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Inside the archive of feelings: Experiencing Il Cinema Ritrovato

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Proudly announcing on its website ‘thirty-seven years of emotions’, the 37th edition of Il Cinema Ritrovato promised a gargantuan feast to those prepared to disengage themselves from the demands of everyday life during nine packed days. This year, the festival’s program boasted ‘470 films including 35mm, 16mm, restored masterpieces and hidden gems from all over the world’,^[1] screening at 7 cinemas in and around the Manifattura delle arti area, where its parent institution, the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, is located.

Presiding over the opening event under the bold cover image from the Mexican-Revolution Western *El Chunchu;/¿Quién sabe?* (A Bullet for the General, Damiano Damiani, 1966), one of this year’s ‘rediscoveries’, Ehsan Khoshbakht promised an ‘edgy’ and a ‘vintage’ edition of the festival. It was left to Gian Luca Farinelli (festival co-director alongside Khoshbakht, Mariann Lewinsky, and Cecilia Cenciarelli) to thank the festival’s truly international and ever-growing audience for ‘protecting us’, especially through the difficult 1990s, in an allusion to Silvio Berlusconi’s first mandate (‘when culture did not count’). The opening of Ritrovato in the shadow of Il Cavaliere’s passing acted as a timely reminder of the festival’s years-long endeavour in building publics against the backdrop of volatile government cultural policy.

The ‘surprise’ programme of silent films that inaugurated and cast a blessing (as per Lewinsky’s summoning) over the 2023 festival contained a cornucopia of images, from harrowing scenes of refugees fleeing the Armenian genocide, to an enchanting 1910 fashion display of Dutch regional hairstyles and bonnets in portraits of astonishing chromatic beauty. The diverse array of affects, themes, and textures in this film selection

was, nevertheless, equalised by the act of digital compilation. The opening exposed one other point of pressure that archival festivals face today: balancing the requirements of preservation, contextualisation, and exhibition of a vastly heterogeneous film heritage.

Unlike the specialised Giornate del Cinema Muto/Pordenone Silent Film Festival, of which Ritrovato is itself an offshoot, the sheer scope of Bologna's generalist programming makes Farinelli's description of the festival as a 'virtual time machine straddling the entire history of cinema'[2] not feel like an overstatement. The Ritrovato's globe-trotting, ages-spanning selection works best as an invitation to devise one's own itinerary (as specialised or as eclectic as one may wish) through particular modes, periods, auteurs, or cultures. The generous programme offers plenty of room for chance encounters and true discoveries, as well as viewing or re-viewing those – often more talked about than seen – unmissable titles.

On offer this year were a Rouben Mamoulian retrospective, two intersecting series on Anna Magnani (on the fiftieth anniversary of her death) and screenwriter Suso Cecchi d'Amico; Michael Powell's beginnings, 'before Pressburger'; the works of Teinosuke Kinugasa; a focus on Swiss filmmaker Leopold Lindtberg, and five restored films from the 1970s and 1980s by director and cinematographer Elfi Mikesch. The Time Machine section's regular 'A Hundred Years Ago' strand brought 1923 production into focus, as well as early cinema from 1903; a series on Russian silent cinema divas in Italy, and another one on German exile comedies of the mid-1930s were two other notable historiographic strands; the 'Cinematibero'/Free Cinema sidebar (faithful to the festival's 1960 Neorealist-inspired origins as the Mostra Internazionale del Cinema Libero, a harbour to experimental and political movements around the world)[3] showcased a selection of West African and Middle Eastern cinemas, alongside a panel on the past, present, and future of African archives.

Bologna's topography attracts a gregarious audience highly attuned to the apparatus of cinema. All main venues are within easy walking distance of each other, and the city's network of portico-ed streets provides shelter from both the blazing June sun and unexpected rain. On the queues to the venues, one is more likely to overhear discussions about obscure programming choices, the quality of a given print, or the state of health of 'la nonna', the affectionate nickname for the carbon-arc light projector on Piazzetta Pasolini, in lieu of the usual bursts of satisfaction or disappointment with a film just seen. Any archival festival is all about the screening experience, including the atmosphere of anticipation, the curators' and guests' introductions, the musical accompaniment for the silents, and especially the prints. The material memory of film was everywhere on display; just to refer to the Mamoulian strand, the deep hues of Technicolor in *Blood and Sand* (1941) brought an unparalleled vibrancy to the lavish sets, make-up, and costuming that atoned for the film's thick-as-nails Orientalism; a well-preserved print of *Applause* (1929) amplified every seedy detail in its vivid canvas of showbiz excess, such as the loose, dirty-looking hanging

tights of a line of music-hall dancers; and *City Streets* (1931) treated us to a stunning star introduction of a very young Gary Cooper in a story about lovers caught in a spider's web of mobster crime.

