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# **Reframing European Cinema – Concepts and Agendas for the Historiography of European Film**

This essay, originally delivered as a paper at the Popular European Cinema Conference in Punkaharju in July 1996, aims to outline some of the critical frameworks and agendas according to which the term 'Popular European Cinema' has been defined over the last ten years. What struck me about the setup of the conference in Finland, and what partly prompted my intervention in the first place, was that despite its titular reference to the 'European', few of the papers actually took account of the supranational implications of this term. What, however, does the label 'European' mean and contribute to the case studies of seemingly separate and enclosed national film cultures? In trying to answer this question, my paper deliberately shifts the emphasis from the cultural specificity of filmic texts to issues of transnational interaction and cross-cultural reception. In this process I not only wish to re-emphasise some areas of European film production which have been seen as peripheral to the more important project of defining national cinemas. I also hope to propose an alternative agenda according to which one might redraw the parameters of European film history.

The re-emergence of the concept of 'European Cinema' in the last ten years has significantly paralleled and been motivated by the wider process of political European integration. The need to protect a vaguely defined yet strongly perceived European film heritage supplied the major rhetorical tool for European member states (led by France), to resist American media dominance during the GATT talks in 1993. The desire to establish or reaffirm a pan-European production base has given impetus to new film funding and filmmaking initiatives such as Euro-Aim and Eurimages. Accompanying this apparent resurgence of the European film, has been a renewed theoretical and historical interest in this topic. It is significant that the two most influential events in relaunching this academic interest (the

<sup>1</sup> Both conferences resulted in publications: Richard Dyer, Ginette Vincendeau (eds.), *Popular European Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1992; and Duncan Petrie (ed.), *Screening Europe. Image and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema*. London: BFI, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Pierre Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies*. London: Routledge, 1991; John Hill, Martin McCloone, Paul Hainsworth (eds.), *Border Crossing. Film In Ireland, Britain and Europe*. London: BFI, 1994; Ginette Vincendeau (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of European Cinema*. London: Cassel/BFI, 1995; Wendy Everett (ed.), *European Identity in Cinema*, Exeter: Intellect Books, 1996; Ginette Vincendeau, "Issues in European Cinema". In John Hill (ed.), *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See Duncan Petrie, "Change and Cinematic Representation in Modern Europe". In Petrie, *Screening Europe*, op.cit, pp. 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> Armand Mattelart, "European film policy and the response to Hollywood". In John Hill (ed.), *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, op.cit, pp. 478-485.

Popular European Cinema conference at the University of Warwick, and the Screening Europe conference at the British Film Institute) both took place in 1989.<sup>1</sup> Responding to a fearful and suspicious national mood in Britain leading up to Maastricht and closer European integration in 1992, both of these conferences, while different in their specific topics and subject matter, set the agenda for discussion on three major areas: the problematisation of the term 'Europe', the issue of national and cultural identity, and the high art/popular culture divide. Nearly ten years later, these issues still dominate the debates.<sup>2</sup>

One definition of European cinema which has come under particular scrutiny is the traditional concept of a European art cinema.<sup>3</sup> Given coherence and legitimacy by a common high cultural heritage which encompasses the history of European thought and the canons and features of Western art and literature, this paradigm of European cinema prescribes a history of masterpieces, stylistic movements and schools, and, above all, of individual directors. What elevates film directors to the canon of European art cinema 'auteurs', is not necessarily their specific national or cultural identity, or even the reflection thereof in their films, but their perceived commonality of independent artistic expression or style, wider humanistic concern, and creative autonomy. In this respect, then, 'European' is less a geo-cultural signifier, but constitutes itself as a more abstract ethical framework of cultural practice according to which national art cinemas define themselves. The institutions which perpetuate and protect this cultural practice indeed have been remarkably similar across European countries over the last twenty years: a mode of production which is heavily reliant on state subsidies (particularly in Germany and France), a cross-European distribution network built on the marketing of festivals and prizes (Berlin, Venice, Cannes), an exhibition centred on the distinctive arena of the 'art house', and finally a network of journals and newspapers committed both to the spirit and the industrial framework of this practice. Crucially, this provides the definition of European cinema's cultural politics, employed by the EU and individual member states, and most prominently exemplified during the GATT debates.<sup>4</sup> There is certainly justification for challenging this paradigm. Its strategy of cultural homogenisation and high cultural bias can be seen as elitist, most notably in its exclusion of regional specificities, popular cultural forms, and audiences (rather than acculturated viewers). It can also be seen to erect, in its most extreme form, a cultural 'fortress Europe'. Hollywood's perceived vulgarity and commercialism can be easily identified as the major force European cinema has to be protected against. More difficult and ambiguous to determine is the role non-western cinemas are assigned in this equation, and how contemporary Europe's multicultural diversity within national boundaries can be represented and integrated according to this framework.

