

From Music to Film: On the Emergence and Stabilization of the Film Festival Concept in the 1930s

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Abstract

This article explores the social history of film to shed light on the emergence and stabilization of the film festival concept in the 1930s and 1940s. The creation of the Venice Mostra in 1932 appears like the result of a slow process of legitimization both desired by the production representatives and by the nascent cinephile representatives. Nevertheless, if the device experimented in Venice will not be thereafter called into question, the concept of “film festival” does not appear stabilized at that time. It was not until the post-war period that FIAPF's activities allowed to the enshrining of the association between the concept of “festival” with the cinematographic media. This article highlights the social forces which helped to build and stabilize the film festival concept, on the basis of the analysis of the film press from various countries. Using discourse analysis, in the framework of a method inspired by the archeologic approach proposed by Michel Foucault, the article highlights discourses and controversies surrounding the adoption and the legitimization of this concept by the actors of cinematographic industry, cinephilia, popular education.

Keywords: Film Festival; Exhibition; Venice Biennale; Music Festival; Cinephilia.

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Introduction

To this day the history of film festivals remains one of the most significant and fertile research fields of Film Festival Studies. In particular, the concept of the “film festival” and of its adoption still generates a whole range of issues. For the scientific community, the first Venice Film Festival in 1932 is a referential point as the starting point of the history of film festivals. However, this assertion must be scrutinized at several levels. The first concerns the kind of events that served as models, knowingly or unknowingly, for the pioneers of the Venetian festival within the framework of the construction of the event structure. As a matter of course, we must take into account the diverse and complex history of the event models from the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (and not only in the cinematographic field). We should also lend attention to the symbolic roots that accompany these processes, particularly the influence of the educational cinematography and of cinephilia, for instance, in order to understand the choices naturally made in Venice at the beginning of the Thirties (Taillibert and Wäfler 2016).

Another critical issue is nevertheless involved in this attempt to lay the groundwork of the earliest history of film festivals. The central research question of this article is the following: how was the concept of the “film festival” gradually adopted to designate the type of event experienced for the first time in Venice, while this expression had been previously used with varying meanings, and will continue to be used for more than a decade after the first Venetian opus? In order to answer this question, we will retain two working hypotheses that will structure the two successive parts of this article. The first poses that, in the early 1930s, the association between the word “festival” and the cinematographic world was familiar to spectators and resulted from the adoption of an organization essentially inherited from music festivals.

The second hypothesis will postulate that the Venice Film Festival organized in 1932 constituted a starting point for a transformation process – but not a breakdown – which will result years later in a consensus on the new meaning of the expression “film festival”.

The approach we adopted essentially followed the methods of historical research. We have questioned and discussed various sources linked to the activities of these film related events during the period considered: programming, posters, reviewing and analysis in newspapers, etc. Concomitantly, the existing literature about the history film festivals will be the theoretical framework of this article.

1 From Music to Film – the Emergence of the Festival Concept

In early 1929, the French newspaper *Le Temps* (1929: 4) announced a series of film festivals to be held in the *Salle des Agriculteurs*, a Parisian movie-theatre specialized in screening film classics:

Since the relationship between music and film has always been one of great sympathy, it comes as no surprise that the screen should borrow its methods from the concert. A series of festivals is to be organized at the Salle des Agriculteurs during the current season, with screenings dedicated to the works of the most justly renowned directors [translated from French].

In contrast to an approach that takes the first edition of the Venice Film Festival in 1932 as the starting point for a history of film festivals, an alternative approach assumes that the famous screenings held on the terrace of the Hotel Excelsior on Lido Island did not appear out of the blue, but were a continuation of existing event models. The advantage of such an approach, closer to a cultural history, is twofold. First, it brings a pre-existing festival culture into focus and shows its influence on the global film festival model. Music festivals are of particular interest, being the field within which the festival concept essentially evolved its modern format. The idea of presenting a series of works of art within the context of a self-contained event was no more an innovation of Venice than the combination of art performances with social events and a festive atmosphere. The glamorous character of the Venice Film Festival also conformed with the tradition of music festivals as established in Europe in the late 19th century. Second, this alternative approach also allows us to direct our attention to early film festivals, held before and after the first edition of the Venice Film Festival, and enables us to understand exactly how the festival concept was adapted from music to film. It is striking for instance that early film festivals were influenced by national traditions established by music festivals. Consequently,

when pertaining to film, the notion of the “festival” initially bore a wide range of meanings, closer to the more general understanding of the concept common in the field of music, and devoid of the more specific aspects that it would later develop in the wake of the Venice Film Festival.

