

The Tradition of European Film Festivals and Cultural Diplomacy

In the context of cultural diplomacy¹, film festivals represent powerful vehicles for bridging ideas and networks across the globe, since they facilitate access to large numbers of people to connect and interact, whether in terms of the film industries or as audiences who are interested in exploring the world beyond cultural stereotypes. Film festivals are integrated into a political economy of cinema, thus their role against the background of cultural diplomacy is hard to neglect. Through the ever-expanding digital technologies, the moving image holds a strong position within the complex dynamics of social, cultural and economic relations. Consequently, the moving image is not only a concept linked to the legacy of modernity, but also a platform for organizing, developing and spreading content across different cultures on the globe according to the principle of soft power².

In general, it is claimed that the vital purpose of film festivals is to facilitate access for commercially unavailable films for wider audiences. To bring to communities, whether film-savvy or less invested, the occasion to see films that they would not easily see on TV or on the Internet. Moreover, film festivals allow the professionals the opportunity to come together and collaborate on joint projects, as well as introduce the lesser trained or experienced in the complex mechanism of the film industries. However, the most consistently diplomatic trait of film festivals is the way they engage a vast network of people, creativity and concern for social issues through the mere practice of film-making. Recently, it seems that film festivals pop up like “Starbucks franchises” in terms of numbers, since every major city in the world seem to run yearly a festival. Doubtlessly, there is a great demand for such film festivals as social events and cultural products, consequently it is natural to develop an interest in the analysis of the diplomatic and business aspects of the festival circuit.

Interestingly, the moving image is integrated in two opposite systems of reception and communication between an audience and the actors of producing film content. Mainstream films and TV series exercise a massive appeal, but they do so on a principle of virtuality, there is no human interaction with the content producers when sitting in front of

¹ The use of the concept is based on the terminology and methodology proposed by Donfried, Mark, Gienow – Hecht, Jessica C.E. *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, Berghahn Books, 2011.

² As defined by Joseph Nye.

the TV. By contrast, film festivals provide a venue for dialogues between audiences and actors, filmmakers, producers and other film crew, thus they depend much more on direct human interaction in order to reach their economic and artistic agendas. Whether active in the context of film festivals or in mainstream films, the moving image has the capacity to engage people and cultures in profound, contradictory, but always meaningful dialogues. The creative industries that are appropriated by the practice of cultural diplomacy heavily rely on the moving image's power of influencing, structuring or de-constructing existing human, social or cultural capital³.

The topic of identity is at the heart of any analysis of film festivals as platforms of cultural diplomacy. As Thomas Elsaesser has remarked, 'there is no such thing as European cinema' and yet 'European cinema exists, and has existed since the beginning of cinema a little more than a hundred years ago'⁴. In other words, European cinema is often mentioned as a unified concept in various reports and media, yet it is essentially no more than a loose-knit collection of 'national' cinemas typically constructed and articulated in relationship to other industries, notably Hollywood and television. Thus both European cinema and the national cinemas which are part of it are based to a great degree upon difference, or more precisely upon what they are not. This is the core of the fascination and potential for change that film festivals embody: since people respond both to processes of identification with similar cultures to the ones they come from, or in reverse, they are quick at spotting and engaging with the differences they sense on the screen, film festivals turn very reliable instruments for exercising soft power, based on a motion of attraction, rather than compulsion. Simultaneously, the moving image alludes also to a sense of fragmentation, difference and instability that the cinematic clash of civilizations inevitably entangles. Cultural diplomacy is able to capitalize on these dynamic techniques of perception and production, not only economically, but also on the level of nation branding and cultural projection.

Thomas Elsaesser's perceptive analysis of the confrontation between the national and the supranational in European history highlights its dual potential, as both an enabling force and means of exclusion. Interestingly, a proposal of solutioning this gap or exclusion has been pointed out in the concept of 'mutual interference', inspired by the work of Robert Cooper, a diplomat and former adviser to Tony Blair. In this sense, Elsaesser states, 'there is no European [. . .] who is not already diasporic in relation to some marker of

³ As defined by Bourdieu in his seminal work from 1986, "The Forms of Capital".

⁴ Elsaesser, Thomas . *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam: AUP, 2005.

difference—be it ethnic, religious or linguistic—and whose identity is not already hyphenated or doubly occupied⁵. In other words, he advocates for plural and performative constructions of identity and identification which are open to the discourses and agendas of the local communities, whilst simultaneously fostering dialogue with that which lies outside Europe's borders: 'the "national" thereby acquires a different meaning, in that it is neither "essentialist" nor "constructivist" [. . .], but "post-national", that is, reintroduced for external use, so to speak, while suspended within the European Union'⁶. These remarks underline the need to move away from 'essentialist' or rooted constructions of identity to much more fluid, context-dependent understandings. Which is in tune with the methods of cultural diplomacy, similarly operating on a principle of listening, rather than speaking, receptive to that which is not easily defined, sending artists abroad and allowing them the freedom to express themselves openly and critically and inspiring other communities in doing so .

