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Same Vision, New Visibility: Il Cinema Ritrovato 2018

Andrea Gelardi



Figure 1: All over the city: Il Cinema Ritrovato (Bologna, Italy). Photo: Andrea Gelardi 2018.

Since it was held in Bologna, Italy, from 23 June to 1 July 2018, a multitude of voices have already discussed in depth the diverse film programme, activities and events of the thirty-second edition of Il Cinema Ritrovato. Through these numerous reports, the discussion about which "new/old" films will enter the canon as a result of being screened at the festival has been held, and due respect to the world's most prestigious archival film festival has been paid. This year, Il Cinema Ritrovato received extensive coverage from specialised journals, alongside both national and international newspapers. David Bordwell's blog post appeared online with typical clockwork timing, together with fresh accounts by other Bologna aficionados, such as Pamela Hutchinson, Ivana Miloš, and Peter Hourigan, who provided their own enthusiast accounts of the festival.

Compared to reports from the prior edition, a significant shift can be observed in the mediatic resonance of the festival. In fact, this year more than before, Il Cinema Ritrovato was perceived and described as a key event in the yearly calendar of cinephiles. As for all A-list festivals, its mediatic image goes hand in hand with the role it has come to play within global film culture. Having evolved from an event designed for local and specialised audiences to a world-class venue that also caters for cosmopolitan filmgoers and tourists, Il Cinema Ritrovato has become a site where new trends and tendencies in cinephilia and film scholarship take

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form. It is now an event that orchestrates the rediscovery of film classics and the reconstruction of film history—a transformation highlighted in almost all of this year's reports.

A common thread runs through the various articles dedicated to the 2018 edition. On 21 June, while a crowd of thousands was gathering in Piazza Maggiore to see *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) on the festival screen, Scorsese made his on-stage appearance to present his film. The next day, Scorsese's interview at the Teatro Comunale and the following première of the newly restored version of *Enamorada* (Emilio Fernández, 1946) opened the festival. Scorsese's presence was more than a glittering display for the filmgoer-tourist. His attendance meant the consecration of the festival and of its organising institution, the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna.

During the past two decades, Scorsese's nonprofit Film Foundation has been cooperating with the Cineteca di Bologna on the World Cinema Project and the recently presented African Film Heritage Project.[1] Both projects are intended to locate (arguably the most uncertain aspect of these missions), restore, preserve and promote "often overlooked classics from outside the Western canon" (Bordwell). This year, Cecilia Cenciarelli, codirector of the Cinema Ritrovato, curated the World Cinema strand, renamed Cinemalibero after the Porretta Terme Film Festival.[2] Following on from the 2017 edition of the festival, in which Med Hondo's work was rediscovered by Western film critics, the Cinemalibero aimed at fostering the interest in African cinema, thus raising awareness of its precarious material condition. As Julian Stringer has noted, film festivals enable the "recirculation and recommodification" of films deemed to be part of the canon (82). In this regard, Il Cinema Ritrovato is no exception. However, beyond a solely commercial interest, it is worth noting how the festival is also characterised by a distinctive pedagogic purpose, playing on the importance of the unfamiliar. Indeed, the festival aims to provide a space where both local and international audiences can appreciate films normally situated "at the margins of the mainstream market" (Cineteca 7), so as to widen the traditional perspectives of cinephilia.



Figure 2: Columns of Canon: Cineteca's Film Archive (Bologna, August 2018). Photo: Andrea Gelardi.

For research purposes, I attended most of the Cinemalibero's events, which was a stimulating experience, and not only in terms of film viewing. *Fad'Jal* (Safi Faye, 1979) was the first film I had the chance to see. The third film directed by the Senegalese ethnologist and filmmaker Safi Faye, it was selected for Un Certain Regard at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, and was restored in 2018 by the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) under the supervision of Faye herself. While mirroring the daily life of a rural village with the use of interviews and direct cinema, Faye does not hesitate to combine a documentary style with a fictional plot, disrupting the traditional documentary/fiction dichotomy. The result is Fad'Jal, an homage to the Senegalese oral storytelling and to the Serer region's rural life that seem to stand out of time. Most of all, Fad'Jal is a statement that a local collective memory should be kept alive for future generations' sake. The statement coexists with a disenchanted acknowledgment of the ephemerality of such a memory, the preservation of which, under the threat of social and political changes, appears as an extreme gesture of resilience. From this perspective, the restoration of this film assumed a more radical significance before my eyes. By perpetuating the film's lesson, the act of restoring this film seemed to work as both a warning of the ephemerality of our cinematic memory, and an endorsement of the idea that current levels attention towards film preservation are never enough.

