



II Cinema Modernissimo – Where every film is an underground film

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Abstract

This is a first for CINEJ Cinema Journal for reviewing a film exhibition avenue. In 2022, during a visit to Bologna, Italy, to study the Italian language, the author learned that the City is both a center and a network of domestic and international film culture due to the efforts of La Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, founded in 1962.

Keywords: cinema; theater; italian cinema; Bologna; film preservation; exhibition



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Il Cinema Modernissimo – Where every film is an underground film

Herbert F. Mintz II

Introduction

In 2022, during a visit to Bologna, Italy, to study the Italian language, I learned that the City is both a center and a network of domestic and international film culture due to the efforts of La Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, founded in 1962.

The Cineteca features The Renzo Renzi Film Library and Archive, film restoration and preservation services, a film restoration summer school, a film bookstore, the Cinema Lumière and the Cinema Cervi, adult professional film production training, exhibition space, the Mercato Ritrovato, an online Cinestore, a school and family film program, publishing and a one of a kind outdoor summer film festival and lecture series, Il Cinema Ritrovato.

In March 2023, the Cineteca newsletter announced its most recent undertaking, the long awaited re-opening of an historic single screen cinema palace, the Il Cinema Modernissimo. At a cost of 6.6 million euros, this re-constructed film theater, built over the site of a previous 1915 film theater, would open to the public for film exhibition in November 2023. The one striking detail of this notice: This film theater would be located below street level where all the films would be literally ‘underground’ films’.

In June 2023, esteemed American film director Martin Scorsese, long connected to the Cineteca and its film restoration and preservation services, attended a special preview event to inaugurate the Il Cinema Modernissimo prior to its grand opening in November 2023.

I visited Bologna in April 2024 to continue my education with regards to Italian culture, language and history. As part of my immersion in the cultural life of Bologna, I knew that I had to visit the Il Cinema Modernissimo.

On Thursday, April 18th, I purchased a ticket at the Cineteca film bookstore in the Piazza Maggiore. I paid a mere €3.50 for a screening of an ‘underground’ film, Citizen Kane (Orson Welles: 1941) at 3:15pm that day at the Il Cinema Modernissimo.



I was informed by staff at the film bookstore that the entrance to the film theater was located at the intersection of a public square, the Piazza Re Enzo, and a city street, the Via Rizzoli.

With my film ticket in hand, I went in search of the entrance to the Il Cinema Modernissimo.

Unlike every other single screen cinema palace that comes to mind, there is no monumental and glamorous architectural façade at street level that alerts the passerby or film patron that they have arrived at the site of a grand film theater. There is no eye-catching neon illuminated three-sided marquee extending outward from the building façade displaying the name of the theater establishment above a rectangular panel containing movable block letters spelling the name of the film on exhibition or the names of the performers. There is no recessed ticket booth or grand front doors or even a movie poster encased in a frame visible from the street.

In fact, there is no exterior to the Il Cinema Modernissimo. Instead, I spotted two small billboards, one with the word ‘Cinema’ and on the other one the word ‘Modernissimo’ printed in a classic font, each word nestled in a field of swirls. On the other side of the larger billboard was a cement stairway and three smaller signs which indicated where to line up and where to enter the film theater. Looking down at the bottom of the cement staircase, I saw the modest entrance to the Il Cinema Modernissimo.



Those gray stairs led to two glass doors, where just outside of them, I presented my film ticket to a staff member. Then I stepped inside. On this level, to my left, a black and white irregular quadrilateral tile floor, recessed lights, bar stools and the Caffè Pathé/Modernissimo Bistrot captured my curious gazes. Looking to my right, a similar tile floor pattern, a seating area with table and chairs, a row of classic film posters, and today's film schedule decorated this level.



I soon spotted a film poster of *Citizen Kane*, in Italian, with the heading, ‘Un giorno un Manifesto’. This was a film poster designed specifically for the upcoming screening of the film *Citizen Kane*. It included an image of Welles as Kane and the title of the film as it is known in Italy, Quarto Potere, translated as ‘Fourth Estate’.



A small sign directed me to follow a wide descending red carpet staircase which took me to the next level and onto a short aisle that was flanked on both sides with tall shelves containing cubicles replete with memorabilia associated with the history of filmmaking. The displays were also evidence of the site's expanded notion of an exhibition space; this was not only a cinema space but an archive space that connected the past to the present.



A few steps more on that same aisle and another staff member checked my film ticket and directed me toward more stairs. These winding stairs, attached to a curvaceous Art Nouveau balustrade, took me to an even lower level and to a short landing that led to partially open red drapes which invited me into the actual theater.



Pushing aside the thick drapes, I saw a film screen space covered by a closed red curtain embedded in a proscenium arch and a theater interior inspired by the Italian variant of the Art Nouveau style. Elegant flowing designs and patterns covered the canopy ceiling and walls. Balcony railings with a treble clef motif, octagonal shaped suspended lamps and long rows of bright red armchair seats embellished this physical space.



I paused for a moment to absorb the significance and ambience of the interior of the Il Cinema Modernissimo.

In just few minutes, I had traveled through an improbable portal of three staircases to go back in time to the visit the interior of a grand movie palace of the 1910s and 1920s, sumptuous, sensuous and visually arresting.

Compared to the increasing standardization of film exhibition by the proliferation of the film multiplex, by the diminution of the big screen experience by streaming services and of viewing a film on a ‘device’, I stood wonderstruck.

The display and arrangement of the theater’s interior embellishments weren’t only an aesthetic effect. The lavish interior is an inviting appeal to enter the fantasy space of a film, initiating the storytelling experience before a film begins.

I began to look for my seat.

At first glance, the seating seemed vintage. These red armchair seats were not modern by current standards, that is, stadium seats, but possessed a touch of the glamour of an earlier era of cinema seating.

Soon I noticed that each red armchair seat had a number as well as the name of an important person or entity associated with film history. My seat was in the stalls, Row J, seat number 19. On the head rest of the armchair in gold Art Deco lettering were the words ‘Pete Docter e La Pixar’. (FYI: Pete Docter is the Oscar winning director of "Monsters, Inc." and the current Chief Creative Officer at Pixar Animation Studios).

Adjacent seats featured international film directors that film studies students would recognize such as Akira Kurosawa and Ken Loach.



By my estimate, about one third of the seats were sold for this screening of *Citizen Kane*. The film was presented in its original language, American English, with Italian subtitles.

The projection booth was visible behind the last row of red armchairs and below a low arch. A program note indicated that the booth is equipped with projectors for both film and digital formats up to 4K.



After the film ended, as I filed out of the underground complex, the waiting area was packed full of patrons for the next feature film, *Ladri di biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica: 1948), translated these days as *Bicycle Thieves*. I first saw that film in New York City 40 years ago as a film studies student when it was erroneously titled ‘The Bicycle Thief’.

According to a recent online program schedule, the Il Cinema Modernissimo tends to operate as a revival house or repertory cinema that specializes in showing classic or notable older films with the occasional special event or a first run film premiere.

The reopening of a single screen film theater as a cinema palace goes against the trend of countless single screen cinema closures over recent years not just in Bologna but even in San Francisco where I live.

The overwhelming question for the Il Cinema Modernissimo remains whether or not a single screen and underground movie palace can compete with the rest of the of multiplexes and pre-existing smaller cinemas in the Centro Storico and in the modern city of Bologna. It is too early to tell if the revenues generated by Il Cinema Modernissimo will continue to provide cinephiles with both a vision and concrete location where film culture is celebrated and film is cherished as an art form.

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