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Film Festivals and Ideology Critique: A Method

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Abstract

Film festivals play an important role in the construction and circulation of not only individual films but entire taxonomies of cinema, from their "discovery of new waves" (Elsaesser 2005: 99) to their production of "hegemonic ...canons" (Vallejo, 2020: 158). The effects of this taxonomical power are felt across filmmaking, criticism, and scholarship, foregrounded in renewed calls to decolonize film festivals and film culture more broadly (Dovey and Sendra 2022[forthcoming], Shambu 2019). This article mobilizes and adapts "New Lacanian" theories of ideology critique to propose a methodology for studying the ways in which film festivals construct meaning for films and, cumulatively, entire canons. Outlining concepts such as the festival apparatus, the festival paratext, and the cinematic Real, I trace the coordinates of a three-tier critical procedure that brings into dialogue festivals' operational and material contexts, their representation of themselves and their films, and the unruly, aesthetic qualities of the films that festivals exhibit. I demonstrate the application of this approach to a recent cause célèbre of Italian migration cinema, Fire at Sea, its awarding and representation at the 2016 edition of the Berlin International Film Festival instantiating the enduring legacy of Neorealism and a "brutal humanist" stance directed towards refugees in the new millennium (Schoonover 2012). Moving between theoretical discussions and the application of this method of ideology critique, I demonstrate how we might interrogate structures of meaning implicit within film festivals' rhetorical operation, offering a ground from which to better understand film festivals and, if desired, advocate for change.

Keywords: Film Festivals; Ideology; Migration; Film Circulation; Film Canons.

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Introduction

Film festivals play an important role in the construction and circulation of not only individual films but entire taxonomies of cinema, from the "discovery of new waves" (Elsaesser 2005: 99) to the production of "hegemonic ...canons" (Vallejo 2020: 158). Scholarship in the field is as varied as the modes through which festivals play this role, ranging from ethnographies, political economies and, latterly, data-driven inquiries into the festival 'network' (Lee 2016, Vallejo 2017, Ahn 2011, Cheung 2016, Loist, 2020). The question of power is rarely far from these investigations. Film festivals exercise and endow power, for example through their conferment of prestige onto certain films in rituals of selection and prize-giving. They are also embedded in networks of power, geopolitical and economic, which condition their operation and programming (de Valck 2007, Ahn 2011, Dovey 2015, Winton 2020). Finally, taken as a network, film festivals are subject to uneven power relations, for example the hierarchies that exist between so-called "A-list" film festivals in the global North and global Southern and "small" festivals (Dovey, McNamara & Olivieri 2013; Loist 2016; Paz Peirano 2020). The effects of this power are felt across filmmaking, film criticism, and film scholarship, recently foregrounded in renewed calls to decolonize film festivals and film culture more broadly (Dovey and Sendra 2022[forthcoming], Shambu 2019).

This article contributes a methodology for studying the intersections of these different kinds of power at film festivals - the relationship between economic and geopolitical factors, shared norms or values, and film festivals' representation of both films and themselves. My emphasis in this article is on representation: the ways in which film festivals' production of texts and other pronouncements on films are at once conditioned by the factors I have just mentioned, and, in turn, condition the construction of ideas about cinema, as well as aesthetic value and political expression. As I discuss at length below, this lattice of material (e.g. economic) and discursive (i.e. representational) elements can be helpfully conceptualised as ideology, both from a theoretical standpoint and in dialogue with writing on film festivals' *modus operandi*. Building on this conceptualisation, I propose a methodology of ideology critique adapted to, and created through, the study of film festivals.

Due to my focus on representation, the methodology I propose adapts theories of ideology critique with roots in poststructural analysis: in particular, contemporary reformulations of the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan. Outlining concepts such as the festival apparatus, the festival paratext, and the cinematic Real, I trace the coordinates of a three-tier critical procedure that brings into dialogue festivals' operational and material contexts, their representation of themselves and their films, and the unruly, aesthetic qualities of the films that festivals exhibit. I use this method to analyse film festivals' production of values around cinema – that is, their creation of canons, counter-canons and taxonomies of cinema, as well as their circulation of ideas about aesthetics and politics. Through ideology critique, the structures of meaning implicit within notions such as "quality," fundamental to film festivals' rhetorical operation, can be rendered explicit and thus interrogated, creating a ground from which we might better understand film festivals and, if we so wish, advocate for change.

1 Re-defining Ideology Critique

In an early international workshop for film festival studies, scholars highlighted research into these institutions' ideological functioning as a crucial area for inquiry. Iordanova (in Brown 2009: 217) outlined a number of aspects of film festivals yet to be studied, and among these was the way in which "the choice of films at a festival reflects a certain ideological standpoint, be that entirely coherent or otherwise." Another intersecting line of analysis was the situation of "film festivals as part of an enormous global culture industry" (Brown 2009: 217). Indeed, one of the most discussed points at this workshop appeared to be film festivals' self-mythologisation.[1] Scholars such as Maty Ba and Slocum (in Brown 2009: 218-19) discussed this in relation to ideology and economics: "Film festivals always (seek to) represent something or someone (consciously or not, they reflect an ideology), and they always serve political (and economic) interests."

1. A term that builds on Barthes' theory of myth. Theories of ideology and myth have been taken as complementary by Barthes himself, and scholars who interpret and apply his theory (Barthes 2012[1957]; Lule 1995; Walton 2012).

As my brief introduction suggests, scholars have pursued fruitful inquiries into several of these aspects of film festivals, from analyses of programming practices to their participation in the global culture industry. Yet, since its brief utterance at the 2009 workshop, the term "ideology" and theories of it have remained relatively absent from such scholarship. Given the diversity of approaches and commitment to self-reflection that characterises the field (Loist 2020: 42), the latency of a methodology of ideology critique merits consideration. This method has remained conspicuously absent from qualitative studies of the festival phenomenon, and is often considered antithetical to the quantitative methods becoming more prevalent in film festival studies. The latter charge is likely grounded in twentieth-century Marxist anti-empiricist polemics, including in film studies (Horton 1972, Commoli & Narboni 2015[1971]), and later work on ideology and media (Taylor 2010). Yet, these theorists' challenges towards empiricism have inadvertently given rise to the view that studies of ideology may be subject to imprecision, incapable of the kind of systematic rigour to which academic inquiry, quantitative or qualitative, is bound.

