

**Echoes****Marco Bertozzi****The Pandemic Event: Notes from the Venice Film Festival 2020****Abstract**

The essay aims to explore the conditions under which the Venice Film Festival was held in 2020. This is a crucial historic moment in which the international festival system sees some events converted into a completely online version, others postponed to a later date, and still others articulated in a hybrid way, depending on the evolution of the pandemic in progress. Among these emergency solutions, discussed in the impalpable digital body of online culture, what are the choices adopted by the Venice Film Festival? While the exhibition reduces the glamorous aspects to reflect on the ways of organising and showing oneself, of protecting the spectators and giving them an idea of normality, the emphasis on the *ways of doing* of this edition is the subject of unprecedented media attention. By recording the tremors of contemporary history like a seismograph, the Venice Film Festival becomes a testing ground both for the Italian 'country system', in the idea of more general rebirths, and for the most innovative trends in film curatorship, confirming its role as a privileged witness of changes, adaptations and reflections in institutional policies linked to culture and its diffusion.

**Keywords**

Festival During the Pandemic, Venice Film Festival, Curatorial Criteria, Festival Rituals, Institutional Cultural Policies, Cinematic Broadcasting via Streaming

**Translation from Italian by**

Sonia Hill

Echoes

# The Pandemic Event

## Notes from the Venice Film Festival 2020

Marco Bertozzi

*Il faut s'intéresser non aux produits culturels sur le marché, mais aux opérations qui en font usage; il faut s'occuper des manières différentes de marquer socialement l'écart opéré dans un donné par une pratique... Dès lors, il faut se tourner vers la prolifération disséminée de créations anonymes et périssables qui font vivre et ne se capitalisent pas.<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. A System in Crisis

When I met Alberto Barbera, director of the Venice Film Festival, at the Teatro Cà Foscari in Venice on February 11, 2020, there was nothing to suggest that the pandemic would turn our lives upside down within the course of just a few weeks. We were at the international conference *Reframing Film Festival. Histories, Economies, Cultures*,<sup>2</sup> where Barbera looked happily back over memories, anecdotes and visions, explaining to the audience what goes on behind the scenes and the decisions associated with the festival. Thanks to the questions posed by Giulia Carluccio, chair of the Consulta Universitaria del Cinema, his reflections touched upon aspects such as the way cinema has changed over recent years (and the resulting changes in festivals), controversies involving the press, the arrival of digital technology, the influence of politics and markets, curatorial criteria, the Netflix revolution, the (scarce) presence of female directors at the festival and the persistence/resistance of independent cinema.

A few days later, along with some film lecturers in Venice, I met Barbera once again, this time at Cà Giustinian, the Biennale headquarters. It was here that the festival director offered us a cycle of public screenings, *Classici fuori mostra - Festival permanente del cinema restaurato (Fringe classics - Permanent festival of restored cinema)*, asking us to take part in the presentations and share a series of recently restored masterpieces from the history of cinema with our students: an ambitious programme, with twelve great films from the past, presented by either

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<sup>1</sup>Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), VII.<sup>2</sup>Curated by Marco Dalla Gassa, Federico Zecca, Angela Bianca Saponari and Andrea Gelardi, *Reframing Film Festival. Histories, Economies, Cultures* should also have taken place at the Università Aldo Moro in Bari, on March 25 and 26, 2020, but it was indefinitely postponed due to the pandemic.

a critic, an academic or a director. The event was supposed to start on March 5, at the Cinema Rossini in Venice, but it underwent an initial postponement—under the illusory impression that it would be a fleeting epidemic—before being definitively cancelled.

Effectively speaking, after the Berlin Festival, which still had a live audience, everything underwent a rapid redrafting: numerous initiatives were cancelled, others moved online, with the archives, film libraries and subscription channels working hard to churn out audiovisual products. While work on film sets was suspended, the festival network saw a number of events transformed into 100% online versions (such as *Visions du Réel*, in Paris), while others were indefinitely deferred (such as the Bergamo Film Meeting and the African, Asian and Latin American Film Festival in Milan), and others still were cancelled completely for 2020 (Locarno, Beijing, Prague, Istanbul, Tribeca, etc.), or hybridised, as the pandemic situation evolved. These were all emergency solutions, discussed within the intangible digital body of online culture, and dictated by the extraordinary nature of a situation that hampered the concept of a festival as a community model for exploring cinema and everything it entails. There were tensions, potential sacrifices and necessary adjustments, all of which had a profound effect on the decisions relating to the Venice Film Festival scheduled for 2 to 12 September 2020, ultimately leading last year's edition to take on an exceptional role, capable of playing the part traditionally associated with the two-yearly event.

