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A STATE-RUN MOVIEGOING EXPERIENCE The Case of State-Owned Movie Theaters in the Republic of San Marino

Abstract

This essay explores the history of state-owned movie theaters in San Marino from the 1980s to today. In San Marino, there are no private cinemas; the State has managed all movie theaters since 1983. Using archival research, oral history, audience data, and interviews, this study examines the connection between film culture, public funding, and the moviegoing experience in San Marino. It highlights the interconnectedness of economic-industrial practices on distribution, acquisition, and programming with a broader political-cultural awareness of the moviegoing experience. The findings show that a State-run cinema is essential in San Marino, as private theaters are not financially viable due to the small audience size. Additionally, State-run cinemas can support both blockbuster films at lower prices and independent films from festivals, which are otherwise unavailable in peripheral cinemas.

Keywords

State-run cinema; public fundings; cinema exhibition; microstate; social space.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The cinema experience in the Republic of San Marino, an independent microstate situated between the Marche and Emilia-Romagna regions, has a unique history distinct from that of neighboring Italy. In the Republic of San Marino, private business-run cinemas do not exist; instead, cinematic experiences have been centrally managed by the State since 1983¹. In that year, the Sammarinese government established the Office of Social and Cultural Activities – UASC (later renamed Cultural Institutes) to oversee all cultural activities in the Republic, including the three movie theaters initially present, which were reduced to only one in 2014.

A State-run film exhibition system presents challenges and opportunities for its citizens. One evident benefit is the financially advantageous cost of moviegoing, as the State-owned movie theater offers a lower price compared to that of private cinemas

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¹ In San Marino, there are few small independent film production companies, and some government-supported projects related to film tourism. The current government coalition's program also envisions the development of the film sector and the establishment of a national Film Commission. However, to date, there is no significant film industry, whether in the private or public sector.

in neighboring Italian towns. On the other hand, film screenings are part of the yearly budget of the public sector and thus subjected to budget cuts, limiting opportunities to purchase expensive movies. The San Marino State-run cinema assures the presence of at least one theater in a territory of 33,000 inhabitants, giving its citizens the possibility to see films without traveling to Italy. However, the moviegoing experience in a State-run single screen theater cannot offer the choices, amenities, and luxuries of the multiplex cinema in the neighboring city of Rimini, reachable in just 20 minutes from the San Marino-Rimini border. Rimini, especially, has a rich moviegoing culture with local theaters such as Settebello and Fulgor, situated in the town center and specializing in arthouse and film festival screenings, and a suburban multiplex cinema inside the Le Befane shopping mall. Moreover, in terms of film distribution and acquisition, San Marino's cinema must contend with its status as an independent microstate within Italy. Although it is a foreign entity, it remains dependent on Italian distributors. Additionally, it currently faces the challenges of both digital distribution and competition from SVOD, which are now main film producers and have all the interests in distributing their audiovisual contents on their platforms².

Considering these preliminary issues, my essay aims to reconstruct the institutional history of state-owned movie theaters in the microstate of San Marino from the 1980s to the present, seeking to answer the following questions: What is the historical development of state-owned movie theaters in San Marino? How has central management by the State influenced the cinematic experience? How have changes in film production, exhibition, and reception from the 1980s to the present affected the State-run cinemas of the San Marino microstate?

Employing a methodology that incorporates archival research, oral history, audience data, and institutional interviews, my essay provides a historical-theoretical outline of the relationship between film culture, public funding, and the moviegoing experience in the San Marino community. Additionally, it will attempt to analyze the changes in cinema-going in the microstate from the 1980s to the present and the different aspects of socialization that the experience of moviegoers may still produce in a context of progressive domestication of the viewing experience.

