

Cultural Exports: Italian Film Festivals in the US

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Abstract

Film festivals serve a variety of purposes. They provide a communal experience, foster meaningful conversation about world cultures, cinematic and social practices. In this essay I investigate how different types and levels of support, as well as geography, determines programming choices, financial outcomes and community engagement. I offer a brief overview of Italian film festivals in the U.S. and I focus on the analysis of three Italian film festivals that distinguish themselves amongst the others because, maintaining their differences, they share the common objective of using films as vehicles for “cultural formation as promotion of Italy abroad” as per the Franceschini Act. They integrate academic screening discussions, lectures, and presentations. However, the way in which they are financially supported as well as the area in which they operate, lead to different outcomes. The public spheres of these festivals create those social identities necessary to promote a cultural capital. I affirm that in the U.S.A., in lack of government funds, film festivals should count on enhancing their cultural capitals in order continue to attract the support of their patrons, mostly interested in obtaining the cultural capitals of educational film festivals.

Keywords: Festival; cinema; sponsorship; Italy; US.

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Film festivals serve a variety of purposes. They provide a communal experience; foster meaningful conversation about world cultures and cinematic and social practices; make it possible for independent and low-budget films to be screened; and serve as a point of convergence, bringing together curators, artists, scholars, students, critics, distributors, investors, and others. Film festivals deliver cinema to people in countries other than those where the movies were made. They are instrumental in giving cinema production its global reach.

Dina Iordanova, a film studies professor at the University of St. Andrews, identifies a vast framework that contains and supports all cinema productions worldwide, of which film festivals are the superstructure's connection points.

The global reach of film is enabled by its unique and inherently transnational infrastructure. And, as the place where the various cinemas come together, film festivals are the most important branch in this infrastructure, but also the most overlooked one. From its outset the large film festival has been the very antithesis of an enclosed national cinema. Such a festival brings together the works from all over the world – and the more it manages to do so, the more respected it is. In that, the film festival has always been the site where the inherently transnational character of cinematic art reveals itself more glaringly (Iordanova 2015: XIII).

The global reach of film festivals is not limited to large events. Although it is easier than ever to access international films thanks to the explosion of online streaming and subscription services, festivals present opportunities for centralized public discourse. They are communal affairs. They bring people together.

International film festivals came long before the internet's universally accessible streaming services, and they have become more popular and influential with each passing year. Alberto Barbera, artistic director of the Venice International Film Festival, recently noted that, since 2012, most festivals have seen increases in audience participation, despite the availability of movies online. "Festivals today are for everybody, they aren't anymore elite events," he said (Barbera 2020).

Film festivals are unique spectacles, a means by which a large portion of the enormous annual quantity of new movies can be assessed, assigned value and directed into commercial channels. They offer a concentration of new movies at a particular moment in time, and often prioritize the auteur. They reveal the tastes and artistic proclivities of discerning executives, curators, jurors, and other festival officials empowered to express opinions about the work of filmmakers and, consequently, the disagreements between organizers and patrons. They also provide a platform for filmmakers who otherwise might not find a significant audience.

The scholar Cindy Wong, assessing the cultural value of film festivals, writes: "On one hand, most festivals are fairly high-brow and exclusionary, on the other, precisely because of the exclusivity that distances film festivals from the industrial mass cinema, they have the freedom to represent and even debate marginal, sensitive, and difficult subject matters" (Wong 2011: 11).

In the US, that freedom is determined in part by the location of the event. In big cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, audiences are more heterogeneous and open to engage with challenging ideas. Indeed, some urban moviegoers seize the opportunities these festivals present to view "art films" that experiment with aesthetics or subject matter. In smaller markets, audiences can be less diverse and have less exposure to international cinema. Therefore, they tend to prefer comedies, perhaps along with certain documentaries about history or Italy's beauty and cultural bounty, and Mafia films.

