

SPECIALE In conversation with Ian Christie

By Roy Menarini

Ian Christie is a film historian, curator, broadcaster and consultant, and has been Anniversary Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College, University of London, since 1999. He has written and edited books on early film, Powell and Pressburger, Russian cinema, Scorsese and Gilliam (further details elsewhere on this site); and worked on exhibitions ranging from *Film as Film* (Hayward, 1979), *Eisenstein: His Life and Art* (MoMA Oxford, 1988) and *Twilight of the Tsars* (Hayward, 1991) to *Spellbound: Art and Film* (Hayward, 1996) and *Modernism: Designing a New World* (V&A, 2006). I also contribute regularly to radio and television programmes on cinema. He is currently a vice-president of Europa Cinemas and member of its Experts Committee. Current research interests include the history of production design, early (and new) optical media, the cultural impact of film in the digital era and the potential of experimental psychology and cognitive neuroscience to tell us more about what (and why) we experience on screen. Plus continuing fascination with the work and careers of Sergei Eisenstein, Michael Powell, Martin Scorsese, Terry Gilliam, Raul Ruiz, Aleksandr Sokurov, Patrick Keiller and some other notable individualists among filmmaking folk.

R.M.: *Do you agree that we can consider film festivals more and more in the role of counter-distribution (vs. mainstream release) and not only in the context of film/media event? Some contemporary authors (like Lav Diaz, Béla Tarr, Lisandro Alonso and others from Contemporary Contemplative Cinema, for example) are screened only in film festivals – many and many times – without a real world distribution (at least not in Italy).*

I.C.: I wouldn't say that film festivals have become a form of 'counter distribution', although it's obviously true that many films are only seen by audiences in festivals. It is rather the case that the mass distribution regime cinema was built upon - from the 1910s to the 60s-70s - has largely disappeared. Only a minority of films produced now receive commercial 'theatrical' distribution in any country (even France!), and the conditions under which this operates means that many of these are on screen for much too short a time to attract and build audiences. This means that art-house theatrical distribution has become a kind of extension of films' debut appearances at festivals - with a high premium on supporting the known figures in the pantheon of art-house cinema. But then, we have to remember that only about 6% of actual film viewings take place on cinema screens today (according to the BFI/UKLFC report *Opening Our Eyes*, 2011), with the rest on TV and computer/mobile screens - and even festivals are now starting to 'distribute' their choices to online viewers (Cinando etc)... We seem to be set on an irreversible path towards big-screen exhibition being a minority choice, and perhaps ideally configured at a 'festival'?

R.M.: *Some argued that festivals are considered by audiences as "live events". Even if you can reach most of the films in other ways (DVD, online, etc.), contemporary or archive film festivals are crowded and full of young cinephiles. Are festivals to be compared with live concerts (as well as mainstream distribution in urban movie theaters maybe is like buying a brand new music album)?*

I.C.: Popular music has rediscovered the appeal of 'live' (even if this often means simulating a packaged performance and adding music-video effects via large screens!). So too film festivals are emphasising their 'live' aspects, with filmmakers present, live (and videoed) introductions, live music of course, especially at archival festivals such as Bologna and Pordenone, and even retro-style projection (as with the carbon-arc screenings at Bologna). Plus of course the traditional aspect in some festivals of scale - very big screens in the open air at Locarno and Bologna. This seems to be part of a general trend towards the 'search for community' in entertainment and perhaps also a 'nostalgia for the affective'? But it exists alongside, and no doubt in dialogue with our desire for instant, personal access via digital media and DVD/video.

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Fig. 1

R.M.: *With economic crisis from 2008, public funds to support the festival network are always smaller. How can niche or grassroots film festivals (LGBT festivals, ethnic or linguistic minorities festivals, etc.) resist if private funds are not interested in niche culture? Is “crowdfunding” the only solution?*

I.C.: Public funding for festivals has always had an element of investment - often in support of tourism - rather than culture funding. Remember that Cannes was originally an initiative for the hoteliers of the region to attract visitors; and almost all festivals today diligently collect information about ‘visitor spend’ in order to receive whatever they do from municipalities and regional government. The EU, through successive iterations of the MEDIA programme, has played a part in supporting and even re-shaping the festival landscape. Ticket sales, to the public, have also become increasingly important for many festivals (which makes them a form of ‘distribution’ from the producers/sales agents point of view). And of course commercial sponsorship has also become vital, with all festivals now displaying their impressive array of sponsors’ logos on-screen and in print. Crowdfunding seem to be to be still a minority contributor, although possibly one that will grow.

R.M.: *What is the role of new media in film festival field? Some festivals screen 6-7 films online (Rotterdam, Rome) in order to show elsewhere a little part of the program; some festivals prefer not to show films but they work hard on social network tools (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) in order to show the “film festival experience” and to entice future viewers; some festivals are strictly online without a concrete place for screenings... What do you think is going to happen in the future?*

I.C.: All of these will continue, with the personalized online experience running alongside the communal dimension of shared screenings. The ‘mix’ will be different in almost every case, according to the motivation of the festival organizers, the market situation in a given country/region, and the ecology of the audience (is it localized, dispersed etc?)

R.M.: *Back to film culture/film criticism: Is it possible for critics to “judge” a festival? Or they can only analyze any single movie (at most single sections)?*

I.C.: There are two aspects to this. One is judging the quality of the competition line-up - eg in Venice,

SPECIALE Cannes, Berlin (this usually dire!) - even though we know this is the result of negotiation with producers as to what is offered for competition. Certainly there seems to be an increase in the competitive dimension - London has recently added a competition, and there are many 'audience awards' at otherwise non-competitive festivals (like Toronto) - which seems to be the result of an appetite to find ways to help films 'distinguish' themselves (Bourdieu!), very similar to the profusion of literary prizes, which have become essential to the publishing industry. The other dimension is judging the overall 'feel', ambience of a festival, now largely carried out by bloggers - see for instance David Bordwell/Kristin Thompson on Bologna, or 'Silent London' (Pamela Hutchison) on Pordenone. This is an interesting convergence between blogging practice and the old idea of festivals having a 'character' (how was Cannes for you this year?), and may well be set to increase.



Fig. 2

R.M.: *One last, brutal question: in your opinion, there are too many film festivals all over the world?*

I.C.: Too many? Only if you try to go to them all... I think most festivals serve a purpose, or rather several purposes, and they succeed as long as these purposes are being served, but die or transform if they're not. It's a market phenomenon, or an ecology, with tradition constantly being revived, refreshed etc. There are certainly more festivals chasing 'big' films for their main programme, and especially for their competitions, than there are films that fit this definition. But it's instructive to look back at historic programmes and see how many indifferent films were shown at the major festivals during the 50s and 60s. The single most striking trend across all festivals has been introducing 'classics' or retrospective strands, to end an over-dependence on new films of uncertain quality and appeal. Even Cannes, alongside Venice and Berlin, and Toronto, now has a solid base of retrospective, boosted by the other buzzword - 'restoration' But that's another hornet's nest...