This view is epitomised in Carroll's (1998: 360) charge that

> ideology critique is not usually an investigation into the conditions of possibility of the objects of study [...] It is criticism, most frequently negative criticism - and not critique, properly so called.

Writing from a cognitivist and "post-theoretical" position, expressed in his and Bordwell's polemical *Post-Theory* (1996), Carroll represents a common challenge to scholars seeking to study ideology and film. Carroll was writing of what he perceived as a trend in cultural studies to denigrate all forms of mass art as *a priori* politically and morally regressive – a position which would determine an investigation's conclusions in advance. Following this challenge, Carroll suggests two features of ideology critique "properly so called": it should investigate the "conditions of possibility" of its objects, and should not entail negative criticism for negative criticism's sake.

That an investigation, conducted in good faith, should not conflate critique and criticism is, I hope, relatively uncontentious. Studies of certain phenomena may proceed from critique to criticism if one finds that criticism is necessary, as has been the case in the research into Eurocentric film cultures cited above. Yet, ideology critique has the capacity also to highlight the 'wisdom and hope' of communities or certain practices (Tuck 2009: 416), and thus to complement the orientation that characterises an emerging, important body of scholarship on "small," and/or global Southern film festivals (Paz Peirano 2020, Sendra 2020, Olivieri 2011). To understand this expanded capacity of critique, one that does not necessitate denigration of its objects, it is vital to interrogate Carroll's definition of "conditions of possibility."

That which constitutes the conditions of possibility of an object is open to contention, and different approaches emphasise different factors. For Carroll (1998: 360), the "structure of economic arrangements" is the determining condition for the development (and ideology) of film. However, political-economic structures are not the only conditions of possibility for cultural objects, or even social formations.[2] Laclau's (2014: 80) *Rhetorical Foundations of Society* argues that the conditions of possibility of any political formation are rhetorical: "each political institution, each category of political analysis, shows itself today as the locus of undecidable language games." I will come to the nature of these "language games", and their implications for an ideology critique of film festivals later. For now, it is worth noting that, while Laclau's account of ideology favours the rhetorical over the economic, scholars such as Tomšič (2015: 61-62) have called for research to reinvigorate a "discursive materialist" approach founded on an understanding of the reciprocity of both economic and discursive structures.

While the economic conditions of possibility of formations, including film festivals, are relatively well-theorised, the notion of discursive conditions of possibility requires further elaboration. To do this, we must delve into poststructuralist and psychoanalytical theories that have come to underpin conceptions of discourse and ideology. Such theories range from Barthes, on whose "mythologisation" Marty Ba and Slocum draw, to the "*Screen* theorists" such as Commoli (as well as Mulvey, Metz, and Baudry) at whom Carroll implicitly takes aim. Yet today we find an important update: the recuperation of theories of ideology critique by "New Lacanian" scholars working since the 1990s: Žižek, Copjec, McGowan, Kunkle, Vighi and others.

2. For a discussion of the complexities of economic determination "in the last instance," particularly in relation to culture, see Stuart Hall (2018[1977]).

This recuperation seeks to address the limitations of 1970s poststructuralist philosophy and film theory by re-articulating and re-theorising ideology, often through a re-interpretation of the works of Jacques Lacan.

In contrast with other theories of discourse (such as Michel Foucault's) and ideology (such as the *Screen* theorists'), recent Lacanian theory is organised around the concept of the "Real," the point of ideology's inherent, and constitutive, failure (Copjec 1994: 39-40). This requires discourse and ideology to take on different meanings, ones which avoid totalising conceptions of either. In Lacanian theory, discourse constitutes the "network of signifiers" explicitly used to describe phenomena (Lacan 2004[1964]: 43). These can range from the written word to moving images, to speech, gestures and so on. If the definition of discourse were to stop here, it would express the idea that our relationship to reality is constructed through a network of explicit meanings with straightforwardly observable effects (Vighi and Feldner 2007: 153). In this framework, ideology would function through our being "duped by" these explicit, and false, representations of reality (McGowan 2007: 3).

In contrast, recent Lacanian theories argue that the ideological procedure does not lie in the "false" representation of reality. Rather, all representation is inherently illusory, since the best it can do is stand in for its object, providing terms that offer communicative efficacy but are not the object itself. The implication of this understanding of representation is that all discourse is subject to the Real, the "inherent failure of symbolization," an inherent senselessness (Žižek 1997: 217). Turning our attention back to film festivals, we might recall scholars such as Rich (2003), Elsaesser (2005: 99) and Andrews (2010: 9) describing "the magical and utterly unsubstantiated notion of quality," the processes of "Eucharistic transubstantiation ... impervious to rational criteria," or even "bogus religiosity" that underpin these events. While Rich's and others' descriptions of festivals could sound harsh, through Lacanian theories of ideology it becomes clear that this kind of mystical irrationality – in other words, senselessness – is a feature of discourse, and festival discourse, *as such*.

Rather than the production of discourses that fail to represent their objects (that is, all discourses), the ideological procedure is distinguished by the concealment of the Real, the ways in which "ideology takes its own failure into account in advance" (Žižek 1989: 142). This concealment is effected through compensatory structures, collectively designated "fantasy," that constitute the "unwritten rules that effectively regulate our speech and acts" (Žižek 2000: 657). Such rules comprise a matrix of hidden associations that fill terms with meaning, and thus make a discourse appear sensible within a given context. For example, in the context of contemporary cinephilia, the otherwise senseless description of a director as an "auteur" is supported by implicit rules governing the meaning of that term – associations with artistic autonomy (Elsaesser 2016), individual genius (Baumann 2007) and even white masculinity (Shambu 2019, Johnson 2019). As this example suggests, although such associations may initially be implicit, they can be uncovered by certain modes of analysis. The one I offer below is, I believe, a relatively holistic method that apprehends both the material and discursive contexts of a festival's representations of films as well as their particular expression in a given text (the festival paratext). It then turns back towards the failure that generates these compensatory associations in the first place, opening a space for further understanding and, if desired, radical change.