Film festivals, especially those in the West, trade in cultural capital – value obtainable if one belongs to a specific social class, according to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In the 1970s, Bourdieu developed the idea that cultural capital is a social asset that can promote mobility in a stratified society and improve one's status and power. By cultural capital Bourdieu means a body of symbolic elements, such as tastes, fashion, skills, and credentials that one acquires as part of a specific social class. Sharing some of these elements creates a sense of community, but it can also create forms of social inequality as some of them are considered better than others. He connects the theory of cultural capital with that of "habitus" – that is, the entrenched habits and skills we possess which are linked to our life's experiences. Bourdieu extended habitus also to our cultural tastes for art, fashion or food. In his book *Distinction*, he made the strongly challenged argument that the artistic tastes of upper-class French citizens are defined by their upbringing. They were exposed to the arts

during childhood and educated to appreciate them. He argues that social class is determined by habitus and by different “fields” where, as in sports, people engage with one another in their quest to reach an improved position and, ultimately, victory. Each field has its own set of rules and goals (Bourdieu 1984).

Festivals in the US often are supported by patrons interested in the acquisition of a cultural capital generated in the “public sphere” – a “domain of social life where *public* opinion can be formed”, as per Jurgen Habermas’ definition (Habermas 1989). The social space fosters interaction and dialogue and resists cultural hegemony. The scholar Michael Warner argues that the reflexive circulation of discourse facilitated by the social space leads to the formation of a social identity associated with festival participation. This social identity is rewarded with cultural capital (Warner 2002).

In the case of Italian film festivals, capital is generated by the artistic programming and interactions that ensue, and are influenced by funders. When funding mostly comes from individuals or private sources, the cultural value can be limited because taste and prejudice come into play. When government funding is substantial, artistic freedom and flexibility typically result, adding cultural value to the experience.

The United States hosts around 600 film festivals annually. Ten are devoted to Italian cinema and funded by grants, private sponsors, donors, patrons and, in a few cases, the Italian government. In this essay, I investigate how different types and levels of support, as well as geography, determine programming choices, financial outcomes and community engagement. I offer a brief overview of Italian film festivals in the US and, drawing partly on personal experience, present three case studies.

The three Italian film festivals I have selected are Open Roads in New York City, Italian Film Festival USA in the Midwest, and Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. Open Roads New Italian Cinema in New York City, is the US-based festival that adheres most closely to European models. Italian Film Festival USA is screened in different cities and sites, including academic campuses, each with its own social dynamics and particular public sphere. Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival is a sustainable hybrid event that leverages the college campus to reach the wider community.

These three film festivals distinguish themselves amongst the others because, while maintaining their differences, they share the common objective of using films as vehicles for “cultural formation as promotion of Italy abroad” as per the Franceschini Act (Law no. 220, November 2016 implemented by the Minister of Cultural Heritage and Activities Dario Franceschini to advance cinema and audiovisual works). The objective might be directly or indirectly shared by other Italian film festivals, but the three case studies selected implement “cultural formation” by integrating academic screening discussions, lectures, and presentations. Regardless of the common backgrounds of these film festivals, the way in which they are financially supported, as well as the area in which they operate, lead to different outcomes. I will investigate the intersections between economic support, place, and audience and how they can influence curatorial choices. I will conclude by explaining that the Italian film festivals in the US, which include an academic component, have proven to be a successful format. These festivals count on promotion and acquisition of cultural and symbolic capitals that can provide a certain stability in the long term. In some cases they face challenges, but the objective of promoters and organizers is to reinforce and make known the power of their capital.

1 The Big Three

The first-ever film festival was held in Venice in 1932. It was part of an effort during the Fascist period in Italy, when national pride was all the rage, to provide an alternative in Europe to Hollywood, which dominated the cinema business at the time. The International Film Festival derived from Italy’s interest in promoting cinema as part of the national economic output and as a way of fostering cultural tourism and draw attention to Venice and its famous beach, the Lido.