The festival abundantly caters to the 'classical' cinephile in search of discoveries from the American and European vaults, but the programme as a whole reflects Bologna's identity as a preservation and exhibition centre actively engaged in the worlding of 20th century-cinema history. This year saw the latest instalment of the Albert Samama Chikli project[4] and the publication of a volume edited by Lewinsky devoted to the Tunisian pioneer. I missed the much-admired Syrian film *Al-Makhdū'un* (The Dupes, 1972) by Egyptian Tewfik Saleh, but David Schickele's *Bushman* (1971) was a highlight. A powerful mix of political documentary and formal search, *Bushman* documents the landing of a Nigerian student nicknamed Gabriel in the San Francisco Bay area in the wake of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam protests movement, conveying its character's transcultural experience and shedding critical light on both the racism of US institutions and the exoticising gaze of a liberal yet self-absorbed white youth. The film exposes the limits of its own position, with the deportation of non-professional actor Paul Eyam Nzie Opokam abruptly tearing through Schickele's cinéma-vérité project.

Seeking out European mid-twentieth century films I had not seen before, I found some gems: Roviros Manthoulis's *Face to Face* (Prosopo me prosopo, 1966) is an astonishing mix of political satire and experimental modernism out of the New Greek Cinema; a sort of inverted *Theorem* (Teorema, Pier Paolo Pasolini 1968) where the class-conscious male outsider risks being devoured by the high-bourgeoisie Athenian family whose home he infiltrates as appointed English teacher to their society daughter. Endlessly inventive in its use of editing, and often wickedly funny, Manthoulis pulls off a prescient cautionary tale about a modern capitalist yet sealed-off society verging on the totalitarian just one year before the coup that ushered in the military dictatorship in Greece. Another handsome digital restoration, *The City Stands Trial* (Processo alla città, Luigi Zampa, 1952) appears now as an *avant la lettre* Neapolitan camorra film and a surprisingly complex police procedural; as Caterina D'Amico delightfully explained, the tireless Suso alternated work on the intricate script of *Processo* in the mornings with the writing of *Bellissima* (1951) for Luchino Visconti in the afternoons – and being far more efficient than her male collaborators, she still had time left to take driving lessons.

Making one's way through the Italian selection, the desired balance between the popular and research dimensions of the festival (which Farinelli notes as one of its goals)[5] means taking risks with films that do not always gracefully withstand the test of time. Digital restoration made possible the restitution of lost footage to *Mid-Century Loves* (Amori di mezzo secolo, various directors, 1954), an uneven omnibus film featuring Alberto Sordi and Silvia Pampanini among others, with a tortuous restoration process.[6] In contrast, the

screening of a foggy digital presentation of *La Contessa Azzurra* (Claudio Gora, 1960) did little to justify the inclusion of this dusty belle-epoque period piece (maybe the only puzzling programming decision). Elsewhere in the Italian focus of the programme, Anna Magnani reigned supreme; her fierce personality dazzles through the mix of comic timing and dramatic intensity of her varied roles: as the leader of a community of women doing grassroots politics in *Angelina (L'Onerevole Angelina)*, Zampa, 1947); in her classic turn as a pugnacious mother in *Bellissima*; or going blonde in the little-seen *The Passionate Thief* (*Risate di gioia*, Mario Monicelli, 1960), where the diva plays a down-and-out film extra at Cinecittà who becomes part of a sensational trio of swindlers alongside the older Totò and the younger Ben Gazzara.

The selection of 'recovered and restored' titles, which premieres the work of the Cineteca and its attached restoration lab *L'Immagine Ritrovata* (founded in 1992), as well as restorations by other archives around the world was predictably eclectic, with an offer that ranged from Germaine Dulac to David Lynch, and included very familiar names: François Truffaut, Ernst Lubitsch, or Charles Chaplin, whose lush 'marked-woman' melodrama *A Woman of Paris* (1923) was reinvigorated by the new score archaeologically constructed from Chaplin's own compositions dating back to the 1950s and 1970s.[7] While film prints from all eras are endangered and in constant need of investment, the restoration efforts of archives are no less subject to the pressures of commercial distributors and A-list festivals looking to fill in their prestige 'classic' sidebars with recognisable titles.[8] Many of the titles featured in Bologna are available in other places and by other means, and yet there's something unique in the way the archival film festival makes a piece of film history alive as an event; also how it produces an opportunity to debate 'how newly viewed films fit – or do not fit – into preconceived histories', as noted by Ian Christie.[9]

Queueing outside the Scorsese cinema for what turned out to be the last ticket available to the screening of *Dragnet Girl* (*Hijòsen no onna*, 1933), a film by Yasujiro Ozu currently available on both the Criterion Channel in the US and the BFI Player in the UK, I met other fellow festivalgoers who were, like me, tantalised by the prospect of watching a restored 'rare' Ozu preceded by an introduction by Wim Wenders, a well-known Japanophile. We were not disappointed: the extremely bright 4K restoration from the National Film Archive of Japan enhanced the depth and textures of every frame and every detail in the unhurried *mise-en-scène* – this is a slow-paced, visually exquisite, and nuanced character study that rewards the time as well as the display afforded by the big screen. Wenders's thoughtful introduction compounded the sense of occasion, as he reflected on the film's atypical position in the Ozu canon and highlighted the pleasures granted by this unusual gangster movie quietly populated by 'gangsters who do not want to be gangsters but want to leave it all behind.'[10]