Stripped of all its most glamorous aspects, the festival was forced to focus less on the content of the individual films in order to reflect on itself instead, on ways to organise and present itself, in order to protect us, the spectators, and to offer us some semblance of normality. This was imperative, for an event that was hanging in the balance for a long time and that, along with Bologna's *Il cinema ritrovato* festival, would mark the 'relaunch' of Italy's major film festivals, after the sometimes problematic emergence of summer arenas as a potential solution to cinema's need.<sup>3</sup>

The focus on *ways of doing things* at last year's Film Festival was an unprecedented object of media attention, perceived by the 'countrywide system' as a testbed for more general relaunches, during a moment of apparent regression in the pandemic. While, just a few years ago, Gianni Amelio asked himself "What is a film festival for?" and answered "It's for films and their makers. It's above all for spectators who buy their tickets somewhere far away from the Venice Lido, because 'good things have been said' about a certain film",<sup>4</sup> this year's festival highlighted the need to amplify the goals of promoting film culture, which is the festival's real reason for being.

## 2. Hybrid Rituals

But let's look at things in order. During a critical period in time, such as the one we're experiencing today, both Alberto Barbera, Director of the Venice Film Festival, and Roberto Cicutto, Chairman of the Biennale, felt the need to confirm that everything would be the same as usual. Certainly, with fewer guests or American films, but featuring the same ritual of screenings, red carpets, photocalls and press conferences seen in the past. The desire for cinema persists, circulates and has to continue to grow normally among the guests, in the meetings and in the discoveries shared or discussed after a screening. As Roberto De Gaetano noted:

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See, for instance, the article by cinema critic Roy Menarini, "Perché il cinema rinascerà soltanto all'insegna della cultura collaborativa", *Che fare?*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.che-fare.com/menarini-cinema-cultura-collaborativa-post-covid/>, accessed March 2021.

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Gianni Amelio, "Tutti gli altri si chiamano Festival", in Peter Cowie, *Happy 75. Breve introduzione alla storia della Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2018), 9.

And here we come to a confirmation, if one were needed. The difference between domestic screens and cinemas—as demonstrated in such an exemplary fashion by a festival—does not so much lie in the possibility of seeing a film in a more sacredly auratic form, as in the possibility of sharing this viewing experience. This is what drives the desire.<sup>5</sup>

There was a need to *start up again* and the possibility of experiencing the Festival with an audience seemed to tap into the strong desire to emerge from the darkness of the first wave of the pandemic. However, the fact that the 2020 ritual was different seems evident, confirmed both by the Festival institution and by festival life experienced on a day-to-day basis. As regards the institutional decisions, it is clear that increasing the number of online seats to 2,400, with international screenings (both individual and with five-film passes) and local screenings across Italy (with subscriptions for all the films), was something special: I remember that in 2019 the online cinema comprised just seven films, with 1,000 seats. By seeking to consider the internet as a beneficial addition to the traditional offering, the Festival hoped for more than simply attracting the audience unable to attend in real life: the idea is that the official *live* programme in the cinema will increasingly be accompanied by an extended online offering, and that this will continue in the future.

There was also another organisational aspect that it will be difficult to drop: online seat booking, even for accredited members. Arriving at the cinema a few minutes in advance, avoiding long queues and having the certainty of seeing the programmed film is something priceless. All of us remember the anger and the humiliation experienced outside doors closed suddenly before our eyes, having anxiously awaited our turn to get in. However, it is worth noting that booking also means having to cancel your booking if you change your mind, so that someone else can take advantage of your seat (this was only a relative issue last year, given that there was always room for everyone in the cinema, with very few exceptions).