The chosen methodology primarily employs interviews with the personnel who have directed and managed state-owned film programming: Vito G. Testaj, current head of the Performing Arts section of the Cultural Institutes; Floriano Sciutti, head of film programming from 1990 to 2020; Paolo Rondelli, current director of the Cultural Institutes; and Gemma Cavalleri, former director of UASC. The interviews were then integrated with the analysis of archival documents related to film programming and publicity, and data on earnings before and after Covid-19. Finally, this research aims to highlight the interconnectedness of economic-industrial practices on distribution, exhibition, and programming with a broader political-cultural awareness of the moviegoing experience.

Based on my preliminary findings, the establishment of a state-operated cinema in a small peripheral location, such as San Marino, emerges as the sole viable alternative to the decline of cinema exhibitions, due to the financial infeasibility of privately operated

² M. Curtin, J. Holt, K. Sanson, *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014, p. 13. See also D. Iordanova, S. Cunningham, eds., *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-Line*, St Andrews: St Andrews film studies, 2012; For the concept of platformization of cultural production, see T. Poell, D.B. Nieborg, B.E. Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity, 2021.

theatres, given the limited audience in the microstate. Furthermore, a state-run cinema fulfills a public cultural mission, facilitating the financial support and exhibition of not only blockbuster films at reduced prices but also independent and auteur films from festival circuits. The distribution of these films often presents challenges, resulting in their primary availability being concentrated in arthouse cinemas in major cities and through certain subscription-based streaming services.

This study sheds light on how state intervention in film exhibition influences both the economic model and the cultural mission of movie theaters. By tracing the evolution of San Marino's cinemas from the 1980s to the present, this essay highlights how a state-operated system can preserve access to film culture in the face of financial and technological challenges. The analysis also emphasizes how such a system maintains the role of cinema as a key site of social interaction and cultural engagement. Through this localized case, we gain insights into the intersection of national policy, film distribution, audience behavior, and socialization in cinema spaces, all of which resonate with New Cinema History's aims to examine the cinematic experience as a broader sociocultural phenomenon³.

2. A CENTRALIZED STATE-OWNED MOVIE THEATERS SYSTEM: NUMBER, LOCATION, AND PURPOSE

The institutionalization of State-run movie screenings started in 1983 with the opening of UASC – Office of Social and Cultural Activities, renamed Cultural Institutes in 2015, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Before the 1980s, film screenings in San Marino happened in non-standard or ephemeral cinema spaces⁴: parish cinemas, cafes, unions, recreative centers, and village halls⁵. One documented movie screening place was the state theater of Collegio Belluzzi (a male boarding school), active from 1900 to the 1970s⁶.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the parish and other ephemeral cinema spaces ceased to exist in favor of four State-run single-screen theatres: Turismo, Concordia, Nuovo, and Pennarossa. The first three were the main theatres situated in the central Castelli (districts) of San Marino: Turismo in the historical center, Concordia in Borgo Maggiore, which is halfway from the center to the Italian border, and Nuovo situated just before the San Marino-Rimini border. Another small theater, Pennarossa, was active on alternate days in a peripheral location of the San Marino territory. The Turismo Theatre was inaugurated in 1972 with active theatrical and cinematic programming until 2015, then closed for renovation to be converted into a musical amphitheater; the Nuovo Theatre in Dogana, near the border with Rimini, currently the largest theatre in

³ D. Biltereyst, R. Maltby, P. Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, London: Routledge, 2019.

⁴ M. Vélez-Serna, *Ephemeral Cinema Spaces: Stories of Reinvention, Resistance and Community*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.

⁵ For a history of post-war moviegoing and the cinema experience, see M. Fanchi, "For Many but not for All: Italian Film History and the Circumstantial Value of Audience Studies", in *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, 387-394. Also, M. Fanchi, "Audience caleidoscopiche: le trasformazioni del pubblico e del consumo di cinema", in *Cinema e storia: rivista annuale di studi interdisciplinari*, V, 2016 (2016): 227-238.