The critical rejection of this model and the shift towards discussing the formation of national and (sub-)cultural identities through - mainly popular - cinema, is in some ways understandable. The rediscovery and rehabilitation of culturally specific popular forms certainly constitute an important area of research, particularly given the high art, class and gender bias in many European countries that has made them invisible or critically neglected for a long time. This approach, however, seems to foreclose too quickly the possibility of a European cinema not necessarily defined by a framework of

elitist modes of production and preferences. Ironically, most of the studies sailing under the flag of 'European popular cinema' are in fact geared towards reinforcing rather than dissolving the boundaries of both national cinemas and national identity. While such a project may have its useful ethnographic or sociological aims, it also has ideological implications which need to be addressed. Any study which centres on a 'national' definition of cinema, reflects to a large extent the critic's own investment in the formation and exclusion processes of national identities. There is, however, nothing intrinsically progressive or subversive in the simple reaffirmation of national popular cultures and their artefacts. In fact, if the political developments and conflicts of this century have taught us anything, it might be that the dividing line or reciprocal interaction between popular culture (itself a fairly contentious and problematic term), national identity, and rabid nationalism can be notoriously slippery. It is noticeable that in Germany which, for obvious historical reasons, has a fraught and uneasy relation to the concept of 'nationhood', popular indigenous culture has been critically viewed with profound suspicion. Analytical approaches to popular German cinema, therefore, have tended to subscribe to theoretical frameworks which are broadly informed by the pessimistic prognostics of the Frankfurt School. In countries such as Britain, on the other hand, where the given parameters of national identity are overall accepted more readily, national popular cultures are assigned a progressive potential far more frequently. This affirmation of the 'national' appears to be more pronounced and urgent in countries which feel beleaguered in their political or cultural identity (e.g. Ireland, Scotland, Belgium, the new Balkan states), and in countries which see themselves as either economically excluded, or culturally independent from the developments of central and Western Europe (the former Eastern Bloc states, the Scandinavian context). What this suggests, then, is that the concept of European cinema and the writing of its history has been negotiated through culturally diverse discursive practices. These practices touch on the very foundation of individual and collective identity formations, and encompass both present concerns and the understanding of the past. In the following pages I shall attempt to historically reinstate, or reimagine the term 'European' in 'European Cinema', by placing it in a dialogic relation to such formations. The categories I will be looking at are the notion of a cinema of diaspora, coproduction initiatives, and cross-cultural reception.

### **The Centres and Margins of Europe**

What I propose as my first working definition of the 'European' in European cinema, is to understand it less as a stable cultural identity or category, but as an ongoing process, marked by indeterminacy, or 'in-between-ness'. In the ancient Greek myth of Europe, the eponymous Canaanite princess is kidnapped and raped by Zeus who, in the guise of a white bull, carries her across the waters of the Mediterranean. As a point of origin and definition, this founding myth provides an emblematic image which is indeterminate in meaning yet violent in its impression. In hindsight, its motif of divine metamorphosis and voyage can be seen to invoke the fluidity and mutability of boundaries, of identities, countries and of Europe itself (the mythological princess, for example, does not originate in today's political or geographical

<sup>5</sup> See Jörg Schöning (ed.), *Fantaisies Russes. Russische Filmmacher in Berlin und Paris 1920-1930*. Munich: Edition Text und Kritik, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> See Jörg Schöning (ed.), *London Calling. Deutsche im britischen Film der dreissiger Jahre*. Munich: Edition Text und Kritik, 1993; Sibylle M. Sturm, *Hallo? Berlin? Ici Paris! Deutsche-französische Filmbeziehungen 1918-1939*. Munich: Edition Text und Kritik, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kevin Gough-Yates, "The British Feature Film as a European Concern". In Günther Berghaus (ed.), *Theatre and Film in Exile*. Oxford: Oswald Wolff, 1989 and "Jews and Exiles in British Cinema". *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, No. 37. London: Secker and Warburg, 1992. See also my "The Production Designer and the Gesamtkunstwerk". In Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views. Key Writings On British Cinema*. London: Cassell, 1996.

Europe). In its motifs of capture and rape, however, the myth emphasises that such fluidity can come at a price, and seems to foresee a European history marked by internal conflicts and external oppression through colonialism, occupation and exclusion. Any working definition of Europe has to acknowledge these dimensions, in their progressive potential as well as their dangers.