The Fascist leader Giuseppe Volti, Count of Misurata, was its founder. He decided that the festival should coincide with the art biennial, which started in 1835. Volti managed to avoid the interference of the Fascist regime for five years, until the construction of the Palazzo del Cinema in 1937 and the increase in political pressure that favored Fascist propaganda films and excluded filmmakers who opposed the regime.

Tourism was also at the root of the Cannes Film Festival, founded in 1946. Like the International Film Festival of Venice, which flourished in a desirable place close to the sea, the French equivalent was located along the beautiful Cote Azure. The Berlin International Film Festival, instead, was not an integral part of a push to bolster tourism. It started in 1951 during the Cold War after Oscar Martay, a “film officer” with the US Army in Berlin, suggested the formation of a festival committee and convinced the American military administration to provide support during the festival’s start-up year. The festival was meant to contribute to the restoration of Germany, preserving what was left of its cultural institutions and introducing new ones.

Since the establishment of these three influential European festivals, many more have been organized – more than 3,000 that purport to have international scope, and many others that are smaller in scale. They show how film festivals, despite their financial battles and competition from streaming services, continue to thrive.

International film festivals in the United States mostly promote national films, often focused on a particular religious, ethnic or cultural identity. Thus we have Jewish film festivals or Asian-American film festivals. These events grant their audiences not only exposure to films they otherwise would not be able to see, but a chance to fuel their cultural, social, and linguistic connections to the material and what is represented on the screen. The Italian-American community in the 1920s and 1930s sought to forge connections with their native land through music and theater. Much later, after Italian cinema gained international currency, Italian Americans could look to films for fulfilling cultural affirmation. Italian film festivals are a relatively recent phenomena. They started with N.I.C.E. in 1990, and have generally not lured Italian Americans in large numbers for reasons perhaps worth exploring in a separate article.

Italy – its art, culture, and history – is well-known to many Americans, both because of tourism and because of a robust population of Italian immigrants and their descendants in the US. Italy created a world-renowned cinema after World War II, and has maintained production ever since, thanks in large measure to support from state funding. The country’s contributions to cinema are worthy of textbooks and documentaries. Italian cinema is especially appreciated in big cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., where Italian-American communities flourish, and more Italian companies do business. Italian film festivals, despite their ethnic component, do not in fact generate a “counter public sphere,” as conceived by scholar Nancy Fraser, “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1990: 56-80). The public sphere created by Italian film festivals is in fact indigenous. It is the result of entrenched cultural expression and persistent interest in Italian creativity. Julian Stinger wrote that film festivals devoted to a particular culture can be for a “specialized minority interest and also for everyone” (Stinger 2008: 54).

Italian film festivals do not inhabit alternative ethnographic public spheres, although they appeal to cinephiles, Italian expatriates, international audiences, and those who simply love Italy. The oldest Italian film festival in the US is the New Italian Cinema Events, or N.I.C.E., started in 1990. The artistic director and organizer is Viviana Del Bianco, who is based in Florence. N.I.C.E. held its first well-attended event in a New York City art house. Del Bianco screened the latest Italian films and presented special guests. A few years later, she extended the festival’s reach by introducing an event in San Francisco. In 2019, N.I.C.E. announced collaborations with American universities such as University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, and New York University. They select a few films from the full N.I.C.E. program to screen on their campuses, and sometime N.I.C.E.’s guests present their films.

N.I.C.E. receives most of its support from the Italian government: Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (MiBACT), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (via the Italian Cultural Institute in San Francisco and New York, the Italian Embassy in Washington, D.C. and the Italian Consulate in Philadelphia), the Department of Culture of the Florence Municipality and Tuscany Region, and Fondazione Sistema Toscana. N.I.C.E. continues to promote new movies, often first works by emerging directors and art films.

