MAKING FILMS COMPREHENSIBLE AND POPULAR ABROAD: THE INNOVATIVE STRATEGY OF MULTIPLE-LANGUAGE VERSIONS

Joseph Garncarz, Universität zu Köln

Many of the European films of the 1920s had strong cross-national export potential, yet their success was restricted by linguistic and cultural barriers. To be understood by the linguistically and culturally diverse audiences of Europe, films had to be translated by one means or another. But translated films could only succeed abroad if they were compatible with the cinematic cultural traditions of the country to which they were exported. The multiple-language versions solved both problems by making a film at once comprehensible to and popular with foreign-language audiences.

In this article, I will explain why multiple-language versions emerged as a production strategy in 1929, why they became the optimal strategy to solve the problems of exporting sound films for a couple of years, and why they declined within a relatively short time span.[1] To answer these questions, we must examine what alternative strategies were available at the time for solving the marketing problems that arose from the diversity of languages and cultures in Europe. I will show why the decline of multiple-language versions as the 1930s progressed should not automatically be construed as an indication of their overall failure.

Here I will concentrate on multiple-language versions produced for the German market or produced in Germany and intended for export to other European countries, especially to France. Germany began making multiple-language versions in 1929; their production peaked in 1931 and then declined. My theses might not necessarily be appropriate to multiple-language versions in all other countries, but it could offer a useful testing model which would more methodically improve our understanding of the significance of the multiple-language versions.

Making Films Comprehensible to Foreign-language Audience

The problem of translating films was brought to a head by the conversion to sound. In the years between the introduction of sound to Europe, between 1929 and 1932, it was not dubbing or subtitling which enabled the maintenance of film as an export commodity, but the innovative strategy of producing and distributing multiple-language versions. In the early sound film period multiple-language versions were *the* means of making a film comprehensible to a different language audience.

Two characteristic features define a multiple-language version: firstly, a multiple-language version is based on the same scenario as the “original” version and is produced by the same company. Secondly, the actors in each version themselves speak the language of the country to which the version is being exported. Unlike the dubbing of a foreign film, the unity of the actor's voice and body is preserved: the audience hear the voice of the actor whom they see speaking. In the vast majority of productions, most of the actors used in the "original" version were replaced by a new set of actors speaking the language for the foreign-language version.

Alternative strategies for solving the problem of the international comprehensibility of sound films, such as subtitling and dubbing, were untenable. In the first case, audiences of the period were not receptive to the idea of reading subtitles while trying to follow the pictures. Moreover such films audibly retained the language of the "original," clearly marking the film as foreign. In 1931 René Lehmann argued from the point of view of the French.

> *The audience of the popular houses only want to hear films speaking French and they are quite right too. For the foreign-speaking film to find a few specialist cinemas in Paris and thus a select audience is all well and good, but the vast cinema going public of Paris, the provinces and the colonies, will not tolerate having its eardrums assaulted by the sounds of an incomprehensible language.*[2]

Unlike sub-titling, dubbing eliminates the foreignness of the original language by replacing it with the local one. It was not the case, as some have suggested, that the production of multiple-language versions in the early sound period was necessary because dubbing was not technically possible. Films had in fact been dubbed for abroad as early as 1929, for example Gustav Ucicky's sound film-operetta *Der unsterbliche Lump* and Kurt Bernhardt's Prussian ballad *Die letzte Kompagnie*.[3]

Dubbing was also a much less costly method than multiple-language version production for solving the problem of language transfer. A version in another language added two-thirds of the production costs of the "original" version to the cost of the film, because the replacement actors had to be paid as well as the actors in the "original" version.[4] With dubbing, even if there was an extra expense for the dubbing itself, both the "double payment" of the stars and the additional costs for the crew and use of the studio were eliminated.