If European history, particularly in this century, has been marked by shifting political boundaries and the widespread experience of migration, exile and diaspora, it is evident that this must have had a profound effect on the history of cinema as well. However, while the contexts of exile and immigration have been readily acknowledged as essential to the multicultural composition of Hollywood, it has not become an equally integral element in the construction of national cinemas in Europe itself. Rather than to focus exclusively on separate national formations, then, a history of European cinema might well begin by exploring the interrelationship between cultural and geographical centres and margins, and by tracing the migratory movements between these poles. Such movements occur frequently within linguistic boundaries (for example, between Anglophone, Francophone and German-speaking countries or regions) which, among other aspects, makes it so difficult to disentangle the histories of, say, German and Austrian, French and Belgian/Walloon, or English and Scottish cinema. The movements of individuals, however, are not always restricted to linguistic borders. Throughout the history of European cinema, it is cosmopolitan capital cities, and their specific production facilities and possibilities, which become focal points and destinations for migrant filmmakers at certain historical moments. In the late 1910s and 1920s, Berlin and its studios accommodated those who were uprooted in the aftermath of the collapse of the multicultural Austro-Hungarian Empire (as in the cases of Fritz Lang, G.W. Pabst, Michael Curtiz, Elisabeth Bergner), and the fall of Tsarist Russia (Fedor Ozep, Anatole Litvak, Olga Tchechova).<sup>5</sup> Any consideration of this most classical period of 'German' cinema needs to acknowledge that it was to a large extent a cinema of immigrants from various cultural backgrounds. During the 1930s, and after Hitler's rise to power, the migrant communities disperse once again, relocating to new centres such as Paris and London,<sup>6</sup> but also to other cities such as Amsterdam and Prague. Many of the migrants would move on to Hollywood by the end of the decade, but their legacy within their host culture was significant. In the context of British cinema, the impact of producers such as Alexander Korda, writers such as Emeric Pressburger, and production designers such as Alfred Junge is considerable.<sup>7</sup> In French cinema, there are the notable contributions by directors such as Max Ophüls, and Robert Siodmak, or by production designers such as Alexander Trauner. In the postwar period, migration continues from the East as a result of Cold War divisions (Polanski, Tarkovsky, Kieslowski). It also witnesses a tentative remigration from Hollywood (Fritz Lang, Siodmak, Ophüls, Charlie Chaplin), and, perhaps most significantly, the immigration waves from Europe's former colonies (North Africa in the case of France, Southern/East Asia and the Caribbean in the case of Britain).

Diasporic experiences and their influence on cinematic practice differ greatly according to political and cultural contexts (which includes, for example, the distinction between 'art' cinema, community-based filmmaking, and popular entertainment). They also vary in their different levels of



Sense and Sensibility:  
A canonical text of  
Englishness directed  
by the Taiwanese  
Ang Lee (left).  
Photo: Finnish Film  
Archive.

cultural assimilation. Whether the migrant filmmaker ‘blends in’ or over-identifies with the host culture, rejects it, or engages in a crosscultural dialogue (as, for example, in much of recent Black British and French ‘beur’ cinema), national film cultures and migrant perspectives (themselves rarely ‘pure’) are always locked in a reciprocal process of interaction. While such processes are perhaps most discernible in the independent film sector, they equally occur within national mainstream or popular cinemas. It is worth noting that national cinemas’ most valued filmic texts, exemplifying national qualities and traditions, have often been conceived by cultural outsiders. Thus, the ur-Germanic myth of the Nibelungen was brought to the screen by the Viennese Fritz Lang, while Alexander Korda’s films of the 1930s celebrated the imperial glory of Great Britain. The Hungarian emigre director Ladislao Vajda provided the cinema of Franco’s Spain in the 1940s and 1950s with a series of popular films which wallowed in Catholic symbolism and folklore. More recently, the reimagination of British heritage in *Room With a View* or *Howards End* has been channelled through the polyglot perspectives of their Indian producer Ismail Merchant, their American director James Ivory and their Polish-German writer Ruth Praver-Jhabvala. The film version of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, another canonical text of Englishness, was directed by the Taiwanese Ang Lee. Cultural interactions such as these, however, don’t simply replicate or reflect already existing national discourses of either the host culture or the outsider. Rather, they ought to be seen as creating new discursive layers and formations which, to a greater or lesser extent, change the make-up of national film cultures.

### **National versus European Film Production**

While the notion of diaspora provides an understanding of wider political frameworks of and cultural effects on film production, industrial imperatives add a further agency for the crosscultural transactions and migrations between European cinemas. The second aspect of determining a European

<sup>8</sup> Manfred Behn (ed.), *Schwarzer Traum und weisse Sklavin. Deutsche-dänische Filmbeziehungen 1910-1930*, Munich: Edition Text und Kritik, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> See Richard Maltby, Andrew Higson (eds.), *Film Europe and Film America. Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange 1920-1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry. London: Routledge, 1993.