Cinema Italian Style, started in 2006 in Los Angeles. The film festival is produced by the government agency Istituto Luce Cinecittà and offers a variety of recently released films. Because of its location, it attracts many actors, filmmakers, screenwriters, producers and other film industry people. Cinema Italian Style’s artistic curator is Laura Delli Colli. In 2008, the festival extended its reach, becoming an integral component of the Seattle International Film Festival. It also organizes events at the Italian Consulate and Italian Cultural

Institute of San Francisco. Cinema Italian Style receives financial support from MiBACT, the Italian Consulate of San Francisco, Italian Consulate of Los Angeles, and Italian Trade Agency. Italian directors and actors enjoy presenting their films there because it takes place in Los Angeles, where the film industry in the US is concentrated.

Pascal Vicedomini is well-known in film circles in Italy and Los Angeles. He is an Italian journalist who in 1995 started Capri, Hollywood and then established in 2002 the Washington, Italian Festival in Washington, followed by the Ischia Global Film & Music Fest and in 2006 the Los Angeles, Italia – Film, Fashion and Art Fest.

The Los Angeles Italia festival is funded mostly by MiBACT, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italian Consulate of Los Angeles, Italian Trade Agency, Italian Film Commission, and Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche Audiovisive Multimediali (A.N.I.C.A.). The festival also receives private support from Intesa San Paolo Bank, Iervolino Entertainment, Rainbow, and Isaia Naples. Its board includes honorary chairman Tony Renis, a famous Italian singer and music producer. The Los Angeles festival emphasizes new Italian productions and includes short retrospectives, screenings of restored films, and some Italian-American movies. It is a glamorous red-carpet affair. The festival, free and open to all, integrates cinema with other expressions of Italian culture (fashion, literature, art).

The Italian Film Festival Inc. promotes “Italian culture through its cinema and art” and organizes two festivals: Cinema Italy Miami, established in 2003, and Cinema Italy Atlanta, which started in 2007. The festivals are commissioned by the Italian Cultural Institute of Miami. Both aim mostly to entertain by screening box office hits. They generally do not have invited special guests from Italy, but screenings are accompanied by social events such as dinners and after-parties. Local Italian businesses provide additional financial and in-kind support.

The San Diego Italian Film Festival is a nonprofit established in 2008. Its annual event is sponsored by the Italian Cultural Institute of Los Angeles, Italian and Italian American Associations in San Diego and private parties. The festival invites guests to present films, lectures, and mingle. During the year, the festival presents special screenings and events related to Italian culture.

2 Academia-related Film Festivals

In the US, a few major Italian film festivals are linked to academic institutions. These festivals can take advantage of school funding, and access to venues and marketing resources. The challenges include scheduling around student activities and the academic calendar, finding appropriate technology solutions for film screenings, and convincing guests from Italy to attend an event that does not include the glamour of big urban festivals or access to industry professionals that those festivals provide.

In 2005, Millicent Marcus, professor of Italian and Film Studies at Yale University, inaugurated the New Italian Film Festival. Marcus, with help from a group of graduate students, each year shows at least five new Italian films and presents a few special guests. The festival is for students but it is also open to the New Haven community. “Our vision is eclectic,” Marcus states. “We want to give our audience a sense of the vitality and range of contemporary Italian film production” (Teare 2019). The event is supported by Yale University and access is free to all.

Marcus believes that it’s important for American audiences to watch contemporary foreign films. “For one, these films provide consciousness-raising alternatives to today’s ‘Hollywood model’ of slick, big-budget, violence-filled, special-effects filmmaking,” she said (ibid.). The festival is well-known and well attended by students, and one of the first Italian film festivals to be held on a university campus.