Furthermore, the Festival's expanded form became immediately apparent right from the onset, with the live broadcast of both the opening ceremony and film (*Lacci* by Daniele Lucchetti) at a series of cinemas that had signed up to an initiative agreed upon with the producers and distributors. This is an interesting aspect: once again the pandemic situation acted as an accelerator for dynamics already in place in society. In this case, the longstanding problem of the so-called release windows system, namely the sequential and chronological system for releasing films in different specialist markets.<sup>6</sup> In just a few words: how long does a film have to be out at the cinema before it can be distributed and watched via streaming? The exceptional nature of the pandemic situation seemed to allow those involved—producers, distributors, operators—to negotiate a momentous agreement, overcoming the reasons for which some films are only available at the cinema for several weeks while others are distributed immediately and simultaneously on different platforms.

The fate of the cinema itself and its ability to adapt to and withstand online distribution lies on the horizon of the battleground. This media readaptation process recalls the advent of television in Italy in the 1950s, and the cinema industry's fear of losing viewers to the small domestic screen. In this case too, some mediation was necessary. Indeed, I remember how the huge success of the television programme *Lascia o raddoppia*, presented by the Italian-American host Mike Buongiorno, forced numerous cinemas to interrupt their regular programming to

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Roberto De Gaetano, "Rinasce il desiderio di cinema. Il successo di 'Venezia 77'", *Fata Morgana Web*, no. 11 (2020), <https://www.fatamorganaweb.it/speciale-venezia77/>, accessed March 2021.

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Giovanni Pascali, *Equilibri e strategie nel mercato della distribuzione cinematografica in Italia* (degree thesis, Rome, LUISS, Dipartimento di Impresa e Management, a.a. 2016/17). See also Giuseppe Richeri, *Economia dei media* (Bari/Roma: Laterza, 2012) and Jeffrey C. Ulin, *The Business of Media Distribution. Monetizing Film, TV, and Video Content in an Online World* (London: Routledge, 2013).

physically host one or more television sets on the stage and allow cinemagoers to watch the programme between one film screening and the next.

The festival responded to the explosion of the pandemic with an explosion of use; a re-adjustment policy that overcame the sacred nature of the closed festival, the fortress that keeps people inside or out. Attending last year's Film Festival made me feel like I was in a limbo governed by the certainty of an assigned seat, but also by the precarious nature of an in-between experience, capable of relaunching the question of the meaning of cinema and its existence in a given cultural system. More than ever, I feel that the question "what is cinema?" is undergoing real growth.<sup>7</sup> This fundamental query was raised by the legendary André Bazin and, over the last two decades, has acted as an arena for academic debates and the adoption of different positions among those who strenuously defend the idea of the traditional screening, namely on the big screen, in the dark of the auditorium itself, and those who, observing the media changes that are currently unfolding, are inclined towards a definition more open to the huge change experienced by contemporary cinema: an art capable of producing—to cite Philippe Dubois—an "imaginaire de l'image, *profond, puissant, solide, tenace, qui imprègne fondamentalement nos esprit et nos pensées, au point de s'imposer aux autres formes*".<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Preserving the Experience

Despite wars, revolutionary developments in our habits and the disappearance of film reels, the Venice Film Festival had always sought to ensure the permanence of its rituals—at most by reinforcing checks and security; or adapting its technological equipment—within a scintillating and secular sacredness. The unpredictable union between pandemic and digital revolution is now having its effect on the Festival and raises a series of questions about the future. A cartoon published by the New Yorker in 1984 showed a couple who, upon arriving in a small mountain village, exclaimed "What this place needs is a film festival". In the coming years will we find ourselves having to say "This place only needs a fast internet connection"?<sup>9</sup>