Despite being both technically feasible and cheaper than multiple-language version production, dubbing did not catch on straight away, however. A May 1930 trade survey came to the conclusion that "dubbed films were unsuccessful or impossible [for the mass audience]"[5] all over Europe. This was due to the fact that contemporary audiences could not bring themselves to identify the voice of one person with the body of another in the creation of a new "synthetic person". Claire Rommer wrote in November 1931:

> *It was strange, almost shocking, to hear a familiar [German] voice coming from a totally unfamiliar [American] body. My colleague's voice had wandered away from him – had disappeared into a stranger – from whose mouth it now runs on incessantly – DESPITE his tongue not uttering those words – despite his lips never framing them! A strange homunculus-like being has been summoned into existence by a conjuring trick.*[6]

Evidence suggests that contemporary cinema-goers were quick to spot when foreign films were dubbed: for the German cinema audience simply hearing a foreign actor speak German without an accent was proof that the film was dubbed. The more impossible it was for the speaker and actor to be one and the same, the greater the rejection: "You really have to watch out!" said the French fan magazine *Pour Vous* in March 1931. "We are hard put to understand how an African from Chad can be speaking in French."[7]

Making Films Popular Abroad

But the initial reluctance to accept a foreign actor speaking in the voice of someone using the local language was not the only reason why the multiple-language version strategy established itself in the early days of sound film. Multiple-language versions continued to be made even after dubbed versions had long been accepted by German and French audiences: in 1936, for instance, there was a French version, *Les Gais lurons*, of the German comedy *Glückskinder.* Indeed, multiple-language versions were still being made, albeit in ever smaller numbers, as late as the 1950s. In 1953 the American movie *The Moon is Blue* was shot with a German language version as *Die Jungfrau auf dem Dach*. The 1955 remake of *Die Drei von der Tankstelle,* to give another example, was shot in a German and a French version, *Le Chemin du paradis,* like the 1930 film.

The problem of exporting films is connected with the different tastes of the culturally differentiated national audiences in Europe. I would argue that the reason why multiple-language versions had a chance of showing a profit even at a time when dubbing had come to be accepted was that they responded not only to linguistic diversity, but were also an effective response to the problem of cultural diversity.

Contrary to what has previously been claimed,[8] the German cinema-going public's favourite films and stars in the 1920s were those in their own national tradition.[9] American films only came second in terms of box-office success, while films from other European countries usually trailed in the third place. Surveys in *Film-Kurier* on the success of films with the public suggest that from 1925 to 1930 67.5 per cent of audiences were going to German films.[10] According to these surveys, Hollywood films accounted for only 19.4 per cent of German cinema-going, while 13.2 per cent of all tickets sold at the box-office were for films by fellow Europeans. According to Colin Crisp, French audiences also preferred their own national films:

> *Attendance figures at the screening of French films, whenever they have been measured, have proved significantly higher than at screenings of films of other nationalities [...] in 1936, of the 75 most popular films in France the top six were French; only 15 of the 75 were American, against 56 French.*[11]

If one assumes the nationality of a star not by where he or she was born but by the national-cultural context in which he or she first rose to stardom, all the top stars during the 1920s in Germany were German, as evidenced by film magazine surveys for 1923-26.[12] Lya Mara, for instance, was born in Riga, Latvia, but only made films in Germany during the 1920s. The most popular American star by far was the child actor Jackie Coogan (receiving 2.8 per cent of the votes for the most popular male actor in 1923-6, and so reaching no. 11), who owed his success to the fact that although the public demand was there, building up child stars was taboo in Germany.[13] These statistics suggest that, as a rule, it was the German rather than the American stars that were most popular with German audiences. And since French films were more popular with the French audience than films from any other country, then it makes sense to assume that this audience also preferred national actors.

If this pattern was typical not only of Germany and France but also of other European countries in the 1920s and 1930s,[14] an export-geared film industry had to adapt its own products to serve the national cultural traditions of the target country. Hence the use, during the silent era, by American companies of creative talents like Greta Garbo or Emil Jannings, imported from Europe in order to improve their own market opportunities with European audiences. It was uncommon, however, to cast different actors in multiple versions. With the coming of sound, this replacement procedure became common practice in multiple-language versions to solve the problem of translation. The new strategy not only made films comprehensible to foreign-language audiences, but made them culturally more compatible as well.

