furthermore, part of the production material for these films is readily available at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (State Central Archive, ACS): as Di Chiara and Noto explained,

> The Italian state was involved in virtually every aspect of the post-war film industry—from financing to studio management, production and film distribution—either through publicly owned or controlled companies. The combined provisions of the laws and rules enforced by the state in the post-war years made the Directorate-General for Entertainment (Direzione Generale dello Spettacolo, DGS) a bureaucratic hub to which requests for such diverse matters as funding, censorship visas, labour controversies and currency transactions were addressed. More specifically, requests submitted by producers for the recognition of the nationality of films [the *certificato di italianità*], which in turn allowed access to soft loans provided by the state-controlled Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, were organised in files (one for each project submitted to the DGS) that are now kept at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato ('State Central Archive') (ACS). This archive contains evidence of the day-to-day mediation and negotiation between the industrial stakeholders carried out by the DGS, and it is a major primary source in our research (Di Chiara and Noto 2023, 648).

5 I will use the Italian term throughout the paper for lack of a better English corresponding term.

The documents kept at the ACS show how the Italian film industry interacted with the Italian state. The newly independent Algerian nation inherited from colonialism a wealth of functioning cinemas (Bedjaoui 2020; Sadoul 1966; Tenfiche 2020a, Tenfiche 2020b) and a solid film culture (Peretti 2023b, 57), but as in the other French colonies in Africa, no production companies, no film laboratories, i.e., no possibility of making films with foreign help and collaborations. In the first ten years after independence twenty something feature-length films were produced, whilst sectors of the film industry were reorganised and nationalised (Austin 2012; Cheurfi 2013; Bedjaoui 2020). Given the limited access to Algerian archives, understanding precisely the production patterns of these films remains a hard task. What can be said, and that helps understand the relationships with Italian cinema, is that the first years of Algerian cinema are dominated by a combination of state intervention and spontaneity, and that in the second half of the 1960s the entire film sector is centralised and nationalised, ending—in the words of Hala Salmane—a period of "confusion and rivalry" (1976, 20). The regime of monopoly was installed with the creation of the ONCIC. As Italy never signed an official coproduction agreement with Algeria—unlike with France, Spain, and other countries (Nicoli 2017, 174)—these productions were on a one-to-one basis and not part of wider agreements.

FROM POLITICAL TO BUSINESS-ORIENTATED INTERACTIONS

After independence Algeria became a meeting place for militants and revolutionaries, a country that peoples struggling for their independence looked at for inspiration, and one where guerrilla organizations, like the Mozambican FRELIMO or the US American Black Panthers, could establish offices. It became, to use a known formula, the Mecca of the revolution, or the capital of the Third World (Prashad 2007, 119–33; Byrne 2016; Simon 2009). *The Battle of Algiers,* not incidentally one of the films routinely screened at their events precisely by the Black Panthers, helped putting Algiers on the political map of the world—as Bedjaoui wrote, "the film by Gillo Pontecorvo has done much to promote the image of Algeria and its liberation war throughout the world" (Bedjaoui 2020, 78–79). And cinema continued to play a part in Third-Worldist and internationalist Algeria, whether to witness and recount what was taking place in the country—such in the case of the films shot by the US American William Klein, *Festival panafricain d'Alger 1969* (1969) and *Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther* (1970)—or as a location: it is in fact in Algiers (with the help of the Algerian government and the involvement of the ONCIC) that Costa-Gavras shot *Z* (1969), one of the most important political films of all times. Among others, Italian popular actor Renato Salvatori stars in the film.

The Algerian and Italian films of the second half of the 1960s apparently tell another story, one that moves from militant and political motives to more strictly industrial and financial preoccupations, with the aim to exploit cheap locations and extras. They seem to comply with a fairly common coproduction model that

existed at the time in Italy, a model which has been aptly described by Francesco Di Chiara and Paolo Noto (2023) for the Italian-Yugoslavian coproductions—where a formal agreement was in place, unlike the Italian-Algerian productions. In other words, these films seem to run parallel to the political films of Costa-Gavras or Klein, yet still participating in the creation of the "archives of specific places" (Gorfinkel and Rhodes 2011, xi), the specific places being in this instance the Algerian cities, deserts, countryside. These films also participate not only in the history of Italian cinema (perhaps a minor and neglected chapter of it) but also and more predominantly in the history of Algerian cinema.

After the political films produced by Casbah Film, that is *Les Mains libres* and of course *The Battle of Algiers,* the first film to be produced across the two countries is *Tre pistole*. According to its screenwriter, Piero Regnoli, the film was "ahead of its time" (Regnoli in Faldini and Fofi 2009, 397) as it pioneered the spaghetti westerns—albeit following the "official" pioneers of the tradition (*filone)*, Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966) and Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dollari*, 1964) (Fisher 2011; Frayling 2006; Totaro 2011). More importantly, Regnoli also briefly explained why the film was filmed in Algeria:

> The film was made in Algeria because Gillo Pontecorvo had just finished shooting *La battaglia di Algeri* there, and Visconti was going to shoot *Lo straniero* there a few months later. Thus Dino De Laurentiis, who had met the general manager of Casbah Film in Algeria [probably Yacef Saadi], wanted to test the organisational skills of the Algerians before sending Visconti's crew there. Therefore, he sent us ahead with this western. We managed to shoot it by turning the cowboys into Mexicans because the faces of the Algerian extras obviously couldn't look North American (Regnoli as quoted in Faldini and Fofi 2009, 397–398).

Tre pistole contro Cesare, whose working title was *I tre ragazzi d'oro*, presented the typical elements of the genre but, as the general inspector of the DGS recognised, "more cosmopolitan… as the three heroes of the film, even if they are brothers, present very different genotypical types, one 'yankee', one French and one Japanese".[6] It was filmed in the De Laurentiis studios in Rome (27 June–13 July, and 22 August–10 September) and in Algeria (16 July–19 August) that is, as attested from a production document dated 20 June 1967, 30 days in Italy and 27 in Algeria.[7] In North Africa, two locations were involved in the making of the film: Algiers, in the second half, and before that the film was shot in the oasis of Bou Saâda, a city nicknamed the "door of the desert" precisely for its proximity to the desert and one that is not new to foreign productions. Thanks to its climate and different landscapes, the city became in fact an important location, referred even, with a certain emphasis, as the *Hollywood algérienne* (Boukhakf 2023). Among others,

6 L'Ispettore generale, "I tre ragazzi d'oro", 7/6/1966, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Tre pistole contro Cesare, CO 34

7 Dino de Laurentis Cinematografica to Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, 20/6/1967, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Tre pistole contro Cesare, CO 34

Cecil B. DeMille shot there *Samson and Delilah* (1949). According to the documents at ACS, the reasoning for filming in Algeria, besides the "reasons inherent to the *compartecipazione*" was precisely because the landscapes could resemble Texas, where the story was set—"motivi di ambientazione (zone simili al Texas)".[8] The film qualifies as Italian, according to the law of the time, and produced by Dino De Laurentiis Cinematografica *in compartecipazione* with Casbah Film (30%)—the initial proposal from June 1966 was 50%–50%. As is customary, the Italian side would enjoy the distribution rights in Italy and some of its former colonies, plus Spain and its territories, whilst the Algerian partner would have rights in France, its territories, and some of the former colonies. Less typically, instead of 30% (that is, the production quota), Casbah Film would have gained 50% from the rest of the world, something that the inspector, in his notes from 7 June 1966, found problematic.

Two preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the study of the production model of *Tre pistole:* first that, as Regnoli noted, De Laurentiis was trying out different potential avenues, locations, possible collaborations, as he did in other countries in those years; second, as De Franceschi argued (2024, 170), the documents preserved at the ACS omit the participation of Algerian cast and crew, or minimise them. There is a precise reason, in this case and the next films as well, that is because in order to receive the certificate of Italian nationality, the overwhelming majority of the people working on the film needed to be Italian. To understand who, from the Algerian side, participated in the film we are aided by Algerian sources, and particularly the two volumes promoted by the Algerian Minister of culture (Ministère de l'Information et de la Culture 1974; Aissaoui 1984). In the case of this film, one example will suffice, that is the involvement of Moussa Haddad in the making of the film. One of the legendary figures of Algerian cinema, he worked on the set of *The Battle of Algiers* and *The Stranger* and would later direct films of his own (among others, *Les Vacances de l'inspecteur Tahar*, 1972). In the Italian documents, his name is never mentioned; in the Algerian sources, he was unequivocally credited as co-director of the film, as in Cheurfi (2013, 312 and 611). Given what I have noted about the partiality of the Italian documents, one may be tempted to state that Moussa Haddad was indeed, as the two catalogues argued, the co-director of the film; but it is equally important to note how these two catalogues are far from error-free, given that, for example, they credited actor Enrico Maria Salerno as author of the screenplay, which is surely incorrect. At this stage, it is impossible to determine the precise involvement of Moussa Haddad in this film.

We have several pieces of information and documentation on the making of *The Stranger,* which was long and complex, and saw the participation—in the span of a few years—of different agencies, individuals, even political forces (De Franceschi 1999; De Franceschi 2024, 173–174). The project started probably in the early 1960s, long before the beginning of Algerian-Italian collaborations. Reading Luchino Visconti's letters, one can learn about the long

8 L'Ispettore generale, "I tre ragazzi d'oro", 7/6/1966, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Tre pistole contro Cesare, CO 34

evolution of the process of writing the screenplay, with the direct involvement of Camus's widow, Francine.[9] The initial project saw Alain Delon as a main actor with the participation of the French company Les Nouveaux Mondes, as a letter from ANICA (Associazione nazionale industrie cinematografiche e affini), the Italian film trade association, to the Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo (Minister for Tourism and Show Business, MTS) attests.[10] The film was a major production, with De Laurentiis partnering again with Casbah Film but also with another Italian company (the Master Film, partially financed by lead actor Marcello Mastroianni) and in coproduction with the French Marianne Production. Differently from *Tre pistole,* Visconti's film is indeed an official coproduction, following the agreements signed in December 1961 between Italy and France, as a MTS statement from 27 May 1968 clearly states.[11] From other documents, we learn that the film is 70% Italian and 30% French. It is more complicated to understand how the film qualifies as Algerian. In the budget, 400 million lire were to be given to Casbah Film for the expenses in Algeria, a huge sum, almost half of the total budget. Furthermore, the general inspector of the DGS, in a note from 6 July 1966, explained that, given that the book is set in Algeria, naturally the film would also be filmed there.[12] Therefore, we can conclude from the documentation available that the Italian 70% of the film included somehow the Algerian part.

A completely different model is employed by *Brancaleone* and *L'asino d'oro*. Both films are Italian films that use Algerian locations, and it is likely that the Italian production companies collaborated minimally with the ONCIC—but the Algerian film institute is explicitly mentioned in the credits. If the documents from the MTS tend to vigorously downplay the Algerian involvement, because the production companies needed to demonstrate that the films were 100% Italian, from the sources currently available it seems fair to say that the production model for these two films differed from the model of the direct participation of Casbah Film. In both cases, the two production companies—Filmes Cinematografica for *L'asino d'oro*, and Fair Film, owned by Mario Cecchi Gori, for *Brancaleone*—justified themselves for filming in Algeria. For example, on 30 September 1969 Filmes wrote "we will have to film in Algeria for 15 days, where there is an ancient Roman city excellently preserved, essential for the outdoor filming".[13] The shooting went on for longer, in four different locations: Djémila

9 Fondazione Antonio Gramsci, Fondo Visconti.

10 A. Valignani (Segretario Generale ANICA) to Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, 26/7/1966, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Lo Straniero, CO39.

11 Il direttore generale, Coproduzione italo-francese del film 'LO STRANIERO'. Istanza della Società Dino de Laurentiis, 10/4/1967, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Lo Straniero, CO39

12 L'Ispettore generale, "Lo straniero", 6/7/1966, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Lo Straniero, CO39

13 Filmes Cinematografica to Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, 30/9/1969, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, L'Asino d'oro, CF5742.

(the said ancient Roman city), El Kantara, Biskra, and Cherchell. As for *Brancaleone,* in an interesting letter to the MTS (dated 19 November 1970), the Fair Film explained how

> as previously requested, the production of our film *Brancaleone alle crociate* required several days of filming abroad due to the specific setting of some scenes in the film, which will undoubtedly enhance its spectacular nature and allow us to promote it more effectively both in Italy and abroad. The filming abroad, specifically in Algeria, first in Ghardaïa and then in Touggourt, lasted four weeks".[14]

A detailed list of the Italian members of the cast and crew follows in the document. In another letter from mid-December, they continued:

> In the opening credits of the film, we have included the names of some Algerian technicians and actors in order to consolidate the good relations between our company and the ONCIC of Algiers, which collaborated with our crew during filming in Algeria. Therefore, it is solely for these reasons that we have chosen to mention some members of the esteemed ONCIC (Ministry of Entertainment) and not because they played a decisive role in the making of the film.[15]

This is probably an understatement, a way to reassure the MTS that the film was entirely Italian. Furthermore, it seems that no other company associated with Mario Cecchi Gori has collaborated with the ONCIC. Once again, looking at Algerian sources, we can note how the director of production of *Brancaleone* was Bachir Hanifi and that other Algerians were involved in different roles (Ministère 1974, 72; Aissaoui 1984, 98). Similarly, several Algerians were involved in the making of Spina's film, including once again Hanifi (Ministère 1974, 73; Aissaoui 1984, 88). Yet, as De Franceschi correctly noted, most of the key roles are held by Italians, to the extreme case of Dada Gallotti's *brownface* for the role of Fotide, instead of hiring an African actress (De Franceschi 2024, 202).

Then what is there of Algerian in these last two films? What do they bring to Algerian cinema or, in general, to Algerian culture? They certainly participate in that archive of specific places that Gorfinkel and Rhodes wrote about. Altered and transformed into something else (Mexico, Mediaeval Italy), the Algerian profilmic space is nonetheless there. A very variegated one: it is interesting to note in fact that these four films were filmed in a variety of places in Algeria, really exploring and exploiting several different locations. They also had a role in continuing to train Algerian cast and crew. And finally, as we have seen, they are considered part of the history of Algerian cinema.

14 Fair Film to Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, 19/11/1970, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Brancaleone alle crociate, CF5980.

15 Fair Film to Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, 15/12/1970, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Turismo e dello Spettacolo, Direzione Generale Cinema, Brancaleone alle crociate, CF5980

CONCLUSIONS. ALGERIAN AND ITALIAN FILMS

In this paper I have illustrated the preliminary results of the investigation on the production models of a small group of films made between Algeria and Italy in the second half of the 1960s. A small group of films that are considered part of Algerian cinema, as we have seen, despite being considered on the Italian side as solely Italian or only *in compartecipazione*. About the Italian productions with/in North Africa at the time, De Franceschi noted how

> The absence of coproduction treaties was overcome on a case-by-case basis by coproduction agreements, but these remained outside a framework of reciprocal relations and did not depart from an asymmetrical and ultimately colonial regime, since they did not provide for automatic dual nationality for films produced under coproduction agreements, nor did they in any way provide for the company or film industry of the third country involved in the agreement to acquire, so to speak, credits to be spent in the future on access to the Italian film market, for the production of films shot in Italy, with a mixed technical and artistic cast and intended for the Italian market (De Franceschi 2024, 61–62).

If we consider the matter from a purely film business side, this is certainly correct, and it remains problematic that these films are not considered "Algerian" and did not enjoy the economic advantages that they would have had if double nationality had been recognised. Still, De Franceschi noted how (in this case referring only to the relationship with Algeria), "what emerges is a relationship that, after the great potential opened up by Pontecorvo's film, never really takes off, offering some opportunities for technical staff and a few secondary actors, but without ever changing the framework of an asymmetry in the balance of power" (De Franceschi 2024, 86). What if, however, we consider the matter from a more cultural and less business-orientated point of view? And what if we try to shift the focus from the Italian sources to the Algerian ones? It is precisely what London-based Algerian-French artist Zineb Sedira did when she included the remix, re-enactment, and reuse of some of these films in her pavilion at the French Biennale 2022 (representing France). Entitled *Dreams Have No Titles* (Reggad, Bardaouil and Fellrath 2022), the pavilion used some of these films in a political way.

Whilst Pontecorvo and Lorenzini, as argued, had an immediate political approach, Sedira also looked at the films directed by Visconti and Ettore Scola's *Le Bal* (*Ballando ballando*, 1983), and more in general at the international films made in and with Algeria in the second half of the 1960s as representing "a moment of friendship and [which] created a family with intellectual, artistic and political connections" (Tapponi 2022). Furthermore, I am convinced that the inclusion of the films analysed in this paper in the history of Algerian cinema, from an official source like the catalogue of the Ministry of Culture, shows how the reality is much more complex than what emerges from the documentation produced by Italian film production companies asking for the certificate of Ital-

ian nationality to the MTS, as I hope to have demonstrated. If we look at the history of Algerian cinema, we can also note how between 1962 and 1971 only 22 feature-length films (feature documentaries included) were produced in the country, which means that around one fourth were films jointly produced or *in compartecipazione* with Italians. We can preliminarily conclude that the role that Italian cinema had in the first phase of Algerian cinema is surely more complex than that of a colonial or neocolonial exploitation.

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From Moscow to Mainstream. The Soviet Quest for Cinematic Influence in the US

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The distribution of Soviet films in the United States began in 1926 with the screening of Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, managed by Amkino, a company registered in the U.S. but closely aligned with the Soviet government's Sovexportfilm agency. Amkino facilitated the circulation of Soviet films, documentaries, and newsreels, targeting Russian-speaking audiences and American communist sympathisers. This initiative was part of the USSR's broader strategy to spread communist ideology globally by directly engaging with the masses.
Renamed Artkino in 1940, the company sought to penetrate the American film market, which was largely dominated by Hollywood studios until 1948. This essay examines the history of Amkino/Artkino and its role in distributing Soviet films in the U.S. from its origins through the early Cold War, a process that remained on the fringes of the industry. The study also explores the company's decline following the 1958 U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange agreement and the death of its president in 1960. By then, Soviet efforts had shifted towards engaging with the Motion Picture Association of America, having lost faith in Artkino's abilities to access major Hollywood theatres.
Drawing on archival materials from the Artkino collection at the Berkeley Film Archive, the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (RGALI) and other sources, this research highlights Soviet attempts to challenge Hollywood's dominance and gain access to mainstream American cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

Following the October Revolution of 1917, the reorganization of what would, within a few years, officially become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had an inevitable impact on the cultural sphere of the nascent country. Indeed, if Lenin—cited by Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education—described cinema as "the most important of the arts," it was undoubtedly because he recognized its power to reach the masses (Kenez 1985). Through substantial investments by the emerging government and as demonstrated during the civil war (Taylor 1971), cinema proved to be a potent means of communication, capable of penetrating even the most remote areas of that vast, forming state.

In terms of cinematic internal policy, the post-revolutionary period required not only the reorganisation of industrial infrastructure but also a redefinition of the artistic medium itself. A deliberate effort emerged to distance the populace from pre-revolutionary cinematic tastes—what Lev Kuleshov, in the inaugural issue of the revolutionary film studies journal *Kino-Fot*, termed the American taste, or *amerikanshchina* (Youngblood 1992). The goal was to cultivate a new kind of viewer; the "new Soviet man", or more precisely, a new Soviet spectator, whose cultural preferences would shift away from "bourgeois entertainment" toward collective, proletarian narratives (Pisu 2018)—a transformation that later evolved and solidified with the implementation of Stalin's Socialist Realism policies in the 1930s.

On the international front, while the domestic policies led to a systematic purge of Western-origin films from state cinemas (Youngblood 1991), the new regime also recognized the necessity of establishing itself as a prominent cultural epicentre—both within Europe and on the global stage. The USSR aimed to present itself as an ideological bastion of world communism, with the hope of extending its political influence across nations (Gilburd 2018). These efforts expanded—with different degrees of success—from Soviet-aligned Europe to more hostile environments—significantly, also to the US.

While scholarship has extensively charted Hollywood's influence within the USSR and across the Cold War landscape (e.g., Shaw 2007; Zhuk 2014), the reverse flow—the circulation and reception of Soviet films in the US—remains comparatively underexplored. Recent studies have emphasized the need to reassess Cold War cinema from a transnational perspective, moving beyond an exclusive focus on national cinemas interpreted only as passive recipients within the spheres of influence of the two superpowers (Buffet 2017), and instead reclaiming the agency of national film cultures. Research has concentrated on institutional histories, with the aim of unveiling the Soviet cinematic industry's internal functioning (Belodubrovskaya 2017; Tcherneva 2018), as well as international dynamics (Lovejoy & Pajala 2022). Other studies have examined independent personalities and organisations that operated across the transnational arena and played an integral part in the cultural Cold War, revisiting not only Europe but also the Global South (Salazkina 2023, Pisu et al. 2025). It is within this evolving scholarly debate, which has increasingly underscored these aspects, that the present article positions itself.

This article examines the Soviet attempt to export its films to the United States—and to establish a cinematic presence there—through the history of Amkino/Artkino, the dedicated distributor active from 1926 into the 1960s. Building on James Krukones's foundational study *The Unspooling of Artkino* (2009), which reconstructs the company's activities from 1940 onward, the article extends the timeline back to its origins as Amkino (1926–1940) and foregrounds the US side of Soviet film export history. Using new sources from the Artkino Collection at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Digital Archive (Flinders), and contemporary mainstream and trade press (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Motion*

Picture Herald), it sheds light on underexplored mechanisms, intermediaries, and institutional logics that structured the circulation of Soviet features, documentaries, and newsreels in the US. The article argues that Artkino provides a crucial lens on Soviet export policy; despite its marginal market share within an industry dominated by Hollywood's studio oligopoly, at least until the 1948 Paramount antitrust decision (McDonald et al. 2019), the company sought to circumvent that system by targeting a network of independent venues, workers' circles, and Russian-speaking communities. Reconstructing this parallel distribution economy brings further clarity on how the USSR pursued cinematic influence in the US outside—and before—the official exchange framework consolidated with the 1958 Lacy-Zarubin Agreement (Kozovoi 2016; Cambi 2017).

THE ORIGINS OF ARTKINO: AMKINO CORPORATION (1926-1940)

Distributing media abroad—and particularly in the United States—proved to be a significant challenge for the newly established Soviet Union. In the US, foreign cinematic policies were closely monitored by local observers, and Soviet productions faced intense scrutiny. Recognising both the exceptionally high percentage of moviegoers in the USSR and the substantial political—and thus propagandistic—power of cinema over the local population, the circulation of Soviet films in America was subsequently reported as either unappealing to Hollywood audiences or as overt Bolshevik propaganda to be avoided (FD 1927, 949-50).

The Soviet agency responsible for film export with foreign countries in the early 1920s was Sovkino, which had been recognised by the US government since its establishment in 1924 (NYT 1924). Its representative on American soil was Leon Zamkovoy, who had already been active in the US as a director since the mid-1910s. Recognizing the Soviet audience's interest in the American market, he envisioned the production of Hollywood films specifically tailored for Soviet viewers, which he sought to achieve by sending US film industry delegations to Russia "to understand the Russian taste" (NYT 1926b).

Furthermore, he encouraged the production of Hollywood films on Soviet soil—particularly, needless to say, those set in Russia. However, his most challenging task was indeed promoting the dissemination of Soviet pictures in the US, which he attempted by forging relationships with local distributors. To this end, the Amkino Corporation (short for *Amerikanskoe Kino*, "American Cinema") was founded in 1926, of which Zamkovoy became the first president. Amkino was registered as a subsidiary of Amtorg (short for *Amerikanskaya Torgovlya*, "American Trade"), the first trade representation of the Soviet Union in the United States, active since 1924. Throughout its history, Artkino served as the main distributor of Soviet films in the US, establishing a network of relationships with smaller theatres, initially in the New York area, to distribute films sidelining the Hollywood industry.

The first Soviet picture distributed in the US, whose case was closely followed by the American press, was Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potëmkin* (*Bronenosets Potëmkin*, 1925), distributed directly by Amkino at the end of 1926, passing through the New York Censor Office on September 1, 1926, which ordered a partial editing of the picture, such as the removal of violent shots and sequences.[1] The movie, albeit receiving positive reviews from American critics, was considered by US observers,[2] as well as the press, to have no entertainment potential whatsoever (FD 1926; see also NYT 1926a), and it was expected that interest in the film would quickly wane.

Besides feature films, Amkino's catalogue included short documentaries, usually no longer than three reels, depicting diverse aspects of Soviet life. Educational titles addressed agriculture, art, education, geography, history, health and hygiene, industry, and science.[3] While screenings were occasionally noted in *The New York Times*, they were far more frequently advertised in Communist-oriented outlets such as *The Daily Worker* (DW 1932), with the ambition of attracting at least a politically sympathetic audience.

Thus, Amkino established itself within the US film industry as a small, independent enterprise, operating outside the circuit of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)—the association encompassing the major Hollywood studios, namely the "Big Five" (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount Pictures, RKO Pictures, Warner Brothers, and Twentieth Century Fox) and the "Little Three" (Columbia Pictures, United Artists, and Universal Pictures). As is well-known, the Hollywood studios maintained an oligopoly over American theatres—many of which were owned by the studios themselves—until the landmark 1948 United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled against the eight studios and compelled them to divest their theatre holdings (Borneman 1985). Amkino's initial main issue, therefore, was securing theatres to showcase its films and circumvent Hollywood's oligopoly. In addition to privately held screenings in workers' circles and independent venues, among the main theatres that distributed Amkino's films in the New York area were the Acme Theatre, the Cameo—which would later become an erotic film cinema after Artkino's activities ended—the Eighth Street Playhouse, the Europa Theatre, the Roxy Theatre, and the Stanley Theatre. The number of venues showing Soviet films in the US grew exponentially in subsequent years,

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1 "This Is a Summary of the Eliminations Required in Potemkin for Showing in New York," September 1, 1926, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Digital Archive, Record ID: 295.
https://flinders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/61FUL_INST/6lrc5h/alma997361456801771

2 "This, and a Follow-up Letter Written the Following Day, Express Concern about the Admission of Russian Films to the US," September 22, 1926, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Digital Archive, Record ID: 296.
https://flinders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/61FUL_INST/6lrc5h/alma997361456301771

3 Educational Film Subject Catalogue. Artkino Fund. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

reaching the highest number of 450 in 1937-38, allegedly the peak of Soviet film popularity in the US, with distribution extending to Los Angeles (Babitsky 1955). From 1935, Amkino's market had already expanded to Canada, Mexico, and South America (FD 1937, 1170-1171), where distribution was supported by other companies, such as Worldkino Corporation.[4]

By the mid-1930s, eventually, after about ten years of activity, Amkino had finally set foot in the American market. The company released several films during these years, resulting from greater production efforts by Soviet studios, including the popular biopic *Ciapaiev* by the Vasilev brothers (*Chapaev*, 1934) and the renowned successes *Lenin in October* by Mikhail Romm (*Lenin v Oktyabre*, 1937), *Alexander Nevsky* by Sergei Eisenstein (*Alexsandr Nevskiy* , 1938), *Lenin in 1918* by Mikhail Romm (*Lenin v 1918 Godu*, 1939), and *Professor Mamlock* (1938), directed by Herbert Rappaport and Adolf Minkin.[5]

Amkino experienced a series of rapid changes of heads throughout its history. Zamkovoy, the first president appointed at the company's founding, was succeeded in 1927 by Leon Monosson (MPW 1927), who oversaw the production of Sergei Eisenstein's film *¡Que viva México!* (1931). Following the well-known difficulties with the film's production (MPH 1931), Monosson was later removed in 1931 and replaced by Viktor Smirnov, allegedly "a lackey of Shumyatsky" (Gottesman & Geduld 1970), the new head of the Soviet film industry and a strict adherent to Stalin's film policies. Smirnov was then replaced in 1934 by Vladimir Verlinskiy, who led the company almost until its unexpected dissolution; in 1939, a severe setback struck the company just when stability seemed assured, ultimately leading to its sudden closure.