1.1 The Festival Concept and its Modern Musical Roots

The festival first appeared as an autonomous art event in music. English cathedrals played a pioneering role in the late 17th century with the organization of festive musical events catering to the emerging middle classes for charitable purposes (Ory 2013). These usually consisted of a procession, a festive service based on a series of distinct musical performances, and a concluding banquet (Mohn 2014). Thus, they already contained three core elements of modern festivals: ceremonies, a series of performances, and social gatherings around a communal meal. The Haendel festival of 1784, celebrated in Westminster Abbey and the London Pantheon to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the composer’s death, seems to have been particularly formative, laying the foundation for the organizational model of modern festivals (Smither 2012). Over the course of several days, the festival presented a series of works composed by Haendel, one of the most revered composers of his time, performed by an impressive number of outstanding singers and instrumentalists. It was attended by a huge audience, including the King and Queen, members of the Royal family, many notables, and members of the clergy. With this event, the festival concept took on a new dimension. From then on, the term “festival” became synonymous with musical events that were exceptional in all possible aspects, be it in terms of the size and quality of the performance apparatus, the works presented or the audience. This is well reflected in the definition given to the word “festival” by the *Revue musicale* (1829: 353), the first French review dedicated to music, in 1829:

The English term *festival* large gatherings of musicians coming together at certain times of the year in important English cities to perform works by great masters, with a significant number of voices and instruments [translated from French].

The Haendel commemorations initiated a boom of music festivals in England, eventually spilling over to the continent in the early 19th century (Mackerness 1976, Loeser and Werbeck 2014). Germany and other Northern European countries with their expanding middle classes gratefully embraced the festival concept. In German-speaking countries however, these events were called “Musikfeste” (music festivals) until the late 20th century, when the English word “festival” was commonly used. German festivals were akin to the English variant in many aspects. They also presented a series of concerts, often over several days, usually concluding with a banquet. But they differed in one important respect. As noted by the English composer Herbert S. Oakeley in his contribution to the “Niederrheinische Musikfeste” (Lower-Rhenish musical festivals) in the *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, “the first object in England is to raise money: in Germany the great object is to benefit art.” (Oakeley 1880: 456). German festivals thus ushered in a small but far-reaching shift in emphasis for the future career of the concept. Their purpose was not primarily charitable, but lay in the common cultivation of music. They not only introduced the so-called “Künstlerkonzert” (artistic concert), but also aimed to acquaint the population at large with the music favoured by the middle classes (Butz 2014). Richard Wagner’s 1876 Bayreuth festival (a lyrical festival) marked the height of this development. In its wake the festival concept attained its full modern meaning as an autonomous art event, no longer conceived as a means for charitable purposes or middle-class politics, but as an end in itself, ideally with its own orchestra, programming, venue (such as Wagner’s *Festspielhaus*), rites and audience (see also Ory 2013).

In summary, one could say that the following aspects characterized the modern festival concept: a self-contained festive event set around a series of exceptional musical (or lyrical) performances celebrating a person, a genre or music as an art. In this generic sense, in the last quarter of the 19th century the festival became an integral part of the growing cultural industries of many countries inside and outside Europe. Germany, for example, experienced a real boom in music festivals - the press even complained of an “epidemic” (Weibel 2014). But there were still national differences at the turn of the century. In contrast to England and Germany, in France modern music festivals were a fixture of the regular programming of urban concert halls. ‘Festival’ became synonymous with one-evening gala concerts dedicated to a particular composer (Schaal 1955). A 1908 issue of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (1908: 5) provides an impression of such events:

Next week, sensational programs every evening. Tuesday, Beethoven-Debussy festival; Friday, great Wagner festival with significant excerpts from the 'Twilight of the Gods'. Ticket sales for these extraordinary concerts are now open [translated from French].

Though they differed from the multi-day festivals in the English and German traditions, such French gala festivals nevertheless exhibited central aspects of the modern festival definition presented above: a series of works by renowned composers, often performed by a large orchestra and accompanied by a rich buffet during the break. It was not unusual for newspaper advertisements to highlight the large number of performers, as was the case in German and English music festivals. The term "festival" thus made sense to the organizers as well as to the audience. As we will show in the next section, it is these French-style gala festivals that had the earliest impact on film.