Hyenas (*Hyènes*, 1992) by Djibril Diop Mambéty was presented in Sala Scorsese by the producer Pierre-Alain Meier. Building on the renewed success of *Touki Bouki* (1973) after its 2008 restoration, this year the fifth film by Mambéty was restored by the Swiss Cinémathèque. Hyenas draws on Mambéty's meeting with a prostitute in Dakar who used to service the poor inhabitants of the local port district. Moved by the impression of such a fortunate meeting, Mambéty started imagining her personal story. *Hyenas* brilliantly combines this creative process with Friederich Dürrenmatt's play The Visit, forging a cruel and hopeless black comedy on modern African society. While the three-act play by the Swiss dramatist remains intact, Mambéty adds to it a corrosive critique that bites into money, Western neocolonialism, consumerism and African traditional society. In the background of the narration, a universe of animals seems to watch or maybe re-enact the drama, constructing a specular symbolic image that silently comments upon the human universe. From this, a dark laughter is cast upon the African modern society and the utopia of development, without leaving any hope for redemption.

It is with a similar tone that *The Black Goddess* (*A Deusa Negra*, 1978) by Ola Balogun touches on the drama of slavery. Shifting from the eighteenth-century slave trade to the present, and from Nigeria to Brazil, the film tells about the forced African diaspora, revealing the complexity of the massive and horrendous displacement of African peoples and outlining a net of connections that, running through continents and time, still echoes in the present. In search of the traces of his once-enslaved ancestors, the protagonist ventures to Brazil and encounters the Yemoia cult. Via the protagonist's experience of occultism and mysticism, the film explores the transatlantic Yourùbá culture, establishing a connection between African and Brazilian popular cultures and linking traumas of the past with the living present. The soundtrack, composed by the drummer Remi Kabaka, is an Afro jazz improvisation that gives a hypnotising and disturbing rhythm to the narration, particularly when the horrors of slavery are described.

Shocked by the audacity of *The Black Goddess*, I could not miss the conference on the history of Nigerian cinema, where Cenciarelli was to interview its director, Ola Balogun. To give some necessary context: to date, none of the films by Balogun have survived, except for a copy of *The Black Goddess* with Japanese subtitles, on which the recent restoration was based. Similarly, while Nollywood's direct-to-video productions continue to attract the interest of Western film scholars (Andrew 17–18), Nigeria's film heritage still maintains a precarious

condition. The conference was unusual from the very beginning. As Cenciarelli started commenting on the difficulties of locating and restoring Nigerian films, Balogun soon diverted from the topic of the discussion, arguing that film preservation is not a priority for a country where filmmakers cannot even afford to produce their work. Complaining of not having the means to continue his artistic career, Balogun also criticised Western institutions for profiting from his art and attacked the editor of a recent publication dedicated to his film productions.[3] Protesting against the continuous exploitation of the African cultural heritage and the neocolonialist attitude of Western countries, the Nigerian filmmaker stormed out of the conference in a fit of rage, leaving the audience with many unsolved doubts.

Alongside the Cinemalibero strand, Cento anni fa (One Hundred Years Ago) is another key venue of the festival. Interesting picks from the Cento anni fa strand were Charles Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918) and *The Bond* (1918), Germaine Dulac's short *Âmes de Fous* (1918), and *Father Sergius* (*Otec Sergij*, 1918), directed by Jakov Protazanov. This film is an adaptation of Lev Tolstoy's short story, in which Prince Kasatsky, later Father Sergius (Ivan Mozzhukhin), opts for a hermitic life after having found out that his fiancée is having an affair with another man. Mozzukhin is superb. While his appearance continuously mutates throughout the film, the Russian actor gives full expression to both the interior and exterior transformation of his character, incarnating the arrogance of a young officer, his existential breakdown and the grey spirituality of an old-age hermit. Another film from 1918 is *The Oriental Language Teacher* (*Učitel orientálních jazyků*, Czechoslovakia, 1918), directed by the actor-director Olga Rautenkranzovà and Jan S. Kolár. The film is a comedy about two lovers, Sylva and the Turkish teacher Algeri, and their conflict with her father to make their romantic dream a reality. Restored in 2002 by the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique, the film stands out as a great example of Czech filmmaking before the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This year's Cento anni fa strand also provided a global insight into the world exiting from the Great War. Through a rich selection of films produced in 1918, the strand was intended to offer an overview of the changing face of Europe and the world, moulded by the drama of the war. In this regard, Louis Feuillade's *Vendémiaire* (1918), produced during the final part of the war, provides an interesting view on the France of this period. Divided in four chapters, the film seems to be nothing but a realist look at rural France and its small communities working in wine production. However, without having a marked propagandistic tone, a highly nationalist sentiment underpins the film's narrative. Indeed, Feuillade glorifies French culture in its purest form, focusing on how it is embodied by rural communities in their everyday life, thus suggesting that the true essence of this country continues to breathe in time of peace and war.

