

# Coming Soon to a Screen Near You

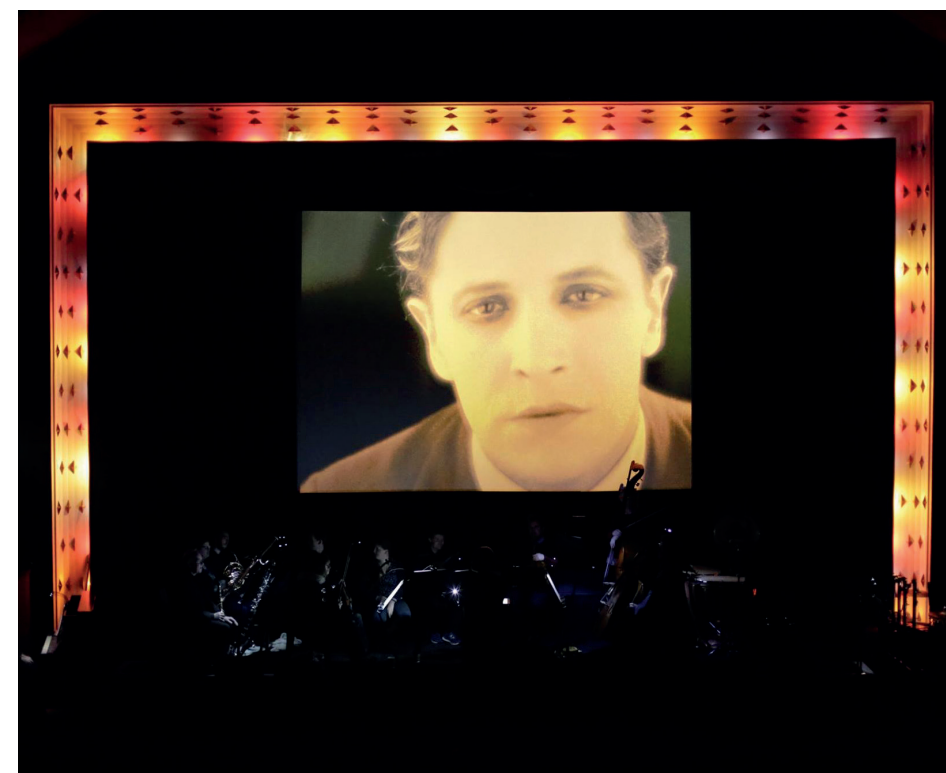
In the age of streaming and a seemingly endless supply of film, do film festivals still matter? CINECITY's Tim Brown reflects on their changing role

In September 1929, the First International Congress of Independent Cinema took place at La Sarraz, in Switzerland. This legendary meeting of the avant-garde – described by one of the British representatives, writer and producer Ivor Montagu, as the world's first film festival – was attended by delegates from twelve countries and featured many leading experimental filmmakers including Sergei Eisenstein, Béla Balázs, Alberto Cavalcanti, Hans Richter and Walter Ruttmann. Films screened included Len Lye's *Tusalava*, *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (Germaine Dulac), *Rain* (Joris Ivens and Mannus Franken) and Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. Marx's dictum – Groucho, not Karl – of not joining any club that would have him as a member, hangs over La Sarraz; Luis Buñuel and René Clair both seem to have been invited but did not attend, though their films were screened. The question of who was or wasn't invited and who might have declined is an intriguing one. While there were some public screenings, La Sarraz had what would be termed today, an industry focus, with two main items on the agenda – the setting up of an independent production cooperative and a federation of film clubs to distribute these and other films of interest.

Avant-garde film had grown out of the art movements of Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism and Expressionism, and the Congress declared as an absolute principle the difference in practice and spirit between independent and commercial cinema. The delegates agreed to 'oppose the international, stultifying, kitschy, dictatorial, capitalist movie industry that

violates the artist's aims.' They also reputedly shot a film – directed by Eisenstein, Richter and Montagu – entitled *The War between Independent and Commercial Film* or *Storm Over La Sarraz*. Filmed by Eduard Tissé, the renowned cinematographer, on Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible*, it depicted independent filmmakers laying siege to the castle at La Sarraz in order to free the art of cinema. The film's symbolic portrayal of independent cinema defeating the commercial was also the first fruit of the new production cooperative, but its fate did not augur well for the independents. When the Congress broke up, the reels of negative were handed to Eisenstein who seemingly lost them on a train somewhere in Europe. A handful of production stills and what appear to be individual film frames are sadly all that remain.

