Quo Vadis, Cinema Europaeum?
Reflections on European Cinema in Digital Times

Daniel Biltereyst, Ghent University
Elena Gipponi, IULM University, Milan
Andrea Miconi, IULM University, Milan

On 24 November 2023, Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* premiered in Paris at the prestigious Salle Pleyel concert hall [Fig. 1]. "Where else could you begin the worldwide rollout of *Napoleon* than France?", Sony's motion picture group's chairman and CEO Tom Rothman said on the red carpet, adding that this grandiose Hollywood biopic on the French emperor "is a big screen experience, [...] it's epic and it's large and it's robust and it wants to play on a big screen" (Keslassy 2023). During the event, British director Ridley Scott thanked Apple Studios, which covered most of the movie's production budget, estimated at $200 million. For its worldwide distribution, Apple Inc.'s subsidiary film and television company (that was launched only in October 2019) partnered with Sony Pictures, which released *Napoleon* under its Columbia Pictures banner. Though Scott's epic received mixed reviews, it quickly became one of the season's biggest box-office hits, after which it will be streamed globally via Apple TV+. Due to France's strict windowing rules, however, Apple Studios will have to wait 17 months to release the film there.

Looking back on *Napoleon*'s world premiere in Paris and its global success, it is difficult not to see the historical reference to, as well as the similarities and differences with Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) [Fig. 2]. Like Scott's film some hundred years earlier, Gance's mythic epic was launched not just as a film, but rather as a major cultural event at the Paris opera at the Palais Garnier. At the time, the French *Napoléon* was a megalomaniacal project, with Gance intending to make several films about the life of the French emperor. The first film, which premiered on 7 April 1927, was a groundbreaking picture full of technological innovations, artistic experiments and complex storytelling, marking a departure from traditional filmmaking (Cuff 2016). However, Gance's *Napoléon* was also one of the most legendary failures in film history, due to financial constraints and the difficulties of distributing and exhibiting an epic film that originally ran over five hours.
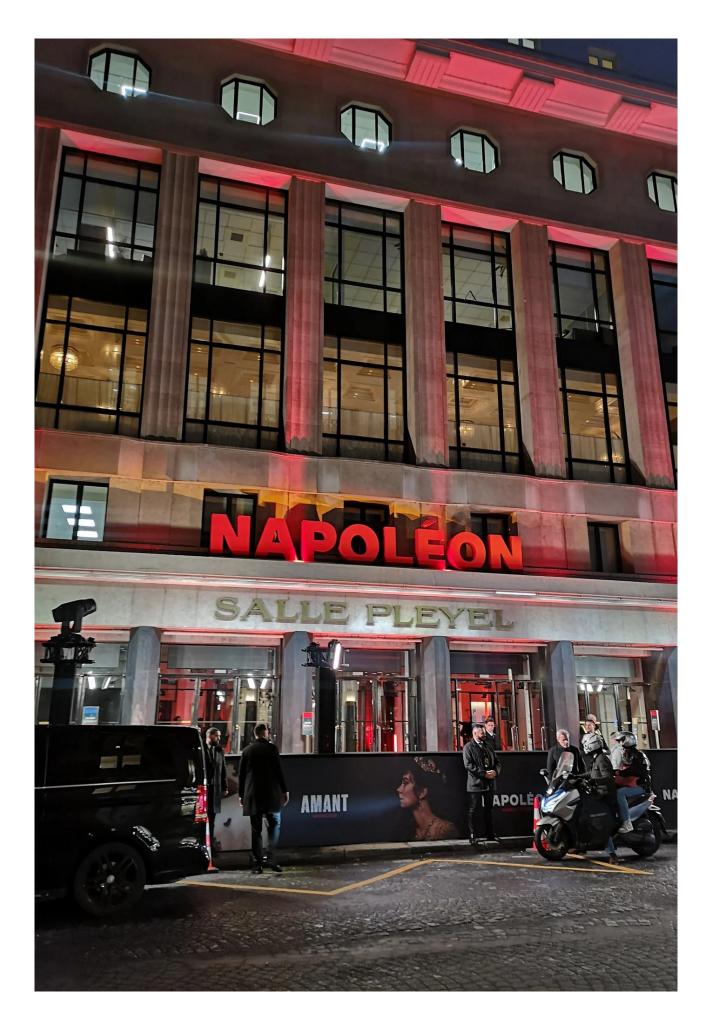
In contrast to Gance's sophisticated narrative, Scott's *Napoleon* was a

Fig. 1 (next page)
The global premiere of Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* on 24 November 2023 at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/joaquinphoenix/comments/17vbhqk/vanessa_kirby_ridley_scott_joaquin_phoenix_attend/.

