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A monumental chronicle of 'The Mother of All Film Festivals'

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A monumental chronicle of ‘The Mother of All Film Festivals’



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The Big Three film festivals (Cannes, Venice, and Berlin) may be of venerable age, but we do not have much by way of detailed and authoritative scholarship on their history. In 2000 there was Wolfgang Jacobsen’s 550-page volume *50 Years Berlinale: International Filmfestspiele Berlin*, published by Nicolai in collaboration with the festival and Filmmuseum Berlin-Deutsche Kinemathek. In 2022, the second major instalment to such histories appeared, in Gian Piero Brunetta’s 1,100-page *La Mostra Internazionale d’Arte Cinematografica di Venezia, 1932-2022*, published by Marsilio in collaboration with La Biennale (2022).[1] We have yet to see an authoritative history of Cannes.

I had the privilege of listening to Brunetta presenting some of this work in early 2020, at a film festival conference in Venice. Already at that time there were signs of the impending public health emergency of Covid-19, yet the seriousness of the situation was not clear to us. Just a few days later, Italy went into lockdown. The province of Veneto was one of the worst-hit. Even two years later, when I first returned to Venice, strict rules and restrictions still applied – yet the film festival had done well. In fact, it was the only one of the Big Three festivals that did not cancel and had managed to hold live events both in 2020 and 2021, even if sanitised and pared down.

The lockdown worked extraordinarily for Brunetta, allowing him to concentrate on the huge historical project and bring it to completion around March 2022, just in time to see it published for the 90th anniversary of the festival (and his own personal 80th birthday). What a magisterial achievement, I thought. I had not managed to complete any large projects during Covid-19. One of my few achievements for the period, however, was to

significantly improve my Italian – particularly useful when it came to making my way through Brunetta's massive volume.

I have divided this review in two parts. First, some more general thoughts on festival historiography that the book triggered in me, related to the role of archives, sponsors, and writing world film history. Next, I will highlight some of the specific contributions of the study.

General considerations: Historiography and the film festival

Good historiography is predicated by the availability and accessibility of festival archives – a topic that keeps coming back every time a festival announces that they have digitised and moved their 'archives' online. Having investigated the status of archives at large film festivals, I believe that it would not have been possible for such a detailed study to materialise without the solid state of ASAC, the Biennale's archive.[2] Venice's archival holdings are in a better state in comparison to the archives of the other large festivals in that they are in one place and catalogued extensively online. Berlinale's archives are difficult to access, and, for a variety of reasons, there is no such thing as a Cannes Film Festival archive that would clearly hold the festival's material in one place; the resulting situation is that we have plenty of picture books on Cannes but only a few in-depth studies. The archives of most other festivals – that is, those beyond the Big Three – are their own responsibility and are rarely deposited.

With the passing of time, the space and maintenance required for archival holdings has turned into a headache. In recent years, the option to digitise has been embraced by many festivals as a solution to the archival problem – but what the websites of most festivals present is a drastically limited selection of 'archived' materials, more or less identical to what would have been in the printed catalogue for that year. There are fewer and fewer situations where 'behind the scenes' material (that would give information on which films were considered but not selected or what ambitions or controversies there may have been) is kept. This is why these days, once I hear a festival proudly announcing the inauguration of a newly digitised 'archive' that is now available online, I know that this will most likely be yet another 'redux' version of brief summaries where whole decades or a festival's history would be condensed to a paragraph or two. In a context where other festivals are axing whole narratives and dropping complexities, the archive related to the *Mostra* is a truly outstanding case – and Brunetta has made the best out of it.

Then, Brunetta's book raises matters related to the balance between an official and critical history. Both this study and Jakobsen's research on the Berlinale are published under the aegis of the respective festivals; Brunetta's volume is prefaced by Roberto Cicutto and Alberto Barbera, the powers-that-be at Venice.[3] This is both enabling and limiting. One

needs the blessing of the festival's leadership – for access, for sponsorship, for distribution – but it inevitably comes with concessions. Certain aspects of the narrative need to be smoothed out to be presented today.

In the case of Venice, the most awkward issue is with the festival's alleged fascist pedigree. In this respect, Brunetta does a remarkable job. He does not shy away from discussing the 1930s fascist affiliations of some of the festival's founders (like Antonio Maraini), but he also shows how Count Volpi was more interested in promoting tourism, and Luciano De Feo in fostering cultural diplomacy. The difficult issues are handled in an early chapter about the festival's DNA, which lists the festival's complex links with tourism, cultural diplomacy, domestic industry, technology, film appreciation, as well as its massive boost for the development of Italian national cinema. He claims, quite rightly, that there was more going on at the festival besides fascist pageants, and that it was more about the art of film than about politics.

