MULTIPLE VERSIONS: A THREAT TO NATIONAL CINEMAS?

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The notion that there are or that there should be national cinemas can be tracked back to the early 20th century. It was expressed in many countries. In 1913 a Spanish magazine, *El cine*, advocated "out of patriotic as well as moral considerations of a high order" the establishment of a national cinema. In Germany, a weekly, *Der Kinematograph*, campaigned in 1911-12 for local film production arguing that "in what could an audience be more interested than in seeing itself on the screen?". Film production was very limited in Germany and Spain at the beginning of the 1910s, but not in Italy where studios were prosperous and, according to their takings, rated third or fourth in the world. And yet, in 1911 an Italian journalist, Giuseppe Prezzolini, launched a long-lasting offensive in support of a national cinema in an influential Florentine paper, *La Voce*. Prezzolini did not fight, as would be the case later, for the sake of Italian studios, but for the defense of Italian culture which, in his view, was betrayed by Italian mainstream films.[1]

However fruitless, Prezzolini's crusade is worth mentioning. His papers remind us that, if production companies were founded on a national basis, they shot films aimed at a universal public. Up to 1914, filmmaking was an international business: directors, technicians and actors did not stop moving from one country to another, taking abroad their skills and methods and coming back home with the narrative recipes, jokes, stylistic inventions they had learned. Kristin Thompson has shown how conventions such as field/counter field or depth of focus, once adopted in one studio, quickly passed to other production companies.

The battle for national cinemas began after WWI, when European producers were frightened by what they called the American invasion. Not surprisingly the combat began in countries where the inadequacy of home-made pictures prompted exhibitors to have recourse to Hollywood. Such was the case in Denmark and Italy where studios had been ruined by the war, and in Spain and Holland where movie output was limited. The problem was mostly economic but it arose at a time when most countries, overburdened by war debts, were barricading themselves against imports. Film companies cleverly took advantage of the situation and engaged public opinion in their combat for the protection of national films. In Germany, the trade-unions and the socialist party, which used films for popular education, joined the production companies' resistance to America. In Great Britain, the Parliament debated the menace that American movies constituted to English culture, and Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, addressing the Commons on June 29, 1925, declared: "It is desirable on national grounds to see that the majority of films exhibited in this country are British. This relates to the enormous power which film is developing for propaganda purposes, and the danger to which we

in Britain lay ourselves open if we allow this method of propaganda to be entirely in the hands of foreign countries." In Spain and Italy, intellectuals filled reviews and magazines with papers arguing for a national cinema.

Now that, for obvious reasons we don't need to mention, the very concepts of nation and national identity are undergoing a critical revision, film specialists question the validity of an approach to cinema which gives greater importance to the national context. Interestingly enough, the debate has been and is still especially heated in Britain with Jeffrey Richards[2] and John Hill[3] defending British cinema as being able to re-imagine the nation. Andrew Higson[4] timidly argues that cultural diversity and foreign influences have long characterised British films, even those of the supposed period of consensus that marked the inter-war and wartime eras.

Adopting Anderson's classic definition of nations as "imagined communities" Richards and Hill insist that, during at least three decades, films mirrored British identity and, in doing so, helped disseminate it throughout Britain. Quoting an impressive list of institutions, events and ceremonies, they enumerate the characteristics of British identity: sense of humour, tolerance, emotional restraint, sense of duty. They know that these qualities are neither exclusively British, not necessarily shared by all Britons but they assume that, at least between the wars and in the 1940s, they were "poetically and imaginatively true" and were accepted by popular audiences. Oddly enough, they do not mention the multiple versions, and compare the British cinema exclusively with Hollywood. I would like to consider the impact of multiple versions on European national cinemas: did they have a negative influence? Did they have no effect at all? Or did they help restart these productions?