3 Case Studies

3.1 Open Roads New Italian Cinema

Although N.I.C.E. was the first Italian film festival in the US, Open Roads New Italian Cinema is the most famous today. Founded in 2000 in New York City, Open Roads is produced in partnership with the Lincoln Center and receives additional support from the Italian Cultural Institute of New York and New York University's Casa Italiana Zerrilli Marimò. The idea of the festival was proposed by Istituto Luce to Richard Peña, a professor of film studies at Columbia University. From 1988 to 2012 he was program director of the Film Society at the Lincoln Center and director of the New York Film Festival. In 1995, Peña collaborated with Unifrance to start Rendez-Vous with French Cinema, the leading American showcase for new French cinema. According to Griselda Guerrasio, senior project manager of Istituto Luce Cinecittà, the success of the New York-based Rendez-Vous with French Cinema inspired the Istituto Luce team to ask Peña to develop a similar event for Italian cinema.¹ Peña, together with Giorgio Gosetti and Antonio Monda (who is a professor of Film Studies at NYU) co-founded Open Roads. Until then, Italian cinema could be seen only occasionally and in few selected venues. Open Roads filled a vacuum, providing New York cinephiles with a chance to immerse themselves in high-quality foreign films.

The festival costs the Istituto Luce Cinecittà around \$100,000 annually, according to Griselda Guerrasio. Other funds come from the Lincoln Center, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, UNI France, and from private sponsors such as Campari and Kodak.

Last year the program included sixteen new films and one restored, and sixteen guests who participated in Q&A sessions with the audience after the screenings of their movies, as well as an intimate Q&A session at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerrilli Marimò for students and members of the community. Open Roads doesn't have the appeal of big festivals. It focuses on promoting a selection of new Italian cinema, and connecting filmmakers and actors with the New York City audience. Open Roads New Italian Cinema does not feature daily press conferences, red carpets or flashy public events. Rather, it has the vibe of successful European film festivals such as Festival de Annecy Cinema Italienne, Festival du Film Italienne de Villerupt and Karlovy Vary Film Festival.

The main mission of Open Roads New Italian Cinema is to share with American filmgoers the state of contemporary cinema in Italy, to give distributors a chance to see new Italian movies they might have missed at Cannes, and to aid filmmakers in finding a US audience. "More and more distributors, even big names, close a deal at Open Roads New Italian Cinema, and they use the festival to promote their films by testing them for effective national distribution" Guerrasio said.²

Italian movie distributors have struggled in the last decade or so to get their films released in the US. The last titles that found a degree of success in American theaters were Paolo Sorrentino's *The Great Beauty* (2013), winner of the Oscar for Best Foreign Film, Nanni Moretti's *Mia madre* (2015), and Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017). The first appealed to Americans because of its aesthetic qualities. The second benefited from its inclusion in the Cannes Film Festival and a cast that featured American actor John Turturro. The third was an adaptation of a novel by the New York-based writer André Aciman and featured English-speaking actors and an attractive setting (Garofalo and Fadda 2020).

Istituto Luce Cinecittà is aware of the distribution challenges, and has established a collaboration with Deutchman Company Inc. to distribute and market new Italian films in the United States. Deutchman Company is owned by the Columbia University professor Ira Deutchman, who has helped Istituto Luce Cinecittà create a fund for American distributors interested in screening new, independent Italian films in at least eight American cities. Former CEO of the Istituto Luce Cinecittà Roberto Ciccutto declared that a new type of coordination for film distribution is needed, and that is why the fund was created. Independent films such as *Miele* (2013) by Valeria Golino and *Indivisibili* (2016) by Edoardo De Angelis found American audiences. Consequently,

1. Email exchange with Griselda Guerrasio, 02-02-20.

2. *ibid.*

the Open Roads New Italian Cinema festival, produced by Istituto Luce Cinecittà, has become especially important. Located in New York, it draws distributors to the area (Brembilla and Garofalo 2019).