Traditionally, it is believed that one of the main functions of film festivals is to promote national cultures, as well as to foster inter-cultural questioning, creativity and business relationships. Most of them are closely linked to cities and nations fully aware of the importance of belonging to a wider "festival circuit", conceived as a network of events based on a process of selection of participants. The international film circuit reveals itself however as a problematic hybrid in the perspective of cultural and international relations: it can also be defined "as a socially produced space unto itself, a unique cultural arena that acts as a contact zone for the working-through of unevenly differentiated power relationships—not so much a parliament of national film industries as a series of diverse, sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating, public spheres [. . .] It is cities which now act as the nodal points on this circuit, not national film industries"⁷. This dimension that relates the moving image to the field of power is visible for example in the hierarchy at work: not all film festivals are equal and some of them, like Cannes or Berlinale are characterized by greater economic and cultural importance than others. There is a clear parallel between the sphere of film festivals and that of capitalist relations, in the sense that they follow similar principles of competition and cooperation which structure global capitalist economies. Cultural diplomacy through film festivals is inevitably attracted in

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ Stringer, Julian. *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, Blackwell Ltd., 2001.

this sphere of capitalist envisioning and has to respond carefully to the power relations it aims at de-construct, on a cultural level.

Mark Donfried's 5-pillar proposal for the new cultural diplomacy applied to this area of cultural production is a productive way to decipher the various layers of meaning and impact created by the film festivals' industry. The industry is organically linked to a historical context that goes back to the project of post-WWII European regeneration, as well as to the historical attempt to define national cinemas in opposition to the Hollywood industry. The origins of the Cannes festival pre-date the outbreak of the WWII and various events attest the connection between films and politics. In 1935, La Mostra Festival in Venice was seriously confronted with accusations of German fascist influence. Renoir's film *La Grande Illusion* failed to win the top prize in 1937, apparently due to its pacifist agenda. In France, Jean Zay, Ministre de l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux Arts, called for the establishment of a rival festival of international standing and Cannes was the chosen location. In 1939, the first Cannes edition took place and its aim was to encourage the development of cinematographic art in all its forms and foster a spirit of collaboration between different producing countries. Hollywood's entries were *The Wizard of Oz* and *Only Angels have Wings* along with stars Mae West, Gary Cooper, Norma Shearer and George Raft. However, on the very same day Poland was invaded by the Germans and, after the opening-night screening of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the festival was cancelled and not reopened until 20 September 1946. It was cancelled again in 1948 and 1950 for a number of financial and administrative reasons, and would become established as an annual event starting with 1951.

Another example that reflects the intersections between film festivals, diplomacy and politics belongs to the early 1990s. While the European market showed an increased interest for productions from the Balkans, simultaneously bloody wars were taking place in former Yugoslavia. They did turn attention to questions of violence in a series of controversial films featured across Europe. The origins of the Sarajevo film festival are also linked to this specific context. Originally, a few informal screenings from 1992, held in the basement of the besieged city, prepared the path towards the later development. In 1993, a ten-day festival conceived as a one-time event took place and it involved extreme personal danger for the participants. Many people were shot by snipers on their way to these screenings, even though the projections they wanted to see were films like *Basic Instinct*. Often the power supplies would be lost. In 1995, towards the end of the war, the

festival could take advantage of the cease of the fire and it established itself since then as one of the most important festivals in Europe.

The film festivals as international events in Europe date back to the 1930s and they started gaining more popularity after WWII, their main agenda reflecting the desire to showcase new cinema. In addition to answering the need to articulate an alternative to the economic power of the Hollywood film industry, they also played a key role in legitimizing specific elements such as authorship, production, exhibition, cultural prestige and recognition. A strict ranking system exists between A (top rated) and B (second rated) festivals, according to the guidelines elaborated by the Paris-based organization, the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF). The three top European film festivals widely recognized as bringing substantial consecrating power in the global film industry are the ones from Cannes, Venice, and Berlin.