1.2 Two Early National Festival Models in Film

At the beginning of the 20th century, festivals had become firmly established in European cultural life as an important form of musical presentation. Consequently, the concept of the "festival" was closely associated with musical performance. But once film left its initial place at the fairgrounds and established itself as a permanent feature of the urban entertainment industry, it was among the first art forms to take over the festival concept. In the following, we will briefly present two different types of early film festivals. Two aspects are in the foreground of the discussion: first, the examples presented show a close link to national (i.e., French and German) music festival traditions. Second, even though we will not discuss the process, these examples illustrate that early festivals could easily evolve into a national model that could be emulated by other film entrepreneurs.

The French-speaking cultural area seems to have had a pioneering role in adopting the festival concept from music to film. There, a national film festival model emerged based on the gala music festival outlined above. A reference to such an event can be found as early as 1908 in the November issue of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (1908:5). On the same page as the advertisement heralding a week of sensational music festivals (see quotation above), the newspaper announced a "grand festival cinématographique" (great cinema festival) to take place at the elegant Parisian *Femina* theatre on the Champs Elysées on November 14 and 15, 1908. The event was organized by count Henri de la Vaulx, a famous French balloonist, and consisted of a series of aviation films with live commentary. The ticket was sold for 3 francs. The event clearly mirrored the gala music festival, both in terms of the program (a series of thematically related films rather than the usual mixed program shown in movie theaters) and the choice of the venue (the *Femina* was a place of high culture, not a nickelodeon-type movie theatre). The relatively high price for a ticket (3 francs) as well as the spatial proximity of the announcement in the paper and the references to the music festival indicate that the event was intended to appeal to the same middle-class audience as the music festivals. The adjective "cinématographique" (film) was evidently necessary to clarify the festival's focus and to distinguish it from the more common musical events, whereas the term "festival" lent such a film event a touch of the extraordinary, a boon for promotional purposes. Much as was usually the case in music, such events could generate an above-average attention in the press because of their exceptional nature. In addition, the potential audience was familiar with the concept from music, so probably knew what to expect from such an event, which in turn guaranteed communicative efficiency. But the term "festival" did more than that; it also conferred a dignity not only to the works shown, but more importantly to film itself. Unlike music, which was legitimized as an art form, film was considered a medium of mass entertainment and was highly controversial among the middle classes for being supposedly morally objectionable. Consequently, film had a low status. The term 'festival' not only made an event seem exceptional, but gave it a crucial aura of respectability, thus making it attractive for a middle-class audience.

Over time, the organization of festivals seems to have become a regular practice in some movie theatres, both commercial and cultural. One commercial movie theatre that embraced the concept was the *Cinéma Palace* in Lausanne, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. According to the local weekly film magazine *L'écran illustré* (1925c: 3), the *Palace* was "known for its comic festivals [translated from French]". In December 1925, for example, it dedicated an event to the American comedian Harold Lloyd, "the best comic actor in the entire world [translated from French]" (*L'écran illustré* 1925a: 4), screening three of his films twice each day for one week (December 11-17). For commercial film entrepreneurs, one advantage of the festival concept was no

CINÉMA-PALACE
Rue St-François LAUSANNE Téléphone 24.80

Du Vendredi 11 au Jeudi 17 Décembre 1925
Chaque jour en Matinée à 3 heures et en Soirée à 8 h. 30.

GRAND FESTIVAL
Harold LLOYD

Faut pas s'en faire !
Le Manoir Hanté !
Oh ! La Belle Voiture !

Fig. 1. Harold Lloyd Festival Advertising. (*L'écran illustré* 1925d: 4)

doubt the fact that it permitted the reintroduction of older films into the program which could be rented at more favourable conditions than new films, while at the same time presenting this as a novelty. Moreover, by adopting the film festival concept a cinema operator could distinguish itself from competitors. This aspect is well echoed in an article about another *Palace* festival held in 1925 and dedicated to Charlie Chaplin:

It is worth noting that the Palace is the only theatre to dedicate entire evenings to the comic genre. This novelty is much appreciated by the public, for many people wish to go to the cinema to be entertained solely by comedy. Next week, therefore, expect no drama, no tedious romantic comedies, nothing but comedy. *The Kid*, *Pay Day* and *Shoulder Arms* should keep the audience laughing all night long [translated from French]. (*L'écran illustré* 1925b: 4).