While La Sarraz successfully passed resolutions to encourage the production, distribution and exhibition of independent film, it took place as synchronised sound was leading to the consolidation of commercial cinema in Hollywood and around the world. Just a month later the Wall Street Crash led to the Great Depression and the beginning of the 'decade of the dictators' when, in Hans Richter's phrase, political tensions 'made poetry no longer suitable... Our age demands the documented fact.' The First International Congress of Independent Cinema at La Sarraz can now be seen as both the high-water mark and disintegration of progress made within art cinema in the 1920s, before being overtaken by massive political, economic, social and cultural upheaval.



La Sarraz was a little-known precursor to what is widely regarded as the world's first film festival, which took place in Venice in 1932. Now, most days of the year, a major international film festival opens somewhere across the globe. While they have been around for almost a century, the last couple of decades have seen an explosion in the number of these intense celebrations of cinema. Some estimate around 80% of current film festivals were created in just the last 20 years. Cheaper technology has led to more films being made which in turn has helped fuel the global expansion of festivals, but there are a number of other factors at play.

CINECITY The Brighton Film Festival is part of this upsurge in numbers. I co-founded it in 2003 with my colleague Frank Gray, Director of Screen Archive South East; such is the ubiquity of film festivals nowadays it seems hard to believe that the city didn't have its own dedicated film festival at that time. Part of a network of key regional festivals across the UK, the 20th

edition of CINECITY takes place this November in a wide range of venues. The principal cinemas are the Duke of York's Picturehouse in Brighton, opened in 1910, the UK's oldest purpose-built continually operating cinema – and one of the newest, the Depot in Lewes, which recently celebrated its fifth anniversary. Inevitably, CINECITY has navigated through many changes over its 20 years, for instance the transition from 100% celluloid projection to now, almost exclusively digital with the concomitant rise in streaming services. However, with its continuing 'Adventures in World Cinema' tagline and programming ethos, coupled with a regional production showcase (the local and global), in some ways remarkably little has changed since the first edition.

In the UK pre-pandemic, around 900 films were released into UK cinemas each year. You could watch a new film every day of the year in the cinema and still miss hundreds of others, even before considering the countless titles that don't secure a big screen release.

With the sheer volume of new films, plus archive treasures, the curation of any film festival takes on increased significance. They can be a reliable guide through the crowded cinema landscape and, in an age when someone is labelled a curator every time they make a selection, those trusted recommendations can bring rich rewards – and save audiences considerable time and money.

Film Festivals are usually at their best when offering something different; as mainstream cinema takes fewer risks with more people going to see the same films, they can act as an alternative distribution network and increasingly the only chance to see a range of films on the big screen. With so many titles being released, slots for foreign language cinema are more squeezed than ever. A festival preview can also help build invaluable word of mouth and make a real difference on a film's subsequent release. For many film fans it is also the festival experience itself, in an increasingly online world, that matters more and more. Cinema's sacred beating heart – the collective experience – is amplified by the 'festival effect', the buzz of an exciting, time-limited programme where every screening is a special one-off. As well as a space for cinephiles, film festivals have a wider traction with the public and can connect with a range of audiences, including young people, encouraging them to embark on further cinematic adventures. 🌀

**Tim Brown is co-founder and co-director of CINECITY, based at the University of Brighton. The 20th annual edition of the festival takes place from November 11-20. [www.cine-city.co.uk](http://www.cine-city.co.uk)**

*Above*  
Covent Garden Sinfonia perform a live soundtrack to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1927) at the Duke of York's Picturehouse as part of CINECITY The Brighton Film Festival 2017  
Photo © Jake Shuttleworth