⁶ Testaj, Vito G., "Lo sviluppo delle istituzioni culturali", in *Storia di San Marino*, edited by L. Gorgolini and S. Pivato, Rimini: Bookstones, 2022, 219-228 (227).

the Republic, used to screen mainstream films and film festival series but since 2014 has been used only for prose theatre; the small Pennarossa cinema in Chiesanuova, active on and off since the post-war period, was closed in 2013. Finally, the Concordia Theatre is the only currently active cinema venue in San Marino. Founded in 1872 with government subsidies and public donations, it was demolished in the 1960s and rebuilt in 1997, later converted in 2014 to a single-screen cinema hall equipped for digital projections⁷.

From the 1980s to 2010, the programming of the four public theaters involved a film rotation system with continuous programming in two main theaters and alternating programming in the other two, with film screenings both in the afternoons and in the evenings. As Vito Testaj remembers, the offer was even excessive compared to the audience, but at the same time, San Marino provided its citizens with the main blockbusters of the time along with a selection of d'essai films:

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a very wide range of offerings in terms of screenings, in the sense that there were afternoon screenings, evening screenings, and many more screenings than there are today. It was quite normal for some screenings to be either empty or almost empty, meaning that sometimes there were only two or three spectators in the theater. We can laugh about it, but it was due to the frequency of the screenings, which was overestimated compared to the effective audience. On the other hand, the Dogana Theatre at that time attracted also public from the Rimini area as it was situated at the San Marino-Italy border, and the ticket prices were lower than in Italy⁸.

Another reason for attracting people outside San Marino was the State-sponsored mini film festivals such as *Occhi sul cinema*, organized by film critic Goffredo Loffreda from 2003 to 2010, which offered screenings of independent movies and films that won prestigious prizes at the main European film festivals such as Cannes, Locarno, and Venice. The film offerings in San Marino have often had a cultural focus even before the establishment of the public office UASC. For instance, in 1968, San Marino hosted the annual congress of art and experimental cinema organized by AIACE (Italian Association of Friends of Art-House Cinema) under the initiative and sponsorship of the San Marino Tourist Board⁹. The former director of UASC, Gemma Cavalleri, also recalls how – from the 1990s until the early 2000s – her office had a substantial budget both for the acquisition of commercial films and for the provision of, as well as for socially themed film festivals focused, for instance, on women's rights, spiritual cinema, or youth films. Cavalleri emphasizes that cinema was part of a broader system of cultural offerings, including music and theater, with a strong commitment to civil and social engagement¹⁰. Moreover, San Marino's emphasis on the cultural function of cinema continued the tradition of the film experience as a “cultural moment” initiated in the early Sixties, where cinema becomes the core of a “strategic social action” and a highly socializing place capable of intervening in the cultural processes of a community¹¹.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸ Interview with Vito G. Testaj, 4 April 2024.

⁹ State Archive, Tourism office file, B39.

¹⁰ Interview with Gemma Cavalleri, 23 July 2024.

¹¹ M. Fanchi, “La trasformazione del consumo cinematografico”, in *Storia del cinema italiano*, edited by G. De Vincenti, vol. 10, Roma: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 1960, 344-357 (345).

3. FILM EXHIBITION IN SAN MARINO

The activity of film exhibition involves the management of the movie material support, which means the reproduction of positive copies of the film or reproduction of copies in digital format along with their transfer to the target markets. It also includes the commercial management of the content, which encompasses distribution agreements with distributors and other parties for the screening of the film in theaters. The purchase of film copies thus depends on the availability of distribution, which serves as a crucial link between production and theatrical exhibition. As Cucco notes, in Italy distribution is highly concentrated and controlled by a few companies that exert significant influence over the supply¹². This dynamic is even more relevant for San Marino, which, due to its unique nature as a public exhibitor belonging to a foreign microstate, has complex relationships with Italian distribution.