Fig. 2.
Screening of Abel Gance's *Napoléon* on May 1927 at the Apollo Cinema, with a reduced length and without triptych.
Source: https://www.cinematheque.fr/article/662.html.

mainstream Hollywood biopic, with an emphasis on spectacle, high production values, grand-scale sets, and the use of star power in order to attract large audiences. In Europe the film was heavily criticized, especially in France, where *Napoleon* was perceived as a "very anti-French" caricatural portrayal of one of the most complex and influential historical figures in modern history (Lorrain 2023). Scott didn't care much for historical accuracy neither, offering, according to the American *Foreign Policy*, a "lukewarm mélange of battle scenes and romantic vignettes" (Gady 2023). The film was also accused of cultural appropriation, or the feeling that another culture is being disrespectfully represented, with French film critic Yal Sadat of *Cahiers du cinéma* arguing that "there is a sense of cultural superiority" about the movie, adding that there is the "idea that we still need big Hollywood to tell us our history" (Roxborough 2023). Sadat's bold statement on the state of European cinema and its inability to attract large audiences echoed what French historian Pierre Sorlin already wrote in his *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990*, namely that "we Europeans create and imagine the world through Hollywood's lenses" (1991, 1).

A central question running through this thematic issue on recent trends in European cinema—a result of research done in the context of the Horizon 2020 framework: project "EUMEPLAT – European Media Platforms: Assessing Positive and Negative Externalities for European Culture"—is whether we should

subscribe to this pessimistic analysis. How has the US filmed entertainment industry succeeded in expanding its hegemony? Are US streamers, such as Netflix, now setting the standard, and what are the consequences for European cinema? Is it beneficial to respond to, or challenge, this hegemony? Should we not strive to overcome the antagonism between Hollywood and Europe, and acknowledge European cinema's marginalized position while fully recognizing the richness of its hybrid and hyphenated identities? Other related questions in this issues deal with how European filmmakers and cultural institutions envision new realities and redefine socio-economic and cultural boundaries within and beyond Europe? What narratives does European cinema construct about the old continent, about inclusion and diversity, or about issues such as poverty, precarity, migration, and other pressing concerns? How do films navigate across borders? What is the role of language, and should European filmmakers consider moving away from Europe's multilingualism to embrace English, the cinematic lingua franca? Are European co-productions viable strategies for overcoming cultural, linguistic, and other obstacles?

OTHERNESS, NEW MARGINALITY AND OTHER TROPES

Asked about how he looks at the state of cinema today, Paul Schrader recently argued in a candid interview with *Le Monde* that streaming platforms have become "the heart of the industry", relegating theatrical releases to the status of a "niche, like opera" ("Paul Schrader, cinéaste" 2023). According to the esteemed American filmmaker and scriptwriter, US streaming giants such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Disney+ now "lead the dance". In a relatively short time, they have been adopting, like Apple TV+ with *Napoleon*, a "hybrid model" wherein premiering in cinemas only serves as a crucial linchpin in determining the film's subsequent trajectory for exploitation and marketability across an array of distribution channels, notably streaming.

It appears that in this ever-evolving landscape each part of the chain, from production and the creative process of filmmaking to consumption and cinephile practices, has undergone a comprehensive transformation, so that cinema has become a niche, and films serve as a means to lead audiences to streaming platforms' catalogues. Over the past decade, the influence of the streamers has been so transformative that numerous questions arise, not only about the current status of cinema and film but also, when viewed from Europe, about European cinema's identity, its fragility, marginality, even periphery, and ultimately the state of its audiovisual industry.

Besides more general discussions on the re-emergence of the "death of cinema" trope and the ambiguities linked to post-cinema in digital times (Denson and Leyda 2016), this special issue connects to more specific themes and tropes in the field of research and criticism on European cinema that took full shape

since the end of the 1980s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with the growing European integration process and intensified support policies for Europe's audiovisual industry (e.g., the launch of the Council of Europe's Eurimages and the European Union's MEDIA Programme), a more consolidated field of research emerged that went beyond the traditional focus on national cinema traditions in Europe (for an overview of the literature, see, amongst others, Bergfelder 2005; Meir 2019, 7–12).