2 Apparatus

The first stage of the method focuses primarily on the material side of the discursive-material intersection posited by Tomšič and other scholars of ideology (Žižek 2006). It investigates the organizational features of festivals, that which I term the festival apparatus. I follow Wong's (2011) use of the term "apparatus" to refer to the institutional structures and practices that constitute a film festival, including their: histories; models of funding; processes of selection; organisation of different programme sections; rituals of prize giving; cultivation of media attention; as well as the roles Festival Directors and other stakeholders play and the geopolitics of their location. This conception of these structural features of film festivals also profits from the association with poststructuralist definitions of the apparatus as a configuration of institutions and practices in and through which ideology functions (Althusser 2014 [1971]).[3]

3. "An ideology always exists in an apparatus and in the practice or practices of that apparatus. This existence is material" (Althusser 2014[1971]: 184). For updates to apparatus theory, see Agamben (2014) and Laclau (2014).

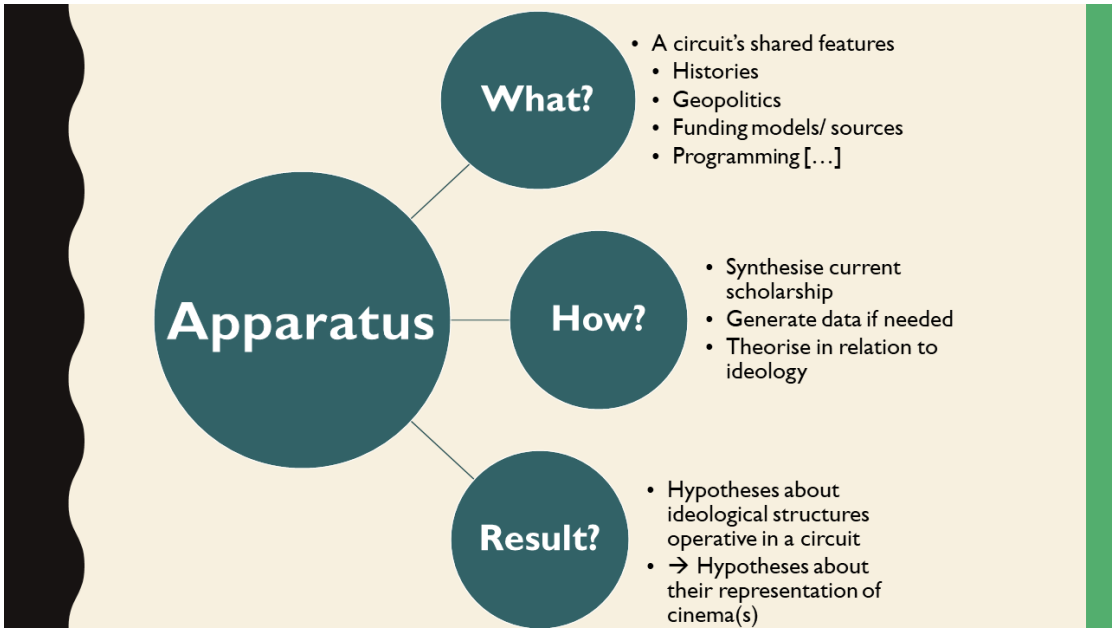


Fig. 1. First stage: analysing the film festival apparatus.

Analysing even one festival's apparatus is an ambitious task that can easily fill an entire study. Therefore, this stage of the method, as one part of a multi-faceted analysis of ideology, synthesises insights from existing scholarship, theorising them through the framework of ideology, to offer an account of broad institutional logics that characterise certain festival types or circuits.[4] In focusing on shared logics and models, the analysis begins to theorise festivals at the structural level, producing a ground from which to analyse particular iterations such as a specific festival or singular edition. It traces how structural features might condition a festival's functioning or be transformed in a given context. Through the example of the 2016 edition of the Berlinale, I show how European "A" festivals' shared history and institutional logics takes a particular form in the context of the so-called "refugee crisis": a commitment to liberal humanism resonating and evolving from the 1946 edition of Cannes to the new millennium. Analysing the apparatus in this way produces specific research questions that can be tested and answered in subsequent stages of the method which focus on the discursive (and Real) aspects of a festival, above all its textual construction of films through paratexts.

We find a basis for this conception of the apparatus in studies of film festivals as "field configuring events" (Rüling 2009, Lampel and Meyer 2008, Strandgaard Pederson and Mazza 2011, Mezias et al 2011). These studies suggest that an important condition for film festivals' representations of films or construction of film canons is the very "institutional logics" by which they operate (Rüling 2009: 51). Strandgaard Pederson and Mazza (2011) trace the formation of these logics by analysing the development of the international film festival model: the institutionalization of practices and values first set out by "early adopter" international festivals, most of which today constitute the European "A-list" (Strandgaard Pederson & Mazza 2011: 145).[5] Expanding Elsaesser's (2005: 91) claim that Cannes "set the template for film festivals the world over," Strandgaard Pederson and Mazza (2011: 159) conclude that early adopter festivals have "managed to define the field and invent tradition," to "create and institutionalize a model for international film festivals that appears to have become an 'unchallenged given'." The notion of an unchallenged given resounds with conceptions of ideology

4. By "circuit" I refer to Iordanova's (2009: 30-32) definition of a circuit as grouping of festivals with shared agendas, target audiences, and pools of films. Elsewhere, I consider also geographical location, investigating the European "A" circuit (Author 2019).

5. The festivals Strandgaard Pederson and Mazza (2011) list are: Venice, Moscow, Cannes, Karlovy Vary, Locarno and Berlin. They also discuss Indian, Argentina and Australian festivals, but situate these in relation to the forerunners just mentioned. More detailed research into the extent to which festivals such as the international Film Festival of India straightforwardly adopted the model set out by Venice and others would illuminate or perhaps challenge the scholars' argument, particularly taking into consideration IFFI's founding in 1952, early in the proliferation of film festivals and shortly after India's formal decolonization in 1949.

as a system of common-sense propositions or, as defined above, "implicit rules". These are concepts that have been afforded such salience that they remain broadly unchallenged, or even that challenging them appears inconceivable (Žižek 2004). In the case of international film festivals, this includes features instituted by early adopters: taking place in a fixed, usually tourist-friendly, metropolitan location; reliance on a mix of public (state) and private (commercial) stakeholders; the presence of awards and, in some cases, film markets; and the time-limited hyper-spectacularisation that Janet Harbord (2009) defines as the festival "time-event."[6]

These constitute organizational features of international film festivals, while other festival types may operate according to other models, other "unchallenged givens" established by early adopters within their respective fields. An exploration of the models that certain kinds of festivals adopt constitutes the first level of inquiry into film festivals and ideology which, as I show later, offers a grounding for the analysis of the norms of representation that festivals might adopt. Indeed, we can begin to observe the effects of these features through an analysis that moves between the levels of festival type and individual festivals, considering the interplay of common organizational features and the particular historical or geopolitical conditions of a festival, or even a specific edition. Here, and in subsequent sections, I will illustrate this process by sharing a shortened version of an analysis that I have undertaken elsewhere (Author 2019, 2020): the programming and awarding of migration docu-fiction *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016) at the 2016 edition of the Berlinale.