The success of the festival – its curatorial achievement, its reliable partners (Istituto Luce Cinecittà and Lincoln Center), its commercial appeal – is largely a result of its prominent location: Lincoln Center in New York City. The audience is composed mostly of New York residents who include cinephiles of all stripes, Italian ex-pats, Italian-Americans, students and foreign-born moviegoers interested in cinema made outside of Hollywood. The public sphere fostered by Open Roads New Italian Cinema is informed by aesthetics and cosmopolitanism, given the nature of the heterogeneous audience and the urban setting. It depends on, as John Urry writes in his *Consuming Places*, “a cultural disposition involving an intellectual aesthetic stance of ‘openness’ towards peoples, places and experiences from different cultures, especially those from different nations” (Szerszynsky and Urry 2002: 461).

The public sphere of Open Roads New Italian Cinema is an extension of Habermas’ formulation, in which he described the XVIII century public sphere as a new space neither controlled by the state nor by private interests where the European bourgeoisie could freely gather and share opinions.

Open Roads New Italian Cinema is mostly immune from government censorship, market forces, individual tastes, and politics. This kind of public sphere is a positive manifestation of cultural globalization, one that enables patrons of different backgrounds, nationalities, and social or economic status to interact with a common purpose – to become cultural citizens with shared interests (Habermas 1989).

Open Roads New Italian Cinema, unhindered by top-down requirements or expectations, presents diverse film programming to a diverse audience, encouraging their investigation of the world outside of the US and reaping benefits from open-minded patrons.

3.2 Italian Film Festival USA

Italian Film Festival and operates in fourteen cities: is organized by the nonprofit “Italian Film Festival of St. Louis,” run by Barbara Klein, who launched the enterprise in 2005 at the request of Francesca Valente, then director of the Italian Cultural Institute of Chicago. The festival made a successful debut at Washington University in St. Louis. Its mission is to create educational experiences and welcoming spaces where audiences can discover Italian culture through cinema. The festival is supported by the Italian government via the Cultural Institutes of Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, and also by universities that provide venues and additional financial support, and by private sponsors, such as Volpi. The festival has its headquarters in St. Louis and operates in fourteen cities: Boston, Boulder, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Memphis, Cleveland, Milwaukee-Madison, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Portland, and Salt Lake City. The venues select films from a menu provided by Klein, pay screening fees, and have the option to show shorts curated by Pierluigi Erbaggio in Detroit. The number of individual films screened in each city varies from two in Boston to sixteen in Detroit, depending on local interest and support.

Klein said one of her biggest challenges as president of the festival is viewing screeners and securing the rights.³ Some filmmakers submit movies directly to the Italian Film Festival USA, which has simplified the review process, she said. As a nonprofit with a modest \$50,000 budget, it struggles to pay high licensing fees. Distributors who operate in the US tend to be easy to work with; distributors based in Italy, can be difficult to pin down. This difficulty is the result of Italian business preferences. Distributors have established few inroads to the American theater marketplace, which is dominated by multiplexes run by large corporations. Italian distributors, already struggling to get films into Italian movie houses, don’t know operators of independent theaters in the US where their films might find an audience, and they don’t have strong working relationships with US-based distribution partners who might help usher their movies into the few art houses that remain active in the US. In addition, the few US distribution agents who are interested in Italian cinema production tend to be highly selective, favoring movies by famous directors or films that emphasize Italy’s charms over its social dysfunction – cinema, in other words, that is likely to appeal to American audiences. Left out in the cold is the majority of Italian movies made each year, including some that are extraordinary examples

3. Email exchange with Barbara Klein, Italian Film Festival USA, 02-10-20.

of cinematic creativity. The costs involved in international distribution can be prohibitive and the financial return uncertain, and this prompts risk-averse distributors in Italy to focus their efforts domestically.⁴

As a curator, Klein is limited by the availability of films and by concerns about pleasing her audience. She seeks to find movies that have a wide appeal, but ultimately relies on city organizers to make the final selections. She depends on paying patrons and seeks to avoid controversy and complaints in an effort to satisfy not only audiences but venue operators in each city. Poorly translated or illegible subtitles, nudity, profanity and violence can cause problems for some American audiences.

