

MULTILINGUAL FILMS, OR WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT A SEEMINGLY BRIGHT IDEA

Pierre Sorlin, Université de Paris III

The multilingual films are a myth. By myth I mean something known to everybody but seldom examined. It is generally taken for granted that the introduction of sound obliged film companies to modify their marketing strategies since it raised the problem of selling pictures to publics which did not understand the language of the original version. The simultaneous making of various versions of the same scripts spoken in different languages was seen as a bright solution which would save money on film set, costume and extras and would allow producers to sell their pictures directly on European markets.

For a long time this was the common knowledge passed on by cinema histories, and it was scattered along with unchecked anecdotes. We can for instance read in books written by serious scholars that every shot was filmed with the actors of the various versions succeeding each other in a row. Such solution would have been inefficient and expensive; as far as I know it was only used at MGM, and for a very short time – but of course the story is amusing and enlivens the book which tells it. It would be unfair to mock such tradition since, for many decades, historians could do nothing but use unreliable written sources, especially with reviews published in film magazines which were not necessarily well informed. However, thanks to numerous restorations achieved during the past decades, new prospects have been opened and the Gradisca seminar has provided an unique chance to take a fresh look at the problem. Without being an expert in this field I am only intrigued by an initiative which at first looked highly promising but turned out to be rather deceptive. And since we are at the beginning of what might last many good years, I would like to raise the well known, but still useful questions: *what, who, why, what for?*

What?

Up to now we have no reliable chronology of how the multilingual films were shot and released. Neither have we solid figures. How many versions were shot? Some say one hundred fifty, others up to two hundreds. I am afraid these are hopeless statistics since there is no way of telling precisely what a multilingual film was. Of course, it was not the same as a co-production, that is to say a picture shot in one country with money coming from two or more countries, but this is the only thing we can take for granted. Beyond that point, there is no clear-cut criterion.

A multilingual film could thus be:

- A group of films made on the basis of same text, either independently or together. In 1936 Forzano shot, from a screenplay of his own, *Tredici uomini e un cannone*. This was

simultaneously a war film and a detective story, set during WWI on the Austrian front-line, in which a perfectly camouflaged canon is destroyed by the Russians. Someone has revealed its existence; is it one of the thirteen men who serve the canon? The film was not exceptional but the story was excellent so that two years later an English and a German company, wanting to use the script for two movies shot in their respective languages, came to an agreement with the Italian producer. They made their films in an Italian studio and could share the many long shots which gave the story its background. Shall we say that, based on their nationality, the films were or weren't a multilingual production?

- A series of movies shot separately from the same script. The case wasn't rare at the time. To take but an example the script of the German film *Die Privatsekretärin*, written by Franz Schultz, was bought by an Italian, a French and an English company, each of which adapted it and produced three independent pictures with independent casts. However, there were differences in the making of the three versions. Wilhelm Thiele, having directed *Die Privatsekretärin*, was later entrusted with making the French version shot in Berlin with German technicians, while the English and Italian versions were directed by two other filmmakers working in their own country. Shall we say that the French and German versions are twins, while the English and Italian ones are mere cousins?

- A film whose different versions were shot in the same studio. This seems to be a straightforward definition but it isn't as simple as it sounds because there could be significant variations depending on the origin of the technical crew and of the actors. Theoretically the same people shot and edited all the films deriving from a script but there were many exceptions, either with mixed crews or with different teams substituting each other. Some directors made all the pictures but there were also several directors or, as was the case with *Paprika* (1932), one director for the German and Italian versions, another for the French one. For linguistic reasons the cast was generally changed but some actors played in two versions and, at the end of the decade, owing to the progress of post-synchronization, some actors – but not necessarily all of them – were hired for the various versions and were then dubbed.

Since any definition would be disputable we had better spell out what it is we expect from the study of simultaneous versions before deciding what is and what isn't a multilingual film. As far as I am concerned I believe that much can be learnt about filmmaking in the 1930s, and about the evolution of cinematic expression during the transition to sound.

Who?