The Berlinale is one of the "early adopters" and therefore shares the features of international film festivals outlined above. Its position as not only a European, but a specifically Western European film festival suggests additional features salient to our analysis. As a European A festival, the Berlinale occupies an important place in the shared history of economic reconstruction and soft power through film culture on the continent (Harbord 2002: 64). This is inextricable from the geopolitical contexts of North American investment influence, and European colonialism. For example, Cannes, although rhetorically claiming to act as a bastion against both Fascism and "America's burgeoning cultural imperialism," was primarily funded by American organisations (Rhyne 2009: 11). Likewise, the Berlinale was initiated by American film officer Oscar Martay, and conceived as "an American instrument in the Cold War" (de Valck 2007: 52). As Fehrenbach (1995: 234-6) argues, the festival was founded as "a celebration of Western values" and "proof of Western economic superiority and cultural dynamism." In the post-war period, several European film festivals were created and supported by American organisations and, as such, were part of geopolitical manoeuvring undertaken with the aim of disseminating (North)Western values across the continent.

Such values included in a North-Western, humanist liberalism that Schoonover (2012: 10) argues first found its place in film culture at the 1946 edition of Cannes, in particular the festival's celebration of anti-Nazi, neorealist film *Rome Open City* (*Roma città aperta*, 1946). Indeed, this edition of Cannes is often seen as a foundational moment for the European A circuit, expressive of the ethical orientation of the time (de Valck 2007: 49). Schoonover (2012: 10) elucidates this orientation, describing Bazin's accounts of the film's exhibition as "overt attempts to aestheticize a mid-century politics of liberal humanism, to find humanism's aesthetic equivalent in filmic terms." These politics of liberal humanism extend beyond the postwar period, setting the "template for the later large-scale humanitarian aid and structures of neo-colonialism" (Schoonover 2012: xxiv). This "brutal humanism" places the North-Western subject at the centre, in a position to offer aid or charity to beneficiaries who are often construed as suffering "others" (Schoonover, 2012: xiv).

This expansion of European agency through a humanist film culture suggests the intersection between post-war American patrimony and European colonialism. As Dovey (2015: 37) argues:

> All of the early 'A-list' European film festivals [...] were created on a European continent that was not only at war with itself, but that felt the need (partly as a result of these wars, and the sense of threat the US posed) to assert its superiority over other parts of the world, particularly its colonies in 'darkest' Africa.

6. With the exception of hyper-spectacularisation, all of these features are discussed in Strandgaard Pederson and Mazza (2011). On Cannes setting a template for festivals and/as tourist destinations, see also Liz Mazdon (200Thanks 6); on a common third-sector funding model, see Rhyne (2009); on film markets and the 'Cannes-Venice duopoly', see Pisu (2018).
These features are not necessarily exclusive to international film festivals: their unchallenged presence in other festival types testifies to the influence of the international film festival model across the network. See Akkadia Ford's (2014) discussion of assumptions about film festival (and queer) culture taking place in metropolitan spaces – assumptions they challenge with the Queer Fruits Film Festival.

Here, Dovey synthesises three key dynamics of the European A festival model in which the Berlinale operates: postwar crisis and reconstruction, North American patrimony [itself experienced as a kind of "colonization" (Dovey 2015: 37)] and the colonialist assertion of agency over an "other" (in this case, Africa). Reading Dovey and Schoonover together offers a ground from which to consider European A festivals' canonization of a certain kind of "ethical" cinema, epitomised by Italian neorealism, and rooted in structures of humanitarianism that characterised post-war film culture.

While the Berlinale has a specific place within these histories, not least because of its founding and development within a project of Western German soft power, the awarding of *Fire at Sea*, an Italian film whose title explicitly conjures Second World War, is highly evocative of this shared European A festival history and project.[7] Yet the specific features of the festival – and the 2016 edition in particular – also play an important role in its legitimation of *Fire at Sea*. Although beginning with Cannes, the political and humanist project outlined above has been most keenly adopted by the Berlinale, distinguishing itself as a "social issue" film festival. In the new millennium, Dieter Kosslick (Festival Director, 2001-2019) led a strategy that "put the festival on the map by training its thematic spotlight on social and political issues such as human rights, climate change and migration" (Boutsko 2021). Indeed, the programming and awarding of *Fire at Sea* can be considered as one in a series of examples that demonstrate this strategy (see other Golden Bear winners such as *Esma's Secret* (2006) and, most recently, *Alcarràs* (2022)).

Meanwhile, the 2016 edition of the Berlinale was characterised by the interplay between common institutional logics, such as the mediation of public stakeholders' interests, and features specific to that edition. One of the Berlinale's most important stakeholders is the German Ministry of Culture, a fact readily stated in the festival's publicity. In 2016, this relationship found expression in a close alignment between the German state's official position on migration and that adopted by the festival. Indeed, we might read the Berlinale's decision not only to award *Fire at Sea*, but to offer free tickets to refugees as complementing a German state politics of humanitarian hospitality or *willkommenskultur* exemplified by Angela Merkel's commitment to settle 80,000 displaced people (31 August 2015) (Karakayalı 2019). Merkel's words were mobilised by the Berlinale, the festival's 2016 edition report not only citing Merkel's "we can do it"' slogan as its inspiration, but explicitly stating that "It is before this particular backdrop that the full power of the International Jury's decision about the winner of the 2016 Golden Bear [*Fire at Sea*] becomes apparent" (Berlinale 2016a).