cinema, therefore, is the economic desire of national film industries to expand across borders. As with the notion of exile, however, the economic drive towards exports, coproduction and international distribution networks has been mainly discussed in relation to Hollywood's global or specifically European aspirations. The American film industry's relatively unchallenged position as the market leader (at least in the Western hemisphere) almost throughout the history of cinema, has made it easy to critically dismiss the various attempts of European industries to create a pan-European film market or 'zone'. Indeed, neither the 'Film Europe' project of the 1920s and 1930s nor the call for a 'European cinema' in the late 1980s have ventured far beyond their initial visions of a unified European industry and their idealistic rhetoric. 'Film Europe', initiated by producers and geared towards the popular as well as the international, came to an abrupt end following the conversion to sound and wider political developments. The 'European cinema' of recent years, conjured up by cultural politicians, has, on the other hand, never been quite clear what its directions ought to be (apart from fending off Hollywood hegemony). It has become a byword, less for creative initiatives, than for a byzantine process of subsidy allocation and distribution. The economic failure of these pan-European endeavours has further strengthened the argument of national specificity of filmic texts, and reinforced an emphasis on culturally and nationally defined film industries. However, while 'Film Europe' or the 1980s rhetoric of 'European Cinema' may have provided only fleeting allegiances on a European scale, there is a long tradition of shifting national alliances in European cinemas which do add up to a history of consistent international transactions.

From the beginnings of cinema in Europe, industrial initiatives towards foreign distribution and production have determined the prevailing economic hegemonies across the continent. The Brothers Lumière discovered early on the attraction and (not only national) audience appeal of foreign location shooting, and alternated in their programmes shorts of French train stations and harbours with scenes of Spanish bullfighting, and natural wonders such as the Niagara Falls. French companies such as Pathé and Gaumont established production and distribution subsidiaries in other countries which gradually transformed into independent national enterprises (for example, the case of Gaumont-British). During the 1910s, the Danish company Nordisk gained a stronghold in Germany by providing finance, distribution networks, personnel and distinctive genre formulas such as the 'white slavery' film.<sup>8</sup> After World War One and the increasing competition from Hollywood, such international activities accelerated and led to a wave of co-productions in the mid- to late 1920s. The transactions between France, Germany and Britain in the context of the Film Europe project have recently been reassessed in their historical significance.<sup>9</sup> However, there are many possible areas of economic interaction during this period which haven't been sufficiently mapped (for example, the distribution and co-production patterns between Western and Eastern Europe). Even during World War Two, an international dimension to filmmaking was evident (though decidedly less reciprocal) in German-occupied countries, where indigenous film industries were annexed as satellite outlets of the German UFA (for example, the French company Continental). After 1945, European as well as wider international aspirations motivated the British Rank Organisation, among others, to set up distribution subsidiaries in other countries.<sup>10</sup> These aspirations also demanded a line of

products which acknowledged the diversity of European markets. In this respect, Rank revived a number of production strategies of the Film Europe initiatives of the 1920s and 1930s. These included the concept of an 'international' film genre, evident, for example, in the post-war films of Powell and Pressburger. Films such as *Oh Rosalinda!* (an adaptation of an operetta hugely popular in Germany and Austria) or *The Battle Of the River Plate* (a naval war drama, centring on a heroic German officer) may have had only a lukewarm response in Britain, but they largely recouped their cost in foreign markets, the latter being the only foreign war film ever to have reached the annual top ten of popular films in postwar Germany. The signing of foreign national stars was another strategy adopted by national film companies to foster distribution success in other countries. From the 1950s onwards national stars such as Christopher Lee, Brigitte Bardot, Curd Jürgens or Gina Lollobrigida, among many others, appeared more or less frequently in foreign productions. Publicity campaigns, and advertisements for these films differed in their emphasis according to a star's market value in different countries.

Accompanying these ventures into other markets, bilateral agreements and multi-national coproduction pacts have been a defining feature of film production in Europe since World War Two. Economic considerations have also determined preferred production centres at particular historical moments (for example, the production boom in Italy, Spain, and Yugoslavia in the 1960s and early 1970s, or the venture of big budget location shooting into Eastern Europe after the fall of communism). Varying levels of production costs, exchange rates, taxation and market growth in different countries have determined shifting national clusters to counter both American dominance and the general dwindling of audience figures. Since the 1950s industrial agreements between France, Italy and West-Germany developed into a particularly strong axis of reciprocal production and distribution. By the mid-1960s, for example, only a small percentage of 'German' films were purely indigenous in their finance and origin. European coproductions such as these have often been viewed by the critical establishment with distinct condescension, and dismissed for their low-brow appeal (for example, the spy thrillers and horror films of the 1960s and 1970s) and for their perceived blandness (the 'Europuddings' of the 1980s and 1990s). While it is possible to challenge or review such value judgements, it is also worth noting that coproductions are not always restricted to the more commercial end of the market. Throughout the postwar period and to the present, international pools of finance have supported and fostered the careers of esteemed national auteurs, ranging from Fellini to Bergman, and from Volker Schlöndorff to Derek Jarman.