So, I am persuaded by Brunetta's argument that Venice was not an inherently fascist festival. But I cannot help noticing that the discussion is conveniently placed in the chapter on the third festival in 1935 (pp. 101-103).[4] An interesting spot. There are nine festival editions of the Venice festival in the fascist period (1932-1942) Why is Brunetta choosing to make his argument at such an early point? Given what happened in subsequent years – with the progressive polarisation of politics and strengthening of fascism, with the ongoing engagement with Nazism, with Goebbels attending several editions of the festival in a row (and even leading a triumphant pageant on Canale Grande in 1938 [137-138]), with Leni Riefenstahl and Veit Harlan celebrated, with numerous propaganda films shown – the defence that Brunetta mounts does not persuade. Indeed, the festival was not conceived by Mussolini's propaganda machine. However, it gets progressively penetrated and suffocated by fascism later in its first decade. And while for its first three editions *La Mostra* was not run by the fascists, this certainly was not the case for the festival's subsequent editions.[5]

It is precisely in these discussions that the difference between an authorised and a critical history of film festivals manifests. Brunetta's work is of the authorised kind, and I admire its comprehensiveness and expanse. The very nature of the project, however, excludes the possibility for a critical investigation of specific periods and personalities. I hope that the publishing of Brunetta's authoritative study will foster the appearance of more studies of the critical type.[6] In general, the ideal situation would be to have these official/authorised studies alongside critical ones – about all festivals.

Furthermore, film festival histories have the opportunity to challenge and change the entrenched and Western-centric film historiography, but only a few actually do it.[7] Brunetta's book is well-intended in recognising the presence of international cinema, yet his discussion mainly follows the well-known cinemas of Western European nations

(predominantly Italy and France, and occasionally Germany and Spain) and the United States. In tracking the presence of international cinema at Venice as a consistent and evolving phenomenon, he is reliable in mentioning films that won awards. When it comes to films that did not win but that are noteworthy, he is selective and, occasionally, predisposed. Smaller European countries, especially those of Eastern Europe, are not recognised for systematic achievements. There is little on films from Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, which were at the festival from its inception. Unlike the case with US and French cinema, the continuous engagement of non-Western film traditions is not charted. This gives the study a Eurocentric bias.

Yet Venice played a tremendous role in the global transmission of lesser-known cinematic cultures. Take 1972, for example, a year when no competition was held. *La Mostra* screened 86 international films, showcasing material from Eastern Europe (Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia), Asia (India and Japan), Brazil, Sweden, Belgium, Turkey, Israel, Kuwait, and others. Directors like Zoltan Huszarik and Nagisa Oshima took part, and there is talk that this was the only time when the work of Indian master Ritwik Ghatak played at a closed screening. In the respective chapter, however, Brunetta mentions Petrovic's *The Master and Margarita*, Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 1971*, and Joachim Pedro de Andrade's *The Conspirators*; as well as a special screening of Yilmaz Guney's *Elegy* (pp. 532-534). But the focus is on French and German titles, as well as on Kubrick with *A Clockwork Orange*. There is no mention of Khalid al-Siddiq's acclaimed Kuwaiti classic *The Cruel Sea* nor of Bill Douglas' Scottish classic *My Childhood*.

Asian cinema is covered, but not sufficiently recognised for its strengths up until late. India may be the world's largest film producing country but it is not acknowledged as a film power in the context of the Venice festival's history.[8] Brunetta indeed writes of Satyajit Ray's *Aparajito* (1957), which won a Golden Lion, but sees it almost exclusively as an Indian version of Italian neorealism and traces its roots only to European influences without giving the Indian master the credit he deserves.[9] It is the same with China, which started showing films in Venice in 1971, still during the Cultural Revolution; Brunetta's first acknowledgment of the presence of Chinese cinema is in the chapter on 1992, when the Golden Lion was awarded to Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Zhu*. Japan's participation is acknowledged somewhat more systematically, especially the stunning victory of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* in 1951. I wish, however, there was more elaboration on the mechanisms of cultural collaboration between Italy and Japan during the pre-Second World War years, when both countries belonged to the Axis around Hitler's Third Reich, and respectively had quite intense exchanges in all spheres. The evidence that some of the pre-World War Two connections persisted in the aftermath of the war and well into the 1950s remains unaddressed.[10] As only occasional films and no trends are discussed regarding Japan, these important tendencies dissipate in the context of the narrative. It is a missed opportunity to offer a deeper understanding through the history of the festival.