Seen from the perspective of cultural diplomacy, the role of the film festival is also to enable, re-construct or de-construct the centrality of the “nation” inside the festival circuit, as well as in the collective mentality of different communities across the globe. Cannes remains an outstanding example for the way such operations are carried: the festival is characterized by long-standing government support for the domestic film industry, attempting to claim cinema as integral part of the French cultural heritage. A number of internal and external pressures were manifested, but the central shaping force has been the relationship between French cinema and its others, notably Hollywood. Tension and struggle heavily describe this complex relationship. As the 1946 Blum-Byrnes agreements on U.S. film imports to France and the 1993 GATT rounds and French calls for “l’exception culturelle” reveal, the opposition between a French cinema of art and quality and an American cinema of mass entertainment has proved invaluable in the articulation of a uniquely ‘French’ cinema. However, this binary divide is far from straightforward. American films attract huge audiences in France and the country, like many others in Europe, acts as an important overseas market for Hollywood. This popular taste for American culture extends to a more high-brow championing of the work of American *auteurs* such as Woody Allen and David Lynch, whose films are often better received in France than within their country of production. What this suggests is that French cinematic identity can perhaps never be clearly distinct from Hollywood or indeed from a global film industry, dominated by Hollywood. It also shows that, whether transparently stated or not, cultural diplomacy is a nurturing framework for the European market of film festivals.

The festival of Cannes and all the major European film festivals are marked by two different discourses. One draws upon a broad historical project of rebuilding Europe, a rebuilding of the social infrastructure ravaged by the WWII, and a consolidation of Europe as a significant player in a global economy. Significantly, during the post-war period, culture turned into a means of supporting local economies through cultural events. The other discourse, elaborated by film critics and institutions, is concerned with the definition of film as a form, in the hope of broadening theoretical categories of the European film in contrast to the tradition of the studio format of the Hollywood film. Here, the oppositions of national cultures, and of aesthetic practices, align in opposition to a mainstream American film product.

Having so far introduced the dichotomy between the European film festivals and Hollywood, it has to be determined what might constitute a non-Hollywood 'transnational' cinema, or more specifically a 'European' cinema. One of the most endearing features of the film festivals is that the festival circuit provides one credible space in which such a cinema might grow. The great majority of popular films which thrive at the domestic box office in France, for example, tend not to translate well to non-French audiences (one notable exception, 2011's "The Artist") due to the limitations of distribution and exhibition networks which themselves are essentially the result of Hollywood's longstanding domination of the global box office. The *auteur* films which lend themselves to festival screenings do, however, extend beyond the domestic context as they travel from festival to festival and, if successful, achieve international distribution on the art-house circuit.

One of the most often emphasized controversial implications of the film festivals is that, as Elsaesser remarks, certain films are now being 'made to measure and made to order' for the festival circuit, creating a 'genre' sometimes referred to as the 'festival film'⁸. Moreover, it is undeniable that a number of directors such as Manoel de Oliveira, Theo Angelopoulos, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne lead careers which had been established and supported by the film festival industry and whose work, arguably, constitutes a form of 'European' cinema which reaches across national borders. Other figures, including Wong Kar Wei (president of the jury at the 2006 Cannes festival), Abbas Kiarostami and Takeshi Kitano, extend this 'group' beyond Europe's frontiers to form an international *auteur* cinema which cannot compete with Hollywood in terms of box office, but whose dissemination transcends the national.

⁸ Elsaesser, Thomas . *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam: AUP, 2005.

A defining role of all the major film festivals, and the one they parade most proudly, is the ability to construct a canon of ‘quality’ cinema whose reputation is extended as it travels across the international circuit and which in turn bestows cultural capital on the festival itself, its jury, the host city and country, and its wider audiences. This has often attracted the accusation of “elitism” and the formation of a strict hierarchy that is simultaneously completely detached from the realities of the film business in general. Mainstream films and TV series are scoring low on “quality”, as seen from the side of the organizers of film festivals, but they are also oblivious to such shaming, since their financial and cultural success is proof enough of their power status.

One could hardly think of a more paradoxical fate for a regional cinema heritage than the one extracted from the Balkans. Sarajevo-born Emir Kusturica became in 1995 the second director, after Francis Ford Coppola, to win the Palme d’Or at the Cannes twice with *Underground: Once Upon a Time There was a Country* and *When Father Was Away on Business*. Kusturica was not the only Balkan success at Cannes. Greek director Theo Angelopoulos won the Grand Prize of the Jury and the FIPRESCI Prize. In the past 20 years, Balkan films have picked up the main awards at important international festivals such as the ones in Berlin, Venice and Tokyo. However, the general penetration of Balkan cinema at major festivals is low, particularly when directors are not able to work within the framework of co-production with a prestigious Western partner, like Kusturica and Angelopolos did. This constitutes a negative dimension of film festivals, one connected to problems of exclusion and marginalization of productions from a certain area, no matter the critical accomplishments that they carry. It is through more sustained and transparent events of cultural diplomacy that such disbalance may be abolished and it is interesting to see, what the future brings if the European Union decided to take on more initiatives in this field.

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