The concern about audience response is common among nonprofit cultural organizations in the US that depend heavily on individual patronage. Reactions depend partly on habits, expectations, and cultural and linguistic practices, which Italian presenters must take into account. However, expectations and cultural practices can be influenced positively when the festival fosters a diverse public sphere, providing opportunities for audiences to encounter other points of view.

In his collection of essays titled *Publics and Counterpublics*, scholar Michael Warner (2002) provides some definitions of “public” in reference to a response to a “text.” He provides a definition of public in general, of public as concrete audience, and of a particular kind of public that manifest itself in relationship to the texts and their circulation. Some of these definitions could help us to better understand the connections between public, films and festivals. Warner did not note any specific tie between sites and the public. Some exceptions can be made with regard to the circulation of a text (in this case a film) for a specific amount of time at different sites, addressed to different publics. Italian Film Festival USA presents its films in different cities. The films watched by the audience, the festival’s public presentations, and the discourse they provoke create a social space. This peculiar geographically extended social space can become a promoter of social change. For example, Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary *Fire at Sea* (2016), presented at Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival in 2017, raised awareness about immigration in Italy and Europe and inspired members of the audience to consider how they could help to compare European and American immigration issues, and to advocate for change (Donadio 2016).

Similarly, the Italian Film Festival USA, as a “geographically extended festival” including movie theatres on university campuses, municipal public theatres, and regular movie theatres – can welcome disparate groups and promote social change.

3.3 Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival

Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival is based at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. I am its founder and artistic director. The festival, which started in 2005, provides students, faculty and staff, and the Charleston community at large, access to new Italian films. Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival and a smaller French film festival provide the only opportunities in Charleston to view international cinema in a concentrated way.

The festival is supported by grants, membership fees, private donations, ticket sales and an annual fundraiser. Among the larger sponsors are Istituto Luce Cinecittà, College of Charleston, and Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Washington, D.C. Over four days, about thirteen films are screened. The cost of the festival is around \$50,000.

Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival is a hybrid. It has an academic component meant to involve and educate students of the College of Charleston (and students from other universities), and also a public component meant to create a festival atmosphere and attract members of the public. The approach also is interdisciplinary so that it might appeal to students (and faculty) from across campus. Students are active participants, assisting with box office duties, marketing and promotion, video recording, special events and more. The festive spirit – red carpet, access to special guests from Italy, afterparties – attracts members of the public, some of whom become donors. Community sponsors like the international focus and public nature of the festival, which is presented in a popular tourist city. This influences the festival’s public sphere discourse. “[F]ilm festivals are events tied to place, part of a calendar of a local ritual, that perform and enact the specific nature and appeal of a location for both inhabitants and visitors” (Harbord 2016: 70).

4. *ibid.*

Film festival organizers must have knowledge of the geographical and cultural characteristics of the host city. It helps them understand what kind of support they can expect to receive from patrons, members, local businesses and nonprofits, city officials and others. The political dynamics of the place (both the host city and school campus) also can inform organizers about what kind of activities are likely to be welcomed and what activities shunned. This knowledge is gained over time. Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival began with a retrospective of the work of filmmaker Gianni Amelio – without any indication of whether the event would be well-received. Only afterwards, did the festival staff understand that retrospectives were rare in Charleston, and that an audience for new Italian movies existed.

The city of Charleston has strong links to Europe, and a general fascination with European culture, especially that of the UK and Italy. Charleston was founded by British colonial settlers in 1670 and soon after played a major role in the transatlantic slave trade, which laid the foundation for the physical city and its enormous wealth, the result of rice farming. Colonial-era homes downtown, Palladian-style plantation houses, independent stores, and a profound commitment to historic preservation all are reminiscent of Europe. What's more, Charleston is located along the Atlantic Ocean. As a long-standing port of call, it has welcomed cultural influences from abroad (especially in the form of art and cuisine). In this sense, it is not unlike Venice and Cannes, both of which are seaside cities that host important film festivals.

