

A Comparative Model for Film Industries and National Cinemas in Small European Countries

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Abstract

The popular and festival success of films from small European countries not only indicates the growing importance of small European film industries but also renders it necessary to investigate how these success stories were initiated. The following paper argues how a comparative model, as developed in other social sciences, could be employed to systematically scrutinise the growing importance of small European film industries. The focus on similar cases together with an analysis of funding models and the structural background of the exhibition sector as presented in the *European Cinema Yearbook* can provide a useful instrument to introduce the comparative model for the understanding of cinema in small European countries.

1. Current trends in academic research on cinema

As film theorist Geoffrey Nowell Smith argues "cinema has always been international, both culturally and economically" (Nowell-Smith 1984, p. 154 in O`Regan 1996, p. 48). Academic research on cinema thus also needs to be international, both culturally and economically. Quite disappointingly, film studies in this respect do not cater for this international quality of film and emphasise the national element of film both on the level of cultural significance and economical importance. When Ginette Vincendeau summarises the state of research on European cinema she is forced to admit that research on European cinema tends to focus on the concept of European art cinema versus Hollywood genre cinema. In general European cinema is either regarded within the concept of National cinema, analysing "how – if at all – the production, circulation and consumption of the moving image is constitutive of the national collectively" (Schlesinger 2000, p. 24) or in the critical interrogation of cinematic movements that are often indigenous to certain nation such as French New Wave, Italian Neo-realism or German New Cinema. The few but influential pan-European studies on the other hand have tended to either focus on the economic level as Finney's *The State of European Cinema. A new Dose of Reality* (1996) or the studies have tried to approach film from a cultural level as in Everett's *European Identity in Cinema* (1996) and Vincendeau / Dyer's *Popular European Genres* (1992). No pan-European study combining the textual and aesthetic with the economic level comparable to Bordwell / Thompson / Staiger's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) is yet achieved for European cinema (Vincendeau 1998).

Scrutinising this situation of academic research for European cinema it has to be stated that in a stark contrast to other areas of research the comparative model is not (yet) established in film studies. Other areas of social science seem to be far more advanced in this respect. Here, mass media theory and in particular comparative politics have been rather successful in drawing references from different countries in order to outline pan-European trends. The comparative analysis of international media systems has been widely integrated in the syllabus of media studies courses. Comparative politics is in general considered an own area of research within the academic discipline of political science (see for example Almond /Powell 1978).The question thus remains why the comparative model could not be transferred for academic research on European cinema.

2. A possible application of the comparative model for research on European cinema

As for other social sciences, a common instrument since the 19th century is the “method of agreement” (Berg-Schlosser / Müller-Rommel 1997, p. 14) or its later application in what is labelled “a most similar systems design” (Przeworski / Teune 1976). In brief, cases that share a common set of independent variables are chosen and the variables in which they differ are used to explain the dependant variable. Examining independent and dependant variables in the area of film studies is a far more complex issue than for example comparing electoral systems. Gaitanides (2001) in an attempt to integrate statistical analysis for explaining the box office success of German and American films in the German market, cannot produce a statistically viable concept to predict the performance of films as factors such as star power, director, genre and plot are hard to pin down statistically. Comparative film studies in this respect needs to employ “a most similar case design” that only sees a common set of variables as a structural foundation. The model itself cannot exclusively explain differences in filmic productions in each country but can help to broaden the understanding of European cinema.

A possible application for a comparative model in film studies is the systematic analysis of cinema both in its economic and cultural significance in small European countries. Here, Vincendeau fears that concerning academic research on cinema these countries “remain(s) in isolation, if not oblivion” (Vincendeau 1998, p. 441). Regarding the cinematic landscape of the last few years, it can be revealed that the challenging trends of European art cinema and even popular European cinema are no longer exclusively generated from the big European national cinemas but can more and more be found within the creative talent of smaller European countries. Thus, film critic Leslie Felperin in a review in film magazine Sight and Sound is forced to declare that “ by 2002, Austria now looks like one of the hotspots on the European film map, along with hitherto sleepy Denmark and the new, formerly Yugoslavian republics” (2002, p. 62). It appears that these small countries indeed significantly shape the development of European cinema in recent years (see for example the critical acclaim of the Dogma 95 style by Lars von Trier, Lone Scherfig, Thomas Vinterberg and others, Denmark). The festival success of films such as *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Pianoteacher*, 2000, Michael Haneke, Austria), *Mies vailla menneisyttä* (*The Man without a Past*, 2002, Aki Kaurismäki, Finland), *Bloody Sunday* (2002, Paul Greengrass, Ireland), *No Man's Land* (2001, Danis Tanvic, Bosnia-Herzegovina / Slovenia) or *Elling* (2001, Peter Næss, Norway) further underlines these assumptions.