In order to understand the causes behind Amkino's closure, it is crucial to focus on the period leading up to its termination in February 1940. The reasons behind it can be traced both to internal conditions within the Soviet Union and to changes in US-USSR relations. Indeed, Soviet film production had evolved significantly since Amkino's founding, starting with the All-Union Conference on Cinema Affairs of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1928, followed by the collectivization of cinematic means of production, and Shumyatsky's appointment as head of the Soviet film industry in 1930. Under Shumyatsky's leadership, the enforcement of Socialist Realism in cinema intensified, as seen in the All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinematography in 1935. The initial reorganization of the film industry had yielded positive results, with a rapid improvement in production; before the revolution, there had been only 1,412 theatres in the territory, but by 1928 that number had grown fivefold, serving an annual audience of 200 million people. Additionally, the number of feature films released had increased from 12 in the years 1922-23 to over ten times that

4 "Contract for the Selling of Distribution Rights of the Film 'Jewish Luck' to Worldkino Corporation for US, Canada, Central America and Cuba," May 28, 1935, Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

5 Amkino Film Releases (Undated). Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

figure in 1926-27 (Taylor 1986). However, the ideological tightening of the late 1930s heavily impacted film production, consequently reducing the number of Soviet films that could be distributed in the US.

Amkino's crisis was primarily driven by the shifting political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, rather than by a decline in the availability of suitable films for American distribution. Prior to the Stalin-Hitler Pact, Amkino had cultivated a stable audience, composed both of Russian-speaking *émigrés* and local viewers drawn to the USSR for political or other reasons. However, the signing of the non-aggression treaty during World War II had a profound impact on American public opinion, leading to a decline in attendance at theatres that had established themselves as Amkino's key exhibitors. A particularly striking example of this backlash appeared in *The New York Times* on September 24, 1939, which openly denounced the company. The article alleged that nine-tenths of Amkino's profits—claimed to be "millions of dollars a year"—were funnelled into the United States to disseminate communist propaganda, suggesting that American audiences were, in effect, financing Soviet ideological influence through their moviegoing habits. These accusations, however, were purely speculative, as Amkino often struggled to generate revenue at all, in fact progressively accumulating debts with the Soviet Union, its sole stakeholder.

Reportedly, the last Amkino film screened at the Cameo was *The Great Dawn*, aka *They Wanted Peace* by Mikheil Chiaureli (*Velikoe Zarevo*, 1938) (NYT 1940b), another exemplary film of advanced Socialist Realism, featuring Mikheil Gelovani as Iosif Stalin.[6] The film, which was discussed in the American press, accused "Anglo-French imperialists" of obstructing German-Soviet friendship after 1917, retrospectively emphasizing the importance of the new alliance against Western imperialism; as *The New York Times* remarked on January 8, 1940, "It's odd what a pact will do". Although the company's closure was considered final by the American press, its story, however, was far from over.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ARTKINO (1941-1945)

It is clear that the Soviet interest in maintaining a US outpost for film outreach was stronger than bankruptcy, as Artkino was founded only a month after Amkino's closure, at the same address (NYT 1940c). Its first release was a film with a particularly evocative title in its English-language distribution: *The Great Beginning* by Iosif Kheifits and Aleksandr Zarkhi (*Chlen pravitelstva*, 1939) (MPH 1940). However, the first year was especially tough for Artkino, with the company releasing only two films (Krukones 2009).

Amkino had previously been led exclusively by Soviet directors, with its last president, Verlinskiy, eventually replaced by his assistant, Nicholas Napoli (MPH 1935)—the first American to assume leadership of the company. In the

6 *The Great Dawn* was the first film in which Gelovani starred as the Soviet dictator, marking the beginning of his impersonation career.

early stages of Artkino's direction, Napoli could not have anticipated the drastic shift in cinematic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union that would soon unfold with the outbreak of World War II and the US entry into the Allied forces following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Just over a year after Artkino's founding, Napoli found himself overseeing what was likely the company's most prolific period. As Hollywood, operating under State Department directives, and Soviet studios documented the war effort, a cultural alliance emerged. This period of exchange temporarily cast the former political adversaries in a favourable light, setting aside ideological divisions to unite against Nazi-Fascism. During these years, Napoli's company effectively served as the sole bridge between the two cinematic spheres.

Starting in 1941, with Germany's attack on the USSR on June 22, the importation of Soviet films to the United States increased; in the six months separating the USSR's entry into the war and the Japanese attack on the United States on December 7, 1941, 12 feature films, 16 short films, and 40,000 feet of newsreels on the Soviet-Nazi war were sent from Russia to the United States. The State Department's shift in perspective was evident; whereas Zamkovoy's earlier attempts to distribute Soviet films in the US had been closely monitored and caused concern, by the end of 1942 the distribution of Soviet war newsreels was managed so that they could be seen by the American public shortly after being filmed, with distribution within a month or six weeks at most. The films were transported swiftly by air, from Moscow to London and then to New York for theatrical distribution (MPH 1942c). These materials, however, exclusively focused on the Soviet war effort; earlier newsreels were out of the distribution circuit. Indeed, in an interview published on the *Motion Picture Herald* Napoli stated that the type of films distributed by Artkino from June 22 were "acceptable to American audiences. They are entertainment films and have patriotic and war-defence themes which are of interest to Americans at this time" (MPH 1941). He further added that by 1942 Artkino had widely extended its distribution reach, operating in cities such as Washington, New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Portland, San Francisco, and other cities in Texas and Florida, reaching areas in the southern United States where they had never been shown before.

Among the films that reached American shores during this period, besides the newsreels, were entertainment films, sent to the US as an attempt to approach the new Western ally with non-political products, taking advantage of the current favourable climate. An example is the musical comedy *Musical Story* by Aleksandr Ivanovsky and Gerbert Rappaport (*Muzykal'naya Istoriya*, 1940), whose plot revolves around a taxi driver who dreams of becoming an opera singer. The majority of films, anyhow, focused on supporting the war effort, such as the documentary *One Day in Soviet Russia* by Roman Karmen and Mikhail Slutsky (*Den' Novogo Mira*, 1941), which reportedly, according to Napoli, was particularly successful and played for three weeks at the Esquire Theatre in Los Angeles. Fiction films with war-related themes included biopics like *Wings*

of victory by Mikhail Kalatozov (*Valerily Chkalov*, 1941),[7] centred on a Red Army test pilot, awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, who tragically died in 1938 while piloting a military aircraft prototype. Furthermore, biopics of historical figures aimed at boosting the local population's morale by glorifying Russian honour and military strength also reached US theatres, such as *General Suvorov* by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Mikhail Doller (*General Suvorov*, 1941), centred on the eponymous general of the Russian Empire. Moreover, among the fiction films worth noting is *The Girl from Leningrad* by Viktor Eisymont (*Frontovye Podrugi*, 1941), the story, set during the Finnish war, of three young women working for the Soviet Red Cross. After traveling to Hollywood in 1942 to establish contacts with the major studios,[8] Napoli secured the rights for a remake, which was distributed in 1943 by United Artists under the title *Three Russian Girls*, directed by Fëdor Ozep and Henry S. Kesler. The setting of the movie was changed to the 1941 Battle of Stalingrad, where the protagonist—Natasha, portrayed by Anna Stern and played by Zoya Fëdorova in the Soviet original—is depicted as a volunteer nurse aiding the allied forces.

In February 1942, Soviet film distribution in the US increased by 60%, involving studios like Warner Bros. that booked the documentary *One Day in Soviet Russia* at the Capitol Theatre in Philadelphia, where it played for two weeks. Similarly, *The Girl from Leningrad* set a record at the Stanley Theatre, the historic Amkino/Artkino cinema in New York, running for eleven weeks (MPH 1942b) and even surpassing *Ciapaiev*, which had held the record at the Cameo Theatre in 1935 (MPH 1942a). February 1942 saw a 500% distribution increase compared to the same month the previous year (FD 1942). This growing demand for Soviet films also extended to 16mm prints, which rose from a low of 300 in 1940 to 4,000 in 1942, as reported by Thomas Brandon, owner of Brandon Films, a non-theatrical distributor of Soviet films in the US since 1936. Brandon Films initially contracted with Amkino, distributing their films in small art theatres that showcased foreign or independent films, as well as in clubs, schools, and private venues. This partnership peaked with Artkino, allowing the films to reach an audience of 1.3 million in 1943; the demand grew so high that Brandon had to re-release classic Soviet films, which had already been in their catalogue for several years (NYT 1944).

The war years marked an undoubtedly prosperous period for Artkino. With the conflict's end and the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany, Napoli viewed the continuation of collaboration and film exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union as a tangible possibility, approaching the future with optimism. Despite the setback caused by Roosevelt's death and the subsequent tightening of the foreign policies toward the USSR under President Harry Truman, the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946 were marked by enthusiastic positivity from the president of Artkino regarding the future of his company. In March 1946, he

7 It is, once again, a film featuring Mikheil Gelovani as Iosif Stalin.

8 Artkino Press Release, May 7, 1942. Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

returned from a six-week trip to the USSR with good news; the end of the war had brought, in Napoli's words, a "renaissance in Soviet film production", which was evident both in the continued production of films in the USSR, despite the severe shortage of resources due to wartime bombings, and in the intention to produce between 50 and 60 films in 1946. Among these pictures was the recently completed second part of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (*Ivan Grozniy*, 1958), which Napoli praised for its technical qualities. He also noted the emergence of new technologies, such as the invention of the Stereokino by Soviet engineer Semyon Ivanov, a multi-lens filming system that added greater depth and three-dimensionality to shots (DW 1946). In his personal writings, Napoli, at the end of his fruitful trip to Russia concluded: "I left Moscow with the feeling that the Soviet film industry has come out of this war with undiminished vitality and creative power. The country that gave the world such masterpieces as *Potemkin*, *Storm Over Asia*, *Road to Life*, and *Ciapaiev* cannot take a back seat in the Cinema of Tomorrow".[9] Unaware that he was already standing on the threshold of the Cold War, Napoli seemed to have complete faith in a positive future for his company.

DECLINE AND BANKRUPTCY (1946-1960S)

After the end of World War II, Napoli's expectations were indeed not met. Notoriously, with the change in direction under the rise of President Truman following Roosevelt's death in 1945, US foreign policy shifted its focus from identifying Nazi Germany as the enemy to regarding the Soviet Union—and, consequently, the spread of Communist ideology in America—as the principal threat to the US population, thus marking the return of the Red Scare, reminiscent of the prewar years.

It is important to note, however, that US suspicion toward Artkino as a vessel for Communism in America had never been entirely dispelled. The wartime period, which coincided with the company's peak success, also saw Nicholas Napoli come under FBI scrutiny as part of the COMRAP ("Comintern Apparatus") investigation. This inquiry, which began in 1943 and was allegedly triggered by an anonymous letter in Russian sent to FBI headquarters, accused more than ten Soviet officials residing legally in the US of acting as communist spies. The investigation aimed to probe the connections between the Soviet government, the Comintern, and the Communist Party USA in order to safeguard national security. Although Napoli was never formally charged as a spy, his name was mentioned in the investigation reports.[10]

Napoli's optimism regarding the future of Soviet cinema in the US was further undermined by the state of the Soviet film industry itself. Artkino's president could not have anticipated that the immediate postwar years would be charac-

9 Nicholas Napoli. Film Notes on a Trip to the Soviet Union (1946?). Artkino Collection. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA).

10 Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Comintern Apparatus (COMRAP) FBI Files*, http://archive.org/details/FBIFileCOMRAP

terised by the infamous film shortage known as *malokartin'e*—a period during which film production in the last years of Stalin's regime was increasingly subject to censorship, compounded by the slow recovery of the film industry following the devastation of war (Dobrenko 2003). Moreover, as is well known, the second part of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* — whose production was enthusiastically brought to the US press by Artkino's president—was harshly criticised by the Party at the end of 1946 for its negative portrayal of Ivan IV, equated with a criticism of Stalin's dictatorial figure. The film was eventually released only in 1958, under Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.

However, the officials at Sovexportfilm, perhaps recalling the prosperous years of Artkino during the wartime alliance, continued to hold Napoli and his company in high regard for several years after the war. Artkino remained a key distributor of Soviet films in the US even during the initial negotiations for film exchanges that commenced in 1948 with Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Export Association[11] and its European representative Louis Kanturek. These negotiations eventually culminated, albeit with considerable difficulty and prolonged timelines, in the historic 1958 cultural exchange agreement between the two superpowers, known as the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement, which, in the words of Andrei Kozovoi (2016), allowed the Soviet entity to set "a foot in the door" of Hollywood's studio distribution system.

Interestingly, during the prolonged negotiations with the Hollywood studios, Sovexportfilm maintained parallel relationships with both the independent distribution company and the MPEA, ensuring that representatives from the two organisations did not meet. For instance, during Napoli's visit to Moscow in May 1950, Kanturek's visit was postponed to accommodate Artkino's president,[12] who stayed from the 12th to the 30th of the month.[13]

On May 20, during a meeting with Sovexportfilm representatives and their chief accountant, a confidential document was produced outlining the relationship between the two companies. Artkino was registered as a joint-stock company in the US, with all revenues and expenses attributed to Artkino, whose role was to purchase films from Sovexportfilm. Unofficially—yet in reality—Artkino functioned as Sovexportfilm's representative in the US, with all revenues and expenses accounted for by Sovexportfilm, while Artkino's balance sheet reflected Sovexportfilm funds as working capital. Indeed, Artkino's only stakeholder was the Soviet Union. By January 1, 1950, the company had accumulated a debt of $55,683.98 to Sovexportfilm, based on the available funds in its US bank accounts, and had recorded an overall loss of $23,292.39. The May 20 meeting resolved that the debt should gradually decrease to between $30,000 and $35,000 through transfers to

11 The Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) was established in the immediate aftermath of World War II as an entity dedicated to the exportation of films by the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), itself an evolution of the MPPDA under the reorganization implemented by the newly appointed president Eric Johnston, formerly the president of the United States Chamber of Commerce. See Jarvie (1990, 277–288).

12 RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 267, l. 11.

13 RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 6.

Moscow over the following quarters, while the loss should be liquidated and ultimately converted into a modest profit.[14] This resolution—eliminating Artkino's losses and its debt to Sovexportfilm—underscores the continued confidence that the Soviet entity placed in Napoli's company during the postwar years.

Furthermore, during that same meeting, Napoli was shown a new batch of films for distribution in the US. In addition to various documentary, scientific, and animated titles, the fiction films included the two parts of *The Fall of Berlin* by Mikheil Chiaureli (*Padenie Berlina*, 1949),[15] *Conspiracy of the Doomed* by Mikhail Kalatozov (*Zagovor Obrechennykh*, 1950), *Cossacks of the Kuban* by Ivan Pyr'ev (*Kubanskie Kazaki*, 1950), *The Faraway Bride* by Evgeniy Ivanov-Barkov (*Dalëkaya Nevesta*, 1948), by *The Russian Question* Mikhail Romm (*Russkiy Vopros*, 1947), and *Alexander Popov* by Herbert Rappaport (*Aleksandr Popov*, 1949).[16] Demonstrating Napoli's significant influence in the film selection phase, a Sovexportfilm document detailed all the cuts recommended by the Artkino president to be made in the Soviet studios before exporting the film to the United States.[17]

It was only a matter of a few years, however, before Sovexportfilm's dissatisfaction became evident. Artkino's business seemed unable to maintain the standards of the war years, and Soviet cultural diplomacy was eager to spread its films in what were considered top-tier theatres. This possibility appeared more feasible with Khrushchev's rise in 1956 and his policies of "peaceful coexistence" with the West. The decline of the company, which existed on paper until the 1980s but lost relevance in the American landscape by the mid-1960s, was therefore due to a combination of factors. The Lacy-Zarubin Agreement in 1958 formally established Sovexportfilm's exclusive dealings with the studios represented by the MPEA, but Sovexportfilm increasingly looked beyond, losing confidence in Napoli and seeking to cover the independent market as well. One notable instance involved J. Jay Frankel, the founder of the distribution company MJP Enterprises. After successfully obtaining the feature animated film *The Snow Queen* (*Snezhnaya Korolëva*) from Soyuzmultfilm in 1957 and selling it to Universal for distribution in US theatres, Frankel gained favour with Sovexportfilm. At just 21 years old, he signed a contract in 1959 to sell four American films coming from the circuits of three major Hollywood studios: the romantic comedy *Knock on Wood* by Melvin Frank and Norman Panama (1954), distributed by Paramount Pictures; *Little Boy Lost* by George Seaton (1953), a drama starring Bing Crosby set during World War II; the drama *The Brave One* by Irving Rapper

14 RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 1.

15 Despite the film's prominent portrayal of Stalin during a period of strained US-USSR relations, *Padenie Berlina* was released at the Stanley Theatre in the summer of 1952 with English superimposed titles. *The New York Times* described it as a World War II film focused on the "capitulation of the German capital" (NYT 1952).

16 *Spisok fil'mov, pokazannykh Gospodinu Napoli* ("List of films shown to Mr. Napoli"). RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 9.

17 *Perechen' stsen i kadrov* ("List of scenes and shots"). RGALI f. 2456, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 10.

(1956), and a fourth one to be purchased from Warner Bros., yet to be specified (NYT 1960). The sale produced an overall revenue of $254,000.

Even more impressively, the following year, Frankel acquired the distribution rights[18] for *Ballad of a Soldier* (*Ballada o Soldate*, 1959) by Grigory Chukhray, a "thaw film" which was acclaimed in the US for its critique of Stalin's regime. The film won the Special Jury Prize at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival, garnered awards at the San Francisco Film Festival, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay in 1961. By 1962, the year of Nicholas Napoli's death, Frankel reportedly concluded additional deals with the USSR for nine more films (NYT 1961).

Sovexportfilm's confidence in MJP Enterprises, and later in Frankel's second company, Accord International Corporation, persisted throughout much of the 1960s. Meanwhile, Artkino—now managed by the new president Rosa Madell from 1962 until her own death in 1970—sparsely continued its activities, having lost its monopoly over the Soviet pictures. Indeed, the surge in film production during the Thaw years included not only an increase in quantity, compared to the years of *malokartin'e*, but also an improvement in quality, featuring themes that reflected the greater artistic freedom gained under Khrushchev's policies. These new films were considered more appealing to US audiences and attracted the interest of more independent American distributors, who saw business opportunities in establishing contacts with Sovexportfilm, Soviet studios, and their directors, to release such films in theatres outside the MPEA circuit, or to resell them to the major Hollywood studios, as Frankel had done for *The Snow Queen*. Artkino's dominance over Soviet film distribution was by then lost, along with the very rationale for the company's existence. Its activities persisted only sporadically, absorbed into an independent cinema system that became increasingly prominent in the 1960s as Hollywood's control over exhibitors declined. Artkino itself lingered into the 1980s, but by then the USSR had long since withdrawn its support.

CONCLUSIONS

The history of Amkino/Artkino can be considered unexpectedly long-lived despite the evident challenges encountered during its evolution. However decisively mitigated by the support of the Soviet government and Sovexportfilm, which provided ongoing financial backing to prevent the company's bankruptcy until interest in its distribution channels waned—supplanted by the historic 1958 agreement with the MPEA/MPAA—the phases of success and decline traversed by the company were primarily shaped by the evolving relations between the United States and the USSR from the latter's foundation and throughout the harsher years of the Cold War.

However, although the trajectory of Amkino/Artkino reached its zenith during

18 RGALI f. 2914, op. 4, ed. khr. 268, l. 10.

the years of World War II—facilitated by the exceptional temporary alliance between the two superpowers—its role in the cultural relations between the two nations during the Cold War was by no means marginal. The company managed to establish itself right after the inception of the USSR and even maintained its authority during negotiations with the MPEA/MPAA, asserting itself as a key player in the unofficial transnational circulation of Soviet films—to the extent that archival resources indicate it suggested modifications and cuts to pictures prior to their release in the United States, thereby circumventing Hollywood channels at least until the signing of the agreement between Sovexportfilm and the MPAA in 1958.

Thus, the history of this relatively minor distribution network—whose agents were eventually abandoned by the USSR in favour of institutional relations with the US film industry—proves to have played a remarkably significant role in shaping the cinematic relations between the two countries. For nearly four decades, despite the ostensible ideological opposition between the two superpowers, this company effectively facilitated the circulation of Soviet audiovisual productions outside official diplomatic channels. Through its distribution activities, it successfully circumvented Hollywood's hegemony in a context that, first during the pre-war hostilities and later throughout the Cold War, appeared otherwise impenetrable.

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The Russians are Coming! Alta Films and the Spanish Discovery of Soviet Films in the Late Cold War Years (1969-1993)

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The revamping of the Spanish distribution company Alta Films after the end of the Franco regime in 1975 challenges some of the prevailing narratives about film cultural circulation in the late decades of the Cold War. From a territory whose own existence was deeply intertwined in the geopolitics of that time (Franco's dictatorship built over decades its international position on its anticommunism), and which has been usually considered peripheral in film historical terms, Enrique González Macho's company was key in the Spanish discovery of those films which had been previously banned for more than four decades from the national screens. At the same time, Alta's transactions with Sovexportfilm also made possible the successful export of Spanish productions to the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

This essay looks at the evolution of these arrangements over a period of more than ten years which culminates in the establishment of Alsov, a company co-owned by Alta Films and Sovexportfilms. Although this enterprise ended abruptly, the activities of Alta Film brought together two countries usually quite distant in film historical terms and involved in a-synchronic processes of political transformation.

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> "In the eighties, did Spain and Spaniards know anything about the cinematography of the socialist countries? Little, very little. So starting to distribute films from the USSR and China could have been a very good and surprising move or just quite the opposite."
> (González Macho 2020, 181)

It is surely unusual that an independent film distribution company receives any attention on the pages of a leading national newspaper. And yet, in April 2013 a long article in the Spanish daily *El País* informed about the end of the 44-year-old Alta Films. The episode was interpreted in connection with the impact of the financial crisis of 2008 on the cultural consumption in general and on the attendance at movie theatres in particular, as well as on the definitive collapse of the DVD industry. But the article also focused on the company's historical relevance for the national film culture: the company that was now closing its doors had "allowed tens of thousands of film fans to access the films of the best Spanish, European, Latin American, Asian and American directors" (Hermoso 2013). Indeed, for decades, Alta had been central for the import and circulation of international independent movies in Spain, many of them also distributed through its own cinema chain, and, starting in 1992, for the production of national and international movies—among them titles by Ken Loach, Icíar Bollaín or Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (Yáñez 2009). This text focuses on the first 25 years of the company (approximately from 1969 to 1993) and specially on the relations that it helped build between Spain and the USSR and, later, the Russian Federation. The case study will mainly focus on the Spanish perspective. Acting from the periphery of the Cold War, Alta challenges some of the prevailing narratives about film cultural circulation in those years (on the Soviet-Spanish relations in the late Cold War years, see Garrido Caballero 2019).

During the late 1970s and 1980s the company was central to forming the tastes of Spanish audiences towards both classic and contemporary Soviet films. The impact of this initiative was very relevant, as these titles had been previously banned for more than four decades from the national screens. The business networks built on this exchange also helped channel the export of Spanish titles to the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s and culminated, between 1990 and 1993, in the Spanish-Soviet joint management of one of Moscow's oldest cinemas, Khudozhestvenny, with the sole purpose of screening Spanish films.

This article will first reconstruct these strategies on industrial terms. The archive of the company and in-depth interviews with its director since 1984, Enrique González Macho, provide valuable material in this regard.[1] Focusing on the 1970s and 1980s, the history of Spanish film distribution is usually interpreted along the lines of gradual market concentration around American majors (already key players in the Spanish film industry since the 1940s) within a context of crisis of theatrical film consumption. This narrative also highlights the growing state intervention (towards rationalization) through a series of film policies usually known as the Miró Law (Meneses 2016) circulation and reception of contemporary Spanish cinema. The policies were considered an important step toward the political, economic and cultural integration in the European Community in

1 The three interviews took place on 26 February 2024, on 14 March 2025 and on 15 April 2025.

1986, which was the final goal for a country leaving behind its dictatorial past and becoming—as often stressed by contemporary voices—a *normal* (West European) democracy (Triana-Toribio 2016, 18–19). Against this (clearly insufficient) framework, the Alta case study questions this interpretation; this may be one of the reasons for it being ignored in more traditional histories of Spanish cinema (usually not interested in its industrial aspects; see Sánchez Noriega 2017).[2] The *transnational turn* of the last two decades has had a strong impact on the conceptualization of Spanish cinema,[3] and researchers today have a much better understanding of the *industrial nature* of Spanish cinema than years before. However, the combination of both areas still presents some blind spots when focusing on previous decades. Considering the 1970s and 1980s, existing research still tells the story of an atomized industry, with problems regarding its international projection and dependent on small companies.[4] It is precisely this lack of financial muscle that ends up being an obstacle also from a historiographical point of view, as it has usually led to only a partial reconstruction, based on secondary sources and memories.

It is thus rewarding to question this interpretative framework and to interpret Alta as an example of a model of alternative film distribution and exhibition that since the 1970s flourished in the Spanish film industry, often exploring new forms of international film relations. This is an example which is very national in its specifics,[5] but also very transnational in its interactions and parallels. It stands as a model which defied traditional ideas about international film circulation and forces us to rethink centre-periphery relations in a way that goes beyond this simplistic dichotomy. From a synchronic perspective, this case study also challenges the researcher to understand the history of Spanish cinema of that time by considering its different and deeply intertwined analytical layers (film culture, industry, policy interventions, international diplomacy, etc.) through an approach that reflects this complexity.

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2 In the chapter about the international presence of Spanish cinema in a more recent book dedicated to *Marca e Identidad del Cine Español* (García Fernández 2015), the authors do not mention Alta; distribution companies are also barely discussed. As usual, its focus is still on the festivals and policy support, with a special interest in Latin America and the US.

3 Nuria Triana-Toribio asked herself rhetorically in 2007 if everyone was "going 'transnational'" (Triana-Toribio 2007, 151). See in this regard the central transnational dimension of *A Companion to Spanish Cinema* (Labanyi and Pavlovic 2013).