In the planetary jukebox of hyper-diffusion via streaming, the relaunch of the Venice Film Festival sought to preserve the liturgy of the dark auditorium, offering a gesture of real solidarity to a sector of the film industry—the cinema operators themselves—that had been so hard hit by the coronavirus crisis. Nevertheless, while the role played by the cinemas is one of social aggregation, allowing people to share the same artistic experience, elements such as the obligatory distancing between the seats, the assiduous presence of *masks* (with their green ray piercing spectators without a mask) and the reiterated audio recordings about remaining in one's seat, create a climate opposed to the one that is illustrated, for example, by Federico Fellini in the scenes where he recreates his experience as a child at the Cinema Fulgor in Rimini (both in *Roma*, 1972, and in *Amarcord*, 1973). The idea of iconic celebration and human mixing is tightened up by the climate of pandemic resistance, in which the aseptic condition of viewer isolation reduces the beauty and power of the cinema experience to the recollection of a mythological 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The cinema crisis has been accelerated by lockdown, but I think that when the pandemic ends it will be a pleasure to return to the auditorium, even if the experience is somewhat different. Indeed, the cinema will have to redefine

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André Bazin, *Che cos'è il cinema? Il film come opera d'arte e come mito nella riflessione di un maestro della critica* (Milano: Garzanti, 1973, [French edition 1958]).

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Philippe Dubois, "Présentation", in eds. Philippe Dubois, Frédéric Monvoisin, Elena Biserna, *Extended Cinema. Le cinéma gagne du terrain* (Udine: Campanotto, 2010), 13. See also Francesco Casetti, *La Galassia Lumière. Sette parole chiave per il cinema che viene* (Milano: Bompiani, 2015).

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The cartoon is mentioned by Peter Cowie, *Happy 75. Breve introduzione alla storia della Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2018), 15.

itself and expand upon its specific offer in the face of the assault launched by home theatres, seasons and online channels, on which the most enterprising operators have already been working for some time: that which the good practices of some independent cinemas during the era of the revolution had begun, during a period of collective and individual reinvention.<sup>10</sup> While the pandemic has thrown us into discomfort and, indeed, into tragedy, we need to remember that it has also simply accelerated the contemporary transformation of the world. Many people have been forced to relearn things, to forget what they already know. We've all had to face something unknown, something historically unprecedented that has ensured that every one of us, artist or otherwise, has had to rethink things and, in many cases, has had the opportunity to reflect on our dreams and lives. This has led other Italian festivals, including ones with a smaller budget and during times of the year when the pandemic was more virulent, to think about their identity, trying to come up with potential responses that have varied from cancelling the event, mixed attendance, or placing the programme on web-based platforms such as MyMovies.

Francesco Francia di Celle, the new director of the Torino Film Festival, made an interesting reflection when presenting the 2020 event, using the metaphor of the garden devastated by a violent winter freeze, really putting the emerging spring plants to the test. Working towards the Festival means:

summing up the damage caused by the freeze, taking care to identify the buds that have become confused in the heap of dry branches, investing in the slim signs of the revival of life, imagining a powerful rebirth that could be miraculous by simply allowing what is already there to grow, given that the virus has not annihilated the festival's significant cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup>

The considerations put forward by Vittorio Iervese, Chairman of the Festival dei Popoli in Florence, also appear prophetic, given that in early April 2020 he pictured a profusion of films about Coronavirus and expressed a hope for works that would not only be informative, but capable of going into depth, transforming our everyday lives into cinema:

in other words, rather than instant movies we're interested in the quality of the film itself. Of course, we'll have a great need for works, and not only in terms of film, that help us to process the trauma and understand more about the changes that are taking place. Certain stories cannot be understood in full from within the eye of the storm.<sup>12</sup>

This is probably why there were very few films about coronavirus at the Venice Film Festival. It's as if, in order to become history, the memory of the images has to keep being pushed for, compared with other images and juxtaposed, even in anachronistic terms, with other viewpoints and paths of meaning in order to emerge from the limbo of the chronicle and to sediment the trauma in a creative fashion. This is a story that needs longer breaths: so, at least *Classici fuori mostra – il festival permanente del cinema restaurato* was salvaged and the same programme was offered again in the Arena Giardini that the Biennale prepared for the summer period, paving the way for the 77<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival. Every Friday and Saturday, from

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Nicola Curtoni and Emilia De Santis, *Alla ricerca della sala. Il giro (d'Italia) dei cinema* (Roma: Acec, 2018).

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Francesco Francia di Celle, "Come si progetta un Festival durante la pandemia", *cheFare?*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.che-fare.com/come-si-progetta-un-festival-di-cinema-durante-la-pandemia/>, accessed December 2020.