Charleston's fascination with Italian culture was reinforced in 1977 when Gian Carlo Menotti established the Spoleto Festival USA, a major multidisciplinary arts event, and one of the most important festivals in the US. It was the counterpart of the Festival dei Due Mondi in Spoleto, Italy. Menotti chose Charleston for its European style and the numerous performing venues. Initially, Spoleto Festival USA was imbued with aspects of Italian culture, especially opera. Now Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival fulfills local longing for Italian culture. Charleston lacks big Italian companies, and therefore cannot count on their sponsorship dollars. The bigger source of support is provided by private donations by patrons of the arts.

In the United States, art institutions typically rely on private funding. Tax credits encourage patrons to donate, which in turn helps them gain symbolic cultural capital, used here according to Pierre Bourdieu's exception of resources available to patrons, on the prestige or recognition of their contributions (Bourdieu 1984).

Art patronage, however, is subjective and selective in terms of aesthetics and ideology and sometimes politics, and therefore requires discretion, unlike government funding, which uses taxpayers money to support the arts more generally (sometimes provoking complaints). Festival organizers generally must collaborate with, or answer to, a board of directors, which often includes social elites, and this creates a dynamic that challenges Bourdieu's theory of habitus.

Francie Ostrower, professor of sociology at the University of Texas, interviewed trustees of arts organizations for her study "The Arts as Cultural Capital Among Elites: Bourdieu's Theory Reconsidered" (1998), and discovered that organizations in the US did not adhere to the French sociologist's concepts. Although trustees often belong to an elite social class, they are not generally experts in the arts, or even have a particular passion for them, contrary to Bourdieu's claims. She interviewed trustees of arts organizations who recognized the importance of their institutions and chose to support them largely for purposes of prestige.

"Contemporary philanthropy is organizational", Ostrower writes (1998: 47). "Most gifts go to organizations and not individuals. Donors develop a connection and loyalty to particular nonprofits that, in turn, fosters and perpetuates their contributions. Involvement with particular organizations becomes part of the donor's very *own identity* in the eyes of those they know. Consequently, individuals derive prestige from identification with nonprofits. From the perspective of the elites, board membership represents the height of involvement and identification" (ibid.).

At Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival, audience expectations towards Italian contemporary cinema and culture can vary, and it is the festival's challenge to find a balance that satisfies patrons while adhering to the mission of presenting creative filmmaking in a way that sheds honest light on aspects of Italy, the main mission of the film festival. Some would prefer to see films that "promote" Italy's stereotyped image of beauty and history while avoiding its ugly politics or organized crime. They see the festival as a tool for advancing the interests of the tourism sector. Others bristle at the sometimes harsh depictions of social and economic stress in Italy. They don't care for the Italian "cinema politico". Others don't like criticism of the Catholic Church.

While the assessment of a film's artistic excellence subjective, the main purpose of the festival is to offer American audiences a view of Italy they would not normally see. Most patrons understand this and appreciate the opportunity to view films that shed light into the corners of Italian society, or focus on interesting characters. The hybrid nature of the festival encourages dialogue that is cross-generational and cross-cultural. In this public sphere, independent opinions are informed by academic lectures and dialogue with invited guests. Filmmakers often make their movies with film festivals in mind, for festivals consecrate and legitimize culture, according to scholar Marijke de Valck (2016: 110-115).

Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival screens movies that were box-office hits in Italy, and also art films, independent films, first features, and documentaries that often do not find large audiences domestically. The festival provides a way for filmmakers of more obscure work to find new audiences and extend the life of their movies. The cultural legitimization of the festival is achieved because the films are presented in an academic environment. Nuovo Cinema Italiano Film Festival, like other Italian film festivals in the US that are not fully funded by the government, needs to pay more attention to the cultural capital it provides. Therein lay the value – and the opportunities.

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