Who were the companies or studios which specialized in the making of multilingual versions? Again we are faced with approximate claims and unreliable reports. Often mentioned is the Paramount studio at Joinville, a suburb of Paris, organized according to a Fordian rhythm of work and representing the most advanced system of filmmaking in Europe. In fact, Paramount's attempt was short-lived, having begun in August 1930 and ending after a year. But other multilingual pictures were made at Joinville before and after this deal. So, when speaking of "Joinville films" it is necessary to make a distinction between the various producing companies which hired the plant, sometimes for one film only. It would also be useful to inquire into their working procedures.

Many also stress the importance of the German UFA which, given the advantage of its sound equipment, convinced foreign companies to work in its Berlin studios. Once again, we must be very careful. Up to 1937 UFA was an independent company which rented its Babelsberg studios to other producers, notably to Bavaria, whose Munich studios had no sound equipment, or to Itala Film Berlin. Many multilingual versions were made in Babelsberg but only a few were produced by UFA.

Joinville and UFA were only two episodes in a much more complicated story whose main part took place in Hollywood where, from 1929 through 1931 all the majors produced a good many pictures in four, and at times in six languages. The attempt came to an end at about the time Paramount was leaving Joinville. In 1929-30 dubbing technology was still elementary, and the multilingual versions were likely to meet spectators' expectations better than the confusing subtitling, or post-synchronisation of poor quality. But it wasn't long before those in charge of adaptation understood that instead of translating they had to find phonetic equivalents to the English words, and before actors learned to attend to lip movements. Multilingual versions required higher investments than straight American pictures. The latter were usually paid back in their distribution on the local market so that export revenue was entirely a bonus. On the other hand each multilingual version had to be sold separately and in many cases didn't cover its expenses. After two years, the majors gave up. Only Europe, for reasons we shall try to explain, continued its production up to WWII.

Why?

There is no particular feature which would allow us to gather all multilingual films in a specific group. But there is something which distinguishes them from other pictures: they were made from a screenplay common to three or four movies. I shall argue that, far from being a negligible detail, this tells us a lot about the production of the multilingual versions. Is it not surprising to see that so much importance was granted to the script? After all, in the silent era, when scriptwriters weren't as protected against plagiarism as they are today, imitating the plot of a previous film was common. As was noted during the 2002 Udine International Film Studies Conference, Dino De Laurentiis did not hesitate in the early 1940s to imitate scripts already shot by other producers. Why is it thus that so many screenplays were bought by several film companies?

It has been pointed out that shooting several versions from one script helped to save money since the same set and the same costumes could be recycled. Should we in that case not be alert to the fact that there were two types of multilingual films? Some were expensive productions such as *Atlantic* or *Two Worlds* (both directed by E.A. Dupont), *Casta Diva*, or the five versions of *The Big Trail* (all directed by Raoul Walsh). But these were exceptions. Most films were comedies of manners borrowed from popular plays or novels. *Paprika* is a good example. A German producer commissioned an adaptation of Max Reimann's successful play *Der Sprung in die Ehe*. The story was very plain. Initial situation: a resourceful young lady meets a misogynous bachelor. Episodes: she uses her womanly wiles to seduce him. Conclusion: they become engaged to each other. Reviewing the film *Il Corriere della Sera* said that the performances were outstanding but that the plot was just one more variant of a hackneyed story. The same could be said

of *T'amerò sempre*, and indeed of most multilingual pictures. Such schemes require neither elaborate sets nor unusual costumes, there are no location shots involved. A few furnished rooms and ordinary clothes are enough.

Another motive for making multilingual versions was to reach foreign audiences not familiar with the language of the country of production. American companies met the problem early. Among their best customers were Latin America audiences so that some studios produced for this important market pictures adjusted to local customs and spoken in Spanish, which were more likely to satisfy the public than the arrangement of typically north American stories. Why then did Hollywood replace this logical solution with multilingual versions made after the same script?

I have found no explanation, and can only offer a hypothesis. From 1929 through 1931 a harsh competition prevailed between American and European producers, each attempting to monopolize the diffusion of talkies. After its agreement with the Tobis Klangfilm and the American patent holders was resolved, UFA could produce films that from a technical point of view were equal to those of the Americans. Didn't the Hollywood tycoons think that a good way of tackling UFA was to lure the best European actors away from their countries by offering them immediate contracts and to make films spoken in various European idioms? All was made in a hurry. Dozens of actors went off to Hollywood, there was no time to crank out original scripts, the studios, wanting to recoup the money paid to foreign actors, were content with shooting several versions of available screenplays. But once the so-called Paris agreement divided the world between the two embattled powers Hollywood dismissed the useless European comedians and put an end to a hopeless, expensive experiment.