The volume at hand: A guided tour through *La Mostra's* history

Comprising some 90 chapters, this elegantly-written book is the ultimate companion through the long and illustrious history of the world's oldest film festival. In working on it, Brunetta enjoyed good access to ASAC's libraries, as he is based in Padova, a short distance from Venice. Supplemental research has been carried out by two assistants at Cineteca di Bologna, Cineteca Lucana (Potenza), and Centro Sperimentale (Rome), as well as at the online archives of newspapers such as *La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Avanti!*, *L'Unita*, *Repubblica*, and of specialised publications (*Bianco e Nero*, *Cinema*, *Positif*, *Variety*, etc.). He also used material from former festival directors Gian Luigi Rondi (1921-2016) and Carlo Lizzani (1922-2013).

The way this huge project is structured is simple but efficient. Printed on very thin paper, the book (hardback only) weighs 1.27 kg; its reference material, even if abridged, spans over 100 pages. It follows the chronology and covers the festival's 77 editions up until 2020, each year in an individual chapter. Chapter titles are smartly used to make a point about a characteristic feature of that year. Then, each chapter is roughly structured in two sections – a discussion of the festival context followed by discussion of key films for the year. The method is to account for the most important political and structural developments without overlooking the changes in programme strands. Then, moving on to films, awards, stars, applause, and skirmishes. This way, most of the festival stakeholders are given proper attention. Only in several cases are there chapters discussing general matters.

Brunetta ensures to keep a good balance between discussing specific films against matters such as the various dimensions of the festival, with its underlying principles of film selection, juries, sidebars, and retrospectives. Information on the festival's finances is given only occasionally; the attention is more on matters of content and the perennially changing regulations. For example, what should the size of the competition be? This may seem a trivial matter, but it turns out quite contentious and is continuously tweaked over time. A good illustration of the fluctuation in competition size is found in the chapter on 1955, when the 35 feature film-competition makes the work of the jury particularly onerous. In 1956 the size is substantially trimmed and only 17 films are included. In the 1990s, the competition shrinks even further, to 12 – coming back to around 20 films in the most recent period.

Or, what number of films can a country have in competition? During certain periods the rule had been 'one film per country', while sometimes there is no restriction and only the 'quality' criterion applies.[11] The standard categories covered in almost every chapter include information on the festival's leadership, venues, competition, and sidebars, the number of countries that took part, and, were any of the usual attendees absent and why.

There were quite a few years when Hollywood did not take part, for example, a decision mainly dictated by cost-benefit analysis.

Brunetta's systematic attention to the festival venues is of particular interest, especially as space is so limited and precious in a city like Venice. He devotes a special introductory chapter to Lido, the festival's headquarters. A lagoon island of good transport connections and spectacular beaches, known as a place for 'luxury retirement', Lido's hotel owners were the driving force in establishing the festival. The event's initial intention had been to entertain the affluent guests, and nobody expected the festival to grow much in size or endure in longevity. It is on the terrace of the Excelsior hotel where the first festival screenings took place (1932-1936), until the Palazzo del Cinema was built and inaugurated in 1937. In some years, however, the festival occupied other spaces, from Palazzo Ducale (1947) to the semi-ruined Lazzaretto Vecchio (2017). Other screening venues – such as the cinemas San Marco and Rossini, the theatres La Fenice and Malibran, as well as impromptu screening spaces in Giardini – have been used over the years. And, in the rebellious early 1970s, the small cinemas around Dorsoduro's Campo Santa Margherita hosted the alternative Giornate del Cinema Italiano.

The volume excels in revealing the essence of *La Mostra* as an Italian festival; it does occasionally comment on its relations with other players and partners, such as the festival at Cannes, but it keeps the focus tightly on Italy. Because, even if international in scope, Venice is a space of encounter between the world and Italian cinema. Brunetta pays particular attention to the dynamics of regional and national interests as they play out in the politics of festival leadership.[12] All the festival's directors have been Italian men,[13] and the same with all presidents, with a preference to figures from the Veneto region. Brunetta analyses the nature and degree of political meddling at the festival – and there has been plenty of political interference throughout these 90 years, not only from Mussolini and Berlusconi, but by all governments, on a variety of matters.

The effects of 1968 are felt throughout the 1970s, resulting in substantial restructuring, adjustments, and the gradual addition of new programme strands. Chapter after chapter, the vested interest of major Italian filmmakers at Venice comes alive,[14] from the showdown in 1968, which leads to Chiarini's resignation and the 'nightmarish' 1971 ('*anno infernale*') of director Rondi (p. 521) leading to the alternative festival organised by ANAC/AACI in the working class part of town, to the eventual dropping of the Italian Cinema Week, in 1997.