What was a "national film" in the 1930s, and in what way was it different from a multiple version film? Despite the fact that there were more American films than local ones on release (only thirty per cent of British films in Great Britain). This, together with the fact that spectators seldom cared for the origin of the movies they attended, the notion of national cinemas was not questioned at the time. If there was something like a national identity, this identity must reveal itself in the media, notably in films – and such is Richards' and Hill's thesis. Did people consider some films as typical of their national identity and distinguish them from other, less typical movies? Few attempts have been made to answer this question. To my knowledge, there is only one book, by Valeria Camporesi,[5] about the way Spanish spectators evaluated "their" cinema. When interviewed the Spaniards said that they were very happy with Spanish movies and praised them. However, except during the 1970s, Spanish films never went above twenty per cent of the screenings and often fell below ten per cent. It is not difficult to account for the paradox: the interviewees often say not what they think but what they consider to be the right answer. For instance, that a citizen necessarily likes the cinema of his or her country. Lacking statistics, Camporesi did, however, have recourse to the press which has constantly glorified the national cinema without ever trying to define it. According to the papers, a truly Spanish cinema had to do with traditions, bullfights, religious processions and folkloric dances. They stressed also something specific to Spanish films: a "true" realism, described sometimes as a direct, dramatic, uncompromising vision of human beings and society, sometimes as a mild, dispassionate, reasonable look at life.

People assume that there are national cinemas but have trouble in characterising them. It might be argued that they only exist in discourses about cinema and vanish as soon as we look outside the critical field. It is therefore our task, as film scholars, to try

and find criteria for deciding what a national film ought to be and to what extent it is very different from a contemporary multiple version. I shall offer for consideration four principles: the language, the social context outlined in the films, the genres and the actors. If there were clear-cut discordances between multiple versions and national films, such criteria should help us spot them.

When writing the text of multiple versions, scriptwriters never forgot that they should address three or more audiences, therefore language should not be colloquial. But national films were planned and composed in a national language: the Spanish cinema was a cinema spoken in Spanish. But, on second thought, is that so obvious? Was it not possible to shoot a film in Spain, with Spanish actors, but with dialogues in Catalan? Most Spanish speaking films were made outside Spain. Moreover, the dialogues often used a theatrical, rather artificial language. In his study of British films, Kenton Bamford[6] notes that, in the 1920s and 1930s, this was the case with many film scripts directly adapted from plays. The same remark applies to other cinemas, every time it was thought that a picture could be sold abroad, scriptwriters wrote dialogues which would be easily dubbed in other languages and were not characteristic of the ways of speaking established in the production country. It will be argued that some films, for instance Neapolitan films, French southern movies or British Josser films could not be dubbed because characters spoke too idiosyncratic a language. But such films were amusing precisely because they deviated from the norm and made fun of the correct, national usage. We only need to think of the many English speaking pictures which were shot neither in Britain nor in the U.S. to realize that the language does not necessarily manifest the national character of a movie.

What about the context, understood as the places, characters and situations set up in a film? Kracauer assumed that the German films made in the Weimar Republic mirrored at the same time some typical features of German traditional values and the reaction of people imbued with such values against mass culture. Take also the British Empire films, as analyzed by Jeffrey Richards: they are typically national inasmuch as they illustrate the moral superiority of British administrators intent on preserving law and justice. Conversely, multiple versions ignored specific identities, their producers wanted to sell them throughout the world and erased all features which could have been interpreted as characteristic of a particular country. But, beyond cultural habits, there are stereotypes which seem to typify a nation such as the discipline and order of the Germans, fair play and phlegm of the British. Such images are used by filmmakers, precisely because they are simple and known to everybody, when they want to briefly and efficiently manifest the origin of a character. Local films and multiple versions had recourse, to the same extent, to stereotypes. Take two multiple versions, *Two Worlds* (1930) and *The Tunnel* (1933): the former stresses the sense of discipline of the young Austrian officer while the tenacity of the main character in the latter is put down to the fact that he is British.