Cultural organizations such as specialized cinemas and film clubs, campaigning for the recognition of film as an art form, likewise adopted the festival concept. From the mid-1920s until the late 1930s, they staged numerous film festivals based on the gala music festival model. Cultural organizations often supplemented the film program with explanatory lectures, which reveals another link between the festivals in music and film. In December 1927, for example, a *René Clair Festival* screened three of the director's films for "the best possible tribute to René Clair [translated from French]" (*La Semaine à Paris* 1927: 64). Another example is the *Tolstoy Festival* organized in October 1928 at the avantgarde *Studio 28* in Montmartre (*Le Petit Journal* 1928: 4). The emerging film clubs sometimes acted directly as organizers of festivals like the *Albert Cavalcanti Festival* staged by the *Tribune Libre du Cinema* (Free Cinema Forum) on May 14, 1930 (*La Semaine à Paris* 1930: 63).

As we will see next, the German-speaking cultural area experienced a similar development, with organizers taking up the tradition of the German multi-day music festival and adapting it to film. However, this shift from music to film happened later in Germany than in France or the French-speaking part of Switzerland. One reason was probably that the organization of such multi-day festival events was more complex than that of gala film festivals. More importantly, it may have been due to the fact that such festivals were usually staged with the active participation of public institutions. The prerequisite would therefore have been the public legitimacy of film, which did not emerge in the German-speaking cultural area until the 1920s (Kreimeier et al. 2005).

The first to organize a film festival in the German-speaking cultural area was the *Bayrische Landesfilmbühne* (Bavarian state film stage), a film association supported by the city of Munich and other Bavarian towns. Its director and the main instigator of the event, Johannes Eckardt, later stated that he had hoped to establish a large-scale annual festive event for film in Germany, akin to those that had long existed for other art forms (Choy 2006: 94). The goal of the *Bayrische Landesfilmbühne* was the cultivation and promotion of so-called "good films", i.e., films that were morally sound, such as popular science documentaries called "Kulturfilme" (cultural films), but also high-quality fiction films. The *Bayrische Landesfilmbühne* organized its first *Film-Festwochen in München* (Munich Film Festival) in 1928 (July 3 to August 23). The goal was to provide a "comparative overview of the current artistic state of world cinema" by screening "42 top performances of European and American film" [translated from German] (Merrill C. Berman Collection 2015: 13) during six weeks. Each week focused on the film production of certain countries, with the last week dedicated to "Kulturfilme". Particular attention was paid to music. The American film trade journal *Film Daily* (1928: 2) announced the "best scores by Hugo Riesenfeld, Erno Rappe and Meisel". But the Munich Film Festival also reflected the tradition of German music festivals in several other aspects, such as its goal (promotion of middle-class taste), event structure (weekly, respectively daily focus, social events), content (outstanding art works), organizing institution (middle-class association) and the discourse surrounding the event (film, respectively music, as art). The hyphen in the festival name is noteworthy, as it expresses the still tentative rapprochement between the notions of "film" and "festival". In the following (and last) edition in 1929, the name was already written in one word: *Münchner Filmfestwochen*.

As was the case in the French-speaking cultural area, other similar events soon followed. In 1934 and 1936 the *Deutsche Gesellschaft Bild und Ton* (German Society for Image and Sound) organized the *Berliner Filmfestwochen* (Berlin Film Festival) in parallel to the Berlin Art Weeks, "in which masterpieces of German and foreign film art [translated from German]" (*Die Volksgemeinschaft* 1936: 2) were screened. Likewise, in 1939, under the patronage of the city of Basel and the Swiss Film Chamber, the local film club *Le Bon Film* ("The good film") staged the *Internationale Filmwoche Basel | Festival international du film à Bâle* (International Film Week



Fig. 2. 1928 Munich Film Festival Poster. (Merrill C. Berman Collection 2015:13)