As with the diasporic elements within national cinemas, the issue of coproduction has featured in the histories of individual film cultures at best as a cursory footnote, or as the exception to the more desirable norm of indigenous and self-reliant national film production. Given the examples outlined above, the latter assessment is certainly debatable on the grounds of actual historical practice. In critical imaginings of national film cultures, however, the strategy of historical selection and exclusion helps to construct and uphold powerful narratives of containment and homogeneity. This, of course, also supports the thriving publishing market for national film histories. The internationalism of film production and media markets, on the

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, "The inexportable: the case of French cinema and radio in the 1950's". In Dyer, Vincendeau, *Popular European Cinema*, op.cit., pp. 141-149.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Garnarcz, "Hollywood in Germany: The Role of American Films in Germany". In David W. Ellwood and Rob Kroes (eds.), *Hollywood in Europe. Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994, pp. 94-134.

other hand, suggests a more uneven historical development, and a narrative of dispersal, incursions and dissolving boundaries.

### **Distribution, Translation, and Cross-Cultural Reception**

Historical studies of distribution patterns and cross-cultural reception between European countries are few and far between, and are, to a certain extent justifiably, overshadowed by the dominant role American film distribution has played across European markets. Received critical opinion conveys a rather sketchy picture of such interactions at best, and tends to rely on the assumption of fairly static and unchangeable national audience preferences. According to this theoretical framework films which emerge from one particular national European context, are seen as texts with an overall determinate and stable textual meaning which can be attributed to a set of equally stable national characteristics. Meaning, then, is articulated through cultural and language difference which sets European films apart from the international appeal and intrinsic polysemy of the Hollywood product. In contrast to the 'open' American film, the closed textuality of European films (and of nationally popular genres in particular) demands a culturally competent viewer, which simultaneously denies access to mass audiences in other countries who don't share or acquire the same competence. Discussing a cycle of French regional comedies of the 1950s, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas has argued, for example, that these films' specific frameworks of cultural reference rendered them unintelligible, inexportable and insignificant for audiences outside their defined context.<sup>11</sup> One may agree that there are indeed some national or subnational genres in European cinema which do not export well. The determining factor in many such cases, however, may ultimately be less the films' cultural specificity, but their lack of production values, marketing, and adequate exhibition 'windows'. As far as cultural preferences are concerned, one also needs to note that not all Hollywood genres have exported equally well across different European countries. As Joseph Garnarcz has shown, for example, Hollywood westerns, musicals, and war films failed to have great impact with postwar German audiences, despite an American stronghold on national distribution.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the notion of an a priori, text-inherent unintelligibility precludes any discussion of how foreign audiences or indigenous critical reception actually negotiate or express their 'failed' understanding or rejection of such texts. As a more general explanatory framework for inter-European distribution and cross-cultural reception, this critical model is thus reductive in two of its basic premises: the perceived stability of textual meanings and the requirement of an acculturated spectator. Within this framework the national origin of the film itself and the national identity, or at least cultural competence, of its audience become inseparable.

As I have argued above in my discussion of diasporic influences and coproductions, a nationally specific and stable meaning may in many cases be difficult to determine at the level of production. Furthermore, once filmic texts enter the context of transnational transfer and distribution, they become subject to significant variations, translations and cultural adaptation processes. Such processes may be viewed as violations to or as 'misunderstandings' of a film's 'original' meaning and its national-cultural roots. However, given the fluidity and indeterminacy of these roots, one could alternatively



discuss these translations as legitimate strategies through which different audiences make sense of certain texts.

The first instance where foreign films (American and European) may undergo changes is at the level of local censorship regulations. Films have been edited, restructured in their narratives, or kept out of circulation due to perceived national sensibilities and moralities in different countries. Demands for the alterations of film texts may not always originate with official censorship institutions, but may be initiated by lobbying or pressure groups, or by concerted press campaigns (as, for example, in the recent discourses on censorship in Britain). National censorship provisions themselves are subject to historical changes in wider social discourses and perceived priorities in individual countries. In the context of British censorship, for example, the emphasis has shifted over the years from the representation of religion and foreign policy in the 1930s, to the issues of child protection and behavioural effects of screen violence in the 1980s and 1990s. In some cases, censorship or preemptive self-censorship by producers and distributors can drastically alter the 'meaning' of a given film. In postwar Germany, for example, the American distributors of *Casablanca* edited and dubbed out any reference to Nazis for the film's German release, anxious not to upset their target audience.<sup>13</sup>

Textual changes may also be motivated by specific exhibition practices and requirements. Allen Eyles, for example, has argued that during the 1950s and 1960s, when American films declined in number, British exhibitors turned to cheaply available and dubbed European fare to fill their screens.<sup>14</sup> However, continental features in British distribution were drastically cut on a regular basis, in order to schedule the films into a standard double-bill programme. German and Italian westerns, for example, originally conceived on an epic scale, and considerably long, were in some instances cut by half of their running time. Edited according to the requirement of continuous action, the British versions were made to resemble the classical American B-serial western which was a staple and recognisable component of the double-bill programme. Continental producers encouraged such perceptions abroad and provided their actors and crews with American-sounding pseudonyms.