4 On exhibition, see García Santamaría (2015, 174), who indicates how roughly in the same period covered by this study (1968–1994), the number of cinema screens went from 7,761 to 1,773. Distribution is still an important blind spot in film historical terms. This article will tackle it by relying mainly on the material provided by the annual reports prepared by the Spanish General Directory for Cinematography (later Spanish National Film Agency ICAA [Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales].

5 See Francisco Hoyos' *Cinecompany* (since 1984), Javier de Garcillán, which predates many of González Macho's interests through the combination of independent film distribution (Musidora, 1975) and exhibition (Alphaville Cinemas, 1977), and Andrés Vicente Gómez (with the distribution company Cineteca SA and later producer with Lolafilms). For the case of Musidora, with a focus on exhibition, see the recent work by Caballero Ruiz de Martín-Esteban (2024), especially its fifth chapter.

TRANSITIONAL TIMES

Alta was founded in 1969 by the painter Juan Miguel López Iglesias and his wife, the actress Yelena Samarina.[6] Its inception reflects however a longer history of exile and new beginnings that go back to the late 1930s. Born in 1927, López Iglesias was the son of Spanish republicans who had left the country to go to the USSR during the Spanish Civil War. He studied painting in Moscow and in 1956 returned to Spain, where he (still constantly under state surveillance) had some success as an artist.[7] By the late 1960s he had started a collaboration with the Sovexportfilm, the All-Union Association in charge of the exports of national films and purchasing of foreign ones. Thanks to his knowledge of the Russian language and of the mechanisms of the Soviet administration, López Iglesias and Samarina facilitated for instance the relations between Spanish and Soviet delegations at the 1968 and 1969 San Sebastian International Film Festival.

Alta edited books and imported Soviet films to Spain. According to the yearbooks provided by the Spanish General Directory for Cinematography,[8] its actual distribution activities started however in 1973.[9] In 1974, the company was already managing six titles. Alta increased the number of films distributed around 1977–1978 (11 and 20 titles respectively) and by the end of the decade it was already managing around 20–25 titles a year.

Except for the Dutch production *Cha Cha* (Herbert Curiel 1979), all of them were Soviet films. While there were some contemporary arthouse productions, such as *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky 1972), *Dersu Uzala* (Akira Kurosawa 1975) or *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven* (Emil Loteanu 1976), the bulk of those titles were the classics of Soviet cinema: *Mother* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926), *Arsenal* (Aleksandr Dovzhenko 1929), *Earth* (Aleksandr Dovzhenko 1930), and Sergei Eisenstein's *The Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October* (1925) and *The Old and the New* (1929). Relevant titles of the thaw years such as *The Cranes are Flying* (Mikhail Kalatozov 1958), *Ballad of a Soldier* (Grigory Chukhray 1959) or the documentary *Ordinary Fascism* (Mikhail Romm 1965) were also already in circulation by the end of the 1970s.

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6 The engineer Ramón López Barrenechea and the real estate broker Visitación Peralta Álvarez were also part of the founding of the company, their participation was however minimal. According to the Official Business Registry, each contributed with 5,000 of the total 150,000 pesetas, while López Iglesias provided 140,000. They did not have any meaningful impact in its managing (Riambau and Torreiro 2008).

7 López Iglesias exhibited two of his paintings (*Estepa* and *Día gris*) at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1962.

8 According to the yearbooks provided by the Ministry of Culture, Alta distributed 5 films in 1975, 5 in 1976, 11 in 1977, 20 in 1978, 25 in 1979 and 34 in 1980. *(Boletín Informativo de Control de Taquilla*, n.d.)

9 The yearbooks analysed (from 1969 to the early 1990s) provide specific data about Alta's distribution activities, which complement the material found in the archives. In 1973 the first films were the musicals *Sleeping Beauty* (Apollinarij Dudko and Konstantin Sergeyev 1964), *Circus Story* (Ilya Gutman 1972) and the animated film *The Wild Swans* (Mikhail Tsekhanovsky and Vera Tsekhanovskaya 1962), probably selected as they did not pose any ideological difficulties.

Limited in their commercial impact—these films circulated mainly among cultural associations and film clubs with *non-commercial* exhibition licences (González Macho, interview by the author, 14 March 2025)—Alta's activities in the 1970s can be seen as a perfect product of the cultural opening that characterized the years of the Spanish transition. Francoism had been systematically banning Soviet productions for decades (with some exceptions after 1966), and although things were starting to change (censorship would be abolished in December of 1977),[10] most of the films were still difficult to screen. In specific circles, this increased their appeal.

For obvious ideological reasons, Soviet cinema had enjoyed enormous prestige among most politically active Spanish cinephiles during the Franco era. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Spanish Communist Party had been the central force behind political and cultural anti-Francoism and one of the main forces (together with the Catholic Church) behind the organization of film clubs, magazines and journals or at the State Film School (Ramos Arenas 2024). For a generation brought up with the "moral obligation to contribute to intellectual debate, a commitment to intervene in industry or society and the conviction that each ideology has its cinematographic correspondence and that taste is not only an aesthetic option, but also a political one" (Pujol Ozonas 2011, 151; my translation), the references of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s still felt very contemporary in more or less clandestine film club sessions. But its relevance was also growing in more official circles: in February and March 1965, the Ministry for Information and Tourism had already permitted retrospectives of classic Soviet cinema during the first film screenings organized by the National Film Archives. Soviet representatives were also usual attendees at the San Sebastián International Film Festival since the late 1960s while the specialized Festival for arthouse cinema in Benalmádena became, under the communist Julio Diamante, a stronghold for Soviet cinema in late Francoism and the first years of the *Transición* to democracy: the festival had already programmed Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublëv* (1966) in 1972 and *Solaris* in 1973. That same year the retrospective *Kozintsev y Trauberg: la fábrica del actor excéntrico* included other Soviet films; in the following years the focus was on the 1930s Soviet productions (1974), Eisenstein and Vertov (1976) or on the recovery of previously banned materials (Latorre Izquierdo, Martínez Illán, and Llano Sánchez 2010, 103).

Commercial screenings were however scarce, with some exceptions starting in the late 1960s and including Grigory Kozintzev's *Don Quixote* (1957, it premiered in Madrid in 1966), the four-part *War and Peace* (Sergei Bondarchuk, 1966–67) and Kozintzev's *Hamlet* (1964, it premiered in 1968); their artistic *respectability* as literary adaptations apparently protected them against political suspicions (Latorre Izquierdo, Martínez Illán, and Llano Sánchez 2010).

10 It is in this regard important to note that most of the Soviet films under discussion had already received their distribution licences in the previous months. The official abolishment of censorship can be therefore seen as the culmination of a gradual process of cultural liberalization that had already started with the dictator's death in 1975.

The exceptionality of these examples shows that normalization was needed. Parallel to the abolishment of censorship, in December of 1977, the Asociación Cultural Hispano-Soviética was founded. At the beginning of 1979 (19 January), an Agreement for the Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (*Convenio de Cooperación Cultural y Científica*) between the Kingdom of Spain and the USSR was signed in Moscow, thus preparing the way for the increasing cooperation over the next decades (Garrido Caballero 2006, especially chapter 7).[11] Alta was both part and effect of these transformations.

As the *Transición* years were coming to an end, things were also changing at the company internally. In 1984 Enrique González Macho bought Alta for three million pesetas from Samarina after López Iglesias's death (Riambau and Torreiro 2008, 387). Until then, he had worked mainly as a producer for Spanish films and for international coproductions shot in Spain. He had also gathered some experience with Cinema2000, a distribution company founded in 1978 with Carlos Galán and specialized in Spanish cinema. It was in this context that he knew López Iglesias and Samarina, from projects such as *Las Truchas* (José Luis García Sánchez 1978), where the latter had a small role. With Alta he bought the films and licences for their non-commercial distribution, as until then these had been screened mainly at film clubs and cultural associations. In his memoirs González Macho talks about "semi clandestine" activities regarding the circulation of these titles (2020, 83). After the takeover he kept the name—a fusion of the first two syllables of the names of López Iglesias' and Samarina's children (Alejandro and Tatiana)—but he was also planning to revamp the company for more ambitious goals.

THE REVAMPING OF ALTA

It was a bumpy start. Shortly after taking over Alta in 1984, the new owner was contacted by Soviet representatives who wanted to prevent him from further dealing with the titles that had been acquired during the years under López Iglesias and threatened him with not letting him enter the USSR. González Macho claimed his right to do so, based on the contract he had signed with the previous proprietor (González Macho 2020, 82). The Soviet representatives came back some time later; this time he was offered collaboration, apparently based on his relevance for the Soviet Union's international relations.

11 While Spanish-USSR relations in this period have been only scarcely covered, there have been some PhD dissertations in the last decades. Apart from the already mentioned work by Garrido Caballero, see also *Presencia de los intereses soviéticos en las Islas Canarias: Sovhispán: 1971–1991* (Yanyshev-Nesterova 2019), which mainly focuses on commercial relations, and Jesús Centenera Ulecia's *Relaciones Hispano-Soviéticas de 1976 a 1986* (2007), which covers mainly the diplomatic side. The internationalisation of Spanish firms promoted by the National Institute of Industry towards the market of the Soviet Union within the context of the Cold War and East-West economic collaboration has been covered by Yanyshev-Nesterova (2024). A Russian perspective on this same subject and covering the 1960s and 1970s is provided by Georgy Filatov (2019).

The contacts already established with Oleg Rudnev, general director of the foreign trade association Sovexportfilm, proved crucial in the next step of the enterprise. A deal was prepared that allowed Alta to further acquire Soviet films and distribute them in Spain. In exchange, to balance commercial trade between Spain and the USSR, the company would sell (or rather contact Spanish producers interested in selling, as Alta wasn't producing films at the time) titles to the Soviet Union.[12] According to González Macho (2020, 87), this allowed him to acquire more Soviet films (which were cheaper) than the Soviet representatives could do with the Spanish productions (valued in around 100,000 dollars per film).

González Macho mentions that he only mediated between the Soviet representatives and the Spanish producers, who then prepared their own contracts. While this episode refers to very specific, almost anecdotal terms, it was also tightly connected to broader changes in the national film industry. Since the appointment of Pilar Miró as Directora General de la Cinematografía in 1982, the new Spanish social democratic government was interested in implementing a set of measures towards the rationalization of its industrial structures. With an eye set on the integration in the European market after 1986, Spanish cinema had to be made more competitive internationally and private initiatives such as Alta were welcomed. In 1985, Cinespaña, the company that the state had controlled since 1968 to support the export of Spanish cinema, was closed. While in the 1970s it had sometimes assisted the national producers in their international adventures, thus fulfilling some of its objectives, in the 1980s its meagre staff, lack of clear economic guidelines and financial control had made it ineffective and definitively obsolete (Martínez 2014).

For approximately ten years (three or four times each year for more or less ten days), González Macho became a regular visitor to the USSR (González Macho 2020, 84). He visited festivals (Moscow and Tashkent), invited Soviet filmmakers and bureaucrats to the Spanish premieres of their films (González Macho 2020, 92 and 182–183) and decided which films he should acquire for Alta after watching them in Moscow with the help of a translator. In his memoirs and during the interviews for this project, he insisted that he always had the final say about which films he would buy, usually against the wishes of the Soviet functionaries, who were more interested in selling contemporary, commercial films, while he was more interested in the classics with a certain artistic pedigree. This personal account gains special relevance against the background of a broader transformation of the Soviet industry in those years: it was in 1986, after the Soviet Filmmakers' Union Congress that elected Elem Klimov as its representative, that the authorities of the USSR permitted the export of many Soviet films that had been banned for years. The 1987 Cannes Film Festival

12 These limitations were typical for the Soviet side since 1958, when the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement facilitated film exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. The USSR looked for equality and "mutually acceptable financial terms", not just to buy films from abroad (which generally were considered more expensive than Soviet films) but also to export their own (Kozovoi 2016, 5).

showed already some of these titles—*Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze 1984) won the grand prize of the jury—but the consequences could be also felt in more prosaic ways on the Spanish screens.

Thus, over the 1980s, Alta kept providing Spanish cinemagoers with the renowned works of the classic Russian avant-garde (among the 27 films distributed in 1987, the company was still offering *Battleship Potemkin*, *October* or Pudovkin's *The End of Saint Petersburg,* 1927). But at the core of the company's revamping after González Macho's takeover was the focus on more recent works that highlighted the contemporary relevance of Soviet cinema: these included Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), *Andrei Rublëv*, *Solaris*, *Stalker* (1979), and modern masterworks like *The Ascent* (Larisa Sheptiko 1977), *Farewell* (Larisa Shepitko and Elem Klimov 1983), *Repentance or My friend Ivan Lapshin* (Aleksey German 1984). Writing for *El País* in January 1988, the film critic Ángel Fernández Santos pointed out how the films of younger filmmakers such as Klimov, Tarkovsky, German or Mikhalkov "have been successfully released and their names are beginning to leave the small circles of connoisseurs to enter the vocabulary of the general public" (Fernández Santos 1988). The collaboration with the Soviet authorities had allowed some members of the industry to visit Spain with the support of Alta Films, such as for the retrospective that the 1987 Valladolid Film Festival dedicated to Aleksey German.

The great variety of titles now in circulation meant also the implementation of different forms of marketing. Especially the older films such as *Potemkin* or the two parts of *Ivan the Terrible* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1944 and 1958) kept being shown with subtitles in smaller arthouse cinemas feeding thus Alta's traditional cinephile audiences.[13] But there was also a parallel development towards broader publics. A key event in this transformation of the company was the relaunch of Akira Kurosawa's Soviet-Japanese coproduction *Dersu Uzala* in August 1984.[14] The film had already circulated among some clubs in the late 1970s but was now presented in a double version (dubbed and with Spanish subtitles).[15] Aiming at broader audiences, the dubbed version premiered in the central Madrid theatre Palacio de la Música and gathered the impressive number of 223,000 spectators only in 1984 (the original version with Spanish subtitles attracted another 50,000). This dubbed version was the 62nd most watched foreign film in Spain in that year.

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13 As one of the highlights of those years, the Cine Club Universitario de Belagua, at the University of Navarra, organized in 1988 a retrospective on all Tarkovsky's work, which was visited by the director's widow and son (Latorre Izquierdo, Martínez Illán, and Llano Sánchez 2010, 104).

14 Although the film had been licenced to Alta since 6 September 1976 and González Macho highlighted it as one of the main successes of the company, the yearly reports by the General Direction of Cinematography state that the film was distributed by Cinema2000, a distribution company for which González Macho had also been working. This discrepancy couldn't be explained.

15 The film had already been shown since 30 October 1976 in smaller cinemas such as Bellas Artes and Duplex I.

For Alta the distribution of these new Soviet films provided important visibility. It was then, around the mid-1980s, that González Macho decided to import and distribute titles from other countries: in 1987 Alta already managed a West German action flick (*Euer Weg führt durch die Hölle*, Ernst Ritter von Theumer 1984), the Argentinian *Otra historia de amor* (Américo Ortíz de Zárate 1986) and the Malian *Yeleen* (Souleymane Cissé 1987), as well as the older Spanish production *Fulgor y Muerte de Joaquín Murrieta* (Luis Calvo Teixeira 1975). As time went by, Alta also took over the distribution of independent Spanish movies, later as Alta Classics. This proved an important success, that again points to the relevance of those years (late 1980s and early 1990s) as transitional times in the national film industry, as the old structures were dismantled and new, independent companies could try their luck with other kinds of productions. Coming out of the dictatorship, González Macho indicated, Spanish cinema was not correctly distributed:

> I tried it, and it worked out. There was a time [around the late 1990s] when Alta had a 35–40% market share of Spanish cinema in Spain. Later the multinationals understood that this could also make money, and they got involved [in the business of independent film distribution]. Something that I always thought was very bad for everyone. (Gonzáles Macho as quoted in Yáñez 2009, 201; my translation)

While this expansion set the basis for the later development of Alta in the 1990s, in the mid-1980s many of its films still struggled to reach broader audiences or even find their space in commercial cinemas. The decision to incorporate an exhibition branch came to fruition in May 1986 with the opening of the cinemas Renoir Princesa.[16] They represented the first parts of a broader network that included the management of around 85 theatres and 200 screens in eight Spanish cities: Madrid, Barcelona, Majadahonda, Palma de Mallorca, Zaragoza, Cuenca, Guadalajara and Santa Cruz de Tenerife (Belinchón 2020). The collaboration with the Soviet film industry continued over those years through the import of Soviet films, the export of Spanish titles, the visits of filmmakers and state representatives to festivals and premieres in both countries; this exchange culminated in the founding of Alsov, a company co-owned by Alta Films and Sovexportfilm, that for almost three years (1990–1993) managed one of Moscow's oldest cinemas, Khudozhestvenny, to screen Spanish films.

16 The cinemas screened the Soviet title—distributed by Alta—*A Cruel Romance* (Eldar Ryazanov 1984), the Polish film *Yesterday* (Radosław Piwowarski 1985), as well as *Dangerous Moves* (*La diagonal del loco*, Richard Dembo 1985) and *Stranger Kiss* (Matthew Chapman 1983).

"HAVING MORE LUCK THAN HITLER AND NAPOLEON"

The history of the creation of Alsov and Alta's involvement in Khudozhestvenny reaches back to 1988, when a first report[17] was addressed to the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Finance documenting the interest in constituting a Soviet-Spanish joint venture. Alsov was entering new terrain in the commercial relations of both countries. The report stated the following (broad) goals for the new company: "export, import, production, distribution and exhibition of audiovisual productions of all kinds". In the document, Alta is presented as a company that has been collaborating with the USSR for twenty years, being also "responsible for the introduction of Spanish film production in that said country". Its ambitious plans would situate the new company "in a privileged situation with regard to the distribution of Soviet production in the Spanish-speaking countries and even in the European Community, where there is currently no society of the characteristics of the one intended to be founded" (all my translations).

This European orientation is a remnant of the original project, conceived as a joint venture with French exhibitors and distributors that did not get off the ground. "Curiously, it is now I alone, with a mixed Spanish-Soviet partnership, the one able to have a cinema open in Moscow before they [other foreign companies] do," (Muñoz 1990b; my translation) commented González Macho retrospectively. The cinema was the first of this kind (supported by a foreign private corporation for the exhibition of Spanish films) that opened in Moscow. Later came the French, with Cinema Mir; the British did so one year later, with Cinema October.

It took almost a year for these plans to be implemented. The company was finally founded in November 1989: its shared capital was 10 million pesetas. Sovexportfilm contributed with 500 shares, Alta Films S.A. with 400 and a private investor, Gilbert López-Atalaya, with 100. Alexei Rastorov,[18] who had been collaborating with Alta for years as a national delegate for Spain from Sovexportfilm, was now the Soviet representative in the company and received a Spanish visa. Khudozhestvenny's lease agreement was then signed for five years starting at the end of 1990.

At the same time, this initiative had to receive the approval of government officials.[19] González Macho also mentions in this regard the crucial intervention of the film producer Elías Querejeta and the Minister of Culture Jorge Semprún

17 "Exposición", by Emilio Asensio Ramírez, dated 30 December 1988, in Archive Alta Films / Cines Renoir.

18 Alexei / Alejo Rastorov Benito de Quirós had been also, like Juan Miguel López Iglesias, one of those children that left Spain in the late 1930s following the Spanish Civil War.

19 Jesús Centenera Ulecia (2007) has covered the diplomatic framework of these initiatives. The transformation of the relations between both countries since the early 1980s, and especially after the social democratic party PSOE came to power in 1982, facilitated some of these initiatives; these were however also put under pressure by Spain joining NATO in 1982.

(González Macho, interview by the author, 14 March 2025). The agreement received the Hague Apostille ensuring its recognition in other countries. Indeed, the Spanish Ministry of Culture supported the initiative and already in June a Spanish delegation led by the Director of the National Film Agency ICAA visited Moscow (Muñoz 1990a) before finally presenting the project at the Ministry on November 5, 1990 to the Soviet ambassador. The diplomatic efforts culminated a few weeks later, when the official gazette of the Spanish State, Boletín Oficial del Estado (BOE), published a Film Relations Agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to "widen and strengthen film collaboration" between the two countries.[20] It explicitly mentioned in its sixth article that both states shall "support the development of initiatives from the public sectors, from joint ventures or from the private sector, which have as their objective the distribution, exhibition or promotion of Spanish films in the USSR and Soviet films in Spain" (BOE, 23 November 1990).

Just three days before that, on November 20, 1990, Khudozhestvenny had premiered in its new fashion as a film theatre for Spanish films. As the press material originally prepared by Alsov highlighted and the news coverage duly repeated, this cinema had been for decades a central venue for the history of Soviet cinema. The 771-seat theatre had opened its doors in 1909 and was thus one of the first permanent movie theatres in the Russian capital; it hosted, among other relevant events, the premiere of *Battleship Potemkin* in 1926. It was located in a very central area, at 14 Arbatskaya Street, just 800 meters from the Kremlin. The press reported plans to screen 2,000 Spanish productions in five years, and González Macho explicitly mentioned the support of Moscow's mayor between 1990 and 1992, Gavriil Kharitonovich Popov (González Macho 2020, 118). It is telling to see how the state support was minimized in public announcements, in favour of an interpretation that presented it as a private initiative. The experiences of Cinespaña seemed to still be very present among the participants. Jorge Semprún, at the time Minister of Culture, highlighted how the initiative came

> from a businessman, Enrique González Macho, who has not only helped to raise awareness of Soviet cinema in Spain but also supports Spanish cinema as much as he can [...] This is the most remarkable thing for the Ministry of Culture, and we have supported it and will support it with everything we can; but the most important thing is that it is an initiative of the private sector. (Muñoz 1990b; my translation)

As a private enterprise, Khudozhestvenny had however certain peculiarities. The cinema had no commercial goals and was intended as a promotional tool for the Spanish cinema, "mainly because the cinema ticket in Moscow is worth about 40 pesetas and, in addition, the Soviet currency, the ruble, is quoted very

20 One year prior to the agreement, the Georgian filmmaker Revaz Chekheidze had already prepared a series on *Don Quixote* (*Zhitie Don Kijota i Sancho*), which was cofinanced by Gosteleradio, the Basque public broadcaster Euskal Telebista (ETB) and a Spanish private investor (Producciones Cinematográficas de Toledo, Procint). It aired in October and November of 1989.

low in the foreign exchange market," indicated González Macho (Muñoz 1990b; my translation). The main goal was the promotion of Spanish films, offering thus a first opportunity for Soviet distributors and exhibitors to come to terms with the Spanish producers and distributors to market their films in the USSR. At the same time, the venue could also "project and organize in parallel other types of activities—short films and documentaries from Spanish companies that want to be known in the USSR—and the business will be in private sponsorship" (Muñoz 1990b; my translation).

Khudozhestvenny finally opened its doors on November 12 with a *Week of Spanish Cinema*. General Director for Cinematography Enrique Balmaseda, critics, state representatives, and the most important names of Spanish cinema were in Moscow supporting the event. Among the attendees was Pedro Almodóvar, proclaiming his intention to conquer Russia with his films, or, as he wittily declared: "having more luck than Hitler and Napoleon" (Muñoz, 1990c; my translation). He was not alone. The week opened with *Letters from Alou* (M. Armendáriz 1990), and included *The Heifer* (Luis García Berlanga 1986), *Padre Nuestro* (Francisco Regueiro 1985), *The War of the Madmen* (Manolo Matji 1986), *Year of Enlightenment* (Fernando Trueba 1986), *Baton Rouge* (Agustín Díaz Yanes 1988), *Wait for me in Heaven* (Antonio Mercero 1988), *The Enchanted Forest* (José Luis Cuerda 1987), *El Lute: Run for your Life* (Vicente Aranda 1987), *Rowing with the Wind* (Gonzalo Suarez 1988), *Oh Carmela!* (Carlos Saura 1989), *Montoyas y Tarantos* (Vicente Escrivá 1989), *The Things of Love* (Jaime Chávarri 1989), *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (Pedro Almodóvar 1989) and *Boom boom* (Rosa Vergés 1990). This was a good collection of Spanish middlebrow productions of the late 1980s. The selection was González Macho's responsibility, and so was that of the films screened in the coming two years (González Macho, interview by the author, 15 April 2025). Meanwhile the Soviet part took over the everyday management of the cinema. As a promotion tool, the initiative was indeed a success: according to a report prepared by Alsov for the first ten months of 1991,[21] the films were usually screened 5 to 6 times a day, gathering 239,229 spectators in 874 screenings, hence averaging 265 viewers per screening. Beyond the screenings, activities included an exhibition of Spanish film posters (January), special events in cooperation with the *Days of Spanish Literature* (April), a retrospective on the actress Sara Montiel (June) and a collaboration with the Moscow International Film Festival to promote the films participating in that event (July). An *International Week of Spanish comedy*, originally planned for September, could take place only partially due to the Soviet coup attempt in late August.[22]

21 "Resultados de la exhibición de películas españolas en el cine Judogestveni [*sic*] (1 de enero – 31 de octubre 1991)", in Archive Alta Films / Cines Renoir.

22 While it is difficult to calibrate the real impact of these initiatives in Moscow, the press coverage seems to reflect its relevance. According to a report prepared by Alsov ("Relación de informaciones aparecidas en periódicos y revistas de emisiones por televisión y radio", 1991, in Archive Alta Films / Cines Renoir), the events were intensively followed by newspapers and magazines, among them *Vechernia Moskva* (30 October 1990 and 5 November 1990), *Moskovskaia Pravda* (4 and 18 November 1990), *Trud* (11

While the cinema was still successful among cinemagoers, the insecure situation of the country hindered its further development. The enterprise ended abruptly in 1993; González Macho claims in his memoirs (González Macho 2020, 123) that in that year he received a telex informing him that the *mafia* had taken over the cinema. That was the end of Khudozhestvenny and of Alsov. The impact could be felt more generally in Alta. It was the same year that the company started producing films, starting with the American independent comedy *In the Soup* (Alexandre Rockwell 1992). Soviet films did not fully disappear from its distribution catalogue but became increasingly rare in the first half of the 1990s, as national audiences got increasingly interested in other regions of international cinema and Russian productions struggled to reach the quality of previous decades. By 1995, Alta had already begun depositing its copies of Soviet films in the Spanish National Film Archives *Filmoteca*. Its business commodities were becoming history.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

What is the significance of Alta's relation to the USSR? The story exposed on the previous pages allows for different levels of interpretation. It is first tempting to understand these 25 years of transformation in broader historical terms, thus reading these episodes of international cultural exchange that flourished in Spain along the evolution of two countries, leaving behind their dictatorial past. The analysis obviously focused on the Spanish side; the company benefited from the partial liberalization of late Francoism; its first successes were based on the cultural openness of the late 1970s, while its further development in the 1980s can also be read parallel to the transformation of its film industry along European guidelines. In more general terms, and although this enterprise ended abruptly, the activities of Alta had been capable of bringing together two territories involved in an asynchronous process of profound political transformation.

At the same time, the company's success could benefit from the normalization of diplomatic relations between both countries and the reforms that permitted the recuperation of silenced Soviet filmmakers after 1986. The document is especially interested in showing how this transformation helped Soviet cinema reach broader, more commercially oriented audiences and allowed for the import of Spanish films in the Soviet Union in the second half of the 1980s. The three-year adventure of Khudozhestvenny can be read as both the culmination of these developments and the realization of their limits.