A key theme in this field is European cinema's relation with Hollywood, with the "Hollywood versus Europe" trope going back to the interwar period (Maltby and Higson 1999) and reaching a highpoint in postwar framings of European cinema as associated with art, modernism, authorship, critical prestige, and social engagement. This antagonism, which was conceptualized by Elsaesser (1994; 2005, 43) as a "founding myth" of film studies as a discipline, resulted in European cinema often being "cast as the 'good' object, by comparison with Hollywood" (2019, 1). It referred to the time when European cinema was conceived as the epitome of modern art cinema, as reflected in the famous Don DeLillo quote where the American writer in an interview for *The New York Times* (May 19, 1991) said: "I think more than writers, the major influences on me have been European movies, and jazz and Abstract Expressionism".

This trope of European cinema as the significant alternative "Other" for Hollywood was evidently a skewed framing of film traditions on the old continent. Firstly, it overlooked the fact that art cinema wasn't always successful, neglecting the rich traditions of national cinemas (Higson 1989), as well as of popular filmmaking, often intertwined with distinct national and regional expressions of stardom, genres and storytelling (Dyer and Vincendeau 1992). Secondly, it failed to consider the more complex interrelationships and collaborations between Hollywood and Europe, characterized by a longstanding tradition of co-productions, or with actors, directors, and other creative personnel working across the ocean. Similarly, as some articles in this theme issue discuss, the trope overlooked pan-European cultural institutions, international film festivals, co-productions, and other forms of mutuality within the European filmed entertainment scene (Hammett-Jamart, Mitric, and Novrup Redvall 2019).

In addition, over the last few decades, processes of globalization and the opportunities created by digitization have profoundly transformed the global cinema landscape. The proliferation of film production and cinema cultures in various parts of the world has led to European cinema often being labelled in streaming catalogues and elsewhere simply as one version of world cinema. This "new marginalization" of Europe and its cinema (Elsaesser 2019, 7) coincided with Hollywood's expanding hegemony in the audiovisual field. In this ever-changing world, where digital technologies enable major conglomerates to compete for and monetize people's attention and moods on a global scale, it is interesting to note how some critical media scholars revert to old theories about American cultural imperialism (e.g., Davis 2023). Spearheaded by Netflix, contemporary platform imperialism refers to strategies by streamers and the major corporations behind them to create monopolies on a transnational scale.

This is mainly achieved by leveraging their economic and technological power and applying strategies of vertical integration of production and distribution centred around their platform.

The "US imperialism" trope manifests in various forms. Alongside US streaming giants dominating subscription and audience reach in Europe, these platforms also function as major distributors of US-produced films, TV series, and original content. Despite European policies in the digital audiovisual economy aiming to promote European content through quotas and other regulations, European audiences now have unprecedented access to a vast library of American content. Audience choice is further technologically segmented, as manufacturers of streaming devices and smart TVs integrate dedicated buttons for Netflix, YouTube and/or Amazon Prime on their remote controls. The influence of major US platforms has additionally alienated European audiences from traditional linear television schedules, posing a significant challenge to European commercial and public service television networks and broadcasters—long-standing strongholds of the European audiovisual industries.

The impact of streamers on the European audiovisual ecosystem might extend even further, possibly reaching its core, as suggested by a recent report on the streaming wars and public film funding in Europe. According to the report, owing to its co-production policies and the establishment of significant production hubs in Europe, Netflix now emerges as the largest commissioner of scripted content in Europe (Gubbins 2022, 3). This resulted not only in an enthusiastic buzz and a production boom, described by some as a "creative overload" (Mitchell 2022). However, as British media analyst Michael Gubbins (2022, 3) argued, it might also be interpreted as high-capitalist US-based multinational conglomerates strategically utilizing European public funds—systems that were once "partly created as bastions of European culture against the dominance of Hollywood".