The San Marino government had and still has agreements with the main distribution providers of Emilia-Romagna: Seac Film (for 01, Lucky Red, BIM, Tucker, Wanted, and independent distributors), Dis Film (mainly Disney, Sony, Warner, Fox), and Cine Servizi (Universal, Medusa, and others). The concentration of power in the hands of a few distribution companies means that these companies have substantial control over which films are distributed and shown in cinemas. For San Marino, this results in a greater challenge in obtaining film copies to screen, as it must negotiate with Italian distributors who may have different priorities. Moreover, the fact that San Marino is a foreign microstate with a public exhibition structure can influence the terms of negotiation, making access to certain productions more complex.

For instance, the commercial relations with the regional distributors were not always linear. Floriano Sciutti, State film programmer from 1990 to 2020, remembers that 20th Century Fox at a national level, which means from their headquarters in Rome, imposed bans on the screening of Fox films in San Marino for many years:

At that time, there was a manager, the general director, who held this position. I remember that to be able to show the movie *Titanic*, which was quite an event here, the San Marino Embassy in Rome had to intervene to lift, so to speak, a ‘ban’. Despite having already signed a contract, at the last moment they backtracked and were no longer willing to release the film to us¹³.

The unwillingness to screen Fox films in San Marino was never explained unless with some personal motives of the manager in charge of the distribution. Indeed, as the person was replaced with a new hire, San Marino no longer had issues with Fox.

In terms of commercial sustainability, a State-run cinema exhibition influences not only ticket costs but also the availability of individual films, their theatrical run, and the possibility of premieres. As cinema is part of the public sector, it's the government that allocates the yearly budget for film acquisition and programming, depending on the availability of finances and quota distribution for all the cultural sectors (including museums, theaters, public libraries, and so on). Although profitability is not the main aim, nonetheless, the San Marino film programming depends on the cost of the single movies and their performance at the box office. The San Marino strategy of film acquisition ought to balance several often oppositional necessities, as Vito Testaj explains:

¹² M. Cucco, *Economia del film. Industria, politiche, mercati*, Rome: Carocci, 2020, 55.

¹³ Interview with Floriano Sciutti, 3 May 2024.

The main necessity is to satisfy the audience and therefore not to abandon the demand for commercial films, which often are shown in neighboring Italian cinemas before we can buy them for our local screenings. In terms of budget management, even though we are a public theater, we still seek an economic break-even goal. That is, we never buy the rights to a film that costs so much that we know we won't be able to recoup the expenses. Even though our decisions are purely tied to the public budget, we never balance the accounts. If a film costs 10 and earns 20, it's not that we have 10 more to spend. We have a spending chapter, and for us, it is important to maintain this ideal ratio between cost and income for each single film because it is an indicator of the good performance of the public cultural offer. Therefore, we mostly have a loyal domestic audience which utilizes our special offers such as the Cinecards. Launched in 2019, Cinecards are mini-subscriptions for 5-10 titles that cinemagoers can purchase in advance at a lower price and then use whenever they want. Cinecards help define our audience and give us the possibility to have a better understanding of the target audience we are addressing¹⁴.

As Testaj indicates, the objectives of the Istituti Culturali's film management are twofold: firstly, to ensure compliance with the government-allocated budget for the cinema screening sector; secondly, to remain attentive to audience preferences, which predominantly consist of families and older adults. This necessitates finding a balance between the costs associated with screening blockbuster films, typically aimed at family audiences, and the availability of arthouse and middlebrow films, which tend to be favored by older viewers.

Besides commercial screenings, moreover, the San Marino cinema programming presents several other State-sponsored cultural activities often in collaboration with Italian and international institutions. For instance, the San Marino theater is part of the *Il cinema ritrovato al cinema* project supported by the Bologna Cineteca, which promotes the distribution of ten digitally restored masterpieces from the history of cinema in their original versions with Italian subtitles. The schedule includes the release of a different film each month across the entire country. Other collaborations include those with Nexo Digital for the series *La grande arte al cinema*¹⁵, the organization of European cinema's international festivals in collaboration with the San Marino Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and film screenings in collaboration with cultural associations, schools, and the University of San Marino.