Another interesting strand of this year's festival was the "Rebirth of Chinese Cinema", a programme that offered eight Chinese films produced between 1941 and 1951. Following the Japanese occupation, China faced a period of great instability and transformation that corresponded to the rebirth of the Chinese film industry, which was forced to stop under the Japanese military government. To produce a sense of familiarity for the audience, these films were presented at the festival as a Neorealist-like tendency in postwar Chinese cinema. As most of these films are characterised by a strong social commitment, a realist gaze into social problems, and generally adopt certain formal solutions, the comparison with postwar Italian cinema is somehow fitting. For example, *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiao Cheng Zhi Chun*, 1948) by Mu Fei well represents the politics of the so-called Chinese progressive movement. The film is a dramatic representation of everyday life in an ancient urban community, Songjiang, and provides a vivid depiction of the atmosphere of a crumbling Chinese society in the aftermath of the war. Long forgotten after the Communist Party banned the film, it was rediscovered in the early 1980s and is now considered a cornerstone of Chinese film history. *The Barber Takes a Wife* (*Jiafeng Xuhuang*, 1947) has a different approach to the

representation of postwar China, and is more reminiscent of the "White Telephone" film comedy than of Neorealism. *The Barber Takes a Wife* is a comedy set in 1947 Shanghai, where a hairdresser and a lady fake their identity for marriage. If the tones of the comedy are somehow light and whimsical, the film is able to offer a radical critique of a society in which social advancement is everyone's chimera and human relationships are only a tool for self-empowerment.

A last mention goes to the retrospective dedicated to some of the lesser-known films by Yilmaz Güney. A major figure in 1950s and 1960s Turkish cinema, Güney is known for his political views which he expressed as a writer and a filmmaker and for which he was eventually prosecuted, imprisoned and exiled. *Bride of the Earth* (*Seyit Han*, 1968) is a tale of personal revenge in rural Turkey that seems to be detached from Güney's political and social commitments. The film is a black-and-white western in which Seyit, interpreted by Güney himself, returns to his Anatolian village after a long journey to marry his beloved one. However, a powerful and rich landowner, a representative of the feudal rural culture, will eventually disrupt Seyit's plans and inflict a tragic and violent ending to his dreams. As in a traditional western, the protagonist is doomed to the solitary path of the revenger, though the landscape is at odds with traditional westerns. As in a Tarkovskian atmosphere, sweeps of water and mud where no shelter is offered are the silent background of the protagonist's fight for revenge against Turkish feudalism. Emanating from these locations, an oppressive sense of ineluctability follows Seyit's fight against the rules of traditional society, which is the only and true villain of this film.



Figure 3: At the end of the night: Bologna's railway station. Photo: Andrea Gelardi 2018.

As I draw the conclusions of this report, a final consideration goes to Piazza Maggiore. Before, during and after the festival, Bologna's central square hosts a series of open-air screenings. Some people bring a chair to sit, while others prefer the steps of the Basilica of San Petronio, and others again simply lie down on the pavement of the square. In a respectful silence, thousands of people from around the world share the experience of watching films.

Looked from this angle, this festival does more than widening the perspectives of the film canon, or presenting little known films from universally praised auteurs. It builds a sense of community. By fostering a communal experience of film viewing, the festival reinterprets the urban space and fosters an active dialogue with the audience. Everybody can be part of this experience, regardless of their origin or social status. In contemporary Italy, this festival is a political act, a social gesture, and a militant choice.

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Notes

[1] The World Cinema Project and the African Film Heritage Project are two "special programs" run by The Film Foundation in collaboration with Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna as scientific partner, several international film archives and supporting charities. In pair with the World Cinema Project, the African Film Heritage Project was firstly announced in 2017 by Martin Scorsese with representatives from the UNESCO and the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI). This project faces the difficulties of locating and restoring the African film heritage, thus seeking to stimulate a culture of film preservation in the African continent.

[2] This programme presents films restored or supported by The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project and other new restorations realised by other institutions from around the world. The name of the strand is an explicit homage to the legacy of the Mostra del Cinema Libero in Porretta Terme, from whose ashes Il Cinema Ritrovato was created.

[3] I am referring to *Magic of Nigeria – On the Cinema of Ola Balogun* edited by Gary Vanisian. This is the first volume that seeks to draw attention to Balogun's filmmaking. The book includes six critical essays and two contributions from Balogun's wife and François Balogun, life-long collaborator of the filmmaker. The publication was funded via Kickstarter and is a nonprofit project organised by the Filmkollektiv Frankfurt.

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