Basel), “the most important film event in Switzerland [translated from German]” (Basler Nachrichten 1939:6). This instigated a series of other similar events in Switzerland in the following years, most of them organized by the growing middle-class film club movement. The announcement of the “Grosse Filmfestwoche” (Great Film Festival Week) in Arosa in 1943, a small mountain resort in Switzerland, once more reflected the tradition of the German-style music festivals based on a series of outstanding performances, explanatory lectures, and social events, all framed by a discourse of grandeur:

A first Film Week is to take place in Arosa from the 31st of January to the 6th of February. The rich and carefully curated program will consist of a series of noteworthy premieres, lectures by filmmakers, an afternoon tea, and a film-themed ball in the presence of the lead actress from a recent Swiss production [translated from German]. (Arosener Zeitung 1943: 1)¹

2 From Venice to Cannes – the Gradual Stabilization of the Concept

As we have just recalled, at the beginning of the 1930s, the audience was quite familiar with the association of the word “festival” with film related events. Then, the organization in 1932 of the Venice Film Festival contributed to the reworking of this term’s meaning and constituted a starting point, not a breaking point, to another meaning which would have overlapped with the other ones.² Based on the Venetian proposition, a new concept of global cinematographic event started to settle down and in numerous countries. Even though in Italy they had organized an “Esposizione” (an exhibition), the event was related in numerous papers in France as a “film festival”.

1. We would like to thank Reto Semadeni from the Arosa-Schanfigg Cultural Archive for his support in obtaining the newspaper article.
 2. The political dimension inherent in the organization of this event in the context of Benito Mussolini’s fascist regime, although central to understanding the evolution of the event in the following years (Paulon 1951, Paulon 1971, Taillibert 1999, Cowie 2018, Brunetta 2022...), will not be the focus of our reflection here.

2.1 The Venice Model: Identification of the Concept of “International Film Festival”

What are the elements characterizing the global model specific to the unprecedented film related event organized in Venice in 1932? The study of press materials, and the way the journalists reported the event help bring about a better understanding of the characteristics they showed off at this time.

The first element to note is the international scope of the event which distinguished it from the numerous national events observed in several countries. All newspapers reports emphasized the expression “international festival”, and we can say that it is the first break with the use of the word “festival” from a national or local scope, as we have observed earlier.

Then, a second important point is that this event publicized and gave substance to the will of some cinephile intellectuals. It recognized the cinema as an artform. If clubs and some specialized magazines were already places of consecration of the cinematographic art, the acceptance of this idea by the general audience was still lacking, and the press represented a major asset. For this purpose, the Venice Film Festival constituted a great sounding board. The organization of an event that showcased the best films from around the world, along with the recognized arts displayed at the Biennale, represented an impressive feat. In the columns of *Paris-Soir*, an anonymous journalist noted with satisfaction: “The cinema, as a synthesis of different arts, has its place among the glorious phalanx of the muses” (“Le cinéma à l’exposition biennale de Venise. La participation française” 1932: 8). In the same vein, in 1932 Charles Delac published a genuine plea in favor of cinema in *Le Temps*:

Venice, hotbed of art, which spreads its influence around the globe, is solemnly giving to the Cinema its artistic pedigree. From now on, *pari passu* with painting, *pari passu* with sculpture, *pari passu* with all the other manifestations of the spirit, the cinema has won its place among the arts. (...) This consecration will make a clean slate of all the prejudices that make shy away from cinema an entire galaxy of enlightened amateurs, for which the necessary industrial aspects of cinema hides all the acutely artistic part of its conception and realization [translated from French].

The Delac’s long text made a great impression on other French columnists, who enshrined its purpose in their respective newspapers. For example, Colin Saül-C. (1932: 6) wrote in *Comoedia*:

The impressive event in Venice, masterfully directed by the count Volpi di Misurata, constitute a high-quality event: an intellectual elite and the official representant of the cinematographic industry proclaim the legitimacy of cinema to join the major arts of humanity: painting, music, sculpture, poetry. If, one day, cinema triumphantly conquers this place of honor, it will be because of the faith and the action of those who, answering the president Delac’s call, gave to cinema its letters of nobility [translated from French].

This kind of article, at this time, contributed to a broad circulation of ideas, and spoke to their connection with an “international film festival” identity, that is the recognition of cinema as an art form. This was a central assumption of the Venetian event, organized apropos within the Artistic Biennale. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that in the same article Charles Delac offered a first assertion of “auteur politics”, in terms similar to the famous text of Alexandre Astruc (1948) written years later:

It cannot be disregarded that the function of each of these artists aren’t equally valuable, that the importance of their intervention in the process of the film making differs significantly. The director, for example, who manages the film, or edits the images with its own rhythm, really create the cinematographic style, as does a writer, a musician or a painter. He has an influence far more significant than other collaborator less involved [translated from French].