While the 2016 edition of the Berlinale is a long way from the 1946 edition of Cannes, focusing on broad structures, such as those of Western identity and liberal compassion (or brutal humanism), allows us to see the legacies of certain values across time – including the time of European A festivals. Indeed, the festival's embrace of a politics of *willkommenskultur* and awarding of *Fire at Sea* also took place at a historical juncture in which tropes of humanitarian compassion, the politics of pity and European crisis were prevalent in media discourse. This includes debates around the circulation of the famous image of the body of a refugee child, Alain Kurdi, sought to interrogate the power of images of dead or suffering bodies to evoke sympathy and humanitarian action (Waldman, 2015). That *Fire at Sea* won the Golden Bear in precisely such a moment suggests a legacy of brutal humanism that has endured and evolved through European film culture over the last fifty years, finding renewed expression in the figuration of refugees. Bringing all of these features together, we can begin to see the influence of several features of the Berlinale festival's apparatus on its programming and awarding of a particular film about migration. This initial analysis also raises important questions about the ways in which Rosi's film, and the migration of refugees from Africa to Europe, may be figured; the extent to which a liberal, humanist compassion that nonetheless affords ultimate power to Europe, is at play in the legitimation of certain films about migration.

3 Paratext

Analysing the festival apparatus suggests the ways in which the legitimation of certain films is conditioned by a festival, or indeed circuit's, historical and geopolitical situation, as well as other factors such as its curatorial profile or relationship to the state. Yet to apprehend the significance and expression of this apparatus, its

7. 'Fuocoammare', as explained in the film, is the title of a World War 2 song, the 'fire at sea' referring the bombing of the ship *La Maddalena* by the British off the coast of Lampedusa.

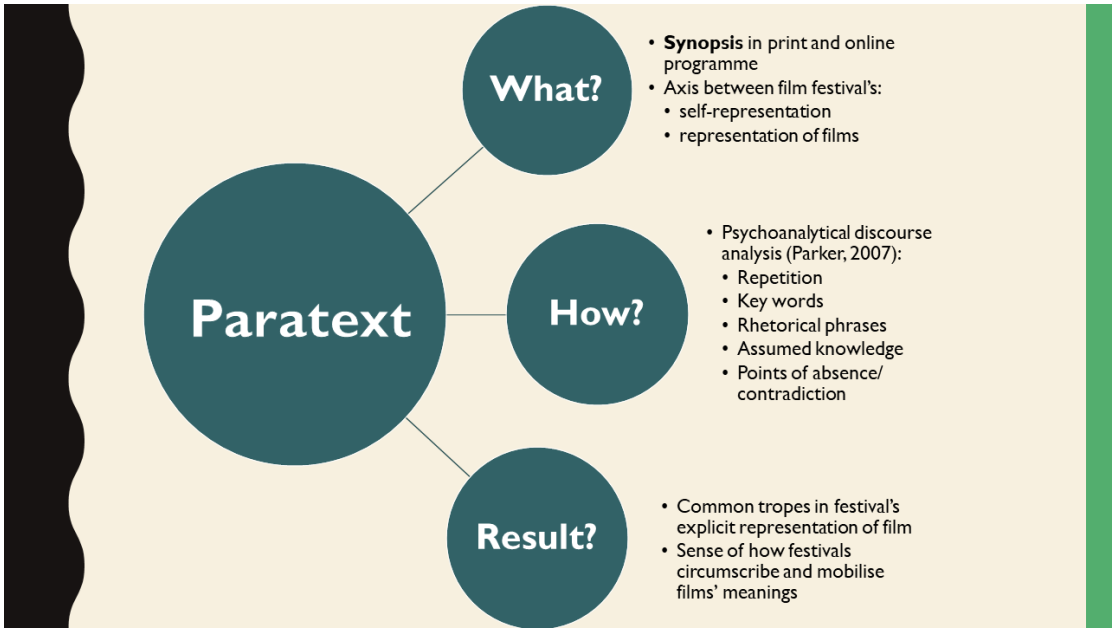


Fig. 2. Stage two: analysing paratexts.

implications for film festivals' representation of certain films and, cumulatively, entire canons, we need to take a further step. Building on approaches that emphasise the "verbal architecture" of the festival (Dayan 2001: 52), the second tier of this method brings into focus a key element of festivals and their role in global film culture – that is, their representation of films beyond the acts of exhibiting or awarding them.[8] While scholars such as Wong (2011) have underscored the reciprocal relationship between a festival's representation of itself and the films it programmes, such analyses tend to sublimate this relationship into a study of the festival, the way that, through such texts, festivals ultimately construct a "festival image" (Stringer 2008: 53). In order to better apprehend festivals' role in constructing film canons, we must reverse this dynamic, emphasising how a festival's cultivation of its self-image conditions its representation of films.

Bringing a focus on the textual representation of films offers a bridge to other areas of film studies, and subtly shifts the emphasis of theorisations of the festival text discussed above. Not only festival architecture, or "ephemera" (Zielinski 2016: 138), the written matter that festivals produce can also be considered "paratexts". Paratexts are conceived primarily in relation to artistic objects such as books (Genette, 1997) and, more recently, films (Gray 2010). Gray (2010: 5), in a foundational book on film marketing, argues that paratexts "create [film] texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them [...] a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text." Moreover, paratexts provide "filters," or "early frames," and our "first formative encounters" with a film (Gray 2010: 2-3). Developing Gray's theory, we can posit the "festival paratext," a text that foremost constructs the film on exhibition, but that is conditioned by the festival at which it is produced. Festival paratexts mediate the reciprocal relationship between film and festival while being primarily oriented towards creating meanings for films.

While Gray's study also suggests the importance of fan-made paratexts – an intriguing and under-studied phenomenon in the case of film festivals – my focus on the institutional construction of films leads me to consider only those materials produced by the film festival. The paratexts that festivals produce for films are myriad, particularly in the digital era, which requires festivals to provide not only printed programme catalogues but websites (and thus online catalogues), and in some cases apps and social media promotion. The rise in film festivals' use of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to promote both themselves and their

8. Damiens (2020) expands this to "visual architecture," suggesting the potentiality of a multi-modal analysis. While Damiens' focus remains primarily on festivals' self-representation, this more holistic concept of visual architecture also offers a crucial area for development in the study of film festivals' representation of films and constructing film canons.