Because of the audiences' preference for actors from their own country, the casting of a language version with actors from that country could increase the film's chance of popularity there. Thus Alfred Abel and Olga Tschechowa played the parts of Herbert Marshall and Nora Baring in *Mary,* the German version of Hitchcock's *Murder* (1930). Even if Alfred Abel and Olga Tschechowa were not big stars, they were undoubtedly well-known and accepted German actors with long careers in the film business. Contrary to common assumptions, even top stars played in multiple-language versions. Take for instance the casting of the French versions of the German films of *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* (1930) and *Der Kongreß tanzt* (1931), known as *Le Chemin du paradis* and *Le Congrès s'amuse*. Both films star Lilian Harvey alongside Henri Garat in the part that Willy Fritsch played in the "original" German version. Garat was already popular as Mistinguett's partner in the Parisian music hall at the Casino de Paris and Moulin Rouge. As Francis Courtade notes of the casting of Garat in French language versions: "It was certainly a clever move on the part of the German producers: they had chosen a French actor idolized by the masses [...] so that the French-speaking audience would be swept off its feet."[15] In a contest in the fan magazine *Pour Vous* in 1931 readers had to choose their favourite stars from a total of 160 actors and actresses, French and foreign, who had appeared on French screens during the year. They were asked to select "the most photogenic star whose moving image was the happiest, the most statuesque, the most pleasant to look at."[16] Henri Garat was voted "the most photogenic French male star" and Lilian Harvey "the most photogenic foreign female star."[17]

As with multiple versions of silent films, the extent of a multiple-language version's adaptation to the cultural environment of the target country was circumscribed by the demands of production efficiency. For reasons of economy, it was not viable to shoot multiple-language versions which were too different from each other. Thus, even if most of the actors were replaced in the foreign versions, most of these were cast true to type. The jovial little man embodied by Heinz Rühmann in *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* has his counterpart in Jacques Maury's character in the French version. The three elderly gentlemen admirers of Käthe von Nagy in *Ihre Majestät die Liebe* (1930) and of Annabella in the French version, *Son Altesse l'amour*, are cast true to type in each case. Versions in which roles are interpreted with significant differences appear to be the exception: in *F.P.I antwortet nicht* Hans Albers plays a "daredevil," whereas in the English version, *The Secrets of F.P.I,* Conrad Veidt plays a "gentleman." A similar alteration was made in Hitchcock's German version of *Murder*, where the role of Sir John is interpreted differently by making him the German cliché of a British gentleman: consequently, for example, Mary Baring is no longer his love interest.

In terms of direction and cinematography, most language versions which were produced in Germany hardly differ at all from their "originals." As far as the *mise en scène*, the length of the take and the editing are concerned, as a rule hardly any marked difference is discernible. This can be explained by the German production practices, for here the multiple-language versions were made by shooting the take of the foreign version immediately after the take of the "original" version, thus shooting both versions in alternation.

The story told in the "original" version was only altered in the language version if the adaptation could be done by simple means. As a rule the nationality of the characters and location of the plot was adapted for the target country. To take just two examples: *Gloria* (1931) was set in Germany in the German version and in France in the French version; similarly, *Ihre Majestät die Liebe* was set in Berlin and Paris, respectively. Only if the historic setting or the national image brooked no modification would the plot location remain the same, as with the French version of *Der Kongreß tanzt,* set, like the German version, in the Austrian world of operetta at the time of the Congress of Vienna. Or consider the German version of *Murder.* Entitled *Mary,* it was adapted to fit the German audience's image of britishness. Most names were changed to English names familiar to German audiences (Diana to Mary, Markham to Brown, Mitchum to Miller). And most importantly, the German version shifts the genre to a classic whodunit because Germans imagined British crime stories as whodunits. The "original" version resolves the case two-thirds into the plot while the German version resolves the case only at its end. Following the same logic, Sir John's assistant Brown/Markham (strangely enough not the master himself) looks like the contemporary German audience's idea of Sherlock Holmes. As Michael Ross has shown, the Germans had a different idea of Holmes's appearance than the English: "No deer-stalker, no curved pipe, no magnifying glass; instead a checked cloak and a flat cap – these are the characteristic features of Sherlock Holmes in Germany in the 1930s."[18]