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Vittorio Iervese, "Intervista a Vittorio Iervese", *Mocu Magazine* (April 9, 2020), <https://www.mocu.it/societa/intervista-vittorio-iervese/>, accessed December 2020.

July 24 to Sunday August 30, restored masterpieces from the past were screened in their original versions, with Italian subtitles.

#### 4. Future Challenges

The challenges linked to the pandemic raise other questions too. How can we give more visibility to experimental films, works by young producers and independent productions, which are not protected/promoted/marketed by strong institutions? This concern has always been in the minds of the directors most open to anything new. I remember the words of Alberto Barbera when he expressed the hope that the Festival could feature “a completely different series of films of every kind made in the world today, films that are not promoted or backed, and that need the Venice Film Festival for this very reason”.<sup>13</sup> There is therefore a need to mitigate certain *obligatory* decisions—the Festival as a place for political and cultural diplomacy—in order to overcome certain institutional rigidity and amplify critical thinking about the present, with increasingly wide-ranging reflections regarding tribes, cultures and emerging social subjects. And also, what potential is there for digital film criticism, divided between a multiplicity of internet publications and a general reduction in its public authoritativeness? Criticism that has to redefine itself, changing lexicon, categories and arguments, for a cinema that has exploded to incorporate many different forms of use. It is therefore criticism as an epistemological act, able to place the film within relocated contexts of the cinema experience. Transforming the present-day gassy era into something that is not a place of agony, but a platform for potential hermeneutic relaunches.

Other questions regard the future role of the Festival. I am thinking of its buildings and its important physical impact on the area of the Lido, the urban transformations yet to come, which are absolutely physical and real. About the role played by the Film Festival, and by the Biennale di Venezia as an institution, in redefining the imagery of a city poised between a tourism monoculture and an exotic reduction in its habitat. I am therefore thinking about an important role played by the Biennale, which specifically ties it to Venice, namely the role of helping to deconstruct the order of the tourist issue: it seems a paradox, for a Festival launched in 1932 precisely in order to project the Lido into the international elite tourism market. It is naturally not a question of renouncing tourism, but of working with other institutions to contribute to emerging from the limit of a totalising gaze, exploring creative flows linked to the emotions of art and the pleasure of cultural discovery: a contemporary perspective, but one fully linked to the future, triggered precisely by the reflections imposed upon us by the pandemic, in which the role of cinema, its powerful imagery and, therefore, its Festival, is fundamental.<sup>14</sup> In order to escape from a monoculture that now seems to be the condition of numerous cities—visited by low-cost flights, monitored by surveillance cameras, not experienced by their inhabitants but explored by tourists staying at Airbnbs and, in short, sold to the merchants of mass tourism—it is important that the institutions reinvent ingenious and experimental ways of living. In order to ensure that Venice is not only a place of consumerism, but also of cultural production, it is fundamental that various cultural institutions—including the Biennale, Palazzo Grassi, the Venetian universities, Venice International University, SaLE Docks, Bevilacqua La Masa, M9 and the network of civic museums—make a real and imaginative effort capable of having an effect on the city of the future. Going back to the Biennale, Angela Vettese observed “how even a single event, as long as it is periodic and not episodic,

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Alberto Barbera, “Variety”, August 30, 2017.

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Angela Vettese, *Venezia vive. Dal presente al futuro e viceversa* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2017).

can have a genuine effect on an atmosphere and an economy. Not omnipotent, but incisive”.<sup>15</sup>

A final aspect, which is no less important, emerged from the debate about the reduction in audience size at film festivals. The crisis placed greater focus on other issues, such as sustainability and accessibility. The fact that major festivals attract an audience and directors from all over the world generates a huge environmental impact. Some festival institutions are reflecting on the inclusion of a digital-first model to allow authors, critics and the audience to be able to access the screenings without necessarily having to travel. Among other things, this model also allows for the progressive democratisation of the festival experience, amplifying the possibility for it to be accessed by audiences from social groups or geographic areas that are prevented from having the festival experience. Once again, it is not a question of replacing the sacred experience of the darkened auditorium, but one of increasing the options for showing the works, especially those that benefit from less promotion by the large-scale distribution business.