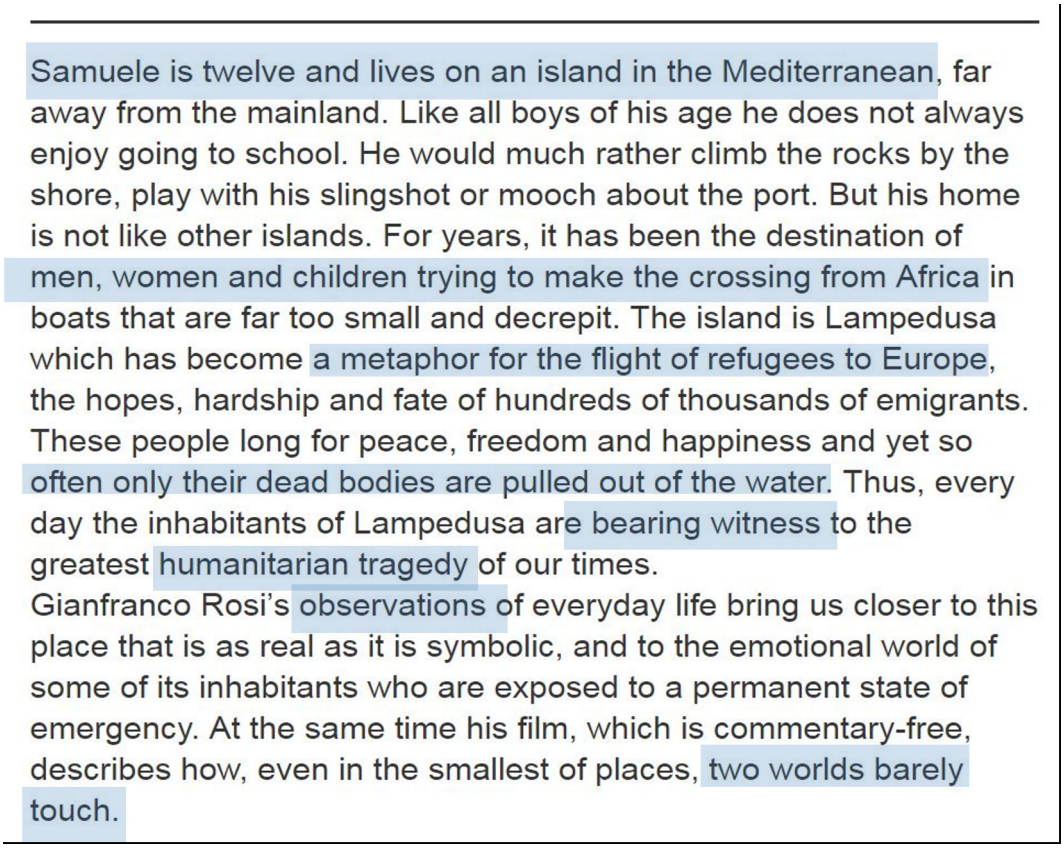
programmes offers possibilities for social media-focused discourse analysis, and even data-driven network analyses of festivals and those who engage with them online. For the time being, however, I would like to consider a more traditional paratext that, I argue, stands at the zenith of the reciprocal relation between a festival's presentation of itself and the films it programmes: the synopses that appear in festivals' print and online catalogues.

These short-form summaries comprise the majority of text in the catalogues that Rich (1998: 31-32) has argued are paramount to a festival's self-representation. The aim of these texts is not simply to give an objective summary of a film on exhibition: synopses are a crucial part of the marketing that takes place through festival brochures and websites. This is not a matter of misrepresenting films (within the framework of ideology outlined above, all representation is a kind of misrepresentation), but rather foregrounding aspects that match a festival's curatorial profile. For example, London Migration Film Festival aims to expand definitions of migration beyond the dominant tropes found in mainstream British media – suffering, racialised refugees travelling to the UK by boat (Parrot and Stahnke 2021). The programmers thus select films that might not fit into obvious categories of "migration cinema," such as experimental movies about movement, or documentaries about displacement within a nation rather than beyond it. These aspects of the festival's aims and programming (its apparatus) are articulated through its textual representations of films: LMFF uses its synopses of such films to re-frame them, constructing their meaning in relation to the theme of migration. Appearing in print and online, edition after edition, the cumulative effect of these texts is the construction of tropes that help to define cinemas within the festival framework. Analysing a body of synopses – for example, synopses of migration films – can indicate the way in which certain cinemas have been constructed within such frameworks. In the interests of concision, I offer an analysis of just one synopsis here – the Berlinale's description of *Fire at Sea*.

Below, I present an annotated version of the synopsis that appeared in the Berlinale's print programme and website. To analyse the text, I adapt the Lacanian discourse analysis proposed by Parker (2005). This method identifies key terms which anchor representation: repeated concepts, rhetorical constructions, and the conclusions of sentences or texts (Parker 2005). I also draw on Parker's emphasis on agency, contradiction and knowledge – above all, which figures are ascribed agency both in and outside of the text (including the reader); points of antagonism between concepts or figures; and moments in a text which presume knowledge, suggesting points of "common sense".

The synopsis of *Fire at Sea* is structured around a central point of antagonism, the division between an implied European perspective and that of African refugees. This is exemplified by the text's concluding reference to "two worlds [that] barely touch." The synopsis alternates between the two positions throughout, from Samuele's activities on Lampedusa's port, to "men, women and children trying to make the crossing from Africa" (their contradictory presence emphasised by the "But" that introduces it), to the "inhabitants of Lampedusa" who are "bearing witness" to said crossing. While maintaining this structure, the text suggests a bridge across the division, primarily through repeated notions of looking. The synopsis moves from Samuele's seeming obliviousness to islanders' witnessing, and then, through a crucial slippage, to the "observations" of the film's director, Rosi. These observations, in turn, "bring us [the implied viewers of the film] closer" to Lampedusa, this site of "metaphor for the flight of refugees to Europe" (italics added). Yet, the power to look is afforded only to the European subject position: the Lampedusan islanders, the Italian director and the implied film spectator, who, if we follow to its logical conclusion the slippage from Lampedusa to Italy to "us," is implicitly addressed as European. Meanwhile, African figures' relation to Europe and its subjects are depicted as one of either lack or passivity. They "try" to reach the continent, "long" for freedom and, finally, their "dead bodies are pulled out of the water."