4. CHANGES IN EXHIBITION AND CINEMAGOING AFTER 2013

Recent years have seen significant transformations in national and international cinema production, distribution, and consumption, primarily driven by the advent of video streaming services, digital technological advancements, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁶. These changes have affected the cinema industries of both large and small nations, with different outcomes¹⁷. In Italy, as Cucco notes, the digitalization at the level of film exhibition has resulted not only in an opportunity to modernize the struc-

¹⁴ Interview with Vito G. Testaj, cit.

¹⁵ *La grande arte al cinema* is an original Nexo Digital project that brings art history's visual storytelling to Italian theaters.

¹⁶ Curtin, Holt, Sanson, *Distribution Revolution*; R. Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, New York: New York University Press, 2019.

¹⁷ For an insight into the film practices of small nations, see Hjort, Mette, ed. *Cinema of Small Nations*: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

tures but also in their rationalization, due to the high cost of the digital projectors and the consequent financial investments needed to convert the halls for digital screenings¹⁸.

These changes have obviously and profoundly affected also the public cinema system in the microstate of San Marino. In the 2010s, the government of San Marino initiated a spending review strategy to curtail public administration costs necessitated by mounting public expenditure and declining revenues. This fiscal tightening was partly attributed to San Marino's removal from the financial blacklist¹⁹. State-run cinemas were not exempt from these budgetary constraints.

Concurrently, the global film distribution and exhibition industry was undergoing a significant technological shift, transitioning from physical film reels to digital formats, particularly Digital Cinema Package (DCP)²⁰. Although the initial costs of digital projection systems were substantial, Italy benefited from European Union funds specifically allocated for this purpose²¹. As reported by ANICA (Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche Audiovisive e Multimediali), at the end of 2013, approximately 75% of Italian cinema screens had been digitized²². However, San Marino, being a non-EU country, did not have access to these funds.

The confluence of the "digital distribution revolution"²³ and the spending review led to the political decision to downsize the cinema exhibition in San Marino. The number of theaters was reduced from four to one, with the limited resources focused on updating the Concordia theater with the necessary technologies for digital projection. Finally, the spending review also meant merging the UASC with other cultural sectors of the public administration. As of today, indeed, the Cultural Institutes comprise the sections of Museums and Monuments, Performing Arts, Archives, and Library. Within the Performing Arts section is the management of the only currently operational cinema hall in the Republic of San Marino, the Concordia Cinema Theatre in Borgo Maggiore, one of the castles (municipalities) of San Marino.

Floriano Sciutti, head film programmer, explains why the Concordia was chosen among all the available theaters:

The reason for deciding to keep only one theater open was economic: the public budget had allocated funds for only one digital machine, so the decision was simply which theater to keep. The Teatro Nuovo and especially the Teatro Turismo had significant limitations in

¹⁸ Cucco, *Economia del film*, 94.

¹⁹ Once a tax haven country, since 2010 San Marino have made significant progress in reforming its financial regulations, adopting international agreements and implementing policies that improved cooperation with foreign tax authorities, adhering to EU standards for tax transparency, and combating tax evasion. Major steps in this direction were taken in 2010 with the abolition of anonymous companies and in 2017 with the abolition of banking secrecy. As a result, San Marino was removed from the Italian blacklist of tax havens in 2014, and from that of Ecofin in 2017. <https://www.besm.sm/site/en/home/international-relations/relationships-with-italy/italian-tax-white-list.html>.

²⁰ DCP refers to a collection of digital files used to store and convey audio, image, and data streams for playback on digital cinema projectors. It is the industry standard for delivering films to cinemas in the digital era.

²¹ The main funding initiatives for the digital conversion of cinemas in Italy were: the Ministerial Decree D.M. 21-1-2010, "Implementing provisions for tax credits granted to cinema operating companies for the introduction and acquisition of equipment and devices intended for digital projection"; the non-repayable funding by CIPE (Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning) launched in 2013; the Law No. 220 of November 14, 2016, "Regulation of Cinema and the Audiovisual Sector".