Apart from adapting the nationality of the characters and location of the plot, it was not common practice to adapt story-lines to the preferences of the target audience because making two culturally perfectly adapted versions would be too expensive. Stories could be varied by changing how scenes were directed only if this was simple to achieve. This practice was not as innovative as is commonly assumed; it had already been established in the silent era. The European-release versions of *Love* (1927) and *The Gold Rush* (1925), for example, both had unhappy endings, while the US-release versions were more optimistic. In *Love*, Greta Garbo's love affair ends in suicide in the European version, while in the Hollywood version it has a happy ending. The European version of *The Gold Rush* shows Charlie's love of Georgia to be an illusion, while in the American version it is, against all odds, crowned with success. The multiple-language versions adapted this practice of efficient story variation. Take for instance the English version *of Der blaue Engel* (1930) and the German version of *Murder* (1930). All the roles of *The Blue Angel* were played by the same actors as in the "original" German version. The fact that the German actors only spoke very poor English was motivated by changing the story: in the English version the pupils of Professor Rath (Emil Jannings) are expected to speak English all the time because they are supposedly learning the language. The German version of *Murder* adapts the British film by altering Diana Baring's reason for not wanting to betray Handel Fane, the murderer. In *Mary*, Handel Fane is not a “half-cast” but an escaped prisoner, because the British taboo on being “half-cast” was not well understood by Germany audiences.

The strategy of casting actors who were successful in the target countries while leaving the film’s other parameters more or less untouched worked well. This is suggested by a variety of primary sources. An industrial report from 1932 reads:

> *UFA-ACE and Pathé-Natan have brilliantly demonstrated that Franco-German co-production can bring nothing but success. So far no single UFA-ACE film has been a flop; on the contrary these films have been among the top films of both the previous and the present season [1930-1 and 1931-2].*[19]

More Effective Strategies of Making Films Acceptable Abroad

My claim is that the importance of multiple-language versions gradually declined during the 1930s because other strategies emerged which solved both of the exporting challenges – the films’ linguistic comprehensibility as well as their cultural acceptance – more efficiently. Within a few years, dubbing had become an accepted form of translation. According to a 1933 observer of the scene:

> *Audiences have become used to German conversation dubbed to American lip movements. The critics do not even mention it in their reviews unless it happens to be particularly ineffective, which is seldom the case today. Despite the campaign against dubbing, which filled the German press when the first dubbed pictures appeared here, there is no doubt that it has come to stay and that the average public accepts it without worrying about who owns the voice that comes out of the loudspeaker.*[20]

If we attribute the rejection of dubbing to the audience’s sense that the voice and the body did not belong to one another, then we must see the acceptance of dubbing as a cultural learning process, in which viewers gradually closed their minds to the realization that the person apparently speaking the words and the person who has actually spoken them are not the same. This learning process made it possible for the film industry to use the cheaper translation process as the standard practice after 1933. This situation applied broadly in Europe but was radically different in the US – a point to which I shall return.

As the problem of the comprehensibility of foreign films came increasingly to be solved by dubbing, the strategy of making multiple-language versions as a form of cultural adaptation lost some of its appeal, for multiple-language versions could not always be efficiently adapted so that the film would lose its foreignness. But there were other means by which this effect could be achieved, and these became gradually more attractive than the multiple-language versions, for not only did they allow films to be cast with the top stars of target countries, but also made possible more culturally differentiated narratives – something which had been largely impossible in the case of versioning, because of production costs. This greater cultural differentiation was also possible because, unlike the multiple-language versions, creative control was now placed entirely in the hands of the nationals of the country for which the films were being made.

One such strategy had already been deployed by Hollywood in the 1920s, and involved using domestic capital to produce films in the target country itself. Even if in this case final control remained in the hands of the foreign financier, the creative process was controlled by nationals of the country for which the film was destined. A second strategy was to sell not a film but the rights to remake that film elsewhere in Europe. According to *Film-Kurier* in 1931: "Experts are [...] of the opinion that this, rather than versions' productions, is the way the international film business [...] will go."[21] In this way, stories could be altered to adapt the film to a different cultural milieu. Such was the case with *First a Girl* (1935), the British remake of the German comedy *Viktor und Viktoria* (1935), in which the lower-class Berlin Varieté was replaced by the more middle-class British music hall. With remakes, not only was it possible to cast a country's own stars, like Jessie Matthews in *First a Girl,* without having to pay for them to go abroad. The entire narrative became worked through by a producers and creative talent adept in their own culture.