The Paris agreement granted the Americas and India to Hollywood, northern and central Europe to UFA but the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Europe was still open to rivalry: Britain with her Elstree plant, Italy with Cinecittà, and Germany were all struggling to attract foreign producers. Much work has to be done to analyze the arrangements made with European companies but is it unthinkable to presume that good bargains including the script, the technical crew and extras were offered to producers in order to convince them to choose London, or Rome, or Berlin?

It would be also necessary to know the financial situation of the other contractors. *Wir brauchen kein Geld*, an Austrian film, was shot in an Italian and a French version in 1933. The original script was rewritten and adapted to an Italian context for the former while there was only a translation of the dialogues for the latter. Now the former was produced by Pittaluga, a wealthy and important Italian distributor, while the latter was produced by its director Jean-Paul Paulin. Hence another query: were there not different strategies of arrangement depending upon the assets of the producing company? Since the story of *Man braucht kein Geld* takes place in a small and anonymous town, there was no need to create a particular atmosphere typical of any given country. Was that the reason Paulin decided to shoot this particular screenplay rather than some other?

What for?

However, money doesn't account for everything. What was it that made it necessary or advantageous to adapt a screenplay to another context or, on the contrary, to not

modify anything? Why was it for instance that *Lisetta*, the Italian version of the German *Das Blumenmädchen vom Grand-Hotel*, cast by the two well-known Italian actors Elsa Merlini and Vittorio De Sica, was set in Berlin and not in an Italian city? Or why did *Batticuore*, the Italian version of the French *Battelements de cœur*, take place in Paris and not in Rome? Was it because the time allotted to the shooting was so short that there was no way of building an Italian set? Or simply because the Italian producer thought that any scenery would do? Or, more likely, because the Italian producers thought that a story involving rich people had to be located in an “international” city, that is Berlin or Paris rather than in Rome?

This finally leads us to the most interesting aspect of the various comparisons: they have a lot to tell us about the strategy of production companies. There are questions we won't be able to answer by confronting only a couple of versions but the juxtaposition will help us to better define the problems we ought to tackle. How much did the use of the same establishing shots, the same scenery and the same costumes influence the shooting, and subsequently the film's reception? And what was required to make spectators feel that they were viewing a “national” movie, not a film made in another country? What were the details and cultural hints sufficient to recreate a local atmosphere? The Italian count of *T'amerò sempre* becomes a rich young man in the French version, the story shifts to Paris, the furniture is changed. Is that enough? Or are there behaviors and attitudes characteristic of one country and difficult to transfer to another? It is impossible to extrapolate general conclusions from one example but it is striking to note how neither John Longden nor Henri Garat are convincing in the part of an Austrian aristocrat in the English and French versions of *Two Worlds/Zwei Welten*: the former is too relaxed, the latter too clumsy.

But are we not indulging in stereotypes here? After all there may have been both clumsy and relaxed officers in the Austrian army. True, but fiction – be it cinematic or literary – is the realm of pre-established patterns. That is the reason why the non-American versions of *The Big Trail* appear awkward: European actors made for implausible cowboys, and westerns or melodramas like *Two Worlds* require typecast characters. Is it not possible to assume that the predominance of comedies among multilingual versions was linked to the difficulty of making good dramas? Now, comedic characters are also archetypes but they correspond to social positions rather than to ethnic prototypes: rich old men married to young ladies, clever young men and pretty saleswomen rather than *Junkers* or cowboys.

This is what makes comparisons so revealing. How were equivalent social positions represented in different countries? How did the actors amuse their spectators? Think of *Man braucht kein Geld* with Hedy Lamar and Hans Moser as confronted with *Non c'è bisogno di denaro* with Maria Denis and Luigi Almirante. How do the different actors conceive their part? How do they interact with their partners? How do they move inside the frame, how do they fill it? What sorts of clothes identify their roles? What puns are acceptable in one language but not in another? These are some of the problems we should keep in mind while looking at the movies. I have raised a few preliminary questions but I am not sure they are the relevant ones. Only a close attention to the films themselves will allow us to carry on with our investigation.