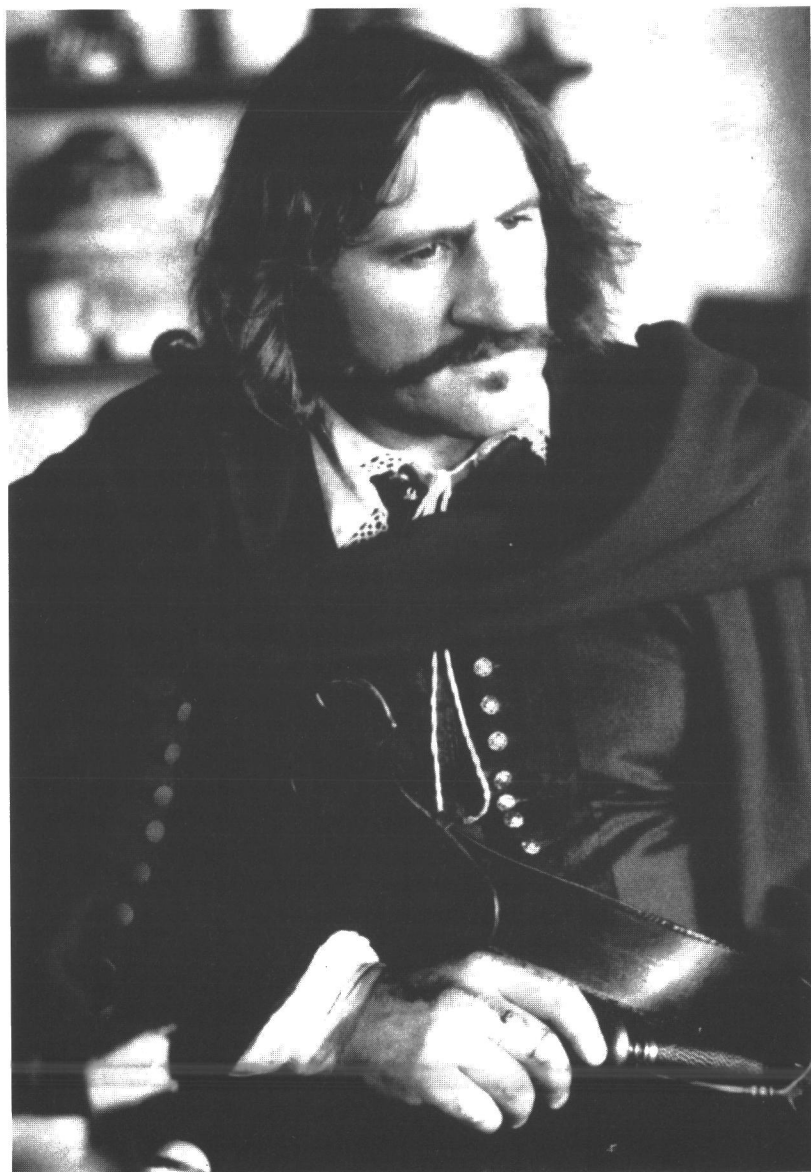
The most pervasive textual changes, however, to occur in the foreign distribution of European films, are due to specific practices of translating dialogue. The most prominent of these are dubbing or subtitling though one could trace translation strategies further back to the silent era and to national variations in intertitles or captions. Rather than to view these practices as literal translations, they may be better understood as strategies of cultural adaptation and familiarisation. In silent intertitles, for example, it was fairly common to replace protagonists' names or specific locations with names or places the target audience was deemed more familiar with. Even today, culturally specific references (particularly to indigenous popular forms or icons) are frequently exchanged in translation for more or less similar examples from the target context. More generally, translations adapt the vernacular and language-specific idioms (often based on class, generational or subcultural variations) into a nationally recognisable correspondence between language, social status, and character. The extent of such changes depends largely on generic differences, and is most notable in films which rely heavily on dialogue, such as comedies. Variations are arguably easier to

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Garnarcz, *Filmfassungen. Eine Theorie signifikanter Filmvariation*. Frankfurt/New York/Paris: Peter Lang, 1992, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Allen Eyles, "Exhibition and Cinemagoing Experience". In Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*. London: BFI, 1997, pp. 217-226.

notice in subtitling, if only for a bilingual viewer. In dubbing, however, cultural adaptations can be taken further, for example by adding or changing specific qualities of characters' voices such as timbre, pronunciation, pitch, or accent. In countries such as Germany, where dubbing is the industrial norm, such vocal and language adaptation strategies have become increasingly sophisticated and elaborate. For example, German audiences are able to recognise a foreign star by their dubbed voice, since industrial practice is to assign wherever possible the same dubbing voice to a popular actor in all of his or her films.