Whether Hollywood studios now "have a free hand to wield the kind of monopolistic power of which the old Hollywood moguls could only dream" (Gubbins 2022, 5) remains to be seen. However, it is equally true that the European audiovisual sector is currently undergoing an intense "content boom" and that we are living in a "golden age of storytelling", as observers continue to repeat. While doubts persist about the sustainability of the streamers' model, especially for the production of "single-off" content like feature films, this euphoric discourse is only partly a result of the streamers' strategy and their decentralized production policies. Moreover, beyond the resilience demonstrated by the European film sector, it is crucial to emphasize the importance and robustness of European policies. Although audiovisual policies across Europe have been criticized for bureaucratic inefficiency and for shifting towards a liberal creative industries approach, they did try to impose limits on, and sought to mitigate prevalent capitalist norms of unregulated free trade, such as installing quotas (Vlassis 2021).

This aligns with longstanding European policies that defend cultural values, placing a strong emphasis on cultural and language diversity. This alignment reflects broader discussions concerning the identity of European cinema. From

an external perspective, European cinema is often still perceived as a distinct entity, characterized positively by diversity, multilingualism, government support, and robust auteur and social realist traditions. Conversely, it is also associated with challenges such as market fragmentation, limited budgets, and language and cultural borders hindering cross-border circulation. This duality reflects the idea that, from within, European cinema is not a monolithic entity; rather, it thrives on its differences, hybridity, elasticity, and porosity. Contrasted with the oligopolistic and highly concentrated network of "Hollywood" conglomerates, the European audiovisual scene resembles an archipelago or a Milky Way of companies and players varying greatly in size, shape, and color.

In his insightful exploration of European cinema's identity and the observation that it is "artificially kept alive with government subsidies", Elsaesser (2019, 7–8) conceptualized its new marginality and "relative irrelevance" as "an opportunity even more than seen as an occasion for nostalgia or regret". Writing in a pre-COVID pandemic era when the streamers' hegemony did not yet glimmer on the audiovisual horizon, Elsaesser emphasized that because "European films have a special kind of freedom", they can more freely explore new directions, addressing urgent social issues with greater insistence.

With streaming platforms in full swing and the illusion that the streaming wars might benefit the European audiovisual sector, a key question arises about the long-term viability of Europe's cinema ecosystem. Another significant challenge is tied to shifting political and ideological constellations. Across Europe, there are major differences of opinion and dissenting views regarding the role of the audiovisual sector—whether as commerce or culture. An even more pressing challenge is posed by the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties and their ascent to power. Will a European Union with a majority of governments led by populist, extremist parties continue to view European cinema as a cultural asset to be defended? Not only is there the danger of rising nationalism or the fear of extreme right-wing factions playing out their anti-Europe agenda and stimulating a nationalist or regional policy, but, as Hans Kundnani argued (2023), right- and extreme-right parties tend to work well together and are increasingly adhering to a pro-European attitude. This entails a shift away from a cosmopolitan view of Europe with porous borders, favouring instead "Eurowhiteness", fixed borders, ideologies of exclusion, and an appeal to defend a European "civilisation". The implications of this ethnoregionalism on a European scale for the filmed entertainment scene on the old continent remain to be seen.

CRISIS, EXCEPTIONALITY, UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The first essay of this thematic issue, authored by Temenuga Trifonova, delves into the ways filmmakers contemplate the harsh realities of poverty

and precarity within European neoliberal societies. Trifonova argues that, over recent decades, film scholars have developed a critical vocabulary to dissect the cinematic portrayal of social relations. The article identifies a notable body of films addressing poverty and precarity across Europe, situating itself within the rich tradition of European social realist cinema. The emerging cinema of precarity (see also the book review section) is particularly intriguing for its nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in Europe's contemporary political, economic, and moral crisis.

The subsequent essay shifts its focus to European film policies. In their contribution, Mariagrazia Fanchi and Massimo Locatelli deal with the tension between protectionist and liberal policies within the EU in connection to the cultural exception principle and theatrical release windows. Conducting a meticulous comparative analysis of the cinema aid systems in major Western European film markets, Fanchi and Locatelli pinpoint both similarities and notable differences in the public support for the audiovisual sector across these territories.

Preserving linguistic diversity has been a focal point in Europe's cultural policies. In their contribution Ann Vogel and Alan Shipman centre their focus on the role of language and the prevalence of English as a force in the international filmed entertainment market. Drawing from Abram de Swaan's theory of the Global Language System, Vogel and Shipman delve into longitudinal datasets from UNESCO regarding national film production categorized by the language of the film. Asserting that the entrenched "high centrality" of English as a cinematic lingua franca is challenging to dismantle, Vogel and Shipman explore the potential of language as a tool to counteract Global Hollywood, particularly by championing the production and support of multilingual films and co-productions.