The hierarchy of looking/longing that the synopsis constructs also implies a hierarchy of agency with deep, and Eurocentric, roots. Witnessing, particularly when construed as an ethical act, recalls the cinematic, brutal humanism discussed above. Importantly for questions of agency, this mode of looking subtracts the power of a suffering figure as a means of activating that of the "ethical witness" – simultaneously a character in the film and the implied spectator (Schoonover 2012: 34, 152). Schoonover (2012: 218) suggests that this "brutal optic" underpinning neorealist aesthetics and ethics "remains at the core of aesthetic values that define quality and significance for film criticism, as well as its system of evaluation for subsequent emerging movements of world cinema." Thus, moving between discourse analysis and a consideration of festival apparatus clarifies the



Samuele is twelve and lives on an island in the Mediterranean, far away from the mainland. Like all boys of his age he does not always enjoy going to school. He would much rather climb the rocks by the shore, play with his slingshot or mooch about the port. But his home is not like other islands. For years, it has been the destination of men, women and children trying to make the crossing from Africa in boats that are far too small and decrepit. The island is Lampedusa which has become a metaphor for the flight of refugees to Europe, the hopes, hardship and fate of hundreds of thousands of emigrants. These people long for peace, freedom and happiness and yet so often only their dead bodies are pulled out of the water. Thus, every day the inhabitants of Lampedusa are bearing witness to the greatest humanitarian tragedy of our times.
Gianfranco Rosi's observations of everyday life bring us closer to this place that is as real as it is symbolic, and to the emotional world of some of its inhabitants who are exposed to a permanent state of emergency. At the same time his film, which is commentary-free, describes how, even in the smallest of places, two worlds barely touch.

Fig. 3. Early draft of an annotated synopsis of *Fire at Sea* (Berlinale 2016b).

significance of paratextual representations and their place within broader systems of political and aesthetic value. More obscure features of the paratext become apparent too. For example, the synopsis' opening on the child figure, Samuele, can now be understood as a further framing of the film within a neorealist legacy famed for its use of child protagonists as bearers of a privileged perspective (Deleuze 2005[1985]: 3). We are now in a position to better understand the relationship between *Fire at Sea*'s legitimation at the Berlinale, the festival's "image" and its re/inscription of film canons. A crucial condition of possibility for *Fire at Sea*'s legitimization via its exhibition, awarding and representation at the Berlinale is the continuing influence of a neorealist cinematic legacy, one that finds new expression via the brutal humanist optic directed towards refugee figures in 2016.

4 Film Text

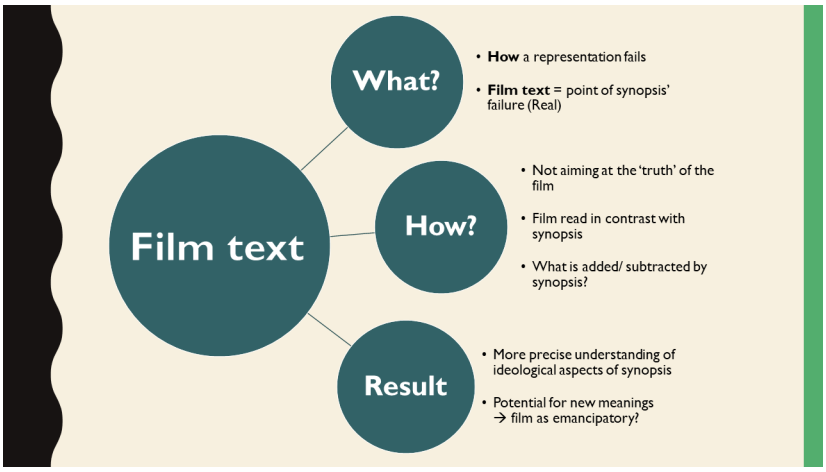


Fig. 4. Third stage: analysing the film text.

Above, I argued that festival paratexts instantiate a reciprocal relationship between the film festival and the film it exhibits. Analysing a festival's apparatus offered the ground from which to identify the ways in which a festival's institutional logics condition its representation of films. To apprehend the second half of this relationship, I now turn from the festival to the film. Yet my approach to analysing the films that festivals exhibit is a deliberately atypical one. It aims to emphasise the points at which the synopsis' representation of the film fails – irruptions of the Real that highlight the constitutive impossibility of paratextual representation. This stage further demonstrates the ideological procedure of the synopsis as such: the attempt to conceal its fundamental misrepresentation of its object. Moreover, by foregrounding the precise moments in which this failure becomes clear, my analysis offers further accuracy in interpreting the 'implicit rules' that govern a festival's representation of the films it exhibits.

My treatment of films as objects that can highlight the Real builds on studies that emphasise films' potential to make manifest the inherent failure of ideology. As McGowan (2007: 171) argues, "rather than seducing us into accepting our symbolic prison, film tends to show us the [R]eal openings within that prison." Yet these openings are ambivalent: because the Real also generates compensatory structures, the moments of failure we find in film can constitute *or* challenge ideology. This duality is summarised well by McGowan and Kunkle (2004: xviii):

> the ideological dimension of film lies in its ability to offer a fantasy scenario that delivers us from a traumatic Real. At the same time, film's radicality lies in its ability to involve us in an encounter with this Real [...] the ideological and radical dimensions of film overlap; both involve a relationship to the traumatic Real.

The scholars define film in relation to the Real, highlighting its potential to either reinforce ideology through a compensatory "fantasy scenario"' or radically challenge it by "involving us in an encounter with this Real."

To define films in this way is to define them in relation to a fundamental ambiguity: registering moments of failure, films can alternately reinforce or challenge a discursive formation.