Translation practices and exhibition contexts are not only instrumental in the textual variations of individual films. They also determine to a large extent the way in which European films are valued or grouped together at particular historical moments and in specific cultural contexts. Owing to



Cyrano de Bergerac:  
Popular or Art  
Cinema?  
Photo: Finnish Film  
Archive.

their respective predominance in different European countries, dubbing and subtitles have acquired varying degrees of cultural acceptance. In Britain, for example, dubbing is habitually seen as a fundamental rupture in cinematic realism or verisimilitude and therefore largely rejected. Alternatively it may be appreciated (particularly by 'cult film' enthusiasts) precisely for its 'false' synchronicity between image and sound. This perception is to a large extent dependent on the fact that dubbing technology in Britain, because of its industrial marginality, has never developed beyond a fairly amateur and primitive level. Moreover, dubbing has traditionally been associated in Britain with the lower or more suspect end of the market, from 1960s exploitation material to European soaps on late night television. During the 1950s and 1960s, a rare boom period for dubbed continental films on British screens, European cinema was for many cinemagoers less associated with 'art' than with 'naughty' entertainment, shock value and sexual titillation. This particular perception was certainly due to the widespread availability of European exploitation genres. Even European 'auteur' films, however, were distributed in Britain according to this perception. 1960s British audiences were, therefore, most likely to encounter a Truffaut or Chabrol film in a seedy off-circuit cinema, and -though subtitled- being shown in tandem with a dubbed exploitation picture. In the last twenty years, dubbing has, with few exceptions, virtually disappeared from British cinema screens, alongside the simultaneous demise of low-brow continental genres and their specific exhibition venues. Subtitles, on the other hand, are viewed as a more acceptable form of translation, yet at the same time they are perceived by the majority of audiences as 'difficult', and seen to require a more concentrated viewing position. In consequence this has not only created a fairly select and elite audience for foreign films in Britain (now almost all subtitled), but has also defined their distribution channels and exclusive exhibition context (the art cinema). Tracing these shifting perceptions of European cinema in Britain one can conclude that it is less for text-immanent qualities, but more due to translation practices and changing exhibition contexts that European films have come to be bracketed in Britain under the all-inclusive umbrella of 'art cinema'. A film such as *Cyrano de Bergerac* may have been a popular text, a star vehicle and a blockbuster success in its country of origin, yet in its subtitled British art-house release it becomes a rarefied aesthetic and educational event to be enjoyed by the cinephile connoisseur.

In countries, by contrast, which predominantly use dubbing for translation purposes, different dichotomies between 'art' versus 'popular' and 'national' versus 'foreign' emerge. In Germany, for example, dubbing has expanded over the years into a significant and technologically advanced subsidiary industry to which prestigious actors, writers and directors lend their names and voices. Dubbing has not only been the industry norm for translating foreign films (for cinema as well as later television) since the early sound period, but has also been a standard practice in using post-production sound for indigenous and co-produced films. In the multinational productions of the 1960s, for example, foreign actors were dubbed while the German cast members retained their original voices. While subtitling has become more widespread over the last twenty years, it is still a fairly limited practice and confined to specialised exhibition in metropolitan art cinemas. As in Britain, subtitles are perceived by the majority as difficult

<sup>15</sup> Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany", op.cit.

to follow or as distracting from the film's visual information. Cultural acceptance of dubbing, on the other hand, is widespread in Germany, and, unlike in Britain, it does not seem to pose problems for the perception of cinematic verisimilitude at all. This naturalisation of dubbing as a practice of cultural adaptation has had significant implications for the circulation and reception of foreign-language films in Germany. Distribution and exhibition patterns as well as audience choices in Germany appear to be determined less by a film's national origin, nor even necessarily by market strength (Hollywood), but by broad generic categorisations. In other words, irrespective of its national origin, a film's popularity or acceptance in Germany depends on how it conforms to established generic expectations and current preferences. Contrary to Britain, for example, where European or foreign films have somehow become interchangeable with the notion of art cinema, in Germany the category of 'art cinema' has been defined in strictly generic terms, such as prevalent themes or narrational features. A film such as *Cyrano de Bergerac*, for example, does not fall into this category. It was shown in Germany on general release in big theatres, and appreciated less as French art, but as a pleasurable costume drama rich in production values.

Generic considerations seem to significantly shape, therefore, the perception of what constitutes popularity in the German context. Joseph Garncarz has argued that during the 1950s nationally produced genres set certain conventions, standards and expectations against which American as well as other European films were either accepted or rejected at the box office.<sup>15</sup> During the 1960s these standards were set in equal measures by national, other European and American films. During the 1970s and 1980s (significantly the period of the 'New German Cinema') audiences began to orientate themselves almost exclusively according to standards set by Hollywood. A notable exception to this rule is German comedy which may have been marginalised by indigenous production priorities in this period, but which remained consistently popular. Furthermore German audiences largely preferred other European comedy formats over American ones, evident in the popularity of stars such as Louis de Funès, Pierre Richard, Monty Python's Flying Circus, or the Italian farces starring Bud Spencer and Terence Hill.

