

Horizon 2020

EUMEPLAT – European Media Platforms: Assessing Negative and Positive Externalities for European Culture

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/22505>



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In his canonical interpretation of European cinema, Thomas Elsaesser notoriously framed it in terms of an ontological juxtaposition with Hollywood, acting as a “Big Other”—a variant of Delanty’s “constitutive other” (1994, 134)—along the five different axes of cultural, institutional, economic, spatial, and political tendencies (Elsaesser 2005, 493–501). In a more recent reading of the theory, interestingly enough, Elsaesser came to question whether such an opposition can still provide European cinema with a solid legitimacy: in fact, “Europe is becoming more like the United States a hundred ago”, that is, a continent of “immigrants” and demographic displacements, cultural shocks and social fractures, to the extent that no “binary difference” could stand up to historical facts (2019, 1–2). What is left of European culture after this “trauma”, and how to absorb it into a new wave of philosophical moviemaking (2019, 14), is therefore Elsaesser’s last and unanswered research question; a question that reminds us of a classic dilemma: is Europe one, or is it the precarious assemblage of diverging forces?

This special issue, made possible by the efforts of Elena Gipponi and Daniël Biltereyst, moves from the results of the *European project EUMEPLAT - European Media Platforms: Assessing Positive and Negative Externalities for European Culture*.

The goal of the research project, funded by the European Commission within the Horizon 2020 framework, is to analyze the relationship between media platformization and the possible consolidation of a common European culture. The project, coordinated by IULM University, brings together twelve partners: Hans-Bredow-Institut of Hamburg, New Bulgarian University, Open University of Catalunya, Gent University, UNIMED-Union of Mediterranean Universities, Bilkent University, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, ISCTE-IUL Lisbon, Ca’ Foscari University, IKED, and Charles University in Prague. Its various work-packages focus on selected aspects of the European landscape: the evolution of media systems, and their regulation over the last thirty years; the Facebook and Twitter debates around the most critical topics; the consumption of movies and TV-series on VOD platforms; the representation of gender and migration on social media; the most followed influencers on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok; and—with regard to this special issue—the production, distribution and success of European theatrical movies.

While secondary analysis has allowed us to collect historical series from thirty countries in the region, first-hand data related to the ten nations represented in the Consortium: Belgium,

Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Türkiye. In all cases, the major research question remains the same: is the process we know as media platformization, in any of its facets, helping the circulation of European ideas, images and cultural works across the boundaries?

As theory and empirical research are deeply intertwined, our findings—if any abstract generalization is allowed—lead us back to the very original tension between unity and multiplicity, that is the premise of European identity. On the one hand, we measured the impact of a number of *convergence* forces: the top-down path to Europeanization, fostered by the EU regulation, the amalgamation of local markets, and portability; the solution of commercial co-productions; and, needless to say, centralization due to the growth of global platforms. On the other, however, we also uncovered a set of *divergence* trends: the fragmentation of the VOD catalogues caused by geo-blocking; the everlasting influence of national media cultures, ranging from TV content to the most popular

TikTokers and YouTubers; or the mid-range level of regional exchanges and collaborations.

Here, once again, and depending on the selected variables, Europe can be seen as a *united* or as a *divided* continent, as has been the case throughout the centuries of its modern history (Moretti 2013, 3-8). That European identity can only be perceived in terms of a “unity in diversity” is a well-known theory, sustained in particular by Edgar Morin (1990, 49-50) and Gerard Delanty (2013, 323-325). Still, one may object that the archipelago of European cultures only makes sense, as the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari put it, in light of its common paradigm—or more ambitiously, only if we accept the challenge of investigating the very *split* which caused those identities to be separated from an original root (1994, 12-13). Through the prism of media cultures—*cinema*, in this case—we aim to detect the conflicting tendencies shaping contemporary Europe: and this can be only but the first step, in a long road of research for years to come.

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