Secondly, and considering now its relevance within a history of the European film industry in the late Cold War era, Alta contributes (through the inclusion of the Spanish case) to enrich our understanding of this phenomenon, providing

November 1990), *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (14 November 1990), and *Ecran iscena* (12 and 19 November 1990). Moscow's local television did the same on the 1, 2, 10 and 12 November. The specialized programme *Kinopanorama* informed about the festival in December 1990. *Radio Mayak*, *Soyuz* and *Vecherni Couier* covered it on 12 November 1990.

some valuable information on the widely under-researched history of Spanish cinema exhibition and adding another component to its multipolar logic. It also channels our attention towards a certain type of (micro, small, and medium-sized) companies that, escaping Hollywood's frame of reference, have been usually overseen in the film historical accounts that for years explained the continent's industry.

Alta's case study was analysed with a focus on the distribution activities, but its ties to film exhibition, production or even broader policy and diplomatic shifts are also key in its history. They are, in fact, the key, as these different layers of activity help us connect the particular to the general in a long history of the European film industry. By the beginning of the 1980s, when Alta was reaching its first zenith, the company was one among 215 distributors (yearly report of the Spanish General Directory for Cinematography from 1980) operating in Spain. Some of these companies were surely tiny and somewhat irrelevant both in industrial and cultural terms, but many others were central in the development of Spanish film culture and industry of the 1980s and 1990s, helping to safeguard its diversity and richness. Thus, while the company's history reminds us constantly of the specificities of the Spanish case—López Iglesias' exile in the USSR, the relevance of a left-wing cinephilia interested in recovering old Soviet titles in the 1970s, the market reconfiguration of the mid-1980s following the Miró Law—it is also possible to see in Alta an example of the different voices and parties that had historically characterized many of the continent's film industries and were central to ensure its cultural diversity. The focus of the international alignments and reconfigurations of these small and medium-sized companies can help us broaden our understanding of the last two decades of the Cold War while it also highlights the challenges that came along with the reconfiguration of the EU audiovisual market from the 1990s onwards.

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Cinema on the Eve of the Cold War: International, National, and Local Interests in Turkey and the Motion Picture Admission Tax

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This article explores Turkey's national cinema policy's legal, economic, and geopolitical foundations during and after World War II. Focusing on the 1948 Municipal Revenues Law, which introduced differentiated admission taxes for domestic and foreign films, the study examines how this fiscal tool functioned as economic regulation and a mechanism of cultural protectionism. Drawing on archival records, parliamentary debates, diplomatic correspondence, and trade data, the article traces how Turkish cinema gained institutional ground against Hollywood's dominance and Egyptian melodrama's popularity. The analysis reveals how taxation policies, sectoral mobilisation, international agreements, and cultural diplomacy converged to open space for domestic film production. Situating Turkish cinema within broader Cold War dynamics and cultural imperialism debates, the article argues that national cinema policy was shaped at the intersection of internal industrial agency and external political pressures, challenging conventional accounts of postwar cultural development.

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INTRODUCTION: NATIONAL CINEMA POLICIES AND TURKEY-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

> The only reason terrible films are being made worldwide today is that cinema is in the hands of big capitalists. All the flaws of contemporary films stem from this capitalist mentality (...) These films are as dangerous as a sophist spreading religious propaganda, a sorcerer practising witchcraft, or a spy disseminating propaganda for a foreign state. The solution is quite simple, and I summarise it in three points: 1) Stricter control over the cultural aspects of films entering Turkey, 2) Banning films that

> propagate or even subtly incorporate themes of the church, occultism, or militarism, 3) Subsidising domestic films that align with the ideals of the regime and modern cultural values (Baltacıoğlu 1937, 2).

İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, one of the leading ideologues of the early Republican period, published his article—which included the above-given epigraph—in 1937 after watching *Chandu on the Magic Island* (Ray Taylor, 1935). This film had been screened in Istanbul cinemas for an extended period. Except for a handful of locally made films—the last of which was produced in 1935 and continued to be shown despite their increasingly worn-out copies—foreign productions entirely dominated Turkish cinemas. The preservation and development of national cinemas have been central concerns for many countries, each shaped by specific historical and economic conditions. The Turkish case presents peculiar conditions under which the national cinema developed in a particular way, reflecting its characteristics. In Turkey, the issue of national cinema has been closely linked to broader cultural policies and the dynamics of film production and distribution. Intellectuals[1] and policymakers of the time considered this dominance, particularly of Hollywood films, contrary to the ideals and cultural policies of the newly established nation-state. Many advocated for strict regulation and outright bans, citing the need to protect children and young audiences from foreign cultural influences. The *Regulation for the Control of Motion Pictures* enacted in 1932 was already in place. However, two new comprehensive legal frameworks replaced it in 1939: the *Regulations on the Control of Films and Film Scripts* and the *Regulations on the Control of Educational and Technical Films*.

Nevertheless, these regulations alone failed to fully address the issue, as the challenge was cultural and economic. In European countries such as Germany, Britain, and France, the dominance of Hollywood prompted economic countermeasures as early as the mid-1920s, including import quotas and restrictions on film screenings to protect national cinemas. In contrast, Turkey's national film industry had mainly remained underdeveloped, and its expansion had never been a governmental priority. As a result, implementing economic measures similar to those in Europe was not a feasible strategy. Although periodic adjustments

1 During the early Republican period, particularly after 1930, concerns about cinema's "harmful" effects on children and youth were frequently discussed in newspapers and magazines and in addition to daily newspapers such as *Akşam*, *Tan*, and *Cumhuriyet*, where writers like Şevket Rado, Sabiha Zekeriya, and Peyami Safa voiced their criticisms, intellectuals such as İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu and Hüsamettin Bozok contributed to the debate through periodicals like *Yeni Adam* and *Resimli Uyanış*. Two prominent works from this period are particularly notable for their emphasis on protecting children and young people from cinema's influence. In *Türkiye'de Sinema ve Tesirleri* ("Cinema and Its Effects in Turkey", 1933), Hilmi A. Malik asserted that "it is inevitable that Turkish children and youth, constantly exposed to foreign films, will fall under their continuous and varied influence" (Malik 1933, 43, our translation). Similarly, Osman Şevki Uludağ, in *Çocuklar Gençler Filmler* ("Children, Youth, Films", 1943), argued that cinema had become increasingly vulgar and dangerous. In his view, "the enemies of society cunningly exploit cinema," (3, our translation) protecting children and young people from it was essential.

to customs tariffs and import quotas were made to address trade imbalances, these measures were primarily economic rather than cultural. They were never explicitly designed to foster or protect domestic film production.[2]

In contrast, in response to the shifting global landscape after World War II, European countries continually adapted their state interventions, integrating taxation policies, tariffs, censorship mechanisms, and local regulations to support their national cinemas. Institutions such as *L'Union Générale Cinématographique* and the *Centre national de la cinématographie* in France, and the *National Film Finance Corporation* in Britain, played pivotal roles in developing policies that both safeguarded domestic industries and facilitated strategic partnerships with Hollywood studios (Guback 1969; Elsaesser 2005; Steinhart 2019). Despite the absence of a comprehensive national cinema policy in Turkey, a single legislative measure—the *Municipal Revenues Law No. 5237*, enacted in 1948—was a crucial factor in shaping the industry. This law inadvertently facilitated the growth of Turkish cinema by granting local governments the authority to impose differentiated motion picture admission tax rates on domestic and foreign films. It provided a protective barrier against Hollywood's overwhelming dominance.

Given this contextual background, this study examines the political, economic, and institutional dynamics that enabled Turkish cinema to emerge as a counterforce to Hollywood during the early Cold War era. Focusing on the critical transition years during and after World War II, the research investigates how legal, fiscal, and diplomatic transformations reshaped the national film industry under mounting international pressures. The study unfolds across three interrelated dimensions: (a) the sectoral organization and advocacy efforts within Turkey's nascent national cinema field; (b) the restructuring of intergovernmental financial relations and the introduction of the *1948 Municipal Revenues Law*, which authorised differentiated taxation on domestic and foreign films; and (c) the evolving framework of Turkish-American relations, including tensions surrounding the *Reciprocal Trade Agreement* and cultural diplomacy efforts mediated through institutions such as the United States Information Services (USIS), a branch of the United States Information Agency (USIA). By integrating archival records with a contextual analysis of legal policies, trade dynamics, and institutional actors, the study offers a critical account of how cinema became a site of cultural negotiation and resistance. It positions Turkey's experience not merely as a domestic reform but as part of a broader global struggle over symbolic capital, cultural sovereignty, and media power in the early Cold War.

2 Turkey did not implement a state-backed policy for national cinema development, unlike its European counterparts, until the 2000s. Aside from censorship and regulatory oversight, the state exhibited little institutional involvement in the film industry. It was not until 1977 that Turkey established its first official institution dedicated to cinema—the General Directorate of Fine Arts—Cinema Department of the Ministry of Culture. Although a limited number of film productions received state support in the late 1980s—when the national cinema had collapsed—systematic financial assistance for domestic cinema only began in 2005.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND SOURCES

This study draws upon key concepts from cultural studies, political economy, and international communication to frame the development of Turkish national cinema within the broader geopolitical tensions of the early Cold War period. Central to this framework is the notion of cultural imperialism, which explains how the global dissemination of U.S. cultural products—especially Hollywood films—served not merely economic aims but also strategic ideological purposes (Jarvie 1992; Elwood and Kroes 1994). During the post-war years, Hollywood's global dominance was reinforced through both market mechanisms and state diplomacy, often embedded within bilateral trade agreements and foreign aid programmes such as the Marshall Plan (Fattor 2014; Jarvie 1990). In this sense, cinema became a tool of soft power (Fattor 2014), projecting American values and narratives onto international audiences. As Nye's (2005) concept suggests, the appeal of U.S. culture abroad facilitated influence without coercion, consolidating hegemonic narratives through seemingly benign entertainment. Based on its industrial scale and global distribution networks, Hollywood's market superiority was further strengthened by structural imbalances in media trade, where peripheral markets such as Turkey had limited capacity to develop autonomous cinematic infrastructures (Hoskins and Mirus 1988; Flibbert 2007). Additionally, Erdogan and Kaya (2002) provide a valuable empirical lens into how institutional mechanisms—such as USIS and the Turkish Censorship Board—mediated the circulation and exhibition of Hollywood films in Turkey. Their work demonstrates that cultural imperialism operated not only through macroeconomic forces and foreign policy channels but also through localised administrative and institutional apparatuses controlling access, visibility, and symbolic legitimacy. This institutional mediation reinforces the broader theoretical assertion that post-war cultural hegemony was enacted through state-led initiatives, international alliances, and domestic bureaucratic compliance, often legitimised as routine governance.

Various nations pursued protective strategies to preserve cultural sovereignty in response to these asymmetries. While countries like France or Britain established national film boards and subsidies (Guback 1969; Miskell 2014), Turkey's more indirect strategy took the form of differentiated taxation, exemplified by the 1948 motion picture admission tax. This fiscal intervention created a regulatory shield for domestic productions and reduced the market share of imported films, especially from Hollywood and Egypt. Framing this development through what Crane (2014) describes as a cultural policy response to globalisation, the article situates the Turkish case as a form of localised resistance to the encroachment of transnational cultural capital. The tension between American cultural hegemony and local film producers reflects what Nowell-Smith and Ricci (1998) interpret as a struggle for national identity within the global entertainment economy. Turkey's experience demonstrates how a seemingly marginal fiscal policy became a pivot around which issues of economic autonomy, ideological contestation, and media sovereignty converged. In line with

Bakker's (2008) analysis of the international film industry's emergence, the Turkish case also exemplifies how late-developing cinemas sought to reclaim agency in a marketplace structurally biased against them. By integrating these theoretical lenses, this article contributes to broader debates on how peripheral media systems negotiated Cold War-era pressures and reshaped their cultural trajectories amid competing forces of globalization and local assertion.

To conduct this study, data were compiled from multiple archival sources: The Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Directorate of State Archives containing correspondence between the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department on cinema, records of the U.S. State Department's communication with the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Turkey, reports issued by the U.S. Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Turkish-American trade agreements, legal regulations on municipal revenues in Turkey, minutes of the Turkish parliamentary plenaries, statutes, reports, and communications of cinema-related associations active in Turkey since 1930, and archives of national and local newspapers. The collected data were organised chronologically and analysed contextually. Using multiple sources enhanced the data triangulation, ensuring a more comprehensive period assessment. Furthermore, this multi-source approach facilitated the identification of relationships and conflicts between national and international agents within the cinema sector of the time. It allowed for further insight into the period's political background.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL CINEMA AND FILM IMPORTATION IN TURKEY: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW (1900S–1940S)

In the first half of the twentieth century, Turkish cinema operated within an import-oriented structure rooted in the country's semi-peripheral integration into global capitalism and the deindustrialisation of the late Ottoman period (Pamuk 1988; Pamuk & Williamson 2011). Early cinema practices mirrored this dependency: foreign films, mainly from the West, dominated local exhibition circuits, while domestic production remained marginal (Işığan 2003). Despite nationalization policies that replaced non-Muslim merchants with Turkish entrepreneurs, major companies like Kemâl Film and İpek Film focused primarily on distribution and importation (Akçura 2004). The transition to sound films in the early 1930s boosted cinema-going, as low literacy rates—only 8% in the late 1920s and 19% by 1939 (Turkish Statistical Institute 2012, 18–21)—had previously restricted access to subtitled films. Initiatives like the Turkish Hearts (*Türk Ocakları*) and the People's Houses (*Halkevleri*) expanded access to cinema, aligning it with Republican modernization efforts. Still, Hollywood's dominance remained intact. A 1943 report by the U.S. Consulate in İzmir noted that "American films are far ahead on the list of imported films into Turkey" (Johnson 1943). Box office records confirm this, with U.S. productions constituting over 70% of screenings in Istanbul during the war years (Berktaş 2010, 127–28). A

1941 article in *Bugün* described Turkey as "the only country in the Balkans and the Middle East that remained illuminated at night," a striking image that underscored the resilience of public leisure culture—especially cinema—despite wartime constraints (*Bugün* 1941, 3, our translation).

This imbalance sparked some of the earliest lobbying efforts in the sector. In 1931, film importers and theatre owners formed a delegation to petition the government for lower customs taxes and increased import quotas (*Milliyet* 1931, 3). That same decade saw ongoing disputes with the Istanbul Municipality over taxes and levies on cinema tickets, including allocations to institutions like the Hospice Centre (*Darülaceze*) and the Turkish Aeronautical Association (*Türk Hava Kurumu*) (*Milliyet* 1930, 7). Cinema operators challenged these levies as unlawful, resulting in punitive measures such as shortened operating hours or full closures. In response, the Turkey Filmmakers and Theatre Owners Association (*Türkiye Sinemacılar ve Filmciler Birliği*) was established in 1932 under Kemâl Seden's leadership, aiming to mediate conflicts, lobby for the sector, and coordinate professional standards. Despite its short lifespan, this initiative marked a critical moment of sectoral mobilization. Throughout the 1930s, film importers and cinema owners organised informally to defend their interests, reinforcing the centrality of import-based business models in the Turkish film economy.

Paradoxically, the war also created structural opportunities for domestic production. With European film flows interrupted, alternative sources like Egypt entered the Turkish market. Egyptian melodramas rapidly gained popularity due to linguistic and cultural familiarity, particularly among audiences who struggled with reading subtitles (Mingant 2022; Gürata 2004).[3] Despite periodic state-imposed bans, these films' widespread appeal—amplified by dubbing and localised musical adaptations—spurred a new wave of national filmmaking. Directors such as Faruk Kenç and Baha Gelenbevi responded with films that adapted melodramatic forms to Turkish themes and audiences. The popularity of *Dertli Pınar* (Faruk Kenç, 1943) exemplified this shift. In parallel, new production and distribution companies such as Özen Film and Erman Film emerged, often building

3 Although Egyptian films enjoyed wide popularity among audiences—particularly in Anatolia—they were the subject of sustained criticism by Turkish film writers and intellectuals of the period. For instance, Nijat Özön argued that these films "played a major role in degrading the audience's cinematic taste and causing cultural regression" (Özön 2013, 128, our translation, 1968, 277, our translation). Hüseyin Hulki, writing in *Türksözü* in 1943, harshly denounced the musical and moral content of Egyptian melodramas, stating that "the melodies, filled with the spirit of rowdy nightclubs, and the scripts, composed entirely of backward themes of love and betrayal, raise not aesthetic but ethical concerns" (Hulki 1943, 2, our translation). More direct rejections of Arab-themed cinema appeared in popular press articles, such as Yusuf Ziya Ortaç's striking satire in *Akbaba* (October 10, 1946): "There are no longer madrasas or tekkes or palaces. However, every tavern plays Oriental music, and every cinema shows an Arab film. Anatolia is intoxicated by these fez-wearing, veiled, yā lelli-singing films. This is our new enemy: the cinema screen is more powerful than the reed pen of the fatalist poet" (Quoted in Cantek 2004, our translation). In this cultural context, Egyptian films were not merely seen as foreign products but as symbolic threats to the Republican project of modernization and national identity formation.

on their earlier experience in film importation. By the late 1940s, companies increased by 30–40%, marking a significant industrial expansion. Genre diversification accelerated, with a growing focus on domestically produced dramas, melodramas, historical epics, and rural narratives. This period represents the critical groundwork for the institutional consolidation of Turkey's national cinema in the post-war era, as domestic producers occupied a more central role in shaping the cultural content and industrial infrastructure of Turkish film.

THE SECTOR GETTING ORGANISED

In the aftermath of World War II, the domestic film industry in Turkey underwent a period of institutional mobilization. On November 1, 1946, eleven local production companies established the Domestic Filmmakers Association (*Yerli Film Yapanlar Cemiyeti*) under the leadership of director-producer Faruk Kenç. Most of these companies had been founded during the war, and the association departed from earlier sectoral initiatives dominated by importers and theatre owners. Merely weeks later, on November 27, 1946, another group—primarily concerned with film importation and cinema operations—formed the Cinema and Filmmakers Organization (*Sinemacılar ve Filmciler Cemiyeti*) under Cemil İpekçi's presidency. Although some members overlapped, the associations diverged in focus: the former prioritised local production, the latter distribution and exhibition.

This distinction became particularly clear in the Domestic Filmmakers Association's efforts to establish a national cinema agenda. The association organised solidarity events, launched a national film competition in 1947–48, and published a founding manifesto titled *Purposes and Objectives of Our Association* (Yerli Film Yapanlar Cemiyeti 1946). Acknowledging the poor quality and limited output of earlier domestic productions, the manifesto attributed this weakness to the lack of state support. Framing cinema as a national cause and a strategic medium "more powerful than newspapers or books" (2, our translation) in shaping public opinion, the association advocated for targeted state intervention.

Two key policy proposals stood out. First, the association highlighted the lower cost of imported films relative to Turkish productions and called for tax exemptions to reduce local production expenses. While Hollywood dominated in quantity, Egyptian and Turkish films maintained longer runs, often remaining in circulation until worn out. As U.S. diplomatic reports observed, Hollywood titles typically played only for a few days, whereas Egyptian and Turkish films, though fewer, drew repeat audiences. From this perspective, the association viewed Egyptian films not merely as alternatives to Hollywood but as direct and more pressing competition. Second, it called for the reduction of the 75% ticket tax on domestic films to 20%, arguing that this would make national productions financially viable for all cinemas. Such reforms would help build Turkish cinema and ensure that "Near Eastern films, which had flooded the country, would no longer be preferred" (Yerli Film Yapanlar Cemiyeti 1946, 4, our translation).

MUNICIPALITIES AUTHORISED FOR ADMISSION TAX

While the Domestic Filmmakers Association publicly advocated for tax reform, the Turkish National Assembly was already reviewing a draft bill to overhaul municipal finances. Submitted by the Cabinet in December 1945, the proposed *Law on Municipal Revenues* aimed to expand local fiscal capacity. Legislators argued that although municipalities were responsible for increasing urban services, their income from the central government had declined. A key example was the motion picture admission tax, which, since the enactment of Law No. 423 in 1924, had included multiple deductions for public institutions such as the Hospice Centre, the Turkish Aeronautical, and wartime family support. Over time, the central government increased its share of cinema-related taxes, leaving municipalities with just 8% of the revenue by 1945, down from an even 50% share in 1924. Taxes and deductions now absorbed up to 75% of ticket prices, significantly constraining local budgets.

After over two years in commission, the revised bill was brought before Parliament on June 3, 1948. The new framework authorised municipalities to collect up to 70% in admission taxes on foreign films, with 10% allocated to the Hospice Centre and 10% to tuberculosis prevention efforts, while retaining the remaining 50% as municipal revenue. In contrast, domestic films would be subject to a maximum tax rate of 25%. Supporters within the ruling Republican People's Party (CHP) contended that this change would increase municipal income by 60% and reduce their dependence on central transfers for decades. Critics in the Democratic Party, such as Salamon Adato, warned that cinema—viewed by many as an affordable necessity—would become a luxury. CHP MP Cenap Aksu, meanwhile, welcomed the lower rate for domestic films as cultural protectionism. However, he warned that it might restrict access to "the masterpieces of cinema, which has become a world-class institution of decency and public education" (TBMM 1948). Despite these objections, the bill passed as Law No. 5237 three weeks later, with the differential tax rates intact.

The Istanbul Municipality promptly enacted the law at maximum rates, triggering divergent responses from industry groups. The Domestic Filmmakers Association welcomed the preferential treatment of domestic films, seeing it as a long-awaited policy shift.[4] In contrast, the Cinema and Filmmakers Organization, dominated by importers and exhibitors, denounced the reform. It warned that screening foreign films under such high taxation had become financially unviable, placing cinemas at risk of closure due to a lack of audience interest

4 Five years after the tax reform, the association's report published in 1953 criticised certain municipalities for taxing all films at the same rate, disregarding the law designed to incentivize domestic productions. In addition to calling for strict adherence to the law, the association advocated for a screen quota regulation requiring at least one-quarter of the films exhibited in major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, and Adana to be domestic productions (Karadoğan 2019, 131–37).

in "low-quality local productions." The organisation demanded that the foreign film admission tax be lowered to 10–20% to ensure sustainability (*Yeni Sabah* 1949, 1, our translation).

TURKISH-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY OVER ADMISSION TAX

The Istanbul Municipality's differentiated admission tax on imported films quickly escalated into a diplomatic dispute. U.S. officials, unprepared for such regulatory intervention, expressed concern over its implications for Hollywood's presence in Turkey. According to a report by Zissi Hadji Savva (1948) from the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul[5]—published during the parliamentary debates—the total volume of film imports to Turkey in 1947 reached 11,732 kilograms (approximately 250 feature films), valued at 170,427 USD. American films accounted for over 80% of imports by weight and 70% by value. In the first half of 1948, U.S. films still made up 73% of the imported film stock. Hadji Savva reported that "there are no quota or contingent measures in effect in Turkey that might reduce or prevent the distribution of United States motion pictures," noting that no such restrictions were considered at the time (1948, 605).

The controversy unfolded against Turkey's broader alignment with U.S. foreign policy interests. Around the same time, the Turkish-American Reciprocal Trade Agreement—signed initially in 1939—was revised, coinciding with Turkey's receipt of Marshall Aid. In October 1948, the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul sent a formal letter to the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, arguing that the new tax violated Article 4 of the agreement. This article stipulated that imported goods from either country would not be subject to internal taxes higher than those of similar domestic products. Citing this clause, the Embassy urged the U.S. State Department to initiate diplomatic action.

By February 1949, the State Department had contacted Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, then Director General of Economic and Commercial Affairs at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Zorlu acknowledged the issue but offered no resolution. Meanwhile, the Motion Picture Association of America intensified pressure through formal appeals to the State Department, emphasising the growing threat to U.S. commercial interests. In the spring of 1949, a coalition of European-based representatives from major Hollywood studios—including Columbia, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, RKO Radio, Twentieth Century Fox, United Artists, Universal International, and Warner Bros.—joined the negotiations. Gerald M. Mayer, representing this commission, wrote to the State Department, highlighting that only 20 films had been produced in Turkey in 1948. However,

5 The predominance of Hollywood films in Istanbul cinemas and the close ties between film importers—all Cinema and Filmmakers Organization members—and the U.S. Consulate likely explain why the initial correspondence on this matter originated in Istanbul.

cinemas increasingly preferred these due to their tax advantage. He warned that this policy posed an escalating threat to Hollywood's market position.

In August 1949, Zorlu finally conveyed Turkey's formal stance to the U.S. Foreign Office. He denied that the admission tax constituted a breach of the trade agreement, stating that there were no restrictions on the import or exhibition of Hollywood films. Zorlu emphasised that the tax revenues—approximately 1,000,000 TL annually (roughly 357,000 USD)—were retained entirely by the Istanbul Municipality and not the central government. Consequently, the municipality had no intention of lowering the tax. At the same time, increasing the 25% tax on domestic films was ruled out, as it would provoke significant backlash from Turkey's growing film industry (U.S. Department of State, 1945–49). State Department records indicate that the issue remained unresolved by 1949, highlighting the enduring tensions between national cultural policy and transnational commercial diplomacy.

THE IMPACT OF THE ADMISSION TAX ON TURKISH CINEMA AND AFTERMATH

This strategic tax reform catalysed a boom in national cinema, marking the beginning of what is now recognised as the golden age of Turkish cinema. During the first half of the 1940s, amidst the constraints of World War II, film production in Turkey remained modest, with only 73 films produced throughout the decade. However, despite the limitations of the war, the 1940s saw the emergence of cinema as a primary site of public leisure and sociability in urban and rural areas. The rise in literacy rates—up from 8% in the late 1920s to 19% by 1939—enhanced audiences' engagement with cinema, while the transition to sound film further facilitated accessibility, particularly for low-literate communities. At the same time, Republican institutions such as the People's Houses and their rural counterparts, the People's Rooms (*Halkodaları*), institutionalised cinema as a pedagogical and modernising tool, deploying travelling cinema units to remote parts of the country. Parallel to this, the USIS and the British Council introduced newsreels, educational, and propaganda films to Turkish audiences, inadvertently cultivating a nationwide familiarity with cinematic form—even in villages where electricity had only recently arrived via Marshall Aid infrastructure projects.

A significant turning point occurred in 1948 when new motion picture admission tax regulations under the *Law on Municipal Revenues* provided financial incentives for domestic film production. This development did not occur in isolation. A generation of Turkish filmmakers—some of whom, like Faruk Kenç and Turgut Demirağ, had studied abroad—could now adapt globally popular melodramatic forms to local audiences. Moreover, Egyptian melodramas, which had gained popularity during the war, began to face state censorship and market restrictions, prompting film importers to shift toward domestic production. As a result, the legislative reform aligned with an emerging cinematic infrastructure and a growing appetite for culturally proximate narratives. Film production

increased significantly, and within two years, the number of new feature films equalled the total produced since 1896, reaching 37. The 1950s marked a period of rapid growth, with 540 films produced and 126 new production houses established. Genre diversification accelerated, and the structures of distribution and exhibition solidified. The 1960s, long considered the golden age of Turkish cinema, witnessed dramatic expansion—1,710 films were produced, and 224 new production houses opened. Annual production peaked after 1965, culminating in 231 films in 1969 and 399 in 1972. However, from 1974 onwards, production began to decline due to the spread of television broadcasting nationwide.