Popularity patterns such as these may be too broad a category to determine the specific dynamics of actual audience preferences at any given time or in a particular cultural context. Moreover, such patterns convey the impression of a changeable, yet still fairly homogenous national audience, and don't account for perhaps significant variations between different spectatorial groups. In Germany, for example, audience preferences may differ markedly along class, generational and educational lines. In a discussion of what a European cinema may generally entail, however, these trends can serve as useful indicators. Firstly, the comparison between different concepts of art and popular cinema in Britain and Germany suggests that this distinction is relatively arbitrary. Rather than to provide a clear definition of European cinema, this opposition is largely constructed according to culturally and historically specific contexts and discourses. Secondly, the standard historical perception of Hollywood's hegemony in European markets versus 'hermetically sealed' national industries and audiences needs to be significantly revised or at least historically nuanced. European audiences

have tended to be far more selective in their preference for American as well as other European genres than is normally assumed. Thirdly, a particular audience's understanding of a foreign film is rarely based on its original textual meaning (even if one could determine such a meaning which is problematic in itself), but negotiated through specific translation and adaptation processes.

### Writing European Film History

In the preceding pages I outlined some of the basic components according to which one might write a transnational history of European cinema. While I have focused admittedly on those interactions and developments which are closest to my own area of research, I am confident that there are comparable developments in other cultural contexts, both within Europe and between Europe and non-European cinemas. In a continuously changing Europe and a media landscape which has been globally orientated for some time, the notion of a European cinema may ultimately be just one isolated focus among many other possible frameworks of cultural and industrial interactions. Since I have consistently argued against an easily definable stylistic or culturally homogenous identity of 'European cinema', the pluralist notion of European cinemas may therefore be a more apt characterisation. This, however, does not mean that European cinemas can only be understood as the sum total of separate and fundamentally divergent national film styles. In terms of production, cinemas in Europe have continuously emerged out of cultural hybridisation processes and economic diversification, within as much as across national boundaries. Translation strategies and cross-cultural reception, on the other hand, disperse the fixed meaning of film texts into distinct interpretative and textual variations which are bound to specific cultural and historical contexts. This model of European cinemas as being defined by the simultaneous agencies of dispersal and recentring, and of diachronic as well as synchronic levels of interpretation, would consequently avoid the generalisations and homogenisations implicit in the narratives of both 'national identity' and of contended versions of a 'unified Europe'. As in the founding myth of Europe, such narratives of containment would be replaced by critical travelogues, charting the fluidity of identities and tracing the brief encounters between films and shifting audience formations.<sup>16</sup>

Such a reframing of the concept of European cinemas would also have to address fundamental methodological issues. Since Siegfried Kracauer's seminal study of German cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler*<sup>17</sup>, the writing of national cinema histories has focused primarily on the ideological function and effects (or better assumption thereof) of filmic narratives and styles. These textual features are not only seen to 'reflect' national formations and developments. By creating homologues between narratives and styles and a particular national trajectory (or, in Kracauer's case, even a national psyche), 'cinema' becomes the supreme agency and medium in constructing national identities. I would venture a guess that this notion would find few supporters outside the fairly select field of national film historians.

Rather than to extract a national meaning or 'essence' out of diverse and often ideologically contradictory texts, then, my paper has suggested a number of alternative methodological frameworks according to which both

<sup>16</sup> Such an approach has been proposed by Pam Cook in her two most recent books: *Fashioning the Nation. Costume and Identity in British Cinema*. BFI, 1996; and *Gainsborough Pictures*. Cassell, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991; Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films. Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992; Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning. History, Culture, and the films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Notable exceptions are Joseph Garnicarz' above-mentioned work for the German context, or the writings of Jackie Stacey, Annette Kuhn and Sue Harper on specific distribution and reception patterns in Britain. See, for example, Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing. Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London: Routledge, 1994; Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1988; Sue Harper, *Picturing The Past. The Rise and Fall of the British Costume drama*. London: BFI, 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Such an approach would possibly also fit into David Bordwell's distinction between totalising 'grand theory' and 'middle level research', outlined in "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory". In David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory. Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp. 3-37.

national specificities and transnational interactions could be revisited. The context of diasporic communities, for example, would have to account for the various political, personal-biographical, and economic determinants of such experiences. The issue of coproductions needs to acknowledge that economic considerations may certainly be part of social and national developments, but they also follow the distinct logic and market dynamics of a capitalist industry. Finally, analyses based on studies of reception, and research into audience preferences and negotiations, may help to retain and even reinforce a sense of cultural specificity, yet undermine the notion of an essentially and a priori knowable audience. While such approaches have initiated a significant reorientation in the writing of American cinema history<sup>18</sup> and are commonly applied to the study of television, a reception studies model has so far been largely resisted and marginalised for the critical evaluation of European cinema.<sup>19</sup> If such a model, however, could enter into an interdisciplinary dialogue, drawing on the interventions from fields such as economics, translation theory, cultural, exile and postcolonial studies,<sup>20</sup> one could arrive at a more progressive and complex perception of European cinemas than the one we have now.