Today, unlike the strategy of producing films in the target country itself, the strategy of remaking films for more than one European market is no longer viable. Arguably, this is a result of the integration of popular film cultures in Europe from the 1970s onward. Whereas in the 1950s hardly any film was equally popular in both France and Germany, in the 1980s the number of hits that the two countries shared shot up dramatically. Never before have so many people seen the same films throughout Europe as they do today. The films which are successes on a European scale are nearly all American-produced. As the tastes of Europe's national audiences have grown closer together, procedures for adapting films to different national cultures have become increasingly unnecessary. The phenomenon of the multiple-language version has thus vanished from the cinemas as irrevocably as the remakes of European films across national frontiers.

If we include the American film market in the equation, however, we note that the integration of popular film culture appears to be a one-way street. European audiences are thus accustomed to American films, while the preferences of the American audiences remain largely unaffected by European film. That is why there are no remakes of American films in Europe but there are remakes of European films for the American market. When European films are not made in English, remakes are necessary not only because of the cultural difference between the USA and Europe, but also because the American public will not accept dubbed versions of foreign films.

---

1 This is an abridged and revised version of the article "Made in Germany: Multiple-Language Versions and the Early German Sound Cinema", in Andrew Higson, Richard Maltby (eds.), *"Film Europe" and "Film America": Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 249-273.

2 René Lehmann, "A Propos du 'dubbing'," *Pour Vous,* no. 133 (June 4, 1931).

3 Hans-Michael Bock, "Ein Instinkt und Zahlenmensch. Joe May als Produzent und Regisseur in Deutschland", in Hans-Michael Bock, Claudia Lenssen (eds.), *Joe May: Regisseur und Produzent* (München: Text + Kritik/CineGraph, 1996), p. 148.

4 Michaela Krützen, "Esperanto für den Tonfilm", in Michael Schaudig (ed.), *Positionen deutscher Filmgeschichte* (München: Schaudig & Ledig, 1996), pp. 149.

5 "Antworten auf 10 Fragen über die Tonfilmlage Europas", *Film-Kurier* (May 31, 1930). Yugoslavia and the Netherlands were the only countries where dubbing seems to have been accepted.

6 Claire Rommer, "Stimmenwanderung", *Die Filmwoche,* no. 48 (November 30, 1932).

7 "La Question des langues", *Pour Vous,* no. 121 (March 12, 1931).

8 Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Market, 1907-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985).

9 Joseph Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany: The Role of American Films in Germany, 1925-1990", in David W. Ellwood, Rob Kroes (eds.), *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), pp. 94-135; Joseph Garncarz, "Art & Industry: German Cinema of the 1920s", in Lee Grieveson, Peter Krämer (eds.), *Silent Cinema Reader* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 763-788.

10 *Film-Kurier,* no. 129 (June 2, 1930), p. 2.

11 Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 12.

12 *Neue Illustrierte Filmwoche*, no. 23 (1924); *Deutsche Filmwoche,* no. 19 (1925); no. 19 (1926); no. 11 (1927).

13 Joseph Garncarz, "Warum gab es im Stummfilmkino keine deutschen Kinderstars", in *KINtop: Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films*, no. 7 (1998), pp. 99-111.

14 Furhammar makes a similar claim for the market share of Swedish films in this period. See Leif Furhammar, *Filmen i Sverige* (Stockholm: Wilken, 1991), p. 133-134.

15 Francis Courtade, "Die deutsch-französischen Koproduktionen", in Heike Hurst, Heiner Gassen (eds), *Kameradschaft Querelle: Kino zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich* (München: Institut Français de Munich /CICIM, 1991), p. 169.

16 *Pour Vous,* no. 151 (October 8, 1931).

17 *Pour Vous,* no. 161 (December 17, 1931).

18 Michael Ross, "The Early German Iconography of Sherlock Holmes," in Peter Horrocks, Richard Lancelyn Green (eds.), *The Return of Sherlock Holmes: The Handbook of The Sherlock Holmes Statue Festival, 21-26 September 1999* (London: The Sherlock Holmes Society, 1999), p. 61.

19 "France and Germany", *La Cinématographie française,* no. 699 (March 25, 1932). *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* and *Der Kongreß tanzt* were not co-productions in the usual sense. Both films were produced by Ufa, and the French versions were distributed by L'Alliance Cinématographique Européenne (ACE).

20 C. Hooper Trask, "On Berlin's Screens", *New York Times* (February 5, 1933), p. 4, quoted in K. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

21 "Auslandsfassung erfolgreicher Filme: *Privatsekretärin* wird Englisch sprechen", *Film-Kurier* (April 2, 1931).