By the late 1970s, this downturn was exacerbated by economic instability, political unrest, and the 1980 military coup. Annual output fell to 124 films in 1977, and only 68 were made in 1980 (Scognamillo 2001, 2002). The 1980 military coup introduced *Municipal Revenues Law No. 2464*, centralising control over tax rates and imposing fixed admission taxes—20% for domestic and 50% for foreign films. Although there was a brief revival in 1986–87, structural challenges such as the videocassette market and mounting production costs led to a renewed decline. By the decade's end, neoliberal economic reforms enabled transnational distributors to enter the Turkish market without local partners, while the admission tax became standardised across all films. In response to the crisis, the state introduced direct subsidies for local productions, initiating a new phase in Turkish film policy.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyse the political and economic conditions that shaped the institutionalization of Turkish national cinema in the early Cold War era, focusing on the period between 1946 and 1950, when the film sector was restructured through a set of pivotal regulations and the conflicting yet entangled interests of various industry stakeholders. By revisiting this critical juncture through the lens of cultural imperialism and soft power, the study situates the emergence of national cinema in Turkey within a broader struggle over cultural sovereignty in an asymmetrical global media landscape. Rather than viewing the period's regulatory developments as isolated domestic phenomena, the study interprets them as embedded responses to transnational pressures—particularly the dominance of Hollywood and Egyptian imports. Drawing on archival documents, legal texts, parliamentary records, materials from cinema-related associations, and contemporary press sources, the research traces how power relations between local, national, and international actors were renegotiated as cinema became a key cultural and ideological contestation domain.

This research has shown that the Law on Municipal Revenues and the revised admission tax had far-reaching implications that extended beyond the economic sphere into the cultural and symbolic domains. While the differentiated tax was formally justified as a fiscal tool, it functioned as an instrument of cultural protectionism, aiming to reduce the symbolic and market dominance of foreign

films—especially Egyptian melodramas and American studio productions. From the cultural policy perspective, the tax can be interpreted as a form of localised resistance to global media flows, echoing the strategic use of regulation in other national contexts where film was seen as a vehicle of soft power. The Turkish case reveals that even a seemingly technical fiscal instrument could be a cultural countermeasure—reshaping audience tastes, market demand, and national production strategies when cinema was widely recognised as a site of ideological influence. Criticisms voiced by contemporary film writers, who associated Egyptian melodramas with cultural and moral decline, further legitimised the tax policy as a defensive cultural measure. Moreover, the findings highlight the internal conflicts within Turkey's evolving film sector, particularly between groups that supported the continued importation of foreign films and those advocating for local production. This intra-sectoral contest mirrored broader tensions between global cultural capital and domestic agency. The ascendancy of the Domestic Filmmakers Association and the decline in imported Egyptian films suggest that the national cinema movement not only gained institutional ground but also successfully challenged Hollywood's market hegemony. These developments signal a strategic reorientation of the Turkish film sector toward national priorities driven by economic self-interest and cultural assertion.

The international dimensions of this shift were equally significant. As Turkey received Marshall Aid and revised its Reciprocal Trade Agreement with the United States, implementing the differentiated admission tax quickly escalated into a diplomatic dispute—revealing how cultural regulation could provoke geopolitical tensions. The reactions of U.S. diplomats and Hollywood industry representatives underscored the extent to which American cinema was integrated into the United States foreign policy apparatus. At the same time, institutional interventions such as those by USIS extended the reach of U.S. cultural diplomacy through curated film libraries, public screenings, and propaganda efforts. These initiatives amplified the symbolic capital of Hollywood in Turkish urban life. Meanwhile, the Turkish Censorship Board, particularly in the late 1940s, demonstrated increasing leniency toward American productions while tightening restrictions on Egyptian and some domestic films. Working in tandem with the differentiated tax, these actors helped reshape cinematic circulation along ideological lines. As Erdogan and Kaya (2002) argue, such mechanisms were part of a broader soft power strategy, wherein cinema was a vehicle of transnational influence shaped by overt diplomacy and covert persuasion. The Turkish case thus reveals that film policy during the early Cold War was co-produced by domestic authorities and international agencies, operating not only within economic logic but also within deeper struggles over narrative sovereignty and cultural value.

Finally, the involvement of the Istanbul Municipality and the Turkish National Assembly in the cinema taxation debate points to the role of local governance in shaping cultural policy. The new Law on Municipal Revenues empowered municipalities financially and ideologically, allowing them to influence the cultural content available to their constituents. While specific to Turkey, this local regulatory autonomy resonates with a broader pattern observed in peripheral

markets where national and subnational actors deployed policy tools to assert cultural agency. Ultimately, this study shows that cinema policy—far from being a peripheral or technical concern—operated as a nexus of national identity, global diplomacy, and cultural resistance in the early Cold War period.

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Two Modernisations: Widescreen Cinema, Film Art Discourses, and U.S. Aid in 1950s Taiwanese Film Culture*

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This article examines the contradictions inherent in the modernization of the film industry through a case study of government-owned film studios in postwar Taiwan. Between 1955 and 1958, under the framework of economic aid, the U.S. government sought to modernize and restructure film studios owned by the ruling authoritarian Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party) party-state in Taiwan. Through grants and loans from the U.S. government, Taiwanese film studios were able to renovate outdated facilities, repair and acquire equipment, and send technicians to the United States and Japan to learn the latest filmmaking technologies. Yet Taiwanese film bureaucrats also resisted the more radical reform projects proposed by their U.S. counterparts.
Drawing on government archives, the first part of the article analyzes the emergence and eventual termination of the U.S. aid program. The second part further illustrates the dual dimensions of the modernization of the Taiwanese film industry: the pursuit of cutting-edge technologies—particularly widescreen formats—and the pursuit of film knowledge and theory. Through a close reading of film critic Bai Ke's formalist critiques of widescreen cinema written during this period, I demonstrate how these two aspects of modernization often stood in tension.

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In this essay, I analyse U.S. aid to the Taiwanese film industry in the 1950s to elucidate two primary aspects of modernisation: technology and knowledge. Like other industrial modernisation processes, the film industry's modernisation involved importing both filmmaking technologies and knowledge. Through the case of an emerging formalist critique of widescreen cinema led by critic-director Bai Ke, I will demonstrate that the relationship between new technologies and knowledge in the film industry can be contentious, if not contradictory.

To place these two modernisations within a concrete historical context, I examine the case of the Taiwanese film industry in the 1950s. After the Japanese Empire surrendered to the Allies on October 25, 1945, the Republic of China (ROC), ruled by the authoritarian Kuomintang party (KMT), became Taiwan's de facto ruler.[1] The corrupt and inept governance of the KMT in Taiwan led to the February 28 Incident in 1947, triggered by the police confiscating contraband cigarettes from a female vendor. This incident escalated into a political movement, demanding greater self-governance, which was violently suppressed by the state in March of that year. On May 19, 1949, the KMT government declared martial law, severely infringing on the human rights of the Taiwanese people. Initially hesitant to support the KMT, the U.S. government quickly incorporated Taiwan into its anti-communist network following the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950.

As the United States' new anti-communist ally, Taiwan received significant economic aid—about USD 100 million annually between 1951 and 1965 (Jacoby 1966, 32). The influx of material goods, equipment, and personnel helped to stabilise Taiwan's economy, laying the foundation for the island's so-called "modernisation". Between 1955 and 1958, an aid program for Taiwanese film studios began, with the U.S. government looking to restructure and modernise the film studios controlled by the KMT party-state (hereafter referred to as the party-state studios). U.S. grants and loans enabled Taiwanese studios to renovate outdated facilities, repair and acquire equipment, and send technicians to

1 Ideologically, the postwar KMT party-state in Taiwan retained many of the ideas and values of the "conservative revolution" and "revolutionary nativism," as analysed by Brian Tsui (2018) and Maggie Clinton (2017). This set of ideas of radical conservatism was anti-communism and suspicious of liberal capitalism and aimed to renew Chinese culture through the intervention of a strong state. The term "party-state," or *dang guo* in Mandarin, refers to the political structure under KMT rule in Taiwan. During the martial law period, the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek and later his son Chiang Ching-kuo, held ultimate authority over all critical political decisions. Government agencies were required to meet regularly with party representatives to coordinate their tasks, effectively rendering the party and state inseparable (Xue, Yang, and Su 2015). For a classic analysis of the KMT party-state's operations, see Nai-teh Wu (1987). I use "authoritarianism" to describe the illiberal rule of the KMT party-state, which largely conforms to the definition offered by Juan J. Linz, who describes authoritarianism as "political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism: without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilisation (except some points in their development); and in which a leader (or occasionally a small group) exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones" (Linz 1964, 297).

the United States and Japan to learn about the latest filmmaking technologies. However, a proposal for a second phase of U.S. aid to the film industry—albeit drafted by the Taiwanese studios—was never realised.

This period of Taiwanese film history clearly demonstrates that the party-state studios played an important role in developing Taiwanese film culture. While they were part of the propaganda machine,[2] they were also keen students of world cinema.[3] In addition to importing new filmmaking equipment, the party-state studios published magazines featuring essays on film art and theory.[4] To understand the development of film culture in Cold War Taiwan, it is essential to consider the triangular relationship involving the party-state and international film discourses, mediated through U.S. film culture, beyond the small group of cultural elites and their endeavour in critical writings and filmmaking.

This essay also contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on Asian cinema and the Cold War (Fu and Yip 2020; Fu 2023; Lee 2024; Lee and Espena 2024). Scholars have shown how the U.S. government's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) used a front organisation, The Asian Foundation (TAF), to support a regional film festival—The Southeast Asian Film Festival (successively called The Asian Film Festival), a Hong Kong-based film studio Asia Pictures, and the fledgling South Korean film industry (Lee 2017, 2020; Fu 2023; Leary 2012). Scholars have pointed out the important role United States Information Agency (USIA) and its South Korean United States Information Services (USIS) posts played in training South Korean filmmakers (Kim 2017). However, relatively little is known about the U.S. government's investment in local film industries during the 1950s through foreign aid programs operated jointly by the International Cooperation Administration (ICA),[5] Mutual Security Agency (MSA), Foreign Operations Administration (FOA), and Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA).[6]

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2 For a general account of Taiwanese film history see (Lu 1998). For analyses of Taiwan Film Studio as the state's propaganda machine see (Hong 2011, Chapter 1) and (Tsai 2018).

3 The successes of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashomon* (1950) and other Japanese historical costume dramas at European film festivals inspired producers in Taiwan and Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. As *Rashomon* and other Japanese costume dramas contributed to the development of art cinema discourses, Taiwanese producers came to believe that costume dramas represented the kind of film that they should make, as they could showcase national aesthetics and culture while attracting international audiences. For an account of how Taiwan Film Studio imitated the *Rashomon* model and how its overseas distribution plan was frustrated by orientalism in the U.S. and European exhibition markets in the early 1960s, see (Liu 2024).

4 *Central Film and Drama Weekly* [Zhongyang yingju zhoukan] featured Chinese film criticism as well as English works translated into Chinese, including theoretical writings. Taiwan Film Studio began publishing a journal, *Movie Arts and Techniques* [Dianying xuekan], in 1957; this journal also featured original and translated film criticism and theoretical writings. Taiwan Film Studio also translated and published selections from Paul Rotha's book *Documentary Film* (1959).

5 ICA was established in 1955 and became the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) in 1961.

6 For a summary of an USAID program for the Nigerian film industry during the 1960s, see (Stevens and Pett 1970).

For conciseness, I follow economist Neil H. Jacoby's usage and refer to all foreign aid-related agencies as "AID" (Jacoby 1966), and the film modernisation program it sponsored in the 1950s as the "AID film program". This essay operates within the field of cultural Cold War studies but shifts the focus from CIA and USIA to AID and the recipient countries of its development projects. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate the complexity of U.S. government's cultural Cold War strategies. Furthermore, this essay avoids a top-down narrative reliant on the coloniser–colonised schema to frame the relationship between the U.S. and Taiwanese governments. Instead, through an analysis of the Taiwan Film Studio archive (record group 076) at Taiwan Historica, I highlight negotiations between bureaucrats on both sides and tensions that emerged within the Taiwanese film industry during its modernisation.

Although the AID film program in Taiwan only ran from 1956 to 1958, party-state studios later proposed a second aid phase, outlining their vision for "modern cinema." Their proposals listed books, magazines, and films seen as essential for training filmmakers. While it's unclear how many of these resources were actually imported after losing U.S. funding, some had already circulated locally. Rather than unfulfilled promises, these proposals highlight the materials and ideas the studios valued in building a new Taiwanese cinema. They also reveal differing views on widescreen cinema—party-state officials embraced it as modern, while filmmakers influenced by Western theory often criticized its artistic impact.

U.S. AID TO THE TAIWANESE FILM INDUSTRY

The first AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry was a three-year plan lasting from FY 1956 (July 1, 1955, to June 30, 1956) to FY 1958 (July 1, 1957, to June 30, 1958). To coordinate the party-state studios and mediate their relationship with U.S. bureaucrats, the Chinese Motion Picture Coordinating Committee (CMPCC) was established in 1955. Once this program came to an end, the Taiwanese party-state studios applied for another three-year plan covering FY 1960 to FY 1962,[7] but the proposed program never materialised, and the CMPCC was disbanded in 1959 (ZX 1959, 3).

Why did the United States take an interest in the Taiwanese film industry? According to a draft proposal prepared by Ralph L. Boyce,[8] American adviser to

7 "Dianying zhipianchang 48 niandu haiwai dinggou qicai juan" [Film studio's overseas equipment procurement for fiscal year 48], 07600298, Taiwan Historica, 121–125.

8 Ralph L. Boyce (1919–2002) was an army correspondent during World War II. After the war, he joined the staff of *Army Times*. In the 1950s, he first served as an information officer with the Marshall Plan before becoming a communication adviser to the governments of Taiwan, the Philippines, and South Vietnam. He later joined the United States Information Agency (USIA) to serve as an information officer in Pakistan

the CMPCC in 1955, the AID film program would enable the party-state studios to "obtain maximum utilisation of equipment and facilities"[9] and "raise the quality and quantity of motion picture production for educational and informational uses."[10] Taiwan's party-state studios were in need of foreign assistance because they could not keep up with the demand driven by the country's recent economic development. Boyce argued that the KMT government needed more films to train workers to keep up with the demand of the developing industrial sector as well as more propaganda films to show the world the economic progress that Taiwan, under the tutelage of the United States, had accomplished in the decade after the war.[11]

If TAF's goal was to foster an alliance of anticommunist film producers in the regions of East and Southeast Asia to contain communism, AID film program for Taiwan represented a different method to containment. AID officials in Taiwan were interested in increasing the productivity of the local film industry so that it could produce industrial and documentary films to train workers and promote postwar Taiwan's economic development abroad. In contrast, the earlier film projects associated with TAF during the 1950s were fiction films and literary adaptations (Lee 2017, 3 and 8; Leary 2012).[12] In the context of postwar East Asia, the AID film project in Taiwan, with its emphasis on nonfiction film, more closely resembled USIS-Korea's efforts to train South Korean filmmakers to produce propaganda films locally (Lee 2017, 10).

The goal of increasing the efficiency and productivity of the Taiwanese film industry was evident in two April 1955 reports made by Dana C. Rogers, a motion picture adviser associated with ICA. Rogers's reports were based on his survey of the five major film studios associated with the KMT party-state—the KMT party-owned Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), the Taiwan provincial government's Taiwan Film Studio (TFS), the Ministry of Defence's China Film Studio (CFS), the Ministry of Education's Chunghwa Film Studio (ChFS), and the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction's film group (JCRR).

In "Existing Film Production Facilities in Taiwan and Plans for Future Expansion",[13] Rogers observed that all studios lacked functional equipment and infrastructure for modern operation. The most crucial problem was inadequate

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and director of field activities in Japan. See "Ralph Boyce Sr. Dies", Washington Post, December 3, 2002, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2002/12/04/ralph-boyce-sr-dies/5f2c4f3f-53a9-45bd-b4a4-4d6199a6dcbd.

9 The copy of the proposal that I am examining here is from the Taiwan Film Studio files. See "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (1)" [CMPCC (1)], 07600210, Taiwan Historica, 73-77). The proposal was sent to TFS director Long Fang on August 12, 1955.

10 "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (1)", 07600210, Taiwan Historica, 73.

11 Ivi, 74.

12 One of the earliest films produced by TAF was an adaptation of a play by Burmese Prime Minister U Nu—*The People Win Through* [Ludu Aung Than, 1953]. Asia Pictures, TAF's main collaborator in Hong Kong, began by producing feature films *Tradition* [Chuan tong, 1955] and *The Heroine* [Yang E, 1955]. See (Lee 2017, 3 and 8) for a description of these projects.

13 "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (2)" [CMPCC (2)], 07600209, Taiwan Historica, 89.

electricity infrastructure, with existing equipment needing extensive repairs. This resulted in the filmmaking conditions being sub-par.

Rogers reasoned that even with U.S. aid, individual studios couldn't maintain separate crews and facilities. He argued for integrating and restructuring party-state studios to avoid duplication, with each serving specific functions. CMPC, being best-equipped, would serve as the core. The U.S. would help acquire new equipment and train filmmakers.

Rogers proposed vertical integration of the diverse party-state studios into one coordinated entity handling production, distribution, and exhibition. TFS, ChFS, and CFS would primarily serve as distribution sites, with TFS distributing state documentaries whilst retaining 16mm nonfiction capability. Another distribution branch would operate through National Taiwan Normal University's audio-visual centre for educational films in Taipei. This centre would be in charge of the distribution of educational films and films made or commissioned by the Ministry of Education at both central and provincial levels. In contrast to the standard account of the AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry (Huang and Wang 2004, 122), Rogers's plan did not only focus on providing equipment to or training technicians for Taiwanese studios. It also restructured the party-state studios, assigning an "editor-writer" to oversee the "planning, budgeting, writing, and editing" of films for at least a year.[14] In "Plan for the Effective Use of Proposed Facilities", Rogers reasoned that, to more efficiently leverage the production ability of the Taiwanese party-state studios, the studios should be producing more films overall. Thus, "an Editor-Writer Technical Assistant [sic] should be recruited as soon as possible to help solve this problem".[15] While Rogers did not explicitly state that an American should fill this role, it was likely on his mind. In his plan, Rogers also suggested that the CMPCC hire experts in cinematography, audio recording, and post-production. Notably, Mandarin proficiency was specifically emphasised for the cinematography "technical assistant," as "photography is an art and needs an understanding, light values, etc. It can be taught any place but should be taught in one's own language. Therefore, it is felt that it is not advisable to bring a Technical Assistant from the United States for training."[16] Based on this logic, other "technical assistants" did not need to know Mandarin, meaning an American, a non-Chinese, or a non-Taiwanese individual could serve in these roles as technical directors.

In summary, Rogers's modernisation plan was more radical than implied by the standard account of the AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry. Rogers proposed the creation of a vertically integrated party-state studio,

14 "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (2)", 07600209, Taiwan Historica, 98.

15 *Ibidem*.

16 Ivi, 99. Why this exception? Conference minutes around this time suggest that Rogers and his US colleagues were trying to push Taiwanese government to hire veteran Chinese-American newsreel cinematographer H.S. "Newsreel" Wong ("Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (2)", 07600209, Taiwan Historica, 60.) Based on extant archival materials, Wong was never hired by CMPCC. The exact reasons for the failure of this plan could only be determined when more materials are available.

suggesting that the first task of the modernisation effort should be to hire an "editor-writer".[17] If this plan had gone through, it would have drastically altered the role of each party-state studio, and it would have likely put a non-KMT bureaucrat at the helm of film production of the party-state studios.

KMT PARTY-STATE BUREAUCRATS' REACTION

Taiwanese bureaucrats from the party-state studios were not keen on the U.S. proposal for studio integration and the appointment of an "editor-writer" to lead the new unified studio's production. Taiwanese bureaucrats opposed the proposal for several reasons, the most significant of which was institutional tradition. They believed their studios served specific functions that could not so easily be dissolved into a new entity. The party-state studios discussed Rogers's integration plan during their inaugural meeting to coordinate the AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry on April 23, 1955.[18] Representatives from the Taiwan Provincial Government Information Office, the Ministry of Education's Science and Education Committee, and the Ministry of Defence expressed principal agreement with Rogers's plan but suggested that the technical details still required resolutions. However, the Ministry of Education's ChFS and the Ministry of Defence's CFS were sceptical. Ministry of Education representative Wang Xingzhou disagreed with moving the ChFS's films to the National Taiwan Normal University, advocating instead for the persistence of the status quo for all studios. CFS Director Zhang Jinde highlighted the CFS's role in producing films for the military and handling confidential materials, arguing that the CFS should remain as part of the Ministry of Defence. Rogers was deferential to Taiwanese bureaucrats, maintaining that his plan was a suggestion with the main goal being to establish a coordination unit among Taiwanese film studios for filmmaking activities. With these disagreements noted, Rogers's plan was approved in principle by the party-state studios.

The standoff between the ChFS, the CFS, and AID officials did not significantly improve by the time of the second meeting on April 27. The discussion focused on each studio's dark rooms and indoor sets, debating how many (if any) each studio could retain. The ChFS's representative continued to reject Rogers's plan, and the CFS Director insisted on keeping the studio as part of the Ministry of Defence with all of its facilities intact. The meeting resulted in an agreement that studios concerned about their "indoor sets" could retain them.[19] After a rocky start, the CMPCC was formally established on April 30, 1955 and managed by KMT bureaucrats, primarily—if not exclusively—of mainland Chinese background.

17 This does not mean that Taiwanese filmmakers were not interested in content or subject matter. It is clear from Bai Ke's writings and the 1959 reading list that means of making better films (in terms of subject matter or content) was on filmmakers' minds.

18 "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (2)", 07600209, Taiwan Historica, 148.

19 "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (2)", 07600209, Taiwan Historica, 145.

After pushback, U.S. officials revised their plan. Whilst studios shared equipment more regularly under CMPCC, their fundamental structure remained unchanged, and Rogers's ambitious integration never came to fruition.[20]

CMPCC: A COMPROMISE

The conflict between the party-state studios and AID officials strongly influenced the design of the CMPCC, creating a structure in which the committee would manage only exteriority (technology and equipment) rather than interiority (content and subject matter). The CMPCC's 31 May 1955 by-laws defined it as a "coordinating group of public and private motion picture production organisations," though no private companies ever joined.

The CMPCC's mission was to "provide the opportunity for coordination of technical and operational problems among member motion picture studios, [...] It aimed to serve as a centralised, coordinated sponsor for applying for and utilizing technical and economic assistance for motion picture production facilities."[21] Its authority was limited to physical and technical capacities, not content, number, or type of films produced by members.

This structure embodies "Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for Application," a 19th-century Qing slogan for modernisation. As Partha Chatterjee has shown, many non-Western intellectuals developed this sort of dualist way of thinking, as exemplified by the tenet that while the West had seemingly superior technology, that fact should not detract from, concern, or affect the more important spiritual aspect of "our" non-Western culture (Chatterjee 1993, 10). In postwar and quasi-postcolonial Taiwan, the CMPCC followed this arrangement, focusing on equipment and funding (exteriority) whilst avoiding film form or content (interiority).

The first phase ended in 1958, when, according to a newspaper article entitled "Inspecting AID Film Program" (*Lianhebao* 1959, 6), AID officials were dissatisfied with the program's outcomes, leading it to not pursue another aid program in the coming years. The officials' dissatisfaction stemmed from Taiwanese bureaucrats' rejection of Rogers's integration plan, shortcomings in the technician exchange program, and the misuse of newly acquired equipment by party-state studios. Instead of using new equipment to make "documentaries" (*jilupian*) as stipulated in the application, party-state studios rented it out to private film companies for profit, defying the aid program's intentions.

Despite these shortcomings, Taiwanese party-state studios were eager for another round of U.S. funding. In their proposals for a new three-year plan for FY 1960–1962, they expressed hope for continued support for equipment acquisition, technician training, infrastructure development, and establishing

20 The U.S. aid was not a swift process. Even by May 1, 1956, a year after the CMPCC's founding, the three technical advisors had still not been sent to Taiwan. "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (1)", 07600210, Taiwan Historica, 136, 140.

21 "Dianying shiye hezuo weiyuanhui (2)", 07600209, Taiwan Historica, 118.

colour printing, film stock distribution, and research centres. The goal, at least rhetorically, was to create a "modern and perfect" film production environment, enabling party-state studios to produce higher-quality films, enter the international film market, and propagate the official message of "Free China" more effectively.[22]

WIDESCREEN CINEMA AND FILM KNOWLEDGE IN THE AID FILM PROGRAM PROPOSALS

Two things stood out in the proposals for a second phase of AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry: the party-state studios' interests in acquiring widescreen cinema and film knowledge. A year prior to the establishment of the CMPCC, Taiwanese film culture was enveloped by the craze of widescreen cinema.[23] During the first week of November 1954, two theatres in Taipei showcased CinemaScope films—*The Robe* (Henry Koster, 1953) and *Knights of the Round Table* (Richard Thorpe, 1953). Private-sector film production companies were eager to acquire the new screen technology. Veteran Taiwanese film director He Jiming visited Japan on March 1, 1958, to learn about the latest widescreen technologies and colour cinematography and to explore co-production opportunities with major Japanese studios. He embarked on this business trip with the hopes of bringing Taiwanese-language films into "the stage of colour and widescreen cinema" (ZX 1958, 3).

After his trip to Japan, He Jiming and his brother He Lingming immediately put the newly bought widescreen lens to use. Hua Xing's first widescreen film was a comedy set in contemporary Taiwan. The film was *Gutless Hero* (1958), advertised as the first Taiwanese-language widescreen film. The choice to make a comedy was a deliberate departure from the typical Taiwanese-language fare of murder mysteries and tragedies (MR 1958, 8). *Gutless Hero* was promoted as a "modern" film: it was about "modern" men and women's love stories and exposed contradictions within "feudal" (*feng jian*) modes of thinking. The cutting-edge widescreen cinema thus became a suitable medium for telling this "modern" story.[24] Namhee Han (2014, 9) has argued that the widescreen cinema was a concrete visual form to express "both desire and

22 "Dianying zhipianchang 48 niandu haiwai dinggou qicai juan", 07600298, Taiwan Historica, 122.

23 For the broader history of widescreen cinema see (Belton 1992; Belton, Hall, and Neale 2010). For a history of widescreen cinema in Japan and South Korea see (Han 2014).

24 This approach to widescreen also makes widescreen cinema as another form of vernacular modernism, that is a discursive field in which experiences of modernity are articulated and debated. Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999); Miriam Hansen, "Vernacular Modernism: Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Durovicová and Newman (Routledge, 2010).

scepticism toward postwar modernity and modernisation" in Japan and South Korea. Looked at this way, *Gutless Hero* and its widescreen imagery can also be read as an expression of and a tool for promoting modernity.