To conclude, I would like to focus on how the pandemic situation can help to create unusual groupings and lateral thinking. New forms of solidarity, sometimes between festivals, and new creative actions have developed during a period of global risk. Knowledge of the risks has led us to overcome a catastrophe with the mindset that “nothing will be like before”. The self-reflection induced by the global situation has forced the Film Festival to take on a public action, bigger than simply screening films, to become a place where the social sphere recognises its ability to face the current metamorphosis, looking at a potential future from an original standpoint. The axis shift, from the central role played by the films to the survival of the Venice Film Festival, saw another moment for reflection in exhibition *Le muse inquiete. La Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia (The Disquieted Muses. When La Biennale di Venezia Meets History)*, exhibition curated by Cecilia Alemani at the Giardini di Venezia and open to the public during the Film Festival (until 8 December 2020). While the event dedicated to Architecture was postponed until 2021 and the one dedicated to Art until 2022, *Le muse inquiete* told the story of the Biennale’s institution since its foundation in 1895 to today, marking 125 years of history incorporating wars, pandemics, totalitarianism, censorship and disputes: the muses are restless “because they pit themselves against the world outside the boundaries of the arts”.<sup>16</sup> The six directors—Cecilia Alemani (Art), Alberto Barbera (Cinema), Marie Chouinard (Dance), Ivan Fedele (Music), Antonio Latella (Theatre), Hashim Sarkis (Architecture)—selected writings, accounts, films, photographs and works, following a path that lingered on the moments when the Venice Biennale immersed itself in the events of global history, generating institutional fractures along with new creative horizons. In greater detail, the part relating to the Venice Film Festival was developed primarily in the first room with the Festival during the years of Fascism, in room 3 with the protests and disputes of 1968 seen through the non-fiction materials in various archives, and in room 9 with scandals, controversies and censorship relating to the presentation of various films. Given the wealth of archival sources, *Le muse inquiete* explored the Biennale disciplines with the idea that the archive could act as an additional muse, capable of restoring strength to the institution as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the muses were divinities in Greek mythology, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and they represented the

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Angela Vettese, “Tra Cultura e Turismo: la Biennale di Venezia e le sue ricadute sul territorio”, in eds. Guido Borelli, Maurizio Busacca, *Venezia. L’istituzione immaginaria della società* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2020), 76.

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Cecilia Alemani, *Le muse inquiete. La Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia*, exhibition booklet (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2020), 7.

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For a more extensive examination of the Venice Biennale I refer to an initial collection of studies *Starting from Venice. Studies on the Biennale*, ed. Clarissa Ricci (Milano: et al./edizioni, 2010).



supreme ideal of Art. Daughters of memory (Mnemosyne), they looked to the past but they also imagined new possibilities for the future through the power of artistic creation.

During a period of global instability, it could not be taken for granted that things would go well. By recording the tremors of contemporary history like a seismograph, the Venice Film Festival has stood out not only as a place for screening the most innovative trends in contemporary cinema, but has also confirmed its role as a privileged witness of the changes, adjustments and reflections in institutional policies linked to culture and its dissemination.

### Author's Biography

Marco Bertozzi is Professor of Documentary and Experimental Cinema at the Iuav University of Venice. His articles on the history and theory of documentary film have appeared in international journals. He has published *Storia del documentario italiano* (2008), which won the Limina Award for best cinema studies book of the year; *Recycled cinema* (2012); and *Documentario come arte. Riuso, performance, autobiografia nell'esperienza del cinema contemporaneo* (2018). He is also a prolific filmmaker. His award-winning films include *Appunti romani* (2004), *Il senso degli altri* (2007), *Predappio in luce* (2008), *Profughi*

*a Cinecittà* (2012), *Cinema grattacielo* (2017). He curated *Bibliofellini*, the three-volume international bibliography published by the Fellini Foundation and the National Cinema School (2002–04), directing an international research team, and he wrote several essays on the work of Fellini, the last of which is *L'Italia di Fellini. Immagini, paesaggi, forme di vita* (2021). He has curated cinema exhibitions in Italy, France, Canada and the United States. Currently, he is part of the team that is planning the new international museum dedicated to Federico Fellini.