The British Empire films form what we are used to call a "genre", that is to say a series of movies made according to the same patterns and dealing with the same issues. Other "genre" films of the inter-war period were the British historical films, the Italian "White telephones", the German *Straßenfilme*, urban melodramas shot between 1923 and 1930. Such films, clearly belonging to the country in which they were made, filled with quotations or references to earlier theatrical or literary traditions, were aimed at a local audience. But in the first half of the 20th century spectators' favourite genres were melodrama, light comedy and the comedy of manner – precisely the predominant genres

among multiple versions. A good example is *The Lady Lies*, a big hit in the early 1930s, shot in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Swedish. In it a widower would like to marry again, his children rebel, but eventually give in out of affection for him. Such tear-jerkers pleased everybody and were well beyond any notion of national identity. Between the wars genre films were the most popular, or at least, those which attracted the biggest audiences. Some, especially the comedies, were "national" inasmuch as they used colloquial expressions which could not be translated. However, they did not illustrate any "national identity," they were a sector of the mainstream cinema, as well as being among the majority of films made in multiple versions.

Genre does not seem a good criterion to evaluate the national character of a film. What about actors? In the first half of the 20th century, those who had been successful in their own country were often seen as national archetypes. A typical case is Emil Jannings'. Considered a star in Germany he was invited to Hollywood in 1927, played the part of a German in a few movies, but was not pleased with these roles and went back home after three years. It must be said that his poor grasp of English prevented him from getting the leading part in talking films. However, even British stars such as George Formby or Margaret Lockwood were not invited to America, and Gracie Fields' short stay in Hollywood was disappointing. Jannings or Fields had to face the same problem: their star status vanished when they reached Hollywood, they were only one among many and did not fit in with the habits of American studios. In fact they had to choose between making the most of their celebrity at home or confining themselves to the part of typical foreigners. Actors of this era were considered the embodiment of their country. That was the reason why the studios recruited native actors for the various versions of a multiple production. Dubbing was soon operational, making a unique version and dubbing it in several languages would have been much cheaper than having to use different casts. However, the only way of selling a film was to remake it with a full set of national actors.

What emerges from this brief discussion is that the very notion of national cinema is far from clear. Multiple versions which were based on scripts not dissimilar from those of national films, used local actors and national languages. These films used well established stereotypes, took an attitude of neutrality toward national identity and in some cases were likely to illustrate it.

But were they not in competition with local productions? Did not the multiple versions endanger local production by draining a large portion of national audiences? There were multiple versions all through the 1930s and even at the beginning of the 1940s but their heyday of this experience were the years 1929 to 1934. During this period cinema was not in very good condition in many European countries. Italy and Spain annually produced less than twenty films, and four fifths of the screenings were of American origin. British and French productions were much more substantial but did not met with an enthusiastic response from spectators, British films only accounted for thirty per cent of the pictures on offer in Britain and forty per cent in France, American movies appealed to cinema-goers more than local productions. Kenton Bamford has explained how British studios built their films on a conception of British identity in which conformity and moral values reigned supreme; theirs was a theatrical cinema which ignored the possibilities of a more dynamic cinematic language and alienated the working class audiences which much preferred American movies both for their content and their technical advances.

Multiple versions were not national films, they were even, as a whole, foreign to local

traditions and concerns. But they were European, in a very imprecise, generic way. Far from the big cities, highways, planes, wide landscapes, horses and guns of Hollywood, multiple version films were staged in cosy, well-furnished interiors, were populated by old-fashioned princes or aristocrats, cabaret or circus artists, well-off middle-class families, in short fanciful characters that European audiences were used to seeing in theatres and novels. The film set of *The Lady Lies* is representative in this respect. It could be anywhere in a Western country but the absence of domestic appliances, of cars, of live music makes it clear that we are not in the U.S. Moreover, multiple versions provided European actors, scriptwriters and even technicians with jobs at a time when offers in national studios were scarce.

The shooting of multiple versions began to decline when national audiences happened to take more interest in local movies. Two factors appear to stand out as being particularly significant in such developments. The first was government intervention to protect the native industry. In Britain, the British Cinematographic Films Act of 1938 strengthened the quota system and encouraged quality; in Italy, Fascism put a ban on American imports and sponsored film production. But the most important was the international crisis and the threat to peace which reactivated national consciousness. Multiple versions dealt with love affairs, family conflicts, the pleasant life enjoyed by the wealthy. They ignored work relationships, industry and business and, of course, military and diplomatic matters. National cinemas did not change in a day; they went on producing melodramas and comedies but the best national money-makers had to do with ongoing concerns. There were, for instance, in Britain, films like *Sing as we go, Off the Dole, Love on the Dole, South Riding* which frankly confronted unemployment or housing problems. In Italy, criticism was impossible but *Gli uomini, che mascalzoni..., Grandi magazzini, Il Signor Max* talked about unskilled jobs, commercial expansion, urban traffic. The new cinematic trend was at variance with the mode of multiple versions and it is not impossible to consider it a reaction against a neutral, uncommitted way of filming.