²² "I dati del mercato cinematografico 2013" at <https://www.anica.it/documentazione-e-dati-annuali-2/dati-annuali-cinema/dati-sul-cinema-italiano/i-dati-del-mercato-cinematografico-2013>. Accessed October 21, 2024.

²³ Curtin, Holt, Sanson, *Distribution Revolution*, 4.

terms of sound technology, and the costs of upgrading the audio systems would have been too high. Additionally, these theaters were very large, oversized for the needs of film screenings for the local audience. The Concordia has a capacity of 300 and is in a more central location between the historic center and the border with Italy. Moreover, it is served by a large parking area nearby, so considering all these factors, it was the best choice²⁴.

The decision to limit film screenings to a single cinema screen, thus, has been primarily influenced by the costs associated with modernizing projection technologies and the increasingly disproportionate relationship between the number of cinema screens and the average audience size in San Marino. This imbalance is further exacerbated by changing viewer habits, with a marked shift from traditional in-theater attendance to home-based streaming. This phenomenon is not unique to San Marino but reflects a wider global trend, driven by the expansion of post-theatrical markets and the rise of on-demand viewing platforms²⁵.

However, despite the spending review, the costs associated with digital modernization, and the audience decline, San Marino has not yet relinquished having at least one public cinema. This decision is driven by two primary reasons. The first, as highlighted by both Floriano Sciutti and Paolo Rondelli, the current director of the Cultural Institutes, pertains to the small size of the territory and its audience. The limited numbers do not attract private investors for obvious reasons of economic sustainability. Therefore, without a public cinema, there would be no cinema theaters in San Marino. The second reason relates to the significant cultural value that cinema holds within San Marino's offerings, even though this is balanced by a consumer demand increasingly leaning towards mainstream cinema, as noted by Vito Testaj:

In my opinion, there is a beneficial relationship between the public cinema and its spectators. The San Marino public tends to prefer the local theater for first-run films rather than traveling to multiplexes. However, it is rare for us to show first-run titles. For instance, this year during the Christmas period, we concentrated our economic efforts during times of higher attendance to be more competitive. Due to financial constraints, we cannot release all films concurrently with their general cinema release. Instead, we target periods when the audience is more likely to be interested and attentive. I can say that our audience does not view us as a secondary option but as a source for titles they might have missed elsewhere or that have been out for a few weeks and are no longer available in other theaters²⁶.

Testaj once again emphasizes the close relationship of trust and service between the San Marino State-run film screenings and their audience, where film consumption is understood as a cultural good available to the public and supported by state funding. Moreover, Testaj explains the complexity of balancing release windows with platform availability:

Movie theaters are forced to chase after titles only when the distributor decides it's the right time because the release window system previously operated in agreement with studios is shrinking. Sometimes, with certain titles, there is simultaneity, meaning they are still available in theaters while also being available on streaming platforms, perhaps for a fee. The problem arises when a film has already been seen, reviewed, and heavily advertised,

²⁴ Interview with Floriano Sciutti, cit.

²⁵ Cucco, *Economia del film*, 127.

²⁶ Interview with Vito G. Testaj, cit.

and ticket prices remain relatively high. The challenge is to assess whether the audience might still be interested. Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't, and occasionally it's a gamble²⁷.

Finally, in terms of the transition from film reels to digital formats, Sciutti argues that it has facilitated San Marino's access to first-run films:

In the transition to digital supports, the market has greatly opened up for small businesses like ours. With film reels, many copies had to be physically printed, and as a second-run theater, you had to wait for one of these copies to become available. It wasn't possible otherwise, or you had to invest sums that were unaffordable for us to have a copy printed specifically for you. With DPC (Digital Cinema Package), this problem disappeared because the copies are immaterial, so it's just a matter of reaching an agreement²⁸.