It is also interesting to observe that this first idea went hand in hand with the affirmation that the success of the first Venetian event was directly linked with the quality of its organizers. Delac defined this principle as “animator”, and established a direct link with the film clubs and their own “festivals”, framing the “artistic direction” as a founding element of festival mediation. In this regard Delac (1932) wrote: “That is the strength of a noble idea, when it has been conceived and prepared by exceptional animators like the count Volpi di Misurata, the sculptor Maraini and Luciano de Feo.” Furthermore, the recognition of cinema as an art is closely linked to the organization of a competition, known as a “referendum-contest” (Bauër 1932: 2). The choice to reward the deserving, talented works replicates the numerous contests organized since the beginning of the

century in the cinematographic field. This competitive aspect is clearly perceived as a way of putting pressure on producers, as an incentive to invest in ambitious projects. In the decades to come, competition would have represented a key feature of “film festivals”, as eloquently expressed by Charles Delac (1932): “It is too early to perceive all of the consequences of this enterprise, whose results will become apparent even in the industrial and commercial circle” [translated from French].

At the same time, all the columnists who covered the event insisted on the attractiveness of the location chosen for the it. The charms of Venice inspired lyrical flights, along with enthusiastic descriptions of the tremendous worldly parties which attracted the most acclaimed figures of the moment:

Night is falling on the lagoon, magical and ethereal, bathed in moonlight, and stumps its dream setting. The Lido gleams in a sea of glittering lights, and on the Excelsior’s terrace, an elegant and joyful crowd gathers. The inaugural session of the first film festival has just taken place (Delac 1932) [translated from French].

Thus, the event model proposed during the Biennale was characterized by a competitive event of international concern, celebrating the advent of cinema as an art, but nevertheless festive, attractive, and willingly worldly.

2.2 A Terminology Adopted by the Press: the Venice Film Festival is an “International Film Festival”

Even if the first poster of the Venetian event claimed that an “International Exhibition of Cinematographic Art” was organized within the Biennale, the journalists did not hesitate to highlight that the first “international film festival” was organized in Venice.

Arguably, the use of this term in this context was prompted by the combination of different phenomena. First, several festivals were held regularly within the Biennale. The Biennale was known for being an exhibition centre, but also, more recently, a festival centre: “The arrival of cinema within the Venice Biennale event, that for thirty years has hosted the most remarkable and undisputed works in its wonderful exhibits and festivals, will draw in a very particular way the attention of the artists to the cinematographic art form” wrote Charles Delac (1932). Logically, the concept was introduced into the Biennale through the music. Since 1930 it hosted the “International festival of contemporary music”, which became an annual event in 1937.³ And it is not by chance that the film festival organized in 1932 was dependant on the music festival. As we read in the September 6th issue of *Variety* (1932: 11), “The films were given on the line of a regular musical festival, with a programme fixed from the beginning and lasting right through fifteen days”. This accordance was viewed positively. For example, Gérard Bauër (1932: 2) wrote in *Paris-Soir*: “Cinema had preceded the music – useful council where filmmakers from France, Italy, Germany, and also America, could exchange some views and visions” [translated from French].

This deep connection made in Venice between musical and film related events provides a key for understanding the use of the term “festival” when used to characterize this new type of event. Indeed, for several years, music festivals would have offered a model, used to legitimate some projects of film related events. For example, in 1938, when Max Reinhardt expressed the desire to create a film festival in Hollywood, the columns of *Le Jour* (1938: 6) read:

The great Max Reinhardt project is to organize, each year, in Hollywood, a festival... akin to Salzburg. It would allow several actors to be applaud on the stage and, at the end, there are so many virtuosi attracted by cinema that music won’t lose its rights... in this American festival! [translated from French]

When the Cannes Film Festival was created, there were still some journalists who recalled the musical origin of the event model, even though the other roots of the concept were also outlined. Pierre-Gilles Veber (1939: 4), journalist for *Le Matin*, wrote: “[This event], as a will of Art and Peace, has lent the name of”festival” to music, dance, and agricultural fairs” [translated from French]. Thus, while during the preparation of the Biennale in

3. In 1934, it’s a theater festival who was created within the framework of the Biennale: the “Festival Internazionale del Teatro di Prosa”, which became annual from 1936.