While McGowan and Kunkle's focus is on ideological structures within film texts, we can shift the terms of their analysis slightly to facilitate a study of the relationship between films and their institutions. The "encounter with [the] Real" that films enable can also be re-defined as an encounter with the inherent fissure between a film and its institutional meaning, such as the meaning it has been ascribed by a film festival. To be clear, this is an entirely heuristic approach, which locates compensatory structures (fantasy) in the paratext and the Real in the film, and does so as a means of better interpreting the ideological procedure of the former. While this reading highlights the functioning of ideology, as well as the specific values that support representation, it does not aim at an interpretation of some truer reading of the film. Rather, I offer a deliberately partial interpretation which acknowledges the film's status as an ambivalent text, and uses that status as a means of critiquing the film's ideological representation at a festival. The analysis finishes on a moment of undecidability: intervening in the fissure in the meanings that festivals ascribe to films, the analysis opens a space of possibility, of new and impossible meanings.

I offer two brief examples to illustrate the application of this method to *Fire at Sea*. First, in contrast with the synopsis' construction of an antagonism between European and African figures, *Fire at Sea* presents a division internal to Europe through its opposition between the compassionate Dr. Bartolo and the de-personalised Frontex rescuers. While the rescuers appear momentarily in the synopsis as hands that pull refugees out of the water, Dr. Bartolo is omitted. This effectively obfuscates one of the primary sites of conflict in both *Fire at Sea* and, more broadly, Europe's struggle for identity in the wake of the "refugee crisis" (Ponzanesi 2016: 152). Through the figures, the film depicts two approaches to engaging with refugees: the official rescue effort, represented by faceless and pragmatic men, only ever seen in contagion suits, and a more personal, compassionate response, represented by the island doctor who treats and speaks to refugees, often with no more "protection" than his lab coat. The film's depiction of these figures is complex, not least through the ironic othering of the official rescuers and the continual framing of Dr. Bartolo in line with a framework of liberal compassion, and I discuss this complexity at length elsewhere (Author 2019). For now, I turn to a second example, one which challenges the very notion of ethical witnessing that is at the heart of the film's legitimation at the Berlinale.

Fig. 5. Refugee gazes into the camera. *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, Rosi, 2016).

At several moments in the film refugee figures exercise the power to look. Moreover, when the characters do so, they look back at the viewer, directly intervening in the power relations between witness and suffering victim. The most striking example of this is a scene in which a young man is being photographed, and processed, in a detention centre. The film aligns the viewer's perspective with that of the photographer, implying our involvement in this scene of capturing a refugee's image. The man appears next to a number, signifying the dehumanzing nature of the procedure. Here is a palpable tension between the gaze of the refugee and the attempt to limit this gaze, signified by the number beside him and the mechanism of both the photo and film cameras. As the number repeatedly clashes with the man's face, the scene takes on a subtle violence: the clash between the objectification of refugees and the full subjectivity signified by their gaze breaks out on

screen. Although *Fire at Sea* has been justifiably criticised for its depiction of refugees overall (Austin 2019), the film contains moments that register not only its own failure, but that of the Berlinale's representation of it. In both cases, the notion of a unitary European identity afforded the power to look – a power today conflated with an ethical orientation towards postcolonial subjects – is challenged by the irruptions of the Real just analysed. These moments of failure offer a vantage point from which the ideological mechanism of the Berlinale synopsis become yet clearer. Most importantly, however, they open up a space for alternative possibilities to emerge: alternative readings of the *Fire at Sea*, and alternative orientations towards festival films, cinematic ethics, European identity and refugees.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I put forward a framework for the systematic study of film festivals as ideological institutions. I offered a definition of ideology that acknowledges the fundamental impossibility of an institution ever fully representing its objects, of film festivals fully representing films, cinemas, social issues and identities. This acknowledges, too, the inherent instability of the film canons that festivals produce. Drawing on insights from recent Lacanian theory, I identified festivals' main ideological procedure as that of concealing this fundamental failure through the evocation of entire matrices of hidden assumptions and meanings. While the notion of these matrices being hidden poses a significant methodological challenge, I put forward a three-stage method for not only establishing if such a compensatory procedure should take place, but identifying the implicit norms that it might draw on. This method grounds its analysis in a study of the material aspects of a festival, which I term the apparatus. It uses this grounding to analyse the specific ways in which a festival represents the films it exhibits, applying Parker's (2005) schematic for psychoanalytical discourse analysis to festival paratexts. I tested the findings of this second stage of the method through a heuristic analysis of the film presented in the synopsis, one that foregrounds the ways in which the film might escape the meanings ascribed to it.

To study representation in this way is to highlight the contingency of the meanings that festivals ascribe to films and cinemas. It is to situate these meanings within larger structures, discursive and material, from assumptions about race and gender to geopolitical power relations. Moreover, through its emphasis on the "Real," Lacanian ideology critique enables us to produce "a rift in the seemingly unbreakable consistency of ideological formations, from which the radical rearticulation of the very ideological framework suddenly appears possible" (Vighi and Feldner 2007: 156). Ideology critique aims to provide an (albeit limited) agency over the very structures of meaning making, intervening in the implicit rules that produce the impression of full meaning, or even rejecting the illusion of fullness itself.

In foregrounding the fundamental ideological operation as not the false representation of objects, but the attempt to conceal the fact that representation fundamentally entails misrepresentation, ideology critique thus opens up a particular space for change. It suggests the possibility of practices that embrace failure; a festival's inability to represent its objects can instead be turned into radical praxis. This might entail the creation of experimental paratexts that do not claim a film's meaning on behalf of the festival but foreground the impossibility of ever doing so, that foreground the instability of film canons, notions of quality and meaning itself. Such a move would be radical in that it challenges the very function of the film festival as an institution that produces meanings for films, offering the ground for a "radical rearticulation" of the festival framework. An alternative praxis also made possible by the Real is the strategic appropriation of misrepresentation: the self-conscious and explicit construction of partial meanings for films to advance certain agendas. This is the case in the London Migration Film Festival's synopses, which exploit the unstable meanings of both migration and the films they exhibit to produce alternative interpretations of each. This kind of intervention demonstrates the possibility to appropriate the Real into a kind of performative contradiction: the assertion of universality through a deliberately partial representation (Butler 2001: 38), in this case the assertion of "migration" as a universal term through which to define and legitimate films. As this latter example demonstrates, ideology critique can illuminate the representational workings of film festivals, whether they put forward the illusory certainty that underpins the Eurocentric film canons rightly challenged today, or embrace the instability of cinematic meanings that might enable us to do away with the very notion of canon altogether.

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