Facilitating the internal circulation of films within Europe and endorsing coproductions have been central pillars of European audiovisual policies. The authors of the upcoming article argue that, in many instances, coproductions struggle to resonate with a broader audience. In their essay, Petar Mitrić and Tamara Kolarić deal with the intricacies of predicting the success and overall impact of coproductions. Focusing on *Quo Vadis, Aida?* (2020), a production of considerable complexity directed by Bosnian filmmaker Jasmila Žbanić, Mitrić and Kolarić present an impact-measuring model for coproductions. Employing a combination of interviews, audience analysis, and modelling, they endeavour to reflect on the concept of an "ideal" European co-production.

In her essay, Annalisa Pellino reflects upon the role of national cultural institutions in debates on cinema as soft power, cinema policies and nation-building, and the role of cinema to enhance European identity/ies under the motto of "unity in diversity". Pellino's contribution involves a comprehensive analysis of film cultural policies implemented by several pivotal national institutes for culture, including the Institut Français, the British Council, the German Goethe-Institut, and the Spanish Instituto Cervantes. Despite numerous differences among these institutions, Pellino illuminates their intriguing role

in shaping a transnational European identity through the promotion of cinema culture.

In their dedicated essay on European cinema and the platform economy, Valerio Coladonato, Dom Holdaway, and Arianna Vietina focus upon the impact of platforms on the circulation of European cinema, specifically examining popular European films on YouTube. The authors utilize various sources, incorporating data from the European Audiovisual Observatory (EAO) and employing scraping methodologies on YouTube. Their sophisticated research looks at the circulation of and interaction with successful European films. One notable finding is the replication of many offline popularity patterns in the online sphere. Key mediating factors influencing popularity continue to be linguistic and cultural proximity, and the significance of stardom in constructing audience engagement. Overall, the authors posit that platforms like YouTube serve as fascinating arenas for disseminating popular European cinema.

The concluding chapter is written by André Lange, an independent researcher, publicist, and a significant observer of the European audiovisual landscape. With a career spanning over two decades at the EAO, Lange is recognized for his instrumental role in co-founding and elevating the Observatory to become the paramount institution dedicated to collecting and analysing data about the audiovisual industry in Europe. His insightful contribution traces the history of institutional data collection on the filmed entertainment industry in both the USA and Europe. Throughout the article, Lange elucidates how Hollywood quickly grasped the strategic importance of systematic market data for the development of export and other industrial audiovisual policies. In Europe, the establishment of an integrated European statistical tool took considerably longer, only coming to fruition in the 1990s with the creation of the Observatory in Strasbourg.

This thematic issue also features two book reviews focusing on recent trends within European cinema. The first review explores cinema, migration, and borderland experiences in Michael Gott's *Screen Borders: From Calais to cinéma-monde*, assessed by Massimiliano Coviello. The second review delves into the edited volume *Precarity in European Film: Depictions and Discourses*, edited by Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten, and Hanna Prenzel, and is examined by Eduard Cuelenaere.

In a world marked by a colossal "content boom" (Mitchell 2022, 3), and in an era where "everything is changing all at once" (Koljonen 2023), reflecting on recent developments poses a significant challenge. Altogether, this thematic issue underlines both the obstacles and opportunities, as well as the fragility and resilience of the European audiovisual scene. This thematic issue, admittedly, did not comprehensively address all the significant recent trends and challenges in Europe's cinemascape and audiovisual industry. Considerations span from the impact of artificial intelligence on filmmaking to the challenge of engaging audiences and specific demographics like youngsters, the role of cinema in matters of sustainability, the outlook for theatrical exhibition, or the sustainability of the arthouse film model. Despite these unexplored facets, it is

our hope that European cinema, although no longer cast as the great "Other" compared to mainstream commercial filmmaking, will continue to produce, distribute, and exhibit films that, as Elsaesser (2019, 3) expressed in his last monograph, refer "to the core philosophical principles and political values of European democracy, testing the appeal or traction that ideals such as liberty, fraternity and equality still have in today's Europe".

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