The transformations in cinema exhibition and audience behavior after the 2010s highlight the broader implications of digitalization in the international film sector. In the case of San Marino, the transition to digital projection technology, coupled with the implementation of a spending review, substantially reconfigured its cinema infrastructure, reducing the number of operational theaters while maintaining a state-supported cultural venue. This development reflects global trends wherein streaming platforms and on-demand viewing have become increasingly dominant. However, it also emphasizes the distinct challenges faced by the microstate in sustaining cultural institutions. Lacking the financial advantages of larger economies or access to European Union funding, microstates like San Marino must navigate the delicate balance between modernization and fiscal restraint, ensuring that, despite limited resources, cinema remains a vital component of the national cultural landscape.

5. AUDIENCE DATA AND TRENDS

Cinema audiences play a crucial role in shaping the programming and acquisition strategies of local theaters, particularly in small markets such as San Marino. Interviews with theater management reveal that the audience in San Marino predominantly consists of families and seniors who rely on the local theater for both mainstream cinema and indie movies and seem resistant to the "commodification of cinema" tied to the multiplex moviegoing experience²⁹. The audience composition is thus another factor influencing the acquisition and programming of the State-run San Marino cinematic offer. Testaj explains:

A lot also depends on the choices we make because it is true that we try to follow the wave of available offerings, but it is also true that within that context, we are necessarily forced to make selections. In fact, we can show 6-7 titles in a month, no more. It's clear that this is a far cry from the many films released in a day at larger theaters. The film programming is based partly on costs and partly on audience feedback. The audience is loyal because we try

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Interview with Floriano Sciutti, cit.

²⁹ S. Hanson, *Screening the World: Global Development of the Multiplex Cinema*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 11. However, it is worth noting that in Italy the multiplex phenomenon adopts a model that is very different from that of the United States, both in terms of concepts and programming. See F. Casetti, M. Fanchi, eds., *Terre incognite. Lo spettatore italiano e le nuove forme dell'esperienza di visione del film*, Rome: Carocci, 2006.

to provide films that are mainstream or mid-budget, often family or children's films, which are genres we know our audience appreciates. For example, we often exclude blockbusters aimed at teenagers, not because we don't want to show them, but our theater doesn't support that demographic well. Teenagers are looking for a wider moviegoing experience, such as that of multiplexes with their offer of food, amenities, shopping, and so on. We cannot provide that. A target we aim at is seniors who have free time, interest, and enjoy going to the cinema. For them, we offer more specialized programming such as French comedies, English period dramas, and in general European cinema. Another successful programming offer is tied to the art documentary cinema such as the Nexo project³⁰.

Family-friendly screenings and European films are thus the core of San Marino's State-run cinema offer. For instance, the highest-grossing film of 2019 at the Concordia cinema was *Pinocchio* (directed by Matteo Garrone) with 1,748 admissions. In 2023, it was the turn of Paola Cortellesi's surprise box office hit *C'è ancora domani*, with 1,688 admissions. These numbers should also be compared with the total attendance for the respective years, considering the difference between pre- and post-Covid years. For example, in 2019, the total cinema attendance was 28,637, while in 2023, after the attendance crisis due to the pandemic, the annual attendance was 12,772³¹.

6. PUBLIC FUNDING AND FILM CULTURE

As we have mentioned, UASC's mission in terms of film programming was directed to promote cinema as a cultural product with social and educational aims, along with theater, art, and music. Even now, San Marino cinema is part of the public Cultural Institutes, whose mission is to "contribute to the cultural growth, individual and collective development of San Marino citizens and promote and spread awareness of the historical identity and intangible cultural values on which the Republic of San Marino is based³²". Therefore, the main characteristic of the San Marino State-run moviegoing experience is the difficult balance between cultural mission and market demands, as emerged from interviews and archival research. San Marino's State-run cinema primarily operates as a second-run venue with only a few rare instances of first-run screenings. It predominantly showcases family-oriented films catering to a broad audience base. Additionally, the programming places significant emphasis on screening films of cultural interest thanks to agreements with the Cinema Ritrovato and Nexo circuits, and to the *Occhi sul cinema* arthouse film screenings in the 1990s and 2000s. This focus highlights its historical commitment to a vision of cinema as culturally relevant, which is interconnected to the strategy of film programming as part of a wider public cultural offer. The cinema also maintains a dependent relationship regarding purchases, often dealing with small numbers. This operational model is reflected in the revenue data, which also shows a clear distinction between the periods before and after the Covid pandemic, in line with Italy's trend³³.