Events like this are crucial to a festival where the word ‘cinophilia’ is central – not least in the prominent ‘cinophile’s heaven’ section – but risks becoming fossilised if not constantly interrogated and redefined, rather than wielded as a withdrawal into old positions. In a talk bearing the slightly cringeworthy title ‘The Eternity of Cinophilia’, Cannes Film Festival and Institute Lumière director Thierry Frémaux, a regular guest at Bologna, had little qualm in reiterating an outmoded separation between ‘talking about society’ and ‘talking about films’ while defending cinophilia as a tool for knowledge – a valuable but futile claim if that knowledge does not revert to the world. Two nights earlier, Nan Goldin had delivered an emotional and pointed introduction to an audience of over 2,000 spectators packing the Piazza Maggiore evening screening of *Bellissima*: ‘in this movie, everybody hustles.’ Watching *Bellissima* with a Bolognese, Italian, and international audience, I was gripped once more by the sophistication of the reflexive mise-en-scène; by Magnani’s power (nowhere more palpable than in the scene where she muses, in front of a mirror, ‘could I be an actress?’); and most of all by the compassionate view of a working-class world of characters who hustle, and dream, and survive, and do not always do the right thing for their children, circa 1950. It was impossible not to be caught in the blend of aesthetic, historical, and political feelings prompted by that unique screening.

The transformation of the magnificent Renaissance square into a huge open-air screen affords an enchanting mix of the highly specialised and the excitement of summer cinema (minus the buzz of mobile phones – this was an exceptionally committed audience). Familiar classics alternate with more challenging choices: the projection of the first *Stella Dallas* (Henry King, 1925) with an original score by Stephen Horne and full orchestra was without a doubt the highlight of the week; all in all, the programme of screenings on the Piazza extend the festival calendar a further two weeks. The festival thus acts as a meeting point for distributors and restorers, researchers and film aficionados, and as a feast of cinema that gives visitors a taste of the local film culture and offers city residents access to the international festival experience – a deal that the free public screenings cement beautifully.

Even on a limited stay and with the requirement of online ticket pre-booking, the straightforward system and the ease of access to tickets and venues made the festival a relatively relaxed experience. Bologna has its own idiosyncratic contingencies: unpredictable bilingual introductions; a Piazza Maggiore screening cancellation due to a bout of summer rain has an automatic knock-on effect on the entire evening’s programme across venues. These glitches do not detract from the quality of what is on offer, as films from other eras and carrying other histories produce new resonances by the act of projecting them again in these spaces, in contact with earlier and later works they were never meant to be seen with.[11] Discussing the silent film selection at this year’s festival, Maggie Hennefeld notes that though many of these treasures will often later screen online, the somatic experience of watching them in a setting dedicated to their collective

exhibition stirs up (to borrow a phrase from scholar Ann Cvetkovich) the “archive of feelings” they preserve... these films gain power in their very incompleteness’.[12]

Though film history returns only in ‘fiery fragments’, as Hennefeld writes,[13] each projection creates a feeling of momentary completeness – images that speak to us. With its adjoining social, information, and research spaces (including the book and DVD fair at the Cineteca’s Renzo Revi library, and the website and the lavishly-produced catalogue enclosed with the festival pass, which has helped me compose this deferred report and extends my experience of the festival), Il Cinema Ritrovato is also the paradigmatic archival film festival as a site of memory, as per Ana Grgic’s formulation: a site of historiographic memory; material memory; as well as social memory – a site of multiple encounters.[14] Few festivals are likely to match the excitement of unearthing archival moments, feelings, and memories that a first-time visit to Il Cinema Ritrovato can generate, so much so that once there I felt like a late arrival to the party, consumed by an intense envy of the veterans around me who had been going to the festival for years, even decades. I cannot wait to return.

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Notes

- [1] Il Cinema Ritrovato, <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/about/> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- [2] Farinelli 2013, p. 93.
- [3] Farinelli, 'Cinemalibero', Il Cinema Ritrovato, <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/sezione/cinemalibero/> (accessed on 31 August 2023).
- [4] See Lewinsky 2023.
- [5] Farinelli 2013, p. 98.
- [6] See Alberto Anile, 'Amori di mezzo secolo', in Il Cinema Ritrovato, pp 253-254.
- [7] Timothy Brock, 'The score for A Woman of Paris', in Il Cinema Ritrovato, p. 222.
- [8] Cherchi Usai 2013, pp. 31-32.
- [9] Christie 2013, p. 50.
- [10] Available on the Cineteca di Bologna YouTube channel: 'Wim Wenders introduces "Hijosen no Onna"', Cineteca Bologna, 11 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRwFHB2-yL4&t=732s> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- [11] I am here echoing the impressions of Jessica Kiang (2023) in her own festival report: <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/living-in-the-now-il-cinema-ritrovato-2023/> (accessed on 30 August 2023).
- [12] Hennefeld 2023.
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] See Grgic 2013.