Although many of these critically acclaimed films have been made with the financial support of bigger European countries, notably France and Britain and their success can often be analysed within the concept of an auteur based European Art Cinema, it has nevertheless to be stated that these acclaimed European art film directors such as Lars von Trier, Aki Kaurismäki, Michael Haneke or Manoel de Oliveira (Portugal) did not emerge out of the blue but all started filming within the structural background of a small European nations. Furthermore, each of these countries has produced fairly important indigenous film cultures with lesser known art film directors such as Jessica Hausner (Austria), Cathal Black (Ireland), Søren Kragh-Jacobsen (Denmark) but also important popular genre productions such as *Hinterholz 8* (1998, Harald Sicheritz, Austria), *About Adam* (2000, Gerry Stembrigde, Ireland), and *Blinkende lygter (Flickering Lights, 2000, Anders Thomas Jensen, Denmark)*. Indeed, the film industries in small European countries share interesting common characteristics. In reference to the media systems of small European countries in general Kurt Luger, while analysing the potential of Austrian films, concludes that on a structural level media systems in small European countries share four common characteristics:

- (1) because of their limited market size, they are depending on bigger markets,
- (2) the limited resources particularly in small countries force their governments to support their production sector
- (3) their media systems are more vulnerable to spill over effects
- (4) finally, privatisation has reduced the potential of democratic and governmental regulation mechanism (1992, p.101).

Additionally, data from the *European Cinema Yearbook* (2001 edition) reveals that -despite different populations, different average ticket prizes and average cinema attendances - only looking at the market potential for each of the small countries, small European film industries have a market potential ranging between around € 75m to under € 150m (with the exception of Luxembourg and Island). This is only roughly one tenth of the bigger markets in Germany, UK and France. Hollywood blockbuster in this respect often achieve quite similar both office figures in these small European countries. Thus, a comparative analysis of small European countries with their limited resources underlines John Hill's (1996) assumption that a governmental sponsored national cinema is the only way to critically interrogate the dominance of Hollywood cinema in Europe. Such a study could ask the question how governmental support schemes in these small European countries impinge on the film production in each country. For a profound comparative analysis the importance of national support schemes in each of the countries needs to be integrated in the study, not only regarding the sheer amount of money that the governments in each of the countries invest

in their film industries (see KORDA database in ÖFI 2002, p. 13) but also the different types of funding schemes and their influence on the textual level (see Brown 1996)

The *European Cinema Yearbook* divulges even more important structural data concerning a comparative analysis of film industries in small European countries as not only similarities between these countries can be identified but also interesting differences can be discovered. It can be seen that in spite of the similar restricted potential for indigenously produced films, the market share of domestic films in each of the countries differs drastically, with extreme low figures in Austria, Ireland, Belgium and rather high figures in Denmark, Finland and Sweden (see also Neiiendam 2002). It needs to be scrutinised how governmental support schemes can account for this different figures. Examining other structural data of the *European Cinema Yearbook*, it becomes apparent that essential differences within the structure of cinematic exhibition in these small European countries can be identified. Austria, Belgium, and Ireland seem to constitute a group of countries where spill over effects from the big neighbour are extremely crucial for the development of their film industries. Additionally the multiplex density as an indicator of concentration is substantially lower in the Scandinavian countries but also in the small southern European countries such as Greece and Portugal than in Belgium, Austria and Ireland. One reason for this strong spill over is the sharing of a common language with a big neighbouring state. In contrast to the Scandinavian countries small countries with a big neighbour are particularly confronted by market concentration in the field of exhibition and distribution. Their markets are often dominated by foreign companies, who see the smaller Austrian, Irish and Belgium market only as a further add on to the ten times bigger French, British or German ones.

3. Evaluation and explanatory potential of a comparative model for cinemas in small European countries

Even only briefly analysing the structural data as available from the *European Cinema Yearbook* it can be concluded that indeed different structural backgrounds in small European countries may partly explain the different status of indigenously produced films. A highly concentrated market with the dominance of foreign, often multi-national co-operations in the area of cinematic exhibition and distribution makes it considerable harder for small scale indigenously produced films to find distribution. Combined with the dominance of multiplex cinemas where at least the popular branch of these films has to compete with the higher budgeted star vehicles of Hollywood cinema further limits the potential of domestic films.

Thus, the data of *the European Cinema Yearbook*, together with a profound analysis of the funding situation in each of the small European countries can provide a framework for a comparative analysis of small European film industries. The comparative model allows to partly explain how for example different funding models such as the subsidies model in Austria or Scandinavia and the tax incentive scheme model in Ireland (Section 481), Luxembourg and most recently Belgium, influence the film production in countries that otherwise share similar structural backgrounds. This makes it possible to deduct theoretical assumptions of one case for other cases. Theoretical assumptions derived from an analysis of well established cinema markets and film industries in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland or Portugal can be used to predict possible implications of developments in less well researched markets such as the Eastern European countries. Linked with an interrogation of the national cinema concept as applied for small European countries by McLoone (2000) (Ireland) or Soila et al. (1998) (Scandinavia), a comparative approach on small European film industries can furthermore integrate cultural elements into the systematic analysis of small European film industries, asking the question how different structural backgrounds together with the implications of different governmental support models shape the textual level of the films produced in each country.

A comparative model for small European film industries may acknowledge film's quality of simultaneously being a cultural good and an economic commodity (Moran 1996, p. 1) while at the same time accounting for the international characteristics of the film industry. This may help that as for academic research on cinema, small European film industries do not remain in oblivion by opening the national cinema concept for small European film industries in particular and for European cinema in general for a comparative approach.

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