Party-state studios viewed widescreen cinema as modern cinema's crown jewel. For instance, in the CFS's proposal for a new three-year phase of AID film program, a major stated goal was to obtain widescreen technology and the capability to independently produce widescreen films by the end of the new phase. The CFS claimed it needed another round of U.S. funding and technical assistance to catch up with the "advanced Euro-American film industry",[25] and produce widescreen films for military entertainment and education.

Beyond technology, studios sought books and films for filmmaker training. This desire for film knowledge was most evident in the Educational Film Studio's (EFS's) "Three-Year Expansion Plan of Educational Film Studio National Academy of Arts and Crafts".[26] The EFS was the studio in which film students at the National Academy of Arts and Crafts (NAAC), an art college established in 1955, engaged in practical training. This studio was also in charge of producing "educational films" and "documentary films". In its proposal, the EFS stated that it needed to modernise and catch up to the "current international standard", as the Chinese Communist Party was aggressive in exporting feature and "cultural films" to Southeast Asia.[27]

In its plan, the EFS outlined the qualities of the ideal filmmakers it sought to train—those who should understand "why they should do this," "why this equipment performs like this," and "why [EFS] makes films." An ideal filmmaker should have knowledge of social psychology and mass communication theory to understand "the role of motion picture as a medium of mass communication". A "reference library" would "consist of important literature and films published and produced domestically and internationally".[28]

The library lists were impressive.[29] The book list featured over 200 items classified into 20 categories: acting, aesthetics, biographies and autobiographies, censorship and propaganda, criticism, directories, bibliographies, annuals, economics, education, history of movies, music, novels of Hollywood and other film centres, technical handbooks, photo plays, sociological aspects of films, special films, technique, television, writing, periodicals, and technical manuals. The film list contained 147 items across five categories: film classics, important documentaries, experimental films, films on photography, and miscellaneous.

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25 "Dianying zhipianchang 48 niandu haiwai dinggou qicai juan", 07600298, Taiwan Historica, 123.

26 The document is written in English. The plan had a starting date of March 1959; thus, it may have been drafted in late 1958 or early 1959 ("Dianying zhipianchang 48 niandu haiwai dinggou qicai juan", 07600298, Taiwan Historica, 137).

27 "Dianying zhipianchang 48 niandu haiwai dinggou qicai juan", 07600298, Taiwan Historica, 137.

28 Ivi, 134.

29 Ivi, 146–158.

The lists reflected the development of Western film studies at the time.[30] The reading list comprised books and journals dating back to the interwar period produced by liberal institutions that pertained to matters of cinema and mass society. It included UNESCO publications by scholars associated with the Payne Fund studies, such as Edgar Dale's *How to Appreciate Motion Pictures* (1933). The list also included classic film theory and criticism books by Eisenstein, Kracauer, Sadoul, Rotha, and Pudovkin, as well as names that have been largely forgotten by today's film studies syllabi, such as Raymond Spottiswoode. Important magazines included *American Cinematographer*, *The Living Cinema*, *The Screen Writers*, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Film Culture*, *Films in Review*, *Educational Screen*, *Journal of University Film Producers Association*, and *Sight and Sound*. The range covered by the film list was also wide, featuring film classics alongside instructional films on filmmaking. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), neorealist films, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), and teaching films like *Film Problems* (1958), created by Indiana University, were all on the list.

Though the second programme never materialised, these lists showcase the writing and film Taiwanese bureaucrats deemed crucial for industry development and modern filmmaker training. Some titles already circulated in Taiwanese film discourse, influencing how Taiwanese filmmakers theorised the cinematic medium. A case in point is Raymond Spottiswoode's *Film and Its Techniques* (1951), labelled as item 146 in the reading list. By 1955, the CMPC's newsletter *Central Film and Drama Weekly* [Zhongyang yingju zhoukan] had already begun printing translations of chapters from *Film and Its Techniques*. According to the translator's preface, Spottiswoode's book was chosen because it was a textbook used by the film program at "the University of California" (CFDW 1955, 2). Spottiswoode's *A Grammar of the* Film, first published in 1935 and reissued in 1950 (Spottiswoode 1935, 1950), was translated and later adapted into a book by leftist film critic and director Chen Liting in 1930s and 1940s China (L. Chen 1941).[31] Chen's book *Dianying guifan*—also titled "A Grammar of the Film" in English—included translated passages from Spottiswoode's original work, especially the segments on montage, alongside Chen's own theorisation of the cinematic medium.

In particular, Spottiswoode's work and Chen's reworking of it shaped filmmaker/film critic Bai Ke's thinking about the cinematic medium and helped him to develop a formalist critique of widescreen cinema, the acme of the party-state studios' modernisation plan.

30 For an important review of the development of film studies in the West, see (Grieveson and Wasson 2008).

31 Spottiswoode's *A Grammar of the Film* was reissued by the University of California Press in 1950 (Spottiswoode 1950).

BAI KE'S FORMALIST CRITIQUE OF WIDESCREEN CINEMA

Bai was not only a successful commercial filmmaker but also an early film theorist and educator in postwar Taiwan.[32] Born in 1913, Bai Ke was originally from Southern China and attended college in Xiamen. In his youth, he participated in several leftist student groups, a factor that led to his incarceration and eventual execution by the KMT party-state in 1964. From 1936 to 1938, Bai initially worked in film studios associated with the KMT and later at Diantong, a film studio established by artists and technicians affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party (Xie 2022, 269). When World War II ended—perhaps due to his film industry experience and his ability to speak Hokkien, a language popular in Southern China and Taiwan—Bai became the first administrative director of the TFS.[33] In addition to filmmaking, he wrote film reviews and theoretical essays on cinema. On top of all that, he taught filmmaking at the Political Warfare College (PWC), a military institution focused on psychological warfare, and the newly established cinema department at NAAC beginning in 1957 (Xie 2022, 271–272).

Close attention to Bai's engagement with Western film theories and his conceptualisation of the cinematic medium can deepen our understanding of the reception and development of film theory and knowledge in postwar East Asia and point to a transnational and translational networks consisted of British and Chinese film theorists. This, in turn, sheds light on what Aaron Gerow describes as "the complexities of living theory (*riron ni ikiru*) within modernity and the global and local struggles over cinema" (Gerow 2010, 11). Bai's career and theorisation efforts also reveal that the authoritarian KMT's filmmaking apparatus was more complex than a homogenous propaganda machine. Bai's close connection with the party-state's film institutions—Taiwan Film Studio and NAAC—alongside his critique of mainstream Chinese-language cinema highlight the complicated and heterogenous nature of postwar Taiwanese state-run filmmaking and film culture, both of which were tightly controlled by the KMT regime.

Bai outlined his film theory and critique of widescreen cinema in *On Film Directing* [Dianying daoyan lun], which collected his critical essays published over the course of the previous decade. The book, published in 1961, was used as teaching material in Bai's film classes at NAAC and PWC.

On Film Directing was influenced by Raymond Spottiswoode's *A Grammar of the Film* (along with Chen's adaptation and translation though Bai didn't disclose this in the preface to the book) and *Film and Its Technique*, as well as Don Livingston's *Film and the Director* (Bai 1961, 1; Spottiswoode 1950, 1951;

32 Bai's film *Longshangsi zi lian* [Romance at Long Shan Temple] was the fourth highest-grossing film in Taipei in September 1962. Its box office revenue that month in Taipei was NTD$ 279,854, ranking behind two Japanese films—Inoue Umetsugu's *Noctune of a Woman* (Onna wa yoru keshō suru, 1961) and Watanabe Kunio's *365 Nights* (Sanbyaku rokujū go ya, 1962) and one American film, Roger Corman's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961). For the box office information, see (XH 1962, 3).

33 "Bai Ke," 129-090000-4990, Academia Historica.

Livingston 1953; Chen 1941). Monographs by Spottiswoode and Livingston were included in the reading list from the EFS's proposal for another round of AID film program. Since that list represented for Taiwanese film bureaucrats a blueprint with which to train modern filmmakers, I propose that Bai Ke's film theory be viewed as an intellectual product that the second round of AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry—had it been approved and implemented—may have produced. The point I am making here is not that Bai Ke's film theory is a necessary outcome of the second round of the AID film program, but to highlight the complexity and possible contradiction within the film modernisation project as exemplified by the EFS's reading and viewing lists.

In using today's theoretical language to describe Bai Ke's theory of film, Bai would be categorised as a formalist, since he believed that the essence of cinema lay in its ability to manipulate reality.[34] Film becomes art by transcending recording function. Bai argued that new advances in film technology, such as widescreen cinema, focused on reproducing reality as faithfully as possible. For Bai, film was a medium for self-expression, so fetishising technology would only hinder cinema's true function.[35]

Bai's criticism of widescreen cinema is most strongly expressed in "On the Formal Problem of Film Screen", and it is here that Spottiswoode's influence is most clearly felt. Bai's essay was partially based on the "Delimitation of the Screen" and "Square and Expanding Screens" sections in Spottiswoode's *A Grammar of the Film* (1950, 141-146). In these sections, Spottiswoode discussed Eisenstein's essay on the square screen, "The Dynamic Square" (Eisenstein 1996 [1930]), and criticised the widescreen experiment prevalent at the time: Magnascope.[36]

Bai adapted many themes from Spottiswoode's book but developed his own idiosyncratic critique of the widescreen format. Bai first posited that a movie screen and projected images were necessary conditions for cinema to be classified an art form, as they enabled cinema to transcend still photography (Bai 1961, 22-23). By projecting natural phenomena and human figures on screen in an "exaggerated" [*kuada*] manner and constantly forming and reforming images of actions within the frame, cinema could become art.

Since the screen defines cinema as art, the shape of the screen represents a crucial aesthetic problem for critics and filmmakers. Bai noted that the problem of screen shape became crucial once Hollywood launched the widescreen format to lure audiences back to the theatres in the 1950s. Bai believed that this shift toward widescreen cinema was detrimental to film art, as the format violated the rule of the "golden ratio". Bai claimed that the golden ratio was

34 Dudley Andrew calls this tradition "formative," which believes that cinema is an art because "it changed the chaos and meaninglessness of the world into a self-sustaining structure and rhythm." (Andrew 1976, 11).

35 This view is most clearly expressed in Bai (1954) which became the first chapter of *On Film Directing*.

36 Developed in the 1920s, Magnascope is a zoom lens used during screening. When cued, the film is switched to a projector with a Magnascope to enlarge the screen image. See Maltin (2025).

the reason why the ratio (length to width) of a 35mm film was (or was close to) 1.618:1 (Bai 1961, 25). He believed that the academy format—with an aspect ratio of 1.375:1—was superior to the widescreen format because the former's rectangular shape could provide dynamism by "incorporating variation within the order". Human psychology, according to this reasoning, preferred this dynamism to the stage-like presentation of CinemaScope or VistaVison (Bai 1961, 26). Furthermore, Bai critiqued Eisenstein's proposal of a "square screen" on the grounds that it deviated too far from human psychology (Bai 1961, 24).

Bai's reasoning is obviously flawed. For one, the academy ratio is not a golden ratio. Second, the golden ratio reasoning is criticised by Eisenstein in his "Dynamic Square" essay, which is summarised by Spottiswoode (1950, 144). In fact, Bai repeated Eisenstein's precise critique that the supporters of the golden ratio in cinema often argued that a golden-ratioed rectangle is a "dynamic symmetry"—a geometrical shape that has a sense of movement built into it. Eisenstein argued that "cinema as a whole" consisted of camera movement and montage, which already imbued a sense of movement in films. Hence, cinema didn't need to rely on the golden ratio to provide a sense of movement (Eisenstein 1996 [1930], 213-214).

While Bai's theory falls short, he nevertheless attempted to develop a film theory based on a universal understanding of human psychology ("golden ratio will be agreeable to all human beings") and formalist aesthetics (artworks do not reflect but rearrange reality). With this theory, he debated established film theorists and launched a critique of widescreen cinema. Bai's theorisation was made possible partly by studying Spottiswoode's, Chen's, and, perhaps indirectly, Eisenstein's works—all listed as essential reading for the training of modern filmmakers in the proposal for the second phase of the AID film program.

Bai's theory of the antagonistic relationship between film technology and film art may be read as an expression of the tension within the modernisation project carried out by the party-state studios in 1950s Taiwan. Modernisation entailed the importation of new equipment as well as new discourses of film knowledge and art cinema. However, as Bai's writings reveal, these two aspects were not necessarily harmonious; in fact, they represented two sides of what was often a contentious relationship.

CONCLUSION

By analysing governmental archives, I have painted a more nuanced picture of the modernisation of the 1950s Taiwanese film industry. In contrast to earlier scholarship, I have demonstrated that the AID film program for the Taiwanese film industry was more radical than previously assumed. Had Rogers's plan been implemented, the Taiwanese party-state studios would have been vertically integrated and possibly led, at least temporarily, by someone with little connection to the KMT. This essay reconstructs the negotiation between U.S. AID officials and KMT bureaucrats, thereby avoiding a simplistic top-down, coloniser-colonised framework for understanding this history. Furthermore, I do not treat moderni-

sation as a monolithic process. Instead, I explore the contradictions within the modernisation plan and present a scenario where new film knowledge sparked a critique of the desire to acquire new film technologies.

Situating this case study within the larger scholarship on the cultural Cold War in East Asian cinema, I propose that the AID film program for Taiwanese party-state studios illustrates another facet of the U.S. government's cultural Cold War strategies. Recent scholarship tends to focus on the CIA-funded organisation—The Asian Foundation (TAF)—and its collaboration with different charismatic figures in the film industries in the region. These "anticommunist entrepreneurs" shared an anticommunist ideology with the U.S. government, yet they also had their own motives and often mobilised resource from the United States to advance their own goals (Iber 2013, 169; Fu 2023, 86). These idiosyncratic characters included Chang Kuo-sin of Asia Pictures in Hong Kong, Nagata Masaichi of Daiei Film in Japan, among others. U.S. government agencies did not always select their local film collaborators based on their experiences in the industry. The case in point is Chang Kuo-sin. A bilingual reporter and a staunch anticommunist, Chang had a vision for the film studio he wanted to establish but lacked practical experiences. Chang's failed efforts to establish his Asia Pictures as a strong competitor against the People's Republic of China-backed Great Wall Movie Enterprise in Hong Kong caused TAF to withdraw its support for the Asia Pictures. Po-shek Fu notices the peculiar aspect of this collaboration between TAF and Chang, who lacked any real experiences in the film industry. Fu asks: how could TAF believe that Chang could shoulder the responsibility of setting up a film studio and produce quality anticommunist films for the overseas Chinese audiences? Fu reasons that this shows TAF's "inconsistent and unrealistic in its dealing with Asia Pictures," which might be reflective of "larger US policy toward China and Asia in the twentieth century" (Fu 2023, 107). The case of the AID film program for the KMT party-state studios in Taiwan demonstrates that the U.S. government, as a complex entity, could have agencies devising different and even conflicting plans to fulfil abstract policy and ideological goals. If in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, TAF and the CIA believed it was more effective to set up a pro-US film studio to serve their objectives, then in Taiwan, at least during the 1950s, AID officials saw the integration of the party-state studios and the increased production of nonfiction films as more efficient means of containing the spread of communism. Furthermore, as I document, the AID bureaucrats had their rationale and basic understanding of the local industry based on some empirical research when they suggested the integration plan of all party-state studios. Their plan was thwarted not necessarily because it was "unrealistic", but because they failed to anticipate and, perhaps were unwilling to confront, the pushback from the KMT party-state bureaucrats. These bureaucrats were not "entrepreneurs" like Chang, yet they had their own reasons and logic for managing their posts, which did not necessarily align with the plans outlined by their U.S. counterparts.

This case study also highlights the importance of archival research in achieving the goal of "de-Cold War"—overcoming a Manichean understanding of the world (K.-h. Chen 2010, Chapter 3). Regarding Cold War-era Taiwan and its relationship with the United States, scholars have long argued that the KMT was com-

plicit in the U.S. anti-communist network. Scholars stressed that the U.S. empire recruited this repressive authoritarian regime into its economic system, fostering a booming—but heavily dependent—economy (Y.-H. Chen 1981). While there is some truth to this claim, the historical relationship between the United States, the KMT party-state, and Taiwanese cineastes is far more complex. Responding to Shu-mei Shih's call for a more sophisticated understanding of Americanism (2024), this essay showcases the agency of local actors by illustrating how KMT bureaucrats resisted the top-down plans of U.S. AID officials. Furthermore, this essay provides a more intricate understanding of modernisation (Cooper 2005, 149). By examining how international discourses on film knowledge and film art enabled a critique of widescreen cinema—the ultimate goal of film industry modernisation in Taiwan—this essay demonstrates that modernisation is not solely about technological advancement but also encompasses the potential for critiquing modernisation itself.

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BEYOND CINEMA

Sufficiency or Excess: Analog and Digital Strategies for Film Heritage Sustainability[1]

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The contemporary media landscape is marked by a tendency to accept the market-driven practices of planned obsolescence, where questions of sufficiency and excess permeate the realms of media industry practices. While this is entering the broader discussion on media sustainability, inadequate attention has been given to these phenomena in the film heritage field.

As content libraries expand, the need for larger and more efficient data centres challenges the limits of storage, archiving, and accessibility. Many countries throughout Europe have witnessed the construction of cutting-edge film storage vaults and preservation centres, but the rising volume of digital content and the induced built-in redundancy of digital formats gradually replacing carrier-based collections have necessitated a heightened focus on digitization, such as digital preservation standards and access for both analog and digital-born film materials.

Our proposal aims to take a critical approach to the digital preservation infrastructure of film heritage. Is digital preservation a reliable answer, 'enough' sustainable in environmental and moral terms, closely linked to economic growth and resource exploitation principles? How can a democratic, inclusive approach to moving image preservation be reconciled with the current audio-visual production hypertrophy? Will economic dynamics face the risk of exposing the most fragile assets and heritage to disappearance?

> Are we ready to renounce part of our goals and ambitions as cultural agents in the interest of a safer, more equal treatment of the natural resources at our disposal?
> (Paolo Cherchi Usai, *"I Can't Breathe." Extinction Rebellion to Film Preservation*)

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2 The three authors have worked collaboratively on the writing of this article, covering the entire content; however, in order to select their respective contributions, Rossella Catanese wrote the first and second paragraphs, Valentina Valente the third, sixth and seventh paragraphs, and Serena Bellotti the fourth, fifth and last paragraphs.

INTRODUCTION: FILM HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND DIGITAL MEDIA GROWTH

The modern media environment is progressively dominated by market-oriented strategies, including the intentional design of products with a limited lifespan. Such a phenomenon reflects a broader trend where commercial interests shape content and technology, pushing consumers towards constant upgrades and replacements to maintain relevance and functionality. Consequently, media companies prioritize profit over longevity, driving a cycle of perpetual consumption. This trend reflects broader concerns regarding both sufficiency and excess within media industry practices; while these issues are beginning to enter mainstream discussions about media sustainability, they remain inadequately addressed within the specific context of film heritage. The film heritage sector, like other areas of the audio-visual media field, is grappling with the relentless drive for ever-increasing volumes of content. This situation is compounded by the broader symptoms of media overproduction in the digital age, where the emphasis on quantity often overshadows considerations of quality and sustainability, even in the GLAM field. This trend has been exacerbated by the exponential growth of digital media, which places unprecedented demands on the infrastructure supporting content creation and preservation. In particular, as content libraries expand, the need for larger and more efficient data centres becomes increasingly pressing (Antoniazzi 2020). These facilities are essential for storing and managing vast quantities of digital assets, yet their expansion poses significant challenges. The demands on storage capacity, archiving processes, and accessibility are reaching critical limits, and the environmental impact of maintaining and scaling these data centres is often overlooked (Cherchi Usai 2020). The energy consumption required to power and cool these data centres contributes to a substantial carbon footprint, raising urgent questions about the sustainability of current practices; this somehow reminds us of the materiality of the supposedly "immaterial" convergence related to the increasing presence of digital technologies.[3] Moreover, the film heritage sector faces additional complexities related to the preservation of historical media. Unlike contemporary digital content, which benefits from ongoing technological advancements, historical film materials require careful management to prevent degradation over time. The intersection of these challenges with the rapid pace of technological change means that film heritage institutions must navigate an increasingly complex landscape, and balance innovation against the duty to preserve assets for

3 "These fossils are then partial evidence of the materiality of electronics — a materiality that is often only apparent once electronics become waste. In fact, electronics involve an elaborate process of waste making, from the mining of metals and minerals to the production of microchips through toxic solvents, to the eventual recycling or disposal of equipment. These processes of pollution, remainder, and decay reveal other orders of materiality that have yet to enter the sense of the digital." (Gabrys 2013, vi).

the future. Experts now question which elements of our cultural past will survive escalating environmental threats, a concern that challenges everyone to reconsider the value of our legacy and the urgency of its protection. This involves rethinking conservation strategies, integrating sustainable practices, and fostering global cooperation to ensure that cultural artifacts withstand the challenges posed by climate change and other ecological pressures.

As discussions on media sustainability evolve, it is crucial to include the film heritage field in these conversations. The sector must address the implications of planned obsolescence and overproduction to mitigate the broader environmental impact associated with the digital transformation of media. This approach will require a re-evaluation of industry practices, greater investment in sustainable technologies, and a renewed focus on preserving the cultural heritage embedded within film (Keilbach and Pabiś-Orzeszyna 2021).

This article employs a hybrid methodological approach, combining a critical review of literature on media sustainability and infrastructure, with original empirical findings from the SAFE (Sustainability of Italian Film Heritage) research project. This dual strategy allows us to situate our analysis within existing scholarly debates while introducing new, concrete evidence from the Italian field, challenging the assumption that digital transition is inherently sustainable. Our empirical data is drawn from three coordinated actions:

- Infrastructural Diagnostics: A twelve-month microclimatic monitoring campaign was conducted in the film vaults of five partner archives to collect concrete data on energy profiles and conservation environments. This selection covers diverse climatic zones (North, Centre, South, Islands) and institutional scales.
- The SAFE Survey: A comprehensive quantitative and qualitative questionnaire distributed to over 20 Italian film heritage institutions focusing on the non-theatrical sector (industrial, amateur, and scientific film). The sample was selected to ensure typological (from state-funded national bodies to small community archives) and geographical diversity, allowing us to observe how sustainability policies impact institutions, providing a realistic snapshot of the Italian ecosystem rather than an idealized one.
- Ethnographic Fieldwork: In-depth interviews and participatory observation were conducted with archivists, technicians, and policymakers across a subset of these institutions. This qualitative data reveals the 'lived experience' of sustainability, capturing the affective, symbolic, and practical challenges that quantitative surveys might miss.

By cross-referencing findings from these methods with the theoretical frameworks of Critical Infrastructure Studies and the degrowth theories, we move beyond a purely exploratory probe to an empirically grounded critical analysis that operationalizes the concept of 'sufficiency' and 'excess', presenting the Italian ecosystem as a symptomatic case for broader European challenges.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE STUDIES

By critically engaging with these complex and interrelated issues, we aim to reflect on a more sustainable, inclusive, and ethically grounded approach to preserving film heritage in the digital age. With such general issues at stake, our main research methodology concerns Critical Infrastructure Studies, which delve into the intricate connections between society and its frameworks, addressing media, technology and society (Larkin 2013; Hesmondhalgh 2021; Parks and Starosielski 2015; Thylstrup 2019; Thylstrup et al. 2021; Flensburg and Lai 2020; Pasek, Vaughan, and Starosielski 2023). In fact, over the past twenty years, the concept of infrastructure has evolved to encompass not only physical networks like railroads and highways but also essential systems and services such as mass media. Media infrastructures encompass both physical forms and discursive constructions, shaped by public ownership, private enterprise, design strategies, regulatory frameworks, collective imaginations, and habits. These infrastructures are deeply intertwined with political and economic agendas. Their reliance on land, raw materials, and energy connects them to broader issues such as finance, urban planning, and natural resource management. This perspective shifts the focus towards the processes of distribution, which have often been overshadowed by the emphasis on production, consumption, encoding, decoding, and textual interpretation in humanities-based research. In traditional humanities media studies, there is a notable disparity between the extensive scholarly focus on screened entertainment and the limited attention given to the infrastructures that enable the distribution, whether they traverse undersea cables, terrestrial networks, or cloud-based systems (Parks and Starosielski 2015, 5). Media infrastructures encompass a vast array of elements, including hardware and software, prominent installations and subtle processes, synthetic objects, human personnel, as well as rural and urban environments. While Infrastructure Studies examine the role of technology within our society, Critical Infrastructure Studies delve deeper into the intricate relationships between society, culture and these structures, by critically analyzing the interactions between materials, artifacts, systems, individuals, institutions, considering the dynamics of power, while also highlighting the unequal distribution of infrastructural resources on national, institutional, and cultural levels.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to this research on film heritage institutions, since they vary significantly in size, institutional role, and methodological approaches, reflecting a broad spectrum of practices and perspectives within the field, shedding light on the resource disparities that influence the preservation and dissemination of film heritage, enabling a more comprehensive exploration of the infrastructural dynamics.

Moreover, the intersection of archival studies with alternative economic models, such as degrowth (Hesmondhalgh 2021), can become a focal point for other theoretical frameworks: questioning the sustainability of film pres-

ervation infrastructures means mapping not just the environmental costs, but the cultural and ethical sustainability of visual ecologies. Our approach aims to interrogate the power structures and institutional frameworks that shape these institutions' practices, as well as consider how technological advancements and shifts in media consumption patterns influence the curation of film heritage.

The concept of sustainability is widely discussed today, covering environmental, social, economic, and cultural dimensions to promote balanced resource use and growth. In film preservation, sustainability means maintaining film heritage in an ecologically, economically, and culturally viable way. It involves the physical care of celluloid in stable conditions and a metaphorical investment in these materials' cultural and economic value. In turn, this includes reducing degradation and finding financial support for costly preservation efforts. However, sustainability in this field addresses ethical questions about commodifying public memory, balancing public interest with market imperatives, and ensuring that economic needs do not eclipse the cultural mission of preservation.

Digital Humanities, Critical Infrastructure Studies, and sustainability intersect in a growing area of inquiry that reflects the evolving relationship between cultural heritage, technological mediation, and ecological responsibility. The digitization and computational analysis of cultural artefacts have opened new avenues for access and interpretation, yet they also reveal the material and infrastructural underpinnings of seemingly immaterial digital practices (Gold 2012; Drucker 2014; Meschini 2019). Critical Infrastructure Studies provides a lens to examine these very systems—servers, databases, metadata standards, energy-intensive data centers—as sociotechnical assemblages shaped by power relations, economic imperatives, and historical legacies. When brought into dialogue with questions of sustainability, this perspective urges a reconsideration of digital projects through their environmental footprint, labor conditions, and long-term viability.