According to Vito Testaj, future strategies for the San Marino cinema sector are aimed at enhancing its cultural value through international collaborations. One of the

³⁰ Interview with Vito G. Testaj, cit.

³¹ Data provided by the San Marino Cultural Institutes.

³² Cultural Institute's Service Charter: <https://www.gov.sm/pub1/GovSM/dam/jcr:876e46d9-420d-4eee-8cdb-edd56b9a0d00/Carta%20dei%20Servizi%20Istituti%20Culturali.pdf>. Accessed July 29, 2024.

³³ See Cinetel data: https://fapav.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/CINETEL_2020_i-dati-del-mercato-del-cinema-in-sala.pdf. Accessed July 29, 2024.

primary initiatives includes the promotion of international film festival screenings, such as the European Union Film Festival “L’Europa a San Marino, San Marino in Europa” (Europe in San Marino, San Marino in Europe), launched in 2023³⁴. These festivals are meant to be cultural and geopolitical platforms for fostering cross-cultural exchange and for positioning San Marino in the European film community. Additionally, Testaj plans to support the screening of debut works and productions by young directors, in collaboration with Italian and international film schools. Finally, in 2023 the establishment of a film library in the upper section of the Concordia cinema hall, dedicated to the curation and exhibition of arthouse films and in collaboration with the University of San Marino’s Humanities Department, represents a commitment to preserving and promoting cinema heritage and culture. These strategies underscore a comprehensive effort not only for the survival and preservation of domestic moviegoing, but also for the valorization of film culture in a small, peripheral, and non-urban setting.

7. STATE-RUN THEATERS AS SOCIAL SPACE

San Marino public cinema theater and related moviegoing experience can be read through the paradigm of cinema as a social space and collective experience, a sort of ‘third place’ (after the home and the workplace) for informal sociability that maintains social ties³⁵. In this context, the cinema serves not just as a venue for watching films but as a vital community hub where people gather, interact, and engage in shared experiences that strengthen social bonds.

Moreover, the concept of cinema as a social space transcends the traditional dichotomies of cinema as either cultural value or commercial industry. As demonstrated by the case of San Marino, the moviegoing experience is cherished as a significant aspect of socialization and the cultural identity of the territory. Cinema is valued for its ability to bring people into a shared space, fostering a sense of community and belonging. This underscores the importance of preserving opportunities for film exhibitions even when they are not always commercially profitable.

The State-run cinema in San Marino exemplifies why cinema should be considered deserving of public support. It represents the only viable option for providing a moviegoing experience to the citizens, residents, and local community of the microstate, where for-profit cinema operations would likely be unfeasible. In this way, State-run cinemas combat the potential desertification of film exhibition, nurturing community-based moviegoing experiences that are deeply rooted in the unique geopolitical status of the microstate. This approach highlights the broader societal benefits of State-supported cinema, which include the promotion of cultural engagement, the reinforcement of social ties, and the enhancement of the community’s cultural life. By serving as a social space, the State-run cinema in San Marino plays a crucial role in maintaining the cultural vitality and social cohesion of the microstate.

³⁴ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/L%E2%80%99Europa%20a%20San%20Marino%2C%20San%20Marino%20in%20Europa_FESTIVAL%20BROCHURE.pdf. Accessed July, 30, 2024.

³⁵ R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day*, New York: Paragon House, 1989. See also Vélez-Serna, *Ephemeral Cinema Spaces*, 61.