Brunetta also chronicles the shifts in other festival stakeholders – critics, for example. He highlights the contribution of many high-profile Italian film writers like Mario Gromo, Francesco and Pier Maria Passinetti, Elio Zorzi, Callisto Cosulich, Guido Aristarco, Tulio Kezich, Irene Bignardi, Lorenzo Codelli, as well as about the published memoirs of directors such as Luciano De Feo, Gian Luigi Rondi, and the books by Flavia Paulon. He also

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acknowledges the work of international critics, such as Bazin, Truffaut, Michel Ciment, and Deborah Young.

I will stop here. It is impossible to have a comprehensive review of such a huge and multi-faceted book. Its index of names runs for 40 pages (*indice dei nomi*, pp. 1137-1178), and the index of films for 48 (*indice dei film*, pp. 1087-1135). Many more sides of Brunetta's massive study could be discussed, and I hope that, over time, other reviewers will complete the picture. For me, this was a fulfilling, enriching, and, as evidenced in this review, a thought-provoking read. I would imagine the audience for this book is most of those involved in the study of festivals. The good news is that La Biennale has made further investments into the project, and have now made the book available in an English translation.[15]

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Notes

- [1] The Biennale has also commissioned and published a much shorter history: Happy '75: A Brief Introduction to the History of the International Film Festival by Peter Cowie (La Biennale, 2007). Cowie was also commissioned by the Berlinale for The Berlinale, The Festival (2010, Bertz Fischer).

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- [2] ASAC: Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, with two locations, in Giardini and Mestre. The Mestre site's extensive holdings cover all past festival editions.
- [3] Likewise, Jakobsen's volume is prefaced by the director (at that time) Moritz de Hadeln. In the case of Cannes, we do not even have detailed official histories; rather, it is books by directors such as Gilles Jacob and Thierry Fremaux that are mainly in circulation.
- [4] Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* screened and was awarded a special Gold Medal at this third edition of the festival.
- [5] The way in which the Berlinale is handling the historical revelations around the Nazi affiliation of its long-standing director Alfred Bauer (1951-1976) is even more inept. It would be worthwhile to publish a separate piece on the matters of the way in which film festivals are handling their awkward historical moments.
- [6] A great example of the critical type of studies related to Venice is Stefano Pisu's 2013 in-depth investigation of the Soviet presence during Venice's early period, *Stalin a Venezia. L'URSS alla mostra del cinema fra diplomazia culturale e scontro ideologico (1932-1953)*. Rubbettino. Another critical study, prefaced by Gian Piero Brunetta, is dedicated to the role of one of the few women, Flavia Paulon, who herself authored several books on the history of Venice (Casadoro, Elena. *Flavia Paulon è il Festival*, Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia, 2006).
- [7] Examples of recent writing that led to revising older concepts about film history through the discussion of festivals include Sanjoong Lee's *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Cornell University Press, 2020) and chapters in Lindiwe Dovey's *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* (Palgrave, 2015), and Rossen Djalalov's *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (McGill-Queen University Press, 2020).
- [8] India and Japan have been at Venice since 1934. India took part with a Telugu (*Sati Savitri* by C. Pullaiah, 1933) and a Bengali film (*Seeta* by Debaki Bose, 1933); Japan with the *Katsudo Shashin* animation *Nippon, Nippon*.
- [9] He seems to think Ray won as a matter of fashion, as the previous year his *Pather Panchali* (1956) had been acclaimed at Cannes.
- [10] Through the 1950s, La Mostra regularly welcomed Japanese producer Nagamasa Kawakita, a man who had been closely associated with fascists and is known for his film collaborations with Nazi Germany.
- [11] Thus, the 2022 competition featured 23 films from ten countries only, of which 12 had been produced or co-produced by the US and 7 by France.
- [12] There is discussion of the political standing of all festival directors, and particularly of Croze, Ammanati, Chiarini, Lizzani, Rondi, Micciche, Pontecorvo, Muller, and Barbera. I found the discussions of the roles played by politicians (Walter Veltroni, Giuliano Urbani) of particular interest.
- [13] Except Moritz de Hadeln, who is regarded as a 'foreigner', even if born in Florence. His tenure, in 2002 and 2003, was short-lived.
- [14] I was intrigued to read, for example, that filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni wrote a brief history of La Mostra's early editions, published in 1940. Brunetta quotes Antonioni's commentary on the reaction to Gustav Mahaty's *Ecstasy*, screened in 1934: 'In the garden of the Excelsior that evening you could hear the breathing of the attentive spectators, you could feel a shiver run through the audience' (p. 81).
- [15] <https://store.labiennale.org/en/prodotto/the-venice-international-film-festival-1932-2022/?v=79cba1185463>