FILM ARCHIVES AND THEIR INFRASTRUCTURAL STRATEGIES

Institutions dedicated to film heritage systematically engage in the processes of collecting, cataloging, preserving, restoring, and making films available for educational, cultural, research, and other non-commercial purposes. In recent years, there has been a notable shift from traditional photochemical materials and methods to digital technologies, alongside an increase in digital objects and platforms. This shift has brought a focus on digitization, digital preservation standards, and frameworks. The advent of digital moving image technologies and the declining use of film-based systems have sparked a broader debate about the role of technology, extending its impact beyond film production to influence film scholarship and critical practice as well.

The revival and preservation of archival materials, that might otherwise have been left to deteriorate, have been significantly impacted by commercial interests, especially in the US due to the prominent role of Hollywood studios and digital OTT platforms. Despite these economic motivations, Barbara Klinger notes that film preservation has an 'ecological dimension' since "Like many preservation movements, it is motivated by the double concerns of conservation and commerce — that is, by both the commitment to safeguard a resource and the desire to find a profitable use for it" (Klinger 2006, 117). Klinger's use of ecological rhetoric serves a dual purpose. Literally, it describes the carefully controlled conditions needed to protect celluloid from decay. Figuratively, it positions the film as a valuable commodity worth preserving, also for its potential to generate revenue.[4] Parallel to the methodological consolidation of deontology for film heritage preservation, over the past decade these entities have been acknowledged as memory gatekeepers by governmental and educational institutions. Many archives, holding firm to their mission of patrimonial preservation, raise the controversial issue of selling images. Lindeperg and Szczepanska raise the question:

> L'Ina, établissement public à caractère industriel et commercial, est ainsi contraint de se financer en partie par la vente de ses documents. Cette autre différence avec les sources écrites et le fonctionnement des Archives nationales donne la mesure du traitement singulier réservé aux images filmées (Lindeperg and Szczepanska 2017, 41).

It seems that for Ina, whose heritage mission has never been denied, this revenue issue has also been a driver of activity and development.

Considering the global warming conditions, and the general need for analog film conservation related to the need for temperature- and humidity-controlled storage centres, film archives are facing prominent infrastructural challenges regarding sustainability, pollution, and consumption.

> Film archives require a great amount of energy to run properly. To have a complete understanding of their needs, we must take into consideration all aspects of the activities that are necessary to ensure a correct working environment: the transportation of staff; that of the films themselves (physically or by air transfer); the energy required to run the offices; and so on (Lafite 2024, 161).

Given the ongoing uncertainty regarding the environmental impact of large-scale policies, archives are increasingly called upon to integrate eco-friendly practices into their operations (Figueroa Fuentes 2024); this involves a careful assessment of every aspect of their workflow, from the materials and methods used in preservation to the energy consumption associated with digital storage and the day-to-day functioning of archival facilities. This means not

4 "These business models, in many cases, are still based on the commercialization of goods and services with short lifespans, incompatible with long-term preservation planning." (Antoniazzi 2020, 2).

only implementing green practices but also actively seeking innovative solutions to reduce their ecological footprint. The commitment to reducing waste and environmental impact extends beyond technical adjustments to encompass a broader cultural shift within archival institutions.

What once was valid mostly for film archives in Global South countries, is now becoming relevant also for many other institutions in the Northern Hemisphere. Since the primary challenge in prolonging the lifespan of films lies in mitigating their accelerated degradation due to high temperature and humidity levels, effective management of storage conditions is therefore essential, achieved through a combination of passive (construction-based) and active (service-based) strategies (Nikolaidou, King, and Coley 2021, 43). Passive control can be enhanced by leveraging thermal mass to create a buffer between external and internal temperatures, with systems such as phase change materials, underground construction, and similar methods that aid in maintaining consistent internal temperatures and reducing energy use. Furthermore, vaults should be fireproof, thermally insulated, and protected against water influx, which may happen for a number of reasons.[5] However, due to the global increase in temperatures, more than passive measures are needed. Active systems, including ground source heat pumps and variable air volume systems, become crucial for achieving the low temperatures necessary for film preservation. Despite these advances, the importance of renewable energy cannot be understated in the quest for net-zero carbon operations: on-site renewable energy sources, like photovoltaics, are critical to reducing reliance on the grid, especially during periods of high carbon intensity. The relationship between lower cooling and dehumidification setpoints and the extended usability of films is well established; however, this also correlates with higher energy consumption for film storage facilities, therefore, balancing these factors is key to achieving both preservation goals and energy efficiency (Nikolaidou, King, and Coley 2021, 46).

THE DIGITAL PRESERVATION PARADOX

The advent of digital technology has significantly captivated film and media scholars, prompting a thorough examination of its epistemological, historical, and technological ramifications. This shift has broadened the scope of André Bazin's foundational ontological query: researchers are now investigating the historical identity of cinema and contemplating the future trajectory of digital cinema. While historians like Paolo Cherchi Usai have interpreted the departure from analog film technologies as a monumental historical shift, and advocates

5 "Ideally, a storage area should be in the centre of a building, slightly elevated from the ground floor [...] Any location at the fringe of a building would make such control more difficult, and possibly less effective. Any location lower than ground level makes air conditioning more expensive, and effective prevention of water influx difficult." (IASA Technical Committee 2014).

of medium specificity argue that these transformations have influenced the medium's relation to realism and materiality, scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser and Tom Gunning have challenged the rigid dichotomy between old and new media. However, beyond these ontological debates, the current discourse necessitates an "infrastructural turn". About cinema, a larger metahistorical issue arises—how to conceptualize and periodize the medium's evolution throughout history. We must shift focus from what digital cinema *is* to how it *is sustained*, revealing the complex, interwoven dependencies between media and their material support system.

Besides these theoretical frameworks, the adoption of digital technologies is often heralded as a 'green' sustainable alternative to traditional methods. Within the realm of archival institutions, digitalization is promoted as a key strategy for reducing carbon footprints, with the promise of minimizing the environmental impact associated with physical records. However, this optimistic view often overlooks the "materiality of the immaterial". As noted by Hunter Vaughan and Pietari Kääpä, the digital ecosystem is underpinned by a heavy reliance on energy-intensive infrastructures, from server farms to cooling systems (Vaughan 2019; Kääpä 2018). At first glance, the shift from physical to digital archives appears to be a logical step towards environmental sustainability: the vision of a "paperless office" eliminating the need for paper, ink, and physical transport (York 2006). This transition has triggered what Jevons' Paradox describes (Wolfe 2012, 36): increased efficiency leads to increased consumption. As archival institutions become more efficient at managing records digitally, there is a corresponding increase in the volume of data generated, stored, and accessed, leading to greater demand for storage capacity, energy consumption, and technological infrastructure, rather than decreasing resource use. A more complete approach is required, one that integrates digital tools with thoughtful archival practices designed to mitigate environmental impact. This includes strategies such as careful appraisal and selection of records for digitization, minimizing data redundancy, and adopting energy-efficient technologies and practices (Pendergrass et al. 2019).

There is, therefore, a paradox inherent in digital preservation. While digitization is touted as a solution to the preservation of film heritage, digital formats themselves are not inherently stable: digital files require constant, active maintenance, to prevent obsolescence. Unlike analog carriers that decay slowly, digital assets face binary risks of total loss. This demands continuous collaboration within and across industries, such as data migration to new formats and storage media: "Migration is designed to avoid having to preserve old devices to read the old storage media, old application software to interpret the old data, and old hardware to run the old software to use the old data" (AMPAS 2007). Migration is not merely a technical necessity but a systemic vulnerability. In the best scenario, newly transferred data successfully replaces the old. However, a significant challenge associated with migration is the potential loss of information, involving the primary data and the associated metadata. Standard protocols now advocate for a "continuous migration" approach, treating data

transfer as an ongoing background activity, complete with quality controls and auditing measures to ensure integrity and obviate the risks of distinct, traumatic format shifts. Yet, this idealized workflow clashes with the material reality of most film heritage institutions, which often lack the financial and human resources to sustain such relentless schedules. Moreover, each migration cycle is an environmentally costly event, necessitating data replication and accelerating hardware turnover. This contributes to the accumulation of e-waste and energy consumption, forcing archives into a difficult trade-off between digital safety and ecological responsibility.

To mitigate these risks, institutions explore energy-efficient storage solutions and prioritize minimizing the data footprint, archiving only essential assets. Furthermore, the 3-2-1 rule (maintaining three copies on two different media, with one off-site) can help reduce the risk of data loss. While this strategy enhances redundancy and safety against disasters, it also triples the infrastructural footprint of every single digital object.

Moreover, the infrastructure needed to store and manage these files is expensive. High-quality digital storage solutions, backup systems, and Digital Asset Management (DAM) platforms require continuous investment in hardware and software licensing. This economic reality creates a disparity: funding often focuses on the visible act of digitizing archival heritage, neglecting the "invisible" costs of long-term storage and staff training. Ultimately, the digital shift profoundly impacts the entire archival workflow It necessitates a broader consideration of methodologies and skills, requiring archivists to manage not just content, but complex metadata and verification processes to identify deep fakes or corruption (Arrighetti 2019).

Furthermore, the digitization process must be seen as an opportunity to rethink how film heritage is preserved, studied, and made accessible to the public, to enhance the richness and accessibility of audiovisual heritage for future generations (Jones and Jancovic 2025). Moreover, archival institutions must engage in ongoing evaluations of their sustainability practices, recognizing that digitalization is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

POLICIES

The current emphasis on digitization in funding allocations for European film heritage institutions, while beneficial in many respects, fails to fully address the comprehensive needs of film archives. In Europe, the financial landscape is predominantly shaped by the allocation of funds toward extensive digitization campaigns rather than long-term structural preservation. This trend reflects a broader neoliberal trend in heritage management, as noted by Antoniazzi and Edmondson, where "capacity" is often confused with technological accumulation (Antoniazzi 2019; Edmondson 2011). While the primary appeal of digitization lies in its potential to democratize access and enhance visibility, this focus often misaligns with archival realities. Film archives require a balanced approach that

includes not only digital access but also the physical maintenance of analogue elements. As digitization "has complicated film archives' work of historical mediation, significant problems remain unresolved, particularly concerning the environmental and economic sustainability of digital storage" (Ingravalle 2024, 21).

Many countries throughout Europe have witnessed the construction of cutting-edge film storage vaults and preservation centres (Venturini 2022), but the rising volume of digital content and the induced built-in redundancy of digital formats gradually replacing the carrier-based collections have necessitated a heightened focus on digitization, such as digital preservation standards and access for both analog and digital-born film materials (Edmondson 2016; Prentice and Gaustad 2017; Catanese, Heftberger, and Olesen 2021). This endeavour prompts digital preservation's sustainability, both environmentally and ethically, as it remains intertwined with the principles of economic growth and resource exploitation.

However, the 'green' promise of digital preservation is increasingly questioned. The environmental costs of maintaining vast digital archives, particularly the energy consumption and carbon emissions of data centres, pose significant ethical concerns (Currò 2024, 169). Cloud storage, often touted as a good solution, presents limitations: according to Antoniazzi, it 'might be useful [...] only for small institutions, or to store relatively small amounts of data [since] the initiatives seem characterised by a high level of fragmentation' (Antoniazzi 2017, 182). Consequently, the sustainability of these practices must be evaluated not only by their ecological footprint but also by their adherence to principles of equity and justice (Currò 2024, 169; Holt and Vonderau 2015; FIAT/IFTA 2019). A critical, often overlooked aspect of this funding model is the neglect of human capital. Investments frequently involve significant capital for infrastructure but fail to foster staff integration.

Resources are allocated primarily into infrastructure or hardware, while training remains underfunded, or worse, trained personnel are not retained due to precarious contracts. This not only diminishes the return on investment but also undermines the long-term sustainability and success of the organization by failing to secure a well-integrated and skilled workforce. For instance, under the NRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) several ambitious digitization projects have started. Yet, these investments have not been matched by a corresponding increase in the stabilization of staff trained to be capable of managing these technologies. This gap undermines the return on investment, as the success of digital initiatives depends on the human capacity to harness them. This systematic vulnerability is evident in Europe, as demonstrated by the crisis of the German *Fonds zur Förderung der Digitalisierung des Filmerbes* (FFE). Launched in 2019 to counter the disappearance of analog heritage, the FFE was designed as a ten-year agreement providing million euros annually (Trumpler 2020). Despite its robust 'three-pillar model' based on conservation and curatorial perspectives, recent budget cuts have endangered the programme, calling its initial goal into question (FFA 2024).

Both the Italian and German cases illustrate that without long-term political commitment to both human and financial resources, digital strategies remain fragile.

SYSTEMIC VULNERABILITIES

Another case of inefficiency in the vision and management of large-scale digitization projects is the disappearance of the European Film Treasures website from the Internet, which marks a significant loss for the field. This publicly funded project, launched in 2008, was a unique digital archive that provided free access to a vast collection of restored films from across Europe. The platform was celebrated for its ability to bring together a diverse range of cinematic works, many of which were rare and previously inaccessible to the public. These included early silent films, documentaries, and avant-garde pieces, offering a glimpse into the rich history of European cinema. The platform was supported by many film archives and institutions across Europe, which contributed to its extensive catalog of over 1,500 films. The website also served as an educational tool, providing information about the films, their creators, and the historical time in which they were made. The website's sudden disappearance is a stark reminder of the fragility of digital cultural heritage projects. Despite its huge public funding and cultural significance, European Film Treasures fell victim to the shifting priorities and financial challenges that often plague such initiatives. The loss of this platform underscores how the sustainability of online cultural repositories is frequently compromised by a lack of long-term support and funding (Giannetti 2022). In fact, these types of investments involve significant amounts of capital up until the final stages of reporting. However, they frequently fail to adequately foster the integration of staff into the organization. A considerable portion of these resources tends to be allocated primarily to infrastructure or other physical assets, while much less attention and funding are directed toward ensuring that staff members are effectively integrated into the institution. Furthermore, often investments are made in training personnel who, after receiving the training, cannot be retained within the institution, leading to a considerable loss of both financial and human resources. This not only diminishes the return on investment but also undermines the long-term sustainability and success of the organization by failing to secure a well-integrated and skilled workforce. For instance, the Italian Ministry for Cultural Heritage, under the NRP Investment for Digital Strategies and Platforms for Cultural Heritage, has initiated several projects aimed at establishing a comprehensive hardware and software infrastructure to support the entire digital ecosystem across the nation, but the investments made in the digital infrastructure have not been matched by an increase in training of staff capable of operating, managing, and systematizing these new technologies. This gap poses a challenge, as the success of these digital initiatives depends not only on the technology itself but also on the human capacity to harness and optimize its potential. This situation

calls for a more balanced approach where investments in technology are paralleled by efforts to upskill and retain staff who are essential to the effective implementation of these digital strategies (ICDP 2022).

In addition to training in digital technologies, the current global context — marked by accelerating climate change and frequent emergencies— demands attention to a broader range of challenges. Beyond the virtual realm, physical infrastructures face significant risks that can impact their sustainability and resilience. Instances such as floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters pose serious threats to archival collections, emphasizing the need for comprehensive strategies that prioritize disaster preparedness and infrastructure strengthening. For instance, on 8 June 2024, at Cineteca Nazionale - Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, the Italian national film archive in Rome, a fire broke out, burning 500 boxes of nitrate reels, a total of 220 titles destroyed (Editoriale Domani 2024). Unfortunately, similar episodes can happen and occurred several times in some Italian film archives, always in summer, when temperatures rise sharply; the nitrate film is a highly flammable material and short-circuits can happen in the systems that are supposed to monitor the temperature and humidity conditions at which those reels are stored. However, the Italian Ministry decided to hide the incident, which was only spoken about publicly when a parliamentary interrogation occurred, a month later, as a political debate. In the same days, on 4 June 2024, a rise in groundwater caused flooding in the nitrate vault of the Dutch national cinematheque, Eye Filmmuseum, with water affecting the lowest-shelf cans. The Eye Collections Center staff called the fire brigade to pump out the water and restore power, after which new pumps and an emergency dryer were installed. The flood impacted only about 80 out of 7,000 cans, as the old metal can lids kept water out of most. Affected films were frozen to stabilize them, and further conservation is planned. Both incidents have added urgency to the longstanding plans for new nitrate vaults both in Rome and Amsterdam, but in the second case an account of the event was immediately shared in the cinematheque's official website and social media pages (Eye Filmmuseum 2024). This testifies a different sense of responsibility for community engagement, but also a different relationship with governmental institutions and their policies.

Moreover, the democratization and inclusivity of moving image preservation must be reconciled with the current hypertrophy of audio-visual production. The overwhelming influx of digital content necessitates the establishment of selective criteria to determine what is preserved. These criteria inevitably involve political and ideological considerations, as decisions about what constitutes culturally significant heritage often reflect power dynamics and societal values. The process of selection thus opens up various scenarios, each with distinct political and ideological implications. It appears evident that the validation provided by digital technologies to the methods involved in safeguarding, archiving, and enriching audiovisual materials does not primarily stem from their technological application, but rather from a fundamental reconsideration of the

underlying epistemology of the archival process. In essence, while digital tools play a significant role in these practices, their true significance lies in prompting a deeper reflection on how archival work is conceptualized and performed. This shift involves not only adopting new technologies but also reevaluating the theoretical frameworks and methodologies that govern how we preserve and interpret audiovisual heritage. Thus, the evolution towards digital methods represents more than just a technical adaptation; it signifies a paradigmatic shift toward a more comprehensive understanding and application of archival principles in the digital age.

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES: STEWARDSHIP INTO FILM COLLECTIONS

Defining limits in terms of stewardship and growth is another critical aspect of this discourse. The question of who will set these limits and on what basis is central to the future of film heritage preservation. The actors and agents involved in this process, ranging from governmental bodies to cultural institutions and private entities, will play crucial roles in shaping the preservation landscape. The potential for a transformative, and possibly traumatic, shift in this landscape looms large, driven by economic dynamics and crises that could expose fragile assets and heritage to the risk of disappearance.

Furthermore, the discourse must address the concept of degrowth in heritage preservation. Echoing the concerns raised by Vaughan regarding the environmental toll of the "digital cloud", and the need for "sustainable media" advocated by Starosielski and Jancovic, a paradigm shift is necessary. As the unsustainable nature of perpetual growth becomes increasingly apparent, a paradigm shift towards degrowth may be necessary. This shift could involve a rebalancing towards the Global South, where moving images are paradoxically at the greatest risk of loss. Embracing degrowth would necessitate a rethinking of preservation priorities, focusing on the equitable distribution of resources and attention to often marginalized or minor heritages. Rather than relying on directives from higher authorities, we must take proactive steps toward adopting more energy-efficient models through practices that should not be delayed by waiting for centralized mandates. There are already effective solutions being put into practice at local levels, demonstrating that meaningful change is possible without top-down intervention: these grassroots initiatives showcase that we have the tools and knowledge to reduce energy consumption in audiovisual archiving today, and the momentum for this transition can and should be driven by local actions and community-led efforts: "We should offer a common answer to this challenge as a community, as we did when digital technologies first shuffled the cards within the profession" (Lafite 2024, 162).

While the field of film and cinema history and the global film archiving community increasingly turn their focus to the less examined aspects of archives, a notable shift is occurring (Ráduly 2022). The advent of new documentary phenomenologies

has highlighted the growth of intriguing niches, even within Italy (Cavallotti, Lotti, and Mariani 2021). These niches encompass a diverse array of film types, including industrial, amateur, family, military, scientific, and local cinema. This expansion has prompted the development of new archival practices and perspectives, which are fundamentally reshaping the landscape of Italian film archives. By uncovering and valuing these previously overlooked areas, the archival community is broadening its scope and redefining the conceptual maps that guide the preservation and study of film heritage in Italy, ensuring a more inclusive representation of the diverse cinematic expressions found within the countries' cultural history. Archivists from both prominent national and smaller local collections have highlighted how the priorities of commercial studios have eclipsed a wide array of culturally significant film material, such as amateur films, home movies, experimental, industrial, educational, scientific films, and other non-theatrical film materials, indicating a substantial gap in the historical documentation (Simoni 2015). Representatives from these non-commercial archives advocated for the importance of the valorization of these genres, which often capture regional histories and marginalized voices, expanding the parameters of what is preserved as cinema, which is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of our cultural and historical landscape (Bozak 2012, 184). Some institutions are looking for solutions on how to preserve and disseminate audiovisual materials using web-based platforms or databases specifically designed to deal with amateur films, family films, institutional films, regional productions, or "filmic memory of territories", such as the Diazinteregio project. This example is particularly interesting because they build up a network to connect organizations from local to regional scale in France (Ange 2024, 36). By advocating for the preservation of these diverse forms of film, heritage institutions are pushing for a reassessment of cultural value that not only enriches the historical record, but also ensures that future generations have access to a more representative and multifaceted view of the past: "in their work, archivists prefer not to speak about selection, but rather about creating an order of priority" (Brunow 2017, 102). Our examination of how archives narrate their own histories, manage scarcity, and articulate their fundamental raison d'être expresses the deeply ingrained values that underpin daily archival practice, clarifying that the long-term viability of cultural heritage is fundamentally rooted in a human-centric dedication that animates and transcends the associated technical and structural difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS

This reflection is part of ongoing research that investigates the film heritage institutions on the Italian territory regarding photochemical, digital, and curatorial preservation aspects. While the challenges of digital preservation and the environmental impact of media are increasingly documented in broader media studies, this literature often remains siloed from the on-the-ground infrastructural and policy realities of FHIs. Our article argues that the Italian context, with its rich yet fragmented archival landscape, can serve as a critical case study

that exposes the central paradox of contemporary film preservation: the pursuit of digital sufficiency, driven by EU and national policies, in fact generates new forms of excess, in energy consumption, data management, and often, inefficient capital allocation.

By integrating critical infrastructure studies with degrowth principles and grounding our analysis in empirical data from the SAFE project, including a nationwide survey, microclimatic monitoring, and ethnographic fieldwork, we inquire not just the "state of the art," but the structural misalignments between policy, technology, and sustainable stewardship. Our contribution offers a granular, evidence-based critique of how these tensions manifest in a major European patrimony state. Ultimately, the fragility of these infrastructures undermines their ability to operate effectively, leaving them vulnerable to economic instability and climate risks.

Therefore, rethinking the digitization process requires moving beyond. As our findings suggest, precise guidelines on data and metadata are useful tools, but they are insufficient if not accompanied by a paradigm shift. The challenge for the future is not simply to manage the transition to new carriers, but to question the logic of accumulation itself. A truly sustainable strategy must prioritize "human infrastructure" over the endless acquisition of hardware. Only by embracing a perspective of sufficiency can film heritage institutions resist the pressures of market-driven excess, ensuring that the preservation of the past does not compromise the livability of the future.

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REVIEWS/COMPTES-RENDUS

Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe. Visual Culture and the Reconstruction of Public Space

Edited by Lucie Česálková, Johannes Praetorius-Rhein, Perrine Val, and Paolo Villa

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Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe is a massive account of a wide variety of productions that fall under the large umbrella of "non-fiction": short films, sponsored reels, ephemerals, documentaries, newsreels, industrial films, and home movies. The period covered in the book starts in 1946 and ends in 1956, even though, as stated in the introduction, neither dates should be taken as rigid endpoints. Rather, these dates represent key transitional moments in European history: the end of War World II on the one hand and, on the other, the year of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, of the repression of anti-communist and anti-Soviet demonstrations in Poland and Hungary, and the rise of television. In the book, "Europe" is also a space with soft boundaries rather than national borders, and in which the divide of the "Iron Curtain" is contested to understand connections and continuities in how film contributed to the construction of individual and collective identities by showing, telling, and recollecting the reconstruction of cities and economies. The book covers a wide territory from a transnational perspective, challenging national categories of film historiography and contesting traditional divisions, particularly, between "East" and "West." The open territory is framed, in the book, through the lens of public and private spaces (respectively, threatened by the rise of depoliticized consumer culture and lost during the time of Fascist and Nazi rule, and of war). Analyses of case studies are coherently advanced with the common understanding that film, as a technology able to represent and recollect realities, had a crucial function during the postwar period in suturing the fractures caused by personal and collective traumatic experiences, political divides, and ideological conflicts.

There are seventeen articles included in the book divided in four sections, plus a preface and an introduction, making for an impressive volume of almost five hundred pages. While the size of the book may seem daunting, the standalone articles are loosely organized into sections that do not necessarily need to be read in order. In addition, a brief overview at the beginning of each section and abstracts at the beginning of each essay allow for a selective read, which can also be conducive to create new connections between case studies. Section 1 "Locating Non-Fiction Film" opens the volume with five essays that approach non-fiction cinema from the point of view of

where it can be located, considering this question both in the relationship between filmic and profilmic (where is the reality represented?) and from the point of view of circulation (where was the film screened?). This is perhaps the most unfocused of the five sections, for the essays are not really connected thematically but by virtue of their broader scope on the book's field of inquiry. Section 2 "Reconstructing realities" is rather more cohesive in terms of its focus, centred around the devastation of the continent during War World II and the efforts by national and international agencies to rebuild not only cities, infrastructures, and industrial sites, but also political institutions and economic systems. All the films discussed in this section promote such agencies as effective in implementing projects to the benefit of society, with the goal of supporting the system that put them in place (either capitalist or communist). Section 3 is also interested in the reconstruction of European cities and economies but with a specific focus on the relationship between spaces (especially, cities in ruins) and the trauma of war. Titled "Spaces of Cultural Trauma," this section features articles on how in different countries, whether they went through the war as occupied territory or as invader, films similarly functioned as tool to heal the visible and invisible scars left by War World II. Comparative analyses are key in this section, with articles focusing on Italian, Polish, German, French cinemas as well as on the relations between European countries (United Kingdom, France and Italy) and their ex-colonies (respectively, Togoland, Cameroun, and Somalia). The last section "Creating New Paths" presents three unique contributions on the accessibility and uses of non-fiction films: on the employment of footage of the liberated concentration and extermination camps by the Allies in compilation films of the postwar period; on the structure and goals of the online exhibition "Frames of Reconstruction"; and on the pedagogical toolkit prepared by some of the authors in the book. The last two articles are relevant to educators who are interested in using digitized filmic representations of the reconstruction period in their classrooms.

Among the many articles included in the book a few stand out either for their unique topic or because they neatly summarize the main questions at stake in the book. "From Rubble to Ruins," written by Francesco Pitassio, Johannes Praetorius-Their, and Perrine Val is a splendid introduction to the political functions played by non-fiction films in the joint reconstruction of physical spaces and social fabric. In "Finding the Best Time for Shorts," Lucie Česálková focuses on film consumption in "non-stop cinemas" in Czechoslovakia, using both distribution data and oral interviews to ask how this form of screening was able to more effectively permeate people's daily routines and thus perceptions of reality. Finally, "Screening Dortmund in Ruins" make visible the work of Elisabeth Wilms, an amateur filmmaker who shot the city centre of Dortmund in the immediate postwar period unexpectedly providing cultural, educational, and political institutions with visual elements to recollect the past.

Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe is the endpoint of a research project undertaken by a team of researchers from France, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Germany: ViCTOR-E (Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration and Reconstruction in Post-WWII Europe), which ran from 2019-2022. It reflects, in its wide scope and array of essays, the project's effort to build a transnational scholarly community, "a European research area, a shared sphere for the exchange of ideas and knowledge" (18). Overall, the book fulfils this mission, offering readers a varied picture of a complex historical period in which national realities enter in a productive dialogue with each other. Evidently, the volume cannot be exhaustive, leaving out some national contexts and placing great-

er emphasis on a few countries (France, Italy, East and West Germany, and Czechoslovakia). At the same time, the overall cohesiveness of the book's research questions across its sections makes up for the somewhat selected view that is typical of edited volumes. The "spatial turn" on film and cultural analyses shared by authors shed light on differences and continuities in the films that represented reconstruction of European nations and the making of new imag(inari)es for their inhabitants.

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The Screen Censorship Companion:

Critical Explorations in the Control of Film and Screen Media

Edited by Daniel Biltereyst and Ernest Mathijs

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The word "censorship" comes from the Latin verb *censeo*, meaning "I examine, I evaluate": in Ancient Rome, beginning around 443 BC, the word "censorship" defined the function of an elected magistrate—the censor—who, in addition to overseeing the census of the population, was appointed to scrutinize the moral conduct of his fellow Roman citizens, and to publicly denounce and punish the dissolute (for instance, by depriving them of the privileges connected to a certain social status, and even of political rights). Therefore, from the very beginning, the interplay of politics and public morality lies at the heart of the institution of censorship. Cut to the mid-twentieth century and zoom in on mass-medium cinema, the word 'censor' had become generally associated with the image of some anonymous State bureaucrat diligently taking notes during private film screenings to modify or remove images and sounds that his superiors find harmful to the population's morality and, most importantly, to their own grip on political power. Edited by Daniel Biltereyst and Ernest Mathijs with the "aim to make recent innovative studies on film and media censorship available to an international English-speaking audience" (2), *The Screen Censorship Companion. Critical Explorations in the Control of Film and Screen Media* has the great merit of making censorship a less "predictable" topic, broadening the horizons of censorship studies beyond the "coercive, repressive and top-down control mechanisms" used all over the world by the dictatorships of yesterday and today "to restrict freedom of speech or undermine free artistic expression" (1).

First, *The Screen Censorship Companion* broadens the horizons in a spatial and temporal sense, enriching the existing literature on censorship enacted by the usual suspects Fascist Italy-Portugal-Spain, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union and Maoist China with a wide range of case studies from different continents and historical periods. For instance, the edited collection encompasses the debate on film censorship from post-World-War-One Weimar Republic to today's geo-political and business relations between US media conglomerates and the Chinese Communist Party, including essays on the situation in post-1923 Turkey, post-World-War-II Italy and France, and Chile, Argentina and Colombia from the 1970s to the 1990s, to name just a few notable case studies.

Second, and strictly related to the aforementioned broadening of spatial and temporal horizons, *The Screen Censorship Companion* doesn't only focus on cinema as a film-theatre-based experience, but also takes into account film censorship across "a wide range of distribution and

access formats", from "video and digital media (VHS and DVD) to online streaming platforms", even including archives and libraries in the book's scope, "as their holdings, in whatever state of accessibility, form part of the collective history and memory of screen media" (8). Indeed, as the essays of the edited collection brilliantly show, when studying film censorship, analysing the film materials isn't enough, because more often than not film censorship is a matter of cutting, deleting, eliminating, i.e. making pieces of film disappear. In most cases, then, in order to "determine who censors, how and why" (15), it is necessary to rely upon paper materials–not only the news items and interviews published in the press, but also the written documents produced by the censors themselves to record their work and justify it to their superiors.

Third, *The Screen Censorship Companion* doesn't fall into the trap of the "hard censorship" model, equating film censorship with direct interventions by a given authority "through bans, cuts and alterations" imposed just before the finished film's release: censors had, and have, "a much broader repertoire of censorship strategies such as infrastructural and technological censorship, control over film production, distribution, exhibition and criticism, as well as tactics to influence public discourse around (and through) films" (1). In other words, "censorship can be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit, visible or more subtle [...] in terms of structural control, internalized censorship or self-censorship" (3): while the *Bücherverbrennungen*-like burning of films and the mobbing/jailing/torturing/murdering of film directors make headlines in countries that care about these sort of things, denying production funds or shooting permissions is just as effective a tool for restricting freedom of expression (perhaps even more effective, since it is much more discreet).

Fourth, by studying film censorship practices in a wide variety of countries throughout the twentieth century and in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, *The Screen Censorship Companion* does a good job of showing that "authoritarian regimes did and do not have a monopoly on censorship" (2). In fact, as several essays of the edited collection demonstrate with in-depth and carefully documented case studies, "depending on the country and its specific political and cultural context, some forms of censorship also existed and exist in countries [...] with political pluralism, competitive elections and civil liberties, and countries with constitutions that proclaim high principles of media freedom and freedom of expression" (2-3).

Naturally, totalitarian regimes all over the world may use a great scholarly contribution like *The Screen Censorship Companion* as a tool to legitimize themselves by saying that democracies should look within first before criticizing other systems; that democracy didn't, doesn't and will never exist since all governments are fundamentally authoritarian; and so on. It is the usual rhetoric deployed by dictatorships in their internal and external propaganda to demoralize people into political indifference and apathy. In the end, it is a matter left to the intelligence of the reader to discern between countries where people are free to research and discuss past and present issues no matter how damning and dishonourable for the State, and countries in which the most obvious historical facts are denied via a mix of State-sanctioned disinformation, forced indoctrination, and psychological and physical intimidation. A good academic book—i.e. one that is truthful, well-written and seeks to contribute to the improvement of human knowledge and humanity as a whole—can't be written assuming that its readers are stupid or malicious. Trusting the intelligence and good faith of their readers, the essays collected in *The Screen Censorship Companion* provide careful and detailed studies of acts of censorship to establish a culture of accountability for each and every attempt to restrict freedom of expression, and not to let "the fog of generalization obfuscate the precise actions that make up censorship" (15). I can't but join the editors in hoping that *The Screen Censorship Com-*

panion may encourage more and more people around the globe to pursue the task of studying censorship throughout the ages as a way to better understand the contradictions of our present day, one in which the countries ranked 178/180 and 57/180 in Reporters Without Borders's 2025 Press Freedom Index present themselves as champions of freedom on the world stage.

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Rethinking the Cinematic Cold War:

The Struggle for Hearts and Minds Goes Global

Edited by Stefano Pisu, Francesco Pitassio, and Maurizio Zinni

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A series of light, breezy, and translucent curtains is the first image that comes to mind when reading the collection of essays edited by Stefano Pisu, Francesco Pitassio, and Maurizio Zinni, which describes a cinematic Cold War characterized by so many exchanges, connections, and crossings that the idea of a single, rigid, and impenetrable Iron Curtain, erected between two opposing blocs, and that of a Hitchcockian *Torn Curtain* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1966) through which the circulation of information seems possible only through defection or, as in the film's finale, daring escapes across the Baltic Sea in wicker baskets, seem ill-fitting. More fitting is György Péteri's vivid metaphor of a "Nylon Curtain," which suggests that Cold War culture should be viewed not simply as the product of "hostile incommunicability" or mutual suspicion between two opposing camps, but as the result of "economic, cultural, and political inter-penetration between East and West" and "strong osmotic tendencies that were globalizing knowledge" (Péteri 2004: 114–5). Pisu, Pitassio and Zinni use Péteri's metaphor to propose a reappraisal of the history of film culture during the Cold War, moving beyond bipolarism to emphasise the intricate network of relationships, interests and individuals involved. "Multilevel" and "multipolar" are the two key concepts that recur throughout the edited collection and guide its investigations; the wide range of cases covered in the book—fifteen chapters which, taken together, cover a period ranging from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s, and a geographical area extending from Italy to China, and Chile—helps to think about Cold War film culture both as a network of professional and personal relationships extending at the State level and at the level of non-governmental organizations and individuals, and as the result of a series of encounters and exchanges that took place not only between superpowers, but also outside, across and on the margins of their boundaries (5–6). The international scope of Cold War Film Studies (Shaw and Youngblood 2010) is very much present in this work, which does not overlook the effects of "socialist internationalism" (Babiracki and Jersild 2016; Salazkina 2023) promoted by Soviet political and cultural institutions and later spread within the Non-Aligned Movement, nor the role played by festivals and other international gatherings in producing culture and fostering exchanges "in a protected arena" under the banner of a (fragile) "egalitarian pan-nationalism" (Andrew 2009: 71–2). One of the collection's main strengths is the seamless integration of an international perspective with an equally fruitful transnational one, further developing a trend already discernible in earlier works devoted to Cold War cinema (Djagalov 2020; Lee 2020; Salazkina

2023). The movement of people, objects and ideas along trade routes that are not always official and international—not only sanctioned by the state or parastatal bodies, but also by commercial enterprises and cultural associations or organised on private initiative (Hannerz 1996)—is in fact a theme present in all chapters and a central issue in many of them. In many cases, this is what Mette Hjort has defined as "affinitive transnationalism", developed on the basis of cultural or ideological affinities or "in connection with shared problems or commitments" (Hjort 2009: 17); in others, transnational exchanges and encounters occur out of opportunism or chance. Due to the complexity of the processes of transnational circulation and production of film culture, the study of the actors and interests that are involved can lead to valuable findings, especially if the investigation employs a multidisciplinary, multilingual and, if necessary, collaborative approach (even just for the source-gathering phase). The ability to work with widely heterogeneous sources, produced in different cultural and linguistic contexts, distinguishes the work of all the authors who contributed to the edited collection.

The contributions are divided into three sections, dealing respectively with the antefacts and initial phase of the cinematic Cold War ("At the Onset: Super- Powers, the Struggle for Europe, the Extension of the Conflict"), with Soviet international film policy during a period of decolonisation and fragmentation within the socialist countries ("Film Diplomacy: Non-Aligned Countries, Decolonization and New Opportunities"), and with the new geopolitical shifts resulting from the weakening influence of the Soviet bloc and increasing processes of globalization ("From Rising Suns to a Slow Sunset: Cooperation, Disillusionment, and Transfers"). Each of these three sections offers insights into the multipolar and multilevel nature of the relationships that shaped film culture during the different phases of the Cold War. Some contributors to the collection discuss in their chapters the links that emerged at the dawn of the Cold War between foreign policy, cultural diplomacy and cinema, focusing on examples of the film policies of the two superpowers, as Zinni and Pisu do in their chapters, or examining particular figures, institutions or political entities, as do Gianluca della Maggiore, Marsha Siefert, Rosemary Feurer, and Charles Musser. Several authors explore cases of film diplomacy, film circulation, and cultural competition in the larger international and transnational scenario, describing exchanges, contacts, and tensions between different interests and ideologies in France (Perrine Val), Yugoslavia (Pitassio), India (Severyan Dyakonov), China (Elena Razlogova), Mexico (Israel Rodríguez), Chile (Margherita Moro), Mali and Guinea (Gabrielle Chomentowski). Finally, in their chapters, Dina Iordanova, Catriona Kelly and Sergei Zhuk shed light on some cultural trends and tipping points at the industrial level, as well as in film exchange and exhibition, which signal the unstoppable crisis of Soviet film institutions and policies in the final phase of the (cinematic) Cold War. In line with various studies conducted over the last decade on the different links between culture, ideology, institutions and diplomacy during the Cold War—studies that have addressed topics such as music (Fosler-Lussier 2015), art (Mikkonen, Scott-Smith and Parkkinen 2019), and books (Haddadian-Moghaddam and Scott-Smith 2025)—, the three editors of the volume have sought to broaden the scope of the discussion by considering film culture as both an important part of the "Cultural Cold War" (see Pisu et al. 2020), which they define as "cultural products and endeavours intended to achieve political goals during the Cold War", and as part of Cold War culture, "that is, the production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic goods during this period" (3). Siefert's discussion of filmmaker Sergei Gerasimov's role as a cultural intermediary for the Soviet Union in the US and China, Iordanova's study of the impact on Cold War cultural balances of the changes in curatorial policies at major European festivals after 1968, and Zhuk's study on the reactions of KGB officials and Communist ideologists to the spread of genre cinema and alternative music among Soviet youth are

three good examples of how this dual perspective can develop from a single individual (Gerasimov), a cultural institution (film festivals) or groups with different interests (KGB officials and young Soviet viewers), and can be applied at the level of production, mediation and reception of film culture.

"Transnational creation and international exchange deal with mutual representations and reception practices. Too narrow an understanding of cinema during the Cold War [...] jeopardises the chances to fully grasp the much richer experience of circulation, consumption, appropriation, and cultural resistance" (260) maintain Pisu, Pitassio and Zinni, who, with this book, have demonstrated the breadth and variety of possible perspectives, still to be fully explored, in the study of both *cinematic* cultural Cold War and Cold War *film* culture. The sheer size of the subject that the editors have begun to explore leads to a consideration of the main "limitations" of this volume, which do not concern the essays themselves but are linked to more practical issues; in order to "rethink" a subject as vast as Cold War culture—even when limited to cinema—a large-scale, multidisciplinary project is needed to compare and connect history and micro-histories, and thoroughly explore multiple socio-cultural contexts. As with many edited collections whose titles are as ambitious as their objectives, such a project finds therefore its greatest "limitations" in the source accessibility and in the space (or, in other words, in the amount of paper) that time and available funds can grant to authors and editors. The fifteen chapters of the collection present fifteen partial perspectives on a multifaceted phenomenon that could, and should, be further investigated in subsequent volumes, for which the text edited by Pisu, Pitassio and Zinni will hopefully serve as a forerunner and example.

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PROJECTS & ABSTRACTS

Chinese 'Main-melody' Cinema

History, Institutions, Languages, and Narratives

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This thesis investigates main-melody cinema (*zhuxuanlü dianying* 主旋律电影), a category of Chinese propaganda films that was officially established in 1987 during the National Conference of Feature Film Studio Directors in Beijing. Since its institutionalization, this category has progressively become one of the most commercially successful and culturally significant segments of China's domestic box office.

Positioned within Chinese film studies, the research adopts a diachronic perspective, tracing the historical origins, institutional frameworks, and narrative transformations of Chinese propaganda cinema, and examining how it has evolved into a mainstream genre with cultural relevance for nation-building processes in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The thesis is structured into two main sections.

Section I provides a historical overview of the institutions developed by the Chinese state to regulate and support propaganda cinema, from early film regulation under the Qing dynasty to the centralized control exercised by the Film Bureau under the ideological guidance of the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The aim is to highlight the historical continuity and relative coherence of Chinese propaganda cinema through an analysis of its institutional framework, by offering a synthesized review of key academic contributions and by equipping the reader with tools to critically assess the contemporary developments of main-melody cinema—which are the focus of Section II.

Section II presents an original periodization of the evolution of main-melody cinema from 1987 to 2022. The starting point marks the formal creation of the category, while the endpoint provides sufficient critical distance to reflect on the productions created for the 100th anniversary of the CCP's founding in 2021, a pivotal moment for Chinese propaganda and nation-building. In this context, this thesis proposes a model based on four phases: emergence, canonization, mainstreaming, and intensification. Section II explores how main-melody cinema has integrated spectacle-driven and commercially oriented modes of storytelling while maintaining its propagandistic aims—thus aligning with global cinematic trends and attracting private investment from major companies such as Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent. Films such as *The Birth of New China* (1989), *Assembly* (2007), *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), and *My People, My*

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Country (2019) serve to exemplify this evolution.

These films are critically examined through an integrated methodology that combines film analysis and narrative theory with approaches drawn from linguistic and cultural Chinese studies. This approach is necessary in order to account for the role of language and culture within Chinese filmic discourse. The goal is to identify the key elements of propagandistic storytelling and to analyze the narratives and discursive strategies of main-melody films with close attention to the specific ideological and cultural context of the PRC. For each case study, characteristic narrative sequences are discussed, and selected lines of dialogue are presented and analyzed both in the original Chinese and in translation.

The thesis is accompanied by an Appendix, which includes a glossary of the Chinese terms cited throughout the study, together with Italian translations.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that main-melody cinema plays an active role in shaping China's national identity, functioning as a symbolic medium through which new narratives of the nation's past, present, and future are constructed and disseminated both within the PRC and in a global context. More broadly, the study reflects on how propaganda, popular culture, and market forces converge in shaping contemporary societies. In the current context of clashing narratives and resurgent nationalisms, exacerbated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is hoped that this research will contribute to building bridges for critical engagement and intercultural dialogue.

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Landscape of Ruins. Decay and Wonder in the Southern United States by William Eggleston and Cormac McCarthy

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Following the transformations undergone by the western landscape in the capitalist and post-capitalist eras during the second half of the 20th century, the increasingly evident emergence of a "landscape of ruins", dotted with the debris of a broken civilisation, came to light. In fact, degradation now dominates the harmonious and natural forms that once defined these lands. Such territories, which are endless and seemingly all the same, can be found throughout the capitalist West in different forms but with similar characteristics. They reflect the same sense of disorganisation and indifference. Yet these empty, fixed, unusable spaces, which cannot properly be classified as "countryside", "city" or "suburbs", are also landscapes, just like a mountain view or a city skyline. Instead of rolling hills and imposing monuments, we find ourselves immersed in spaces resembling landfills, devoid of any plan, where abandonment and indifference reign supreme. Here, "waste" becomes the contemporary ruin, "what remains" of human action and presence. Rather than asking what kind of landscapes they are, which would only perpetuate the problematic typological classification of spaces, we should be asking ourselves a different question, that is more closely related to the aesthetic approach to landscape: is it still necessary or possible to find some form of beauty in these spaces? And, above all, can we still establish an emotional relationship with these places, or are we destined to inevitable alienation from the "new" spaces we inhabit?

These questions form the basis of the research. To develop an answer, it was first necessary to select contemporary landscapes with common characteristics. The area selected for analysis is the region stretching from the Smoky Mountains to the Mississippi Delta, passing through cotton plantations and the suburbs of cities in the southern United States, which has its own unique space-time coordinates. The mixture of fascination and terror that the "Deep South" immediately evokes is the complex result of a layering of narratives that, over time, have fuelled a particular perception of these places (Bone 2005; Hinrichsen 2015). Authors such as Mark Twain, Langston Hughes, James Agee and, above all, William Faulkner have played an instrumental role in developing a true poetics of the South. Their works range from novels and poetry to more journalistic stories, but they all share an

1 Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Professor Luisella Farinotti (IULM University, Milan), to be discussed in 2026.

extraordinary ability to evoke images of the landscapes they traverse and narrate. The intrinsic tendency to *depict*, which is characteristic of certain authors, allows for an interesting and still little-explored parallel with photography.

James Agee's collaboration with Walker Evans on his seminal work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), was no coincidence. In the introduction to the volume, Agee immediately clarified that the photographs were not intended to illustrate or accompany the text. On the contrary, the photographs were to be considered equal and independent, to be read in continuity with the writing. This work enables us to explore the landscapes of research, almost as if it were a precursor to contemporary landscapes, and to identify the methodological approach adopted. Two authors have contributed decisively to shaping the contemporary geographical and symbolic imagination of the southern United States (from the 1970s to the present day), with a particular focus on the landscape: photographer William Eggleston (Memphis, 1939) and writer Cormac McCarthy (Rhode Island, 1933 – Santa Fe, 2023). They draw on the photographic and literary heritage of these regions to create a complex cartography of the "new" South, which critics have termed the "post-South" (Bone 2005; Child 2011).

Eggleston and McCarthy are key figures in the study of the landscape of ruins for two reasons in particular. Firstly, based on the authors' statements and the extensive secondary literature, it emerges that Eggleston suggests his photographic series should be read as a novel (Ferris 2013). Secondly, McCarthy's style has repeatedly been defined as 'eidetic' (Petrelli 2020), emphasising his evident tendency to depict and 'read' the world (Luce 2009). In the interplay of narrative and image—the two expressive media of photography and literature—the two cannot be considered independently of each other. Through fiction, the photographic series and the novel create possible worlds in which the opposition between true and false is suspended. These imaginary worlds are so rooted in the real landscape that they cannot be separated. The landscape is thus considered an area of indistinguishability between reality and imagination, visibility and invisibility, actuality and virtuality. It is not "something" to be observed, but rather an emotional tone that conveys the potential for a relationship with a fractured and dilapidated territory, inhabited by spectres and ghosts (Simmel 1913; Jackson 1980; Raffestin 2005; Jakob 2009; Gordon 2008; Yablon 2009).

What emerges, therefore, from Eggleston's photographs and McCarthy's novels, is the common condition of the *inhabitants* of that territory at a specific moment in history. The authors' work goes beyond documenting the landscape's transformations; they construct intertwining, non-linear stories that provide a comprehensive *vision* of reality—the *aesthetic experience* derived from their relationship with the landscape. They achieve this through epistemological and archaeological research: in their hands, photography and narration are tools for understanding reality and digging through the abandoned debris of Western society to bring it to light and question it.

The research is structured as a journey through the darkest and most hidden corners of the Southern States. It should be understood as a kind of *flânerie* through the vast, humid landscapes of Mississippi and Louisiana; the dirty, malodorous places of urban and mountainous Tennessee; and the areas of Georgia and Alabama where the ghosts of history continue to haunt the present. As it is a form of *flânerie*—a clandestine state shared by Eggleston and McCarthy's "characters", the inhabitants of these lands—here is no real beginning or end to the journey. Rather, it is an intimate and desperate attempt to find traces of life and wonder amidst the contemporary landscape of ruins.

The thesis is structured around two intertwining lines of enquiry. The first, developed in chapters one and three, focuses on the analysis of photographic and literary works. The second, corresponding to chapters two and four, offers

a theoretical reflection on key concepts and categories of landscape and ruin aesthetics. Alternating between an in-depth analysis of specific works and a broader examination of issues arising from photographs and texts, the thesis reinforces the idea that, while inspired by certain authors, the research necessarily takes the discourse to a broader horizon. Within this framework, photography and novels are exercises in envisioning a disappearing world on the brink of collapse. Through the creation of new visual and narrative alphabets, these two forms of expression establish themselves as methods of deduction, capable of bringing to life that which one would like to see lost, abandoned or invisible. The shared archaeological process of "excavating" words and images results in a kind of metaphysics of ultimate things, which calls into question the conditions that make a relationship with a landscape populated by spectres and ghosts possible. In this landscape, every distinction between the real and the imaginary, the visible and the invisible, is suspended.

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Promises (Delivered) Across the Atlantic:

The Representation of Italian Immigration through Home Movies

Daniel Melfi / Ph.D. Thesis Project [1]
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This project investigates the representation of post-WWII Italian immigration to Canada and the US through home movies. Part of an inter-university Ph.D. program organized by the region of Tuscany, this research centres on an analysis of the films preserved at (and is undertaken in collaboration with) Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia, also known as Home Movies, in Bologna. The project highlights two objectives. The first is to develop a new cataloguing and questionnaire model for the collections and their donors. The second is to refine a scientific protocol for the recording of oral history, specifically as it pertains to home movies. The intention is to cultivate translatable models to the North American context by employing ethnographic and anthropologic strategies alongside archiving practices. This way, the project may further expand its scope with a collectively drive film collection and memory gathering aspect in the future in cities where the Italian-Canadian and Italian-American communities are most populous, especially in Montréal, New York City, and Toronto. To elaborate, the project builds on the following research questions: utilizing a microhistorical approach, what do home movies reveal about Italian emigrant experience in the post-WWII period? Furthermore, what is the value of collecting collective memory (on small-gauge motion picture stock)?

The research involves a close reading of over thirty hours of footage on small-gauge photochemical motion picture stock, recorded in the postwar period in Italy and North America, between the late 1940s and the early 1980s. The films document the daily lives of Italian immigrants that emigrated from Italy from a variety of southern rural realities. Between 1929 and 1985 about nine million Italians emigrated (Del Boca and Venturini 2003). Between 1941 and 1980, about 500,000 Italians immigrated to Canada (Ramirez 1989) while in the same period over 500,000 arrived in the US (Cavaioli 2008). This wave of emigration was caused by a lack of labour opportunities, a poorly organized agricultural economy and widespread poverty in rural regions in Italy, not only in the south but the north as well (Del Boca and Venturini 2003).

The films preserved at Home Movies belong to six separate collections. They range in length from fifteen metres to over 120 metres (approximately four minutes to thirty minutes). The visual texts depict the contrasts between the socio-economic realities that Italians left behind in post-war rural Italy and those that they encountered in Canada and the US at a time of rapid economic

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growth and expansion. They do, however, also reveal more or less subtle processes of cultural assimilation to their new lives in North America. The research exists at the intersection of film studies, historiography, ethnography and anthropology, employing a microhistorical approach and centring on auto- and domestic ethnographic gazes inherent in the texts. In the process, this investigation reveals the authentic representation of a particularly important moment of European and North American postwar migration. But it also demonstrates the importance and value of home movies and their preservation in a funded institutional context, enabling the digitization and accessibility of these collections for scholars and citizens alike.

By employing a detail-oriented and analytical approach, the research applies the principles of microhistory as developed by Italian historians Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, two of the field's founders and proponents. Specifically, this approach works to shift the focus of the typical macro-historical lens in order to focus on figures not only outside of the historical canon but to do so in a microscopic and analytical fashion. Although Ginzburg and Levi have written extensively on this topic, it has been scholar Efrén Cuevas that has continued to position such an approach in relation to the documentary value of home movies. He writes that a microhistorical perspective "combines historiographical rigor with a creative approach", in response to the realization that, "an urgent need arises to make the everyday visible, to rescue it from the oblivion to which the grand narratives habitually consign it" (2022).

The intention is to reveal previously ignored but indicative facets of a familiar macro-historical context (in this case the massive wave of postwar Italian migration to Canada and the US). This project communicates ways in which such an event might be best articulated through the findings of smaller, detail-oriented investigation into the life of one particular individual, such as a farmer that has left the Italian rural region of Molise and immigrated to a burgeoning North American metropolis like Toronto. This research's methodology radiates out of the confluence of primary sources, the filmic texts (which are in fact digital scans of the 16mm, 8mm and S8 films), along with research by scholars like Cuevas, Roger Odin, Cecilia Mörner, Michael Renov, Patricia Zimmermann, and Catherine Russell. It does, however, utilize anthropologic and ethnographic tools and methods such as interviews with extant family members and donors of the films. Here, the scientific protocol for recording oral history—as it pertains to home movies—can prove to be not only a key to addressing the research questions of the project, but also offers a quantifiable result for this three-year-long course program. As Mörner writes, ethnographic methods, particularly interviews, can "compensate for the lack of both textual analysis and contextual analysis" (2011). Information gleaned through such encounters can then be cross-referenced with the filmic objects themselves, investigating their projection history, labelling, and organization—all according to the traces on the film stock, containers and reels.

Together with the film inspection reports and existing catalogues, this collage of information, including primary and secondary source material, provides an ample landscape in which to conduct a microscopic analysis leading to discoveries and, more importantly, more questions, which bring the research closer to its goals and objectives. Through an investigation of the representation of post-WWII Italian immigration to Canada and the US through home movies, this project makes an argument for the microhistorical capacity of home movies and their ability to reveal new details about established narratives. The target of this research is to assert the value and importance of home movies preservation and archivisation in appropriately funded and accessible institutions.

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* This is a selective, not exhaustive, bibliography.

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