This history offers new insights into the problem of national cinemas. On the one hand, as can be inferred from the changes that affected most European cinemas in the late 1930s, a national cinema was a cinema approved and sponsored by the state, in other words, it was a public institution. If national means "in the interests" of the community, the local cinema became "national" where lobbies, fighting against American pictures and multiple versions, were able to force the government to finance local production. But, on the other hand, these cinemas were national because they were capable of giving expression to the anxieties and expectations of the nation. British films, for instance, reinforced the national will to resist Germany in the late 1930s. We are lead to propound a new definition of national cinemas. Until the end of the 1940s there were, in most countries, four different species of national films:

- genre films aimed exclusively at local audiences;
- films built for and around national stars labelled as representative of national characters because of their specialization in genre films (Formby, Totò) or because of their conscious will to embody national types (Amedeo Nazarri, Emil Jannings);
- "nationalized" films, produced thanks to state money;
- films of national assertion or national protest.

The very notion of national cinema, mostly used after WWI by intellectuals and by

film producers intent on resisting American imports, had changed meaning during the 1930s. National cinema came to mean a cinema backed by the government and anxious to meet the expectations of a local audience. Does that mean that multiple versions, far from threatening national cinemas, helped to revive them at the end of the 1930s? The issue is probably more complicated and cannot be reduced to this conflict of influences. Interestingly, Richards notes that many patterns which looked well established before WWII were overturned during the war: values and forms of self identification change with the passing of time and also with the respective position of various groups inside the nation. In his chapter on war films, Richards insists that cinema played an important part in reinforcing the sense of national identity before WWII. Did it contribute to strengthen or did it merely adapt to the sense of community increased by the economic crisis and the fear of war? This is a fundamental query that is impossible to answer, I do not want to discuss it, simply to signal it. Whatever the possible answer, it seems that difficult times, crises, wars prompt the citizens of a nation, or a least the majority of them, to reaffirm their belonging to their country. Danger drew the citizens closer to each other and lead them to adopt the same behaviour.

When using the word cinema we have three different things in mind. First, products that are objects of entertainment. Second, cinema as a commercial network. Finally, cinema as film consumption. Between the world wars distribution and even exhibition were dominated by American companies while the majority of screened films were of American origin. The distinction of each country was manifest only through consumption, that is, in the realm of habit and culture. The most relevant question is therefore: what did people want to see and why? Did spectators think in terms of national preference? There is no general answer; it all depended upon the availability of national movies, the pressure put on public opinion, the state of the relationship with other countries. Multiple versions did rather well when local productions were weak; they declined when spectators asked for more commitment. A close investigation could help us to better understand people's choice. But I am afraid this would tell us neither whether, to quote Richards, films disseminate "national identity, values and character," nor to what extent spectators' national identity is, or is not, strengthened by film attendance.

1   Prezzolini advocated "un cinematografo nazionale che, abbandonando le scene sentimentali e le avventure poliziesche, prendesse a a far conoscere agli italiani il nostro paese, le sue glorie e le sue vergogne, le sue gioie e i suoi dolori, e permettesse a tutti di rendersi conto, con i propri occhi, come sudino sangue i milioni d'oro che annualmente l'emigrato riversi in Italia." Giuseppe Prezzolini, "La guerra e il cinematografo," *La voce* (August 22, 1912), pp. 876-887.

2   Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British Identity from Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

3   John Hill, "British Cinema as National Cinema," in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

4   Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen*, XXX, no. 4 (1989), pp. 36-46.

5   Valeria Camporesi, *Para grandes y chicos. Un cine para los Españoles* (Madrid: Turfán, 1994).

6   Kenton Bamford, *Distorted Images. British Film and National Identity in the 1930s* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1999).