Fig. 3. Poster of the Venetian Mostra - 1932.

1932 some newspapers referred to “the first international artistic cinematography event” (*Paris Soir*, 1932: 8), as soon as the event began, most of the French journalists described the event as a “festival.” We can observe the same phenomenon in the English-language papers. For example, in the abovementioned article of *Variety* it was proclaimed as “Italy’s Film Festival”.

2.3 The Thirties: the Advent of a “Film Festival” Model (Moscow, Brussels, Cannes)

The post-Venice period enshrined the event model proposed in 1932 as well as the term “festival” that was used to designate it. The year 1935 was especially important in this process, as different concomitant phenomena reinforced the use of this term in this specific context. On the one hand, the Venetian event became annual, gaining its independence from the Artistic Biennale:

As the name of Biennale implies, the events of the Venice Biennale (exhibits, theatre performances, concerts, international film festival) should in principle happen only every two years. However, the success of the film festival of 1934 film festival prompted the Biennale committee to depart to these rules and to organize an edition this summer in the same atmosphere of the gardens of the Excelsior Hotel, in the Lido (Sabatier 1935) [translated from French].

On the other hand, during 1935, two events of international concern were organized, and both were designated as “film festivals”. These were the “Moscow International film festival,”⁴ and the “International film festival” in Brussels.⁵ On the basis of this observation, we will now try to understand what unifying elements these three events shared that justified their designation as “film festivals”.

First, it is interesting to note that, as in Venice, the events in Moscow and Brussels established a link between the film screenings and the concept of “exhibition”. In Moscow, the film festival was tethered to an exhibition called “Fifteen years of the Soviet cinema”, hosted by the “House of cinema” to celebrate this anniversary. In Brussels, the festival which took place in the “Alberteum”⁶ was organized within the frame of the “Universal Exhibition”. On this event, an anonymous journalist of *Comoedia* wrote, “This Festival will happily complement the big artistic events organized into the Exhibition” (“À l’Exposition de Bruxelles. Un Festival International du Cinéma” 1935: 1).

Moreover, all the newspapers that reported on the event emphasized their international scope. That is arguably the main difference with the “film festival model” accepted before. These events also shared a program characterized by the high volume of films they screened.

We can also note that, as in the case of Venice, the role of these events in the affirmation of the artistic essence of cinema was emphasized by the newspapers, particularly in France. Indeed, French newspapers tended to glorify the “artistic quality”, the “Seventh Art”, the “great films”, and “the most relevant works of the great directors” presented at the festival (“À l’Exposition de Bruxelles. Un Festival International du Cinéma” 1935: 1), to promote the fact that films were screened in their native language, and so on.

The competitive nature of these three events was very important points in completing the model. From another point of view, the journalists consistently highlighted the worldly and festive aspects of these events based on the model of the Venetian celebrations. Large parties were organized and these soon became important components of communication between national representatives. For example, Pierre Anouil (1935), in *Comoedia*, made the following comment about the Moscow Festival:

It’s true that the Russian State has put the resources needed at the disposal of cinema. How much money will the Chambre Syndicale Française have for Louis Lumière? I do not even want

4. Moskovskiy myezhdoonarodniy kinofestival, 21st February – 2nd March 1935.

5. Festival International du cinéma, 29th September – 17th October 1935.

6. “The Alberteum – and the Planetarium which completed it – constitute one of the most interested scientific site never realize for a Universal Exhibition. The promoters of this enterprise reached to create in Brussels a Museum similar to the Kensington and Munich’s ones, dedicated to History and science popularization. The obtained the necessary supports in order to realize their work, gathering under the auspices of the King Léopold III, and called ‘Alberteum - Aedes Scientiae’ (“Alberteum”, quotation from the guestbook of the Universal Exhibition of Brussels 1935 [online] Site Worldfairs.info, accessed November 2020, 17th https://www.worldfairs.info/expopavillondetails.php?expo_id=29&pavillon_id=2318) [translated from French]

to think about it. It's also true that the French State certainly relies on the "improvisation" with which we used to be familiar, and of which we are the victims, because such parties should not create illusion; get to the bottom of things, and show the country that our effort is as good as anybody else [translated from French].

Thus, these the organizing States invested in these events as tools which served their ambitions for international prestige and could also be used to promote their own national film productions, so as to demonstrate their cultural superiority to the rest of the world. Progressively, the idea that these events were only interesting if they showcased previously unseen films became decisive. The discovery became an additional value. To that, we must add the idea of selectivity, which ensured that only quality films would be screened, but the truth is that it was not always the case at this time. And yet, journalists considered it to be both an essential and distinctive feature of this type of events. For example, Pierre Sabatier (1935) wrote at the end of the Venice Film Festival:

However, it is regrettable that, this year, the committee in charge, in each country, in order to choose the films for the Venice Film Festival did not limit this choice to new films, or at least to superior quality films. [...] It is true that it is only the third festival since the creation of the Biennale and we can hope that for those that follow, a more rigorous selection will be made, not only in the interests of the event, but also in the interests of the film production companies [translated from French].

This ambition was reasserted in 1939 during the organization of the Cannes film festival, in a regulation that stipulated that, "All the films presented at Cannes must have been produced during the last twelve months before the opening of the festival. In addition, fifty per cent of the feature films have to be unscreened in Europe" (R.F. 1939: 4) [translated from French].

As this excerpt suggests, the Cannes Festival, scheduled for 1939, definitively entrenched the concept of film festival, based on the model described before. Thus, introducing the Cannes event, Henry Barby (1939: 8) synthesized the "international film festival" concept in this way:

Since 1934, Venice was the place of a worldwide event called the "Venice Biennale", and, as a matter of fact, it became annual, a place where the big motion picture companies from the whole world came to present their films (three to four films per day) to an international jury [translated from French].

We can say that at this time, the concept, and the term chosen to designate it, seemed to be definitively adopted.

2.4 Permeability of the Concept During the Decades

In addition to these remarks, we must avoid thinking that this definition was only retained at the end of the decade. There are numerous examples that show that after 1932 the term "festival" continued to be used to describe a wide variety of events, as was the tendency during the 1920s (at club meetings, commemorations, and so on). It is important to keep in mind the commonalities between these two kinds of events termed "festivals". Cinephilia, for example, was added in the case of the other types of "film festivals" as a special interest in film history. As indicated by Jean Laury (1933: 5), writing for *Le Figaro*, these "film festivals" provided the advantage of a wider array of selections in their heritage programming choices:

Film festival is, in some ways, a compendium of the story of screen. This excellent formula offers an anthology and invite us to make our point clear. I prefer it to the one adopted by some movie theaters which offer, at the beginning of the show, old films chosen from among the worst. To be helpful, lessons from the past must be beautiful, not ridiculous, and invite comparison, without provoking laughter [translated from French].

Conclusion

The concluding definition of a “film festival” proposed by Jean Laury is quite different from the definition of the “international film festival” we have considered thus far. How else can we interpret the fact that only this second meaning survived until World War II? We propose two working hypotheses on this topic. First, the success of these international events during the 1930s helped to entrench this specific point of view and can be analysed at three levels: popularity (because attendance was important each time), critical (because they were accustomed to many journalists who could corroborate their views about cinema as an artform) and media success (because a lot a journalists, from all the countries invited to participate to the film festivals, were mobilized). The presence of prestigious guests in these international events attracted additional media coverage, thus contributing to the mediatization of these events to the general public.



Fig. 4. Some guests of the Venice Mostra, 1934. “Le Festival International du cinéma” (1934). *Comoedia* August 24th

The second hypothesis is that the interest of the FIAPF (International Federation of Films Producers Associations)⁷ for international film festivals had an extensive role in the process. During the post-War period, international film festivals in fact became sites where the producers exerted their influence and promoted their films. As Caroline Moine (2013) has demonstrated in her research, since the fifties, the FIAPF has played a behind-the-scenes role in the organization of these festivals by regulating their calendars, categorizing them, and setting an international hierarchy among them. These two combined hypotheses help to explain why, dur-

7. Created in 1933, the FIAPF is an organization in charge, among other tasks, of regulating international film festivals. Its Secretariat is in Brussels.

ing the post-War period, the use of the word “festival” in the cinematographic frame was standardized as an “international festival”, and the